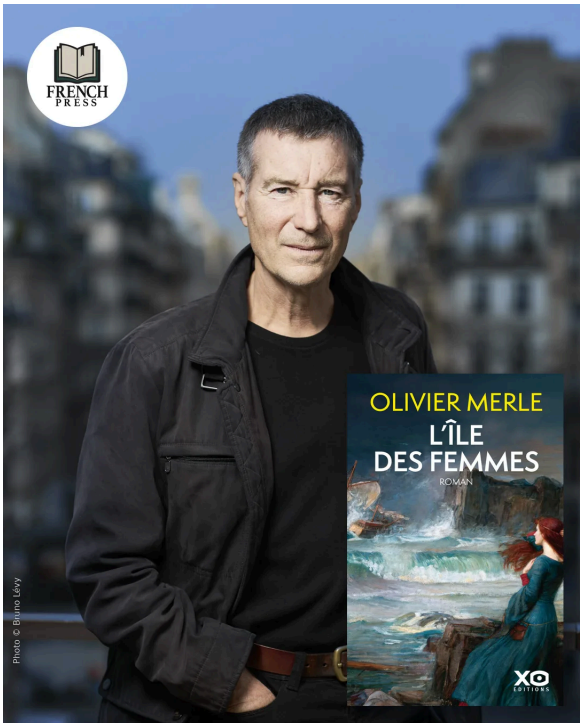
REVIEW

L'Île des femmes: The Shipwreck of Certainties

by Amandine Mazas

November 3, 2026 · On *L'Île des femmes (XO Éditions)*

Beneath the surface of a maritime adventure novel, Olivier Merle explores the boundaries of justice and the foundations of power. The result is a remarkably well-crafted narrative in which the most devastating storms may not be the ones we expect.



The title promises us an island. Olivier Merle, however, takes his time bringing us there. Perhaps this is the novel's first great achievement: the art of delaying an announced destination, building anticipation without ever testing the reader's patience.

The year is 1757. Captain Attenborough is transporting a prisoner from Madras to London, where the man is due to be hanged. But the voyage descends into chaos when pirates seize the ship, before a storm drives it against the cliffs. The survivors find themselves on an unknown shore. What initially appears to be nothing

more than a maritime adventure gradually becomes the setting for a much deeper reflection on justice, freedom, and the dynamics of power.

Olivier Merle has a genuine gift for narrative construction. The plot builds steadily, each new turn enriching a story whose underlying stakes are revealed with remarkable precision. The island remains tantalizingly out of reach, but the anticipation serves to nourish the narrative rather than slow it down. Short chapters maintain a brisk pace, while the prose, elegant and rich in its choice of vocabulary, retains an admirable fluidity. The dark humor, at times delightfully irreverent, provides a welcome sense of distance from the gravity of certain situations. I particularly enjoyed the balance between the immediate pleasures of adventure and a philosophical ambition that never overshadows the novelistic experience.

For beneath the storms lies a fundamental question: is a decision necessarily just simply because it complies with the law?

The prisoner's fate offers a striking illustration. A man of noble birth who served as a judge, he has been sentenced for killing the man who attempted to rape his wife. The paradox is dizzying: the very man who once administered justice now finds himself subject to its authority. Murder remains a crime, but the circumstances complicate our moral judgment. Between the letter of the law and our sense of what is right, a gap opens up, and Olivier Merle explores it with considerable intelligence. Can justice content itself with punishing an act without taking into account the violence that preceded it? The question extends far beyond this man's fate, shaking our confidence in the supposed impartiality of the rules that govern us.

This reflection finds a particularly powerful echo in the fate of the women on the island. Shaped by violence and the deprivation of their freedom, they embody another form of injustice, one whose consequences profoundly disrupt existing power relations. Olivier Merle shifts the focus of his inquiry: the question is no longer simply what constitutes justice, but who has the authority to decide what justice means. On this remote land, far removed from the rest of the world, social conventions begin to lose their self-evidence. The women claim the right to determine the course of their own lives, while the men are confronted with principles that challenge their understanding of authority. The island thus becomes a remarkable testing ground: do the hierarchies to which we submit rest on genuine legitimacy, or merely on the habit of accepting them?

It is in the dialogue between these two destinies that the novel reveals its full richness. On one side, a judge condemned for killing the man who threatened his wife; on the other, women subjected to a form of violence that the social order of their time helped make possible. Two distinct situations that expose the contradictions of a social order claiming to define justice while allowing injustice to flourish. Yet Olivier Merle is careful never to turn his narrative into an argument or a demonstration. Its philosophical questions emerge from the experiences of the characters, their contradictions, and the circumstances that force them to reconsider their certainties. Adventure is not merely a pretext for reflection: it becomes the very engine of it.

This is precisely the combination I found so compelling. Where the novel might have settled for a succession of spectacular adventures, it achieves an unexpected depth without sacrificing the pleasure of reading. Its narrative progression, subtle humor, and accomplished prose come together in a remarkably well-controlled whole.

I loved *L'Île des femmes* for its sweeping narrative ambition, but even more for the way it leads us, almost without our noticing, toward questions that extend far beyond its historical setting. For the true shipwreck in *L'Île des femmes* may not be that of a vessel, but rather the collapse of the certainties we once believed to be most firmly established.

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— Amandine Mazas

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