

*Piffling: Differential Geography, Islandness
and a Fictional Channel Island*

Henry Johnson

University of Otago

henry.johnson@otago.ac.nz

Copyright© 2021 Henry Johnson. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged, in accordance with our Creative Commons Licence.

Abstract: *Wooden Overcoats* is an independent comedy fiction podcast from 2015 about rival funeral homes set on the fictional island of Piffling. Study of the podcast offers a window into contemporary fictional Channel Island representation, a critique of which can help in comprehending the space and place of islands in literary studies more broadly. This article explores *Wooden Overcoats* in terms of small island representation (i.e., islandness) and how this contributes to discourse in the field of Island Studies. Focus is given to the ideas of differential geography, islandness and a fictional Channel Island. The podcast's metaphorical language is deconstructed within a dialectics of space and place in order to foreground signifiers of cultural meaning that can help uncover meaning about the ontology of islands and the epistemology of islandness. Contrary to the cliché of social island insularity, *Wooden Overcoats* presents Piffling's islanders as mostly open-minded and welcoming of outsiders. However, while the idea of 'converse parody' offers a surface-level depiction of islandness, this method of representation actually helps to reinforce the stereotype it's aiming to counter. Whether remote, hostile or paradisiacal, islands have a character that can capture the creative imagination. Such inventiveness is played out in *Wooden Overcoats* in two main ways: (i) the island of Piffling is presented as central to the storyline, which portrays the lives of its islanders; and (ii) the social dynamics of Piffling are presented as a converse island parody in that the story portrays islanders in ways that refute stereotypical depictions that are typical in everyday discourse about island society.

Keywords: Channel Islands; converse parody; fictional islands; islandness

Introduction

VIRGIL SODBURY: Fans of *Island of Passion* will of course know that it is the story of Marianne, a vivacious young woman, who is shipwrecked on an island inhabited only by lots of men. Lots and lots of men. (*Wooden Overcoats*, “Piffling Lives: Island of Passion”)

These words are from a special episode of *Wooden Overcoats* (2015–), an independent podcast that takes its title from a euphemism for a coffin and set on the fictional island of Piffling, which is located in the Channel Islands in the English Channel (British, but close to France). (The Channel Islands are comprised of two Bailiwicks with four self-governing jurisdictions), In this particular episode, the scene is set in a similar way to many other island-based stories in that it aims to capture the listener’s attention and imagination not only with *Island of Passion*’s inviting title, but also by portraying an island’s isolation, remoteness and danger. As a story within a story, *Island of Passion* by Veronica Night, “the most infamous erotic novelist of the Channel Isles!” (Captain, S1/E6 [i.e., Series 1 /Episode 6]), is also set on a fictional island, and this embedded narrative is an important signifier not only in terms of its account of an island experience, but also regarding its portrayal of loneliness, albeit with its alluring innuendo of Marianne being stranded “on an island inhabited only by lots of men”. As the narrator of this episode continues, *Island of Passion* “billed itself as a sort of philosophical treatise on the nature of loneliness but was . . . just a raunchy book”. It is with such innuendo and humour that *Wooden Overcoats* portrays the island of Piffling, but the story also acts as a window into island representation through fictional narrative, an interpretation of which helps in discerning and interpreting tropes of islandness as they are presented within a podcast medium produced primarily through an island gaze with village humour at its core.

Wooden Overcoats is a comedy fiction podcast about rival funeral homes. The podcast ran for three series with eight, c30-min episodes in each. In addition, there were several extra, shorter podcasts covering “Piffling Lives” (5 podcasts), “Funn Fragments” (5 podcasts), “Funn” (1 podcast), “Fragments” (4 podcasts), and “The Trouble With Rudyard” (1 podcast). In addition to the podcasts, there were also occasional staged shows performed in front of a live audience. The humorous dimension of the podcast helps the audience distinguish fact and fiction, and allows the writers to embellish island representation within the storyline. The series was created by David K Barnes,¹ who conceived the initial characters Rudyard Funn and his sister Antigone, who have run the island of Piffling’s only funeral home, Funn Funerals, for some time. When a competitor and newcomer to the island, Eric Chapman, sets up business on the island, the social dynamics of small island life – depicted as a ‘converse parody’ – creates competition that drives the story’s plot. The critically acclaimed podcast, as commended by the likes of *The New Statesman*, *The New York Times* and *The Times*,² is narrated by Madeleine, who is a mouse and Rudyard’s (only) friend. Full of eccentric characters, including Nigel Wavering, who is an agnostic vicar, *Wooden Overcoats* offers a window into the medium of contemporary podcast fictional island representation, a critique of which can help in comprehending the space and place of islands in literary studies more broadly.

This article is a study of the portrayal of the fictional island of Piffling. The enquiry places emphasis on understanding the invented island on its own terms (McCall, 1994, p. 1) by

expanding the field of fictional island studies into the sphere of theatrical podcast content analysis. I explore *Wooden Overcoats*' depiction of its concocted island, not only in terms of narrative, but also regarding the process of small island representation (i.e., islandness) in contemporary fiction and how this contributes to discourse in the field of Island Studies.

The subject of fictional islands has been a significant feature in the field of Island Studies (Crane and Fletcher, 2017). Why do islands make popular subjects in works of fiction? An answer to such a question is that, whether Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610–11) or Arthur C Clarke's *Islands in the Sky* (1952), the notion of an "island lure" (Baldacchino, 2010) reveals real and imaginative locations as phenomena of geographic stimulus. Especially in creative contexts, including literature and location branding, islands are "presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or religious pilgrimage" (ibid, p. 374). While the fictional island of Atlantis, which features in Plato's texts *Timaeus* (c. 360 BCE) and *Critias* (c. 360 BCE), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) has been significant in establishing islands within the cultural imagination, scholars of islands have explored imaginary islands from a variety of perspectives, from, for example, literature to micronations, and myths to fantasy (Crane and Fletcher, 2017; MacKinnon, 2020).

The field of fiction is awash with island stories and capturing the interest of writers and readers in a range of subject areas (Bockrath, 2003). For example, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was a story about being shipwrecked on a remote island, and it set the scene for related novels over the next few centuries. Crusoe-ism includes RM Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), which is based on the lives of three boys who were shipwrecked on an island in the South Pacific, and William Golding's allegorical and dystopian novel, *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which offers a similar thought-provoking story of male juveniles stranded on a tropical island and venturing through some brutal processes while exploring and experiencing life in this isolated setting. These and many other island-based novels generally portray islands as remote and hostile locations, which is very much antithetical to the imagery associated with islands in the sphere of touristic island destination culture in the contemporary mediascape. With the fictional island of Piffling, however, the storyline isn't about abandonment or island branding on a surface level of interpretation, but about the lives of islanders as portrayed through a humorous narrative of spoken text. Within this particular storyline, tropes of islandness permeate the diegesis and are interpreted in this article as a way of discerning how and why the fictional island and its islanders are presented through an island gaze.

In a study of micronations, Hayward comments on "site-responsive art's ability to provide illuminating representations of key issues in local discourse" (2018, p. 161). While the island of Piffling is portrayed as a type of micronation, as alluded to in the special episode "Piffling Lives: Agatha Doyle and the Honey Trap" in connection with Piffling's ambassador to New Zealand, or an "(imaginary) island micronation" (ibid, p. 165), it is an invented island within literary and media creative thought, and close content analysis of its island-related themes can offer insight to the field of Island Studies on island representation in contemporary media fiction. Offering a further analogy with the idea of micronations, Hayward contends that "however imaginary the micronation is, its association with a region of a small state raises questions concerning the ethics of (mis)representation" (2019, p. 183). This idea can also be applied to the imaginary island

of Piffing and interpreted through a critical lens in connection with island characterization. In this context, the purpose of this article is to interpret islandness as portrayed in the story and to consider critically its (mis)representation in the field of Island Studies.

The dichotomy between the extreme notions of remoteness and resourcefulness has been explored in island scholarship through an “engagement with psychologies of island experience” (Hay, 2013, p. 209). Further, “in some of its manifestations this psychology is pathological in character, conducive to despair, cultural and economic stagnation, and a xenophobic conservatism. In others it is enabling, conducive to resilience, resourcefulness, cultural dynamism and a can-do economics” (ibid). This is a type of “nervous duality” (Baldacchino, 2005a, p. 248), which is a notion of islands that reveals a simultaneous interconnection of opposites. In my analysis, Piffing is presented in what might be termed a ‘converse parody’. That is, and based on the main writer’s explanation for choosing an island location (Barnes, in BBC Radio Guernsey, 2015), the imaginary small island of Piffing is represented by fictional locals who actually behave in what Barnes believes is an opposite way to stereotypical images of islanders, who are invariably characterized by having a suspicious outlook on the outside world and newcomers. As Barnes says, he “thought it would be really nice to do something on an island “ (ibid), and one of the reasons for this is that the characters are all:

Really loveable . . . It’s one of those stereotypes you don’t get in series which are set in a village on islands where it’s a *closed* community. They *don’t trust outsiders*. We thought, no, no, that’s not true. Most of these communities are exceptionally welcoming. And that’s what we wanted to do with this. So the humour for us in this series is that it’s an island full of very welcoming, warm and fun individuals. (ibid, my emphasis)

In the story, such an outlook is presented through an island gaze on Eric Chapman, who is a newcomer and rival funeral director to the (suspicious) Funns. Rudyard Funn, in particular, doesn’t like the idea of having a competitor business on the small island (even though the island seems to have a large population and an array of facilities within a tiny space), and is portrayed as one islander who is especially hostile to newcomers. As an example of ‘converse parody’, *Wooden Overcoats* presents Eric as a particularly popular new resident of Piffing Vale, the island’s only village. While residents of small islands may be associated with being wary of newcomers, which might be linked to “a wider trope of ‘invasion’” (King, 2009, p. 71), Eric is offered a counter reception as a way of playing on such preconceived perceptions of islanders and islandness. Islands are often “facing the challenge of finding the balance between local and global, openness and closure, threat and opportunity, trust and xenophobia” (Groome Wynne, 2007, p. 120) that results in them being ‘a nervous duality’ (Baldacchino, 2005a p. 248). In the story, “the locals are friendly, open-minded and keen to experiment. If you know what we mean” (*Wooden Overcoats*, “Characters”, 2020). To add a twist to the story, Rudyard’s sister, Antigone, is attracted to Eric, which is played out in the first episode:

ANTIGONE: I’m the mortician. Where the action is! (SHRILL) Ha ha ha!
ERIC: (POLITE) Ha ha. I bet there’s not much you don’t know about the body, eh Antigone?

ANTIGONE: (BEAT) That sounded like a double meaning.

GEORGIE: It's called flirting.

ANTIGONE: Oh! Gosh! Is it?

ERIC: (EMBARRASSED) Well now-

ANTIGONE: No! It was lovely, smashing, do it again. Have I made it awkward? Damn-

RUDYARD: (CLEARS THROAT) Haven't got all day. (S1/E1)

In the field of island studies, “the term ‘insularity’ carries problematic connotations of isolation and inward-lookingness, whereas many islanders are very outward-looking, by their very nature as islanders” (King, 2009, p. 57). Following this line of thought, and contrary to an island insularity cliché, *Wooden Overcoats* presents Piffing's islanders as mostly open-minded and welcoming of outsiders. However, it is only with one main character in the story, Rudyard Funn, who negates this perspective, and because of this he is a local who is actually viewed as an outsider by other islanders (Barnes, in BBC Radio Guernsey, 2015; Barnes, in Morrison, 2015). It is with this ‘outward-looking’ trope of ‘island openness’ that the writers of the podcast characterize this small British island and its residents. In this context, and following Barnes' point above, the podcast's metaphorical language of small island representation can be deconstructed within a dialectics of space and place in order to foreground signifiers of cultural meaning that can help uncover meaning about the ontology of islands and the epistemology of islandness. While the idea of ‘converse parody’ offers a surface-level depiction of islandness, what I illustrate in this article is that this method itself actually helps to reinforce the stereotype it's actually aiming to counter.

Whether remote, hostile or paradisiacal, islands have a character that can capture the creative imagination. Such inventiveness is played out in *Wooden Overcoats* in two main ways: (i) the island of Piffing is presented as central to the storyline, which portrays the lives of its islanders; and (ii) the social dynamics of Piffing are presented as a converse island parody in that the story portrays islanders in ways that refute stereotypical depictions that are typical in everyday discourse about island society.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first, “Differential Geographies”, discusses Piffing's wider geography within the English Channel, along with the idea of difference as a result of its inbetweenness in relation to the English and French mainlands. Moving to the island itself, the second part of the article is a succinct examination of Piffing Island, looking especially at its name, location and size. Lastly, as a way of comprehending the space and place of Piffing as an island phenomenon in fictional island studies, the notion of islandness is discussed in connection with island and island-related tropes that appear in the podcast.

Differential Geographies

According to the storyline, Piffing is located in the English Channel. The island is fictional, while the English Channel is real, which creates a podcast context that simultaneously includes the unknown and known. Within the English Channel, which covers an area of 89,870 square km and provides a bustling sea passage between England and France, there are a number of tangible islands that are mostly very close to the shore

and are either British or French (Fig. 1). On the British side of the Channel, the largest of these islands, the Isle of Wight, is just a few kilometres off the English coast. Also on the southern English coastline there are a number of small islands, including Hayling Island (bridged to the mainland), Brownsea Island, Isle of Portland (a tied island), Looe Island (also known as St Georges Island), St Michael's Mount (a tidal island), and St Clement's Isle. All of these islands are very close to their mainland, which is England on the relatively large island of Great Britain and part of the UK. Other British islands in the Channel are the Channel Islands (e.g., Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney, Sark, Herm, and a number of very small islands, islets and reefs), but rather than being close to the English coastline, as with the other islands noted above, the Channel Islands lie very near to France – their closest mainland. The link between the Channel Islands' geographical distance from Great Britain and their French propinquity pertains to their historical integration within the Duchy of Normandy (now part of northern France), which conquered England in 1066 and with the Norman Duke, William the Conqueror, becoming the first Norman King of England. Because of their relative closeness to France and strategic importance in the Channel, the islands have long been contested by the French (several wars and invasions of the Channel Islands have occurred), and were even occupied by Germany for five years during World War Two.

The French islands in the Channel (known as La Manche in French, meaning “sleeve” due to its shape) are numerous and include Îles Saint-Marcouf, Tatihou, Chausey (an archipelago of 365 islands at low tide), Mont Saint-Michel, Île de Bréhat, Île de Batz, Île de Sieck, and Île Vierge. The islands within the English Channel/La Manche are, therefore, situated along both the English and French coastlines, with the Channel Islands occupying a somewhat anomalous politico-geographic space due to their Norman history and allegiance to the Anglo-Norman Crown. It is with such differential geographies of the space and place islands in the Channel, and especially the dutiful peculiarity of the Channel Islands, of which Piffling is a part, that becomes an underpinning point of difference in *Wooden Overcoats*.



Figure 1. Edited map of original by NordNordWest – own work, using United States National Imagery and Mapping Agency data, CC BY-SA 3.0 de,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11624375> (accessed 12 November 2020).

In this setting of islands (and mostly sea), cultural difference is evident in several ways, and it is a theme that is part of *Wooden Overcoats* raison d'être. First, there is a difference between the English mainland (on the island of Great Britain) and the small islands along the English coast. The dissimilarity is primarily in terms of coastal islands that are mostly detached from their mainland by a narrow passage of sea. And second, there is a sense of difference with the Channel Islands that are located just off the French coast. For the Channel Islands, they have a sense of difference inherent in their geographic proximity to France yet are British Crown possessions (Crown Dependencies). They have maintained a sense of cultural inbetweenness and identity ambivalence due to their historical influences not only from their Norman forebears, but also the French mainland more broadly. Indeed, as the podcast's main writer mentions, the space between France and England is important to the storyline as Piffling is set between and is a melting point of cultures (Barnes, in BBC Radio Jersey, 2015; and BBC Radio Jersey, 2018). This space can be considered as liminal, in that it occupies a position of difference as a consequence of geography, history and culture, politically disjunct from two mainlands yet culturally connected to both.

Wooden Overcoats points to the Channel Islands as its island location. As Madeleine mentions in her opening lines to S1/E1: "Now, hidden in the English Channel is an island called Piffling. On the island is a village: Piffling Vale". While the Channel Islands are only mentioned by name in S3/E8 (the last main episode), as well as in two special episodes, media commentary on the series, allows the listener to discern the island's geographic and archipelagic location. The idea of a location such as the Channel Islands (also referred to as Channel Isles in S1/E6), which has an ambiguous sense of identity that is neither French nor part of the United Kingdom (notwithstanding the large number of UK residents who have immigrated to the islands), but having cultural roots in Normandy and maintaining allegiance to the Crown, is at the core of what the main writer wanted to achieve as a point of difference. Indeed, Barnes notes that Piffling is "an island between two countries [i.e., the UK and France], neither entirely one nor the other", and, as a result, it does have its own distinct identity (Barnes, in Morrison, 2015, see also Baldacchino et al. 2019). To locate Piffling as an island location of inbetweenness, as with the non-fictional Channel Islands, the podcast mentions France in connection with geography, and England with regard to culture. That is, in S1/E2, when the listener is still at an early stage of comprehending Piffling's *raison d'être*, Rudyard and Antigone are in discussion over a game of Boggle (a word game) they are playing when the geographic proximity of their island location is foregrounded (see also S3/E8, the last in the series). When Antigone declares two words, "Nouvelle and Vague", Rudyard retorts:

RUDYARD: No good and against the rules.

ANTIGONE: No they're not!

RUDYARD: You can't have French words in an English game!

ANTIGONE: But we're closer to France!

One of the traits of Channel Island identity is that the islands are closer to France than they are to the mainland of Great Britain, therefore showing their inbetweenness as a place that has a hybrid culture with various cultural influences and their own island

identity. For example, the laws of the islands' jurisdictions have emerged from their Norman period and are nowadays distinct in Europe. There are also unique currencies, postage stamps, languages, and folklore, each of which makes the islands' cultures quite different to the land of their British sovereign and their nearby French mainland.

In connection with Piffing's geography, Barnes comments that he was looking for a location for the story, and as English villages had been the focus of other series, he thought that an island would be a point of difference, so he set about creating a fictional Channel Island (Barnes, in BBC Radio Guernsey, 2015). Such a fictional site would be surrounded by water, thereby offering a sense of difference in contrast to small villages and towns on the mainland, which have often been portrayed in British TV comedy series (e.g., *Doc Martin*; *The Vicar of Dibley*). As noted earlier, another point of difference for Barnes was that he wanted the islanders to trust outsiders so that part of the podcast's humour was an opposite idea to the stereotype that insular locations did not welcome outsiders (ibid). Barnes' intention in locating the podcast on a fictional island relates to the phenomena that Baldacchino labels "the island effect" (2005b, p. 30) or "the island lure" (ibid). For Barnes, the "lure" of Piffing for its main writer was more to do with the location as a point of difference vis-à-vis the English mainland as well as the possibility of portraying that difference in a contrary way to island stereotypes.

While the location of Piffing is slowly established throughout the series, Barnes notes his personal distance from the Channel Islands. As he comments, "I have no first hand experience of the Channel Islands, alas, though one of the other writers on the team did, and the producers' [sic] flatmate comes from one of them too, and was able to vet what we were doing in the scripts" (Barnes, in Morrison, 2015). Regarding his cultural knowledge of the islands, as he admits: "I feel like a total fraud" (Barnes, in BBC Radio Guernsey, 2015). The main writer, therefore, is scripting the storyline around his imagined notion of not only what Piffing might be, but also life in the actual Channel Islands. This type of double inventiveness plays on how islands are perceived, and in the case of the Channel Islands how they are perceived and represented through an English gaze. Some of these traits are played out in the series, particularly in connection with locating Piffing (e.g., near to France but close to England) and describing some of the islanders' key traits (e.g., tax avoidance). It is here that content analysis of *Wooden Overcoats* must consider the "ethics of (mis)representation" (Hayward, 2019, p. 183) and what the story signifies about islandness, which are topics of discussion in the following parts of this article.

The Channel Islands have been the location of other media series. These include the British TV series, *Bergerac*, which was a crime drama set on Jersey and running from 1981 to 1991. Although being a dissimilar genre, the visual imagery of *Bergerac*, such as beaches, coastlines and boats, helped portray scenes of islandness on Jersey in ways that *Wooden Overcoats* as a podcast would find particularly demanding. There is also the BBC Three TV pilot of 2010, *This is Jinsy*, which, in its name, plays on the names of Jersey and Guernsey. Set on the latter, *This is Jinsy* is a fictional eccentric comedy that also offers a glimpse of some island locations. For example, on its Facebook page, a short description of the show helps illustrate its particular brand of island comedy:

Jinsy is a little island whose 791 residents are monitored by 1,067 tessellators.
These tessellators include video cameras for surveillance as well as little

screens to allow the residents to watch important island events, such as the tri-annual island cow wash (live from Glotters field). They also include a handy slot for paying fines, and a sphincter nozzle for product and pill downloads. (There's a hook at the back to put your coat on too!). (<https://www.facebook.com/thisisjinsy/>)

The series' webpage included much information about the show, and even showed a detailed map of Jinsy with numerous island landmarks (see <https://web.archive.org/web/20110925001653/http://www.jinsy.com>). However, Barnes notes that he hasn't heard of *This is Jinsy* (Barnes, in BBC Radio Guernsey, 2015), which adds to his unfamiliarity not only with the Channel Islands, but also how they have been represented in other popular media.

While *Wooden Overcoats* is a podcast that lacks the imagery of the TV shows such as those mentioned above, it did include some illustrations that helped portray Piffling (Fig. 2). For example, in a promotional image included on a poster for a 2018 tour, as well as the podcast's website and Facebook page, the subject matter introduced pictorial representations of the island's residents, as well a shot that seemingly portrays an island scene with an ocean backdrop. The image, however, was actually taken in south Devon at Compass Cove on the Dartmouth coast of southern England. Regardless of the actual location, and the possibility that the islanders were actually on holiday together on their British mainland, the purpose of the scene is to showcase an idea of the characters and to signify islandness, which is achieved in part with the backdrop of the English Channel.



Fig. 2. Publicity image. Left to right: Agatha Doyle, Petunia Bloom, Herbert Cough, Mr Crumble the donkey, Sid Marlowe, Lady Templar, Eric, Madeleine, Rudyard, Antigone, Dr Edgware (David K. Barnes), Georgie, Nana Crusoe, Mayor Desmond Desmond, Rev. Nigel Wavering and Jennifer Delacroix. See <https://www.behance.net/gallery/74536751/Wooden-Overcoats>. Image used with permission courtesy of *Wooden Overcoats*.

One might think that as an island of inbetweenness, Piffling's residents might have a distinct language, dialect or accent. Notwithstanding the need for the series to maintain a degree of familiarity for its target audience, and also the availability of its actors, the characters in *Wooden Overcoats* sound very English. They do have a range of accents, but these mostly represent a middle-class southern English village lifestyle albeit with a

few northern accents included. The small cast of main characters provides a mix of genders and ages along these lines, but, as the series unfolds, there are some personalities that contribute to a socially diverse island population. For example, S1/E1 includes the following characters (various other figures are introduced throughout the episodes):

Rudyard Funn	Voice of Felix Trench	Proprietor of Funn Funerals
Antigone Funn	Voice of Beth Eyre	Rudyard's twin sister mortician at Funn Funerals
Eric Chapman	Voice of Tom Crowley	Newcomer to Piffling who runs a funeral home
Georgie Crusoe	Voice of Ciara Baxendale	Assistant at Funn Funerals
Madeleine (narrator and a mouse)	Voice of Belinda Lang	Rudyard friend
Mayor Desmond Desmond	Voice of Steve Hodson	Piffling's Mayor
Rev Nigel Wavering	Voice of Andy Secombe	An agnostic vicar
Marjorie	Voice of Elle McAlpine	Works in the Mayor's office
Jerry	Voice of Max Tyler	A baker

Piffling

The term “piffling” is included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020) as both a noun and an adjective. As a noun, it means “the action of talking or behaving ineffectually”, and as an adjective it means “inconsequential, trivial; derisory”. In the context of a comedy fiction podcast, the use of such a name for the island of Piffling helps explain the jocular mood that the writer was intending to create.

At first, Barnes, thought about setting the series in an English mainland village, but because he wanted “a greater sense of a self-sustaining community” (Barnes, in Morrison, 2015), he chose an island setting because such a location “sounded far more interesting” (ibid). In the podcast, Piffling is considered one of the Channel Islands (Morrison, 2015), although its exact location within the archipelago in relation to Jersey and Guernsey, which are mentioned, is difficult to discern. Island locations are typically very self-sustaining, with varying degrees of connectivity to mainlands and other islands, large or small (Grydehøj and Casagrande, 2020). While in a globalized world, local, national and international trade seem to dominate the commercial sphere of consumer choice, the idea of an island setting such as Piffling offers to listeners a sense of an idyllic island lifestyle that has community and a self-sustaining lifestyle at its core. A small village in England might have offered an imagined lifestyle with quaint pubs full of eccentric characters, a post office and village shop, which all meet the demands of locals. There is, of course,

connectivity beyond the village, and travel to and from the village might be a regular part of daily life. An island, however, offers a sense of detachment. It is a location beyond the mainland where travel to and from the island would require (if there isn't a bridge) a journey on a boat or an aircraft. An island creates a liminal dimension of inbetweenness, in both travel and life on the island.

Some small island locations have even further degrees of separation (Pugh, 2013; Stratford et al., 2011). For example, in the Channel Islands, the island of Herm is located within the Bailiwick of Guernsey (an archipelago of three jurisdictions). To get to Herm from Guernsey one must take a boat. To get to the island from England, one would normally either fly or take a ferry to Guernsey. It is with this degree of separation from the mainland that the author wants to present Piffling. The island provides a setting that is surrounded by water, limited in space but with abundant facilities, and full of local characters that together help to provide a particularly zany and engaging storyline.

In its fictional setting, Piffling has a single village called Piffling Vale. The term "Vale" for the village is similar to some villages in England, and may also play on the name Vale, which is one of Guernsey's ten parishes (the second largest of the Channel Islands). Even though it's a small island, Piffling has a number of facilities and attractions, including two hospitals, a golf course and a marina, all of which make the island seem abundant in space and population. Further, Piffling "has a hall, a flower market, two funeral homes and a Mayor. Despite its size, the village is deceptively well stocked with other establishments and amenities, though mobile phone signal is only available in the vicar's bathroom" (Wooden Overcoats, "Characters", 2020). There is clearly a jocular narrative that exaggerates Piffling in terms of space and place. Its smallness, yet with an abundance of amenities, offers a humorous contradiction that plays along with the story's characterization of islandness. As Baldacchino comments: "Islands – hundreds of thousands in the material world, countless more in the fictional one – come literally in all shapes and sizes" (2005a, p. 247). Piffling is one such fictional island, the size of which exaggerates its importance in the plot, although island size and the utilization of island space is often an area of concern for island populations (Johnson, 2019). However, Piffling is very much a fictional island and often represented with an exaggerated text as part of the witty storyline.

Piffling is actually a particularly small island. As noted on the podcast's website, it has "a landmass exactly 1 mile [1.6 km] in diameter located in the English Channel" (Wooden Overcoats, "Characters", 2020). In the context of the Channel Islands, of which Piffling is considered a part, the island would not be the largest, and would be smaller than Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark. With a description of being 1 mile in diameter (see also S1/E7), one might presume that Piffling has a more-or-less round shape, otherwise its landmass would normally be measured in terms of its length and width. Piffling would presumably be smaller than Sark, but have a land mass slightly larger than Herm. However, in a setting of a seemingly impossible geography (Carpenter, 2013), as the writer notes: "Quite how everything fits geographically, nobody knows. It's half the fun!" (Barnes, in Morrison, 2015).

Islandness

Concerning the portrayal of the podcast's island setting, an analysis of Piffing's tropes of islandness, and that of archipelagic Channel Islandness, should be considered. As journalist Ryan Morrison (2015) comments, "it is surprising just how accurately he [Barnes] manages to capture the odd, but wonderful weirdness that comes with living in the Channel Islands, somewhere that isn't really England but isn't France either".

The notion of islandness is important to consider regarding how a fictional island is represented and what signifiers of island meaning might be discerned within this particular island discourse. What are island and Channel Island tropes? Just how are islands and the Channel Islands represented in the podcast? In an attempt to address such questions, I have offered below a study of some key terms that one might expect to appear in the script, along with ones that actually appear. Interestingly, as noted above, the word "Channel Islands" only occurs in S3/E8 and in two special episodes: "Random Mouse" and "Agatha Doyle and the Honey Trap". As part of an unfolding text on Piffing's exact location, it is only at the end of the third series that the island's location is explicitly revealed. Early in the episode, the Channel Islands are mentioned in connection with the amount of (alcoholic) drinks at a wedding reception, which have been imported by helicopter, but later in the episode is a scene explaining how Georgie arrived in the Channel Islands. In a boat, she asks:

GEORGIE: Where are we?

NANA: The Channel Islands!

GEORGIE: You what? So after all this, we're only just off the coast of Britain?

NANA: Actually, we're closer to France! (S3, E8)

In the "Random Mouse" episode, the Channel Islands are mentioned once. During dialogue on the French mainland, they are referred to in connection with their proximity to France. At Random Mouse (a pun on the publishing company Random House), and with a text replete in similar puns, the mice decide to give Madeleine, who narrates the podcast and wants to turn her stories into a bestseller, a publishing opportunity:

TREVOR: Right, back to this funeral thing - alright, I'll come out whiskers first; I'll take this one on. The Channel Islands would be great for breaking into the French domestic market. I've got a contact at Bloom-souris I can call.

ESMERELDA: Excellent. I think we've got space for this Madeleine whoever-she-is on the slate for summer. Gloria, can you draw up a standard two-book deal and pop it in the post? Cheers, thanks.

The approximate archipelagic location of Piffing is established further with references to real islands in the Channel Islands. The second largest of the Channel Islands, Guernsey, is referred to in S1/E2. The island is mentioned just once in the episode and in this case in connection to the characters Sid Marlowe (a journalist) and Petunia Bloom (a florist), taking a short vacation together. When Rudyard asks Sid if he's brought a camera, Sid notes: "This better be important. I'm meant to be taking Petunia Bloom on a hot weekend to Guernsey." While mention of Guernsey doesn't necessary locate Piffing

within the Bailiwick of Guernsey, which includes the island of Guernsey and the island jurisdictions of Alderney and Sark, in the context of early references to the Channel Islands (noted in S3 as discussed above), one might establish that Piffling is indeed nearby. Further nearby geographical references are given in S3/E1, when there is mention of the largest of the Channel Islands, Jersey, which is referred to once in one scene in opposition to Piffling. Here, the character Lady Vivienne Templar, when requesting a funeral service, discovers that Rudyard's friend is a mouse and complains: "I'm not hiring Funn Funerals and I'm not hiring you! I shall be taking my business to Jersey!". The implication is that Jersey is nearby and would be able to take on funeral services. Most importantly, Lady Vivienne doesn't refer to a mainland, either England or France, but stresses Jersey as an island of geographic and commercial importance viv-à-vis Piffling.

In S3/E6, the third largest of the Channel Islands, Alderney, is mentioned, thereby firmly establishing Piffling's geography. Referred to four times in Scene 9, Alderney is presented as a location that could be reached by boat for five pounds or less, with a departure from Piffling after 5:30 (presumably in the morning) and returning the same day. In this scene, the Mayor missed the boat back to Piffling and had to stay the night in Alderney. No other Channel Islands are mentioned by name. With mention of Guernsey, Jersey and Alderney at various places throughout the podcast, Piffling's position is presumed to be as one of the Channel Islands, although a more precise geographical location is not known. Nevertheless, the island seems to have mostly English influences in terms of accents and island features, and, together with the references to other Channel Islands, one might presume that it is not as close to the French mainland as the other Channel Islands.

The four jurisdictions in the Channel Islands are well known in the financial services industry. On the islands there are rates of tax that make them favourable for individuals and businesses alike to be based there. Sometimes known as "tax havens", or relating to "tax avoidance", the islands have featured much in the field of Island Studies regarding the status of islands in many locations that benefit from the development of a local financial services industry (e.g., Oliver, 2019). In *Wooden Overcoats*, Piffling is contextualized on several occasions in connection with tax, and especially tax avoidance in S1/E5. In this episode, Seymour Profitte describes with enthusiasm about his tax avoidance in a discussion with Antigone, who refers later on in a somewhat sneering manner to "Aunty Tax Man":

ANTIGONE: (WITH EFFORT) So, Seymour, my brother said you worked in finance?

SEYMOUR: I'm a rich man who keeps rich men richer. Tax avoidance, that's the name of the game! Keep it quiet.

ANTIGONE: Why?

SEYMOUR: Because people with a lot of money want to keep it – that's kind of their slogan.

ANTIGONE: Can't they afford to pay-

SEYMOUR: Let me cut you off, you poor deluded fox. Economics is a bit more mucho complicato than that. See, my current client made an absolute packet in the nineties working with Donatella in heroin-chic, invested everything in north London props, and now he's looking to bring it over here

to keep it away from Aunty Tax Man. Comes to me, I save him two point five million, pocket ten percent myself: job's a good'un.

ANTIGONE: That's... sweet.

SEYMOUR: Sweet profit, you mean. Ha! What else can I tell you?

In this setting of small island society that seems to capitalize on its offshore tax status, Seymour is aptly named Seymour Profitte. With a surname that is borrowed from the French for “profit”, which is a further signifier of location in terms of French influence, Seymour is all about making a gain from business transactions. He brags about his wealth, tax avoidance, and desire to always make a profit. However, later realizing that Seymour was simply after her money, Antigone retorts: “Oh stuff it, Rudyard – it was a con! Seymour wanted us to bury millions of pounds in a tax fiddle!”.

In the podcast, the degree of engagement with island-related tropes is an important factor to consider when examining islandness in its broadest definition. For this particular series, two spheres of analysis might be considered. The first relates to the author's outsider perspective on what might be expected to be represented concerning an island in the English Channel. If Piffling is an island in the Channel Islands, typically there might be references to nearby and distant mainlands, forms of sea transport, and mention of sea-related themes. Such expectations relate primarily to a physical focus of the island, rather than occurrences of themes within the podcast's dialogue itself. For this reason, Table 1 shows possible island-related word occurrences that might be used to represent the island as found in S1. While mention of other Channel Islands and France have been discussed, in the first series of the podcast, for example, there are several distinct direct references to island tropes. However, apart from establishing that Piffling is an island in the English Channel, typical island-type themes are few.

Table 1. Island-related word occurrences in S1.

	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8
Piffling	4	10	7	12	7	12	16	3
Island/Isle(s)	3	6	3	4	2	7	3	5
Sea/Wave	0	0	0	0	0	5	2	2
Channel	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Mainland	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Boat/boating	3	1	0	0	0	7	0	0
England/English	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
France/French	0	4	5	0	0	0	0	0
Rock	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sand	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

A comical storyline focused on two funeral houses on a relatively small island helps foreground some of the issues islands have with economies of scale and internal competition (Grydehøj, 2011), and the dialogue is centred around this subject matter. Local features of the island are also prominent (i.e., village and shop), as is commentary on the weather (i.e., rain). Even though the mouse (Madeleine) is a character, her presence is also stressed through sound with periodic squeaks. Another feature of the soundtrack is the ringing of a bell above the front door at Funn Funerals. The bell is heard much in the first episode, thereby establishing the business setting rather than the island location.

Several other terms used in the podcast offer a sense of islandness, or at least a coastal culture. For example, seagulls are mentioned on several occasions. In one episode (S2/E1), the natural environment is foregrounded in the dialogue. The text opens with a scene entitled “Waves and Seagulls”, two island-related tropes, although also common to many coastal settings. The text is complemented by the sounds of waves and seagulls. In a later episode, S1/E6, the topic of seagulls is stressed throughout the text and especially in connection with a type of competition between the rival funeral homes. As Rudyard comments: “Whoever gives their seagull the best funeral by six o’clock gets the client and the cash.” The subject matter offers much comedy, with, during one heated moment, Georgie retorting: “And Eric can shove his seagull up his arse”. Another coastal reference is mention of fishing and fish. Indeed, throughout S1/E6, which is entitled “Georgina and the Waves”, part of the episode is set on a boat and the narrative has many references that signify a coastal community and help support Piffling’s island identity:

MADELEINE: (V.O.) On Rudyard’s orders, Georgie rowed as furiously as she could, until eventually, well, here we are. Adrift, tired, and nowhere to go. And still with a dead seagull to dispose of. Still, I should be grateful. They haven’t tried eating me yet.

Further coastal terms include waves, sea, (sea)gulls, boat, Atlantic Ocean, mainland, lighthouse, yacht, rowboat, and splashing. Of these terms, reference to the “mainland” is particularly important in reinforcing the characters’ island home.

While islandness is created through textual references to geographic space and place, the podcast includes background sounds and music that help contribute to the sense of location, albeit not directly to islandness. For example, in S1/E1, the sonic environment includes the sound of rain, wind and sheep, among a number of other sound effects. There is also original incidental music at start and end, which, again, does not have an inherent island association. The voices of the actors seem to signify Englishness, and especially a southern, middle-class accent. There are no citations of an island language or dialect, unlike some of the actual Channel Islands where there are both local accents using spoken English as well as local languages with Norman roots on the French mainland (e.g., Jèrriais in Jersey and Guernésiais in Guernsey). There are also significant numbers of residents of Portuguese and Polish decent living on the islands. However, a multicultural island context is signified with a number of global accents, including New Zealand, Australian, Mexican, and Irish.

Conclusion

Wooden Overcoats depicts the fictional island of Piffling within a discourse of ‘converse parody’. In the story, make-believe locals are characterized in a way that is intended to challenge commonplace stereotypical images of islanders who, rather than being suspicious of the outside world, are actually open-minded and welcoming of newcomers. That is, with the exception of one of the main personalities in the podcast, Rudyard Funn, who is confronted by a rival who has recently set up business on the island. For the islanders, it is Rudyard who becomes the outsider, rather than his rival, Eric Chapman, who the islanders adore.

Recognizing that the writers of the podcast may embellish island representation within the story, for the field of Island Studies such depiction helps reveal several important features of fictional island representation. As well as expanding the critical scholarly field to include further detailed studies of fictitious islands, albeit in this case within a paradigm of existent contextual surroundings such as the island geography of the Channel Islands and nearby France, this article has foregrounded through critical content analysis distinct tropes of islandness that permeate the narrative. These island expressions are important in terms of not only how and why they are featured in the storyline, but also because of their meaning beyond this particular theatrical podcast.

This short study has highlighted the importance and prevalence of the island lure in contemporary media culture, and in this case within the medium of a theatrical podcast. The show's narrative illustrates how a fictional and geographically insular culture (i.e., Piffling) can be vulnerable yet resilient, dependent on travel by sea or air, meteorological conditions, and tidal flows. As a British comedy, it foregrounds the English Channel not only as an aquatic border between the UK and France, but also as a space occupied by the liminal Channel Islands with their distinct heritage geography. In the storyline, the negation of island stereotypes helps reinforce a negative discourse of difference, where the foregrounding of islander attitudes through humour highlights its opposite, which in the storyline is the character Rudyard Funn. Acknowledging the possibility of further study of the podcast, which might include additional qualitative content analysis, an investigation of reception, and interviews with the writers and actors, this short article has offered an inquiry into some of the fictional island dynamics connected with Piffling, and added to discourse of fictional island studies more broadly.

Endnotes

¹ As a writer and script editor, Barnes has many other credits to his name. Born in the coastal city of Portsmouth in the south of England, Barnes has focused on comedy, where he has worked in audio, stage and dramaturgy, amongst other areas. Other writers have also worked on the podcast (see <https://www.davidkbarnes.com>).

² See further <https://www.woodenovercoats.com/press> (accessed 9 February 2021).

References

“piffling, n.”. *OED Online*. September (2020). Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/236605> (accessed November 10, 2020).

“piffling, adj.”. *OED Online*. September (2020). Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/244603> (accessed November 10, 2020).

Bacon, Francis [1627] (2008). New Atlantis, in More, Bacon and Neville, *Three early modern Utopias: Utopia, New Atlantis and the Isle of Pines*. Oxford: Oxford University Publishing

Baldacchino, Godfrey. (2005a). Islands: objects of representation. *Geografiska Annaler* 87 (4): 247–251.

_____. (2005b). Successful small-scale manufacturing from small islands: Comparing firms benefiting from locally available raw material input. *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship* 18 (1): 21–38.

_____. (2010). Editorial: The island lure. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business* 9 (4): 373–377.

Baldacchino, Godfrey and Contributors. (2019). *Solution protocols to festering island disputes 'Win-Win' solutions for the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*. New York: Routledge

Ballantyne, Robert Michael. [1857] (2017). *The coral island*. Champaign, IL: Book Jungle.

BBC Radio Guernsey. (2015). David K. Barnes speaks to Kay Langlois. 20 October. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2WHdr1hcfE> (accessed 17 November 2020).

BBC Radio Jersey. 2015. David K. Barnes on Good Morning 20 October. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3w2O8atwPE> (accessed 17 November 2020).

_____. (2018). Cameron Ward. 22 February. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05wfxf1> (accessed 17 November 2020).

Bergerac, 1981-1991, [TV programme], BBC

Bockrath, Joseph. (2003). Law on remote islands: The convergence of fact and fiction. *Legal Studies Forum* 27 (1): 21–82.

Carpenter, J. R. (2013). *The Broadside of a Yarn*, *Performance Research* 18 (5): 88–95.

Clarke, Arthur C. [1952] (1979). *Islands in the sky*. Boston: Gregg Press.

Crane, Ralph and Lisa Fletcher. (2017). *Island genres, genre Islands: Conceptualisation and representation in popular fiction*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Defoe, Daniel. [1719] (1981). *Robinson Crusoe*. Toronto: Bantam.

Golding, William. (1954). *Lord of the flies: A novel*. New York: Putnam.

Groome Wynne, Barbara. (2007). Social capital and social economy in sub-national island jurisdictions. *Island Studies Journal* 2 (1): 115–132.

- Grydehøj, Adam. (2011). Making the most of smallness: economic policy in microstates and sub-national island jurisdictions. *Space and Polity* 15 (3): 183–196.
- Grydehøj, Adam and Marco Casagrande. (2020). Islands of connectivity: Archipelago relationality and transport infrastructure in Venice Lagoon. *Area* 52: 56–64.
- Hay, Pete. (2013). What the Sea portends: A reconsideration of contested island tropes. *Island Studies Journal* 9 (2): 209–232.
- Hayward, Philip. (2018). Secessionism, submergence and site-responsive art: the Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater at the 1st Freemantle Biennale. *Shima* 12 (1): 160–171.
- _____. (2019). Oecusse and the Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno: Pranksterism, misrepresentation and micronationality. *Small States & Territories* 2 (2): 183–194.
- Johnson, Henry. (2019). Islands of design: Reshaping land, sea and space. *Area* 52 (1): 23-29.
- King, Russell. (2009). Geography, islands and migration in an era of global mobility. *Island Studies Journal* 4: 53–84.
- MacKinnon, Sarah R. (2020). Seasteads and aquapelagos: Introducing nissology to speculative-fiction studies. *Fafnir: Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* 7 (1): 27–41.
- McCall, Grant. (1994). Nissology: The study of islands. *Journal of the Pacific Society* 17 (2–3): 1–14.
- More, Thomas, and Baker-Smith, Dominic (trans.) [1516] (2012). *Utopia*. London: Penguin Classics Publishing
- Morrison, Ryan. (2015). World first 'sitcom podcast' is set in a fictional Channel Island. 19 October, <https://medium.com/up-your-ego/world-first-sitcom-podcast-is-set-in-a-fictional-channel-island-e0565741cbbc> (accessed 11 November 2020).
- Oliver, Michael J. (2019). A small island territory moving down the 'development ladder'?: A case study of Jersey. *Small States and Territories* 2 (1): 83–104.
- Plato [c360 BCE] (2016). *Timaus and Critias*. London: Penguin Classics
- Pugh, Jonathan. (2013). Island movements: Thinking with the archipelago. *Island Studies Journal* 8 (1): 9–24.
- Shakespeare, William, and Northrop Frye. [1610–11] (1959). *The tempest*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.

Stratford, Elaine, Godfrey Baldacchino, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko, and Andrew Harwood. (2011). Envisioning the archipelago. *Island Studies Journal* 6 (2): 113–130.

Vicar of Dibley (1994-2000). Tiger Aspect Productions

Wooden Overcoats website: <https://www.woodenovercoats.com> (accessed 17 November 2020). The podcasts are available on the website or on iTunes.

Wooden Overcoats. (2020). “Characters”. <https://www.woodenovercoats.com/characters> (accessed 17 November 2020).

Biography: Henry Johnson is Professor of Music at the School of Performing Arts at the University of Otago.