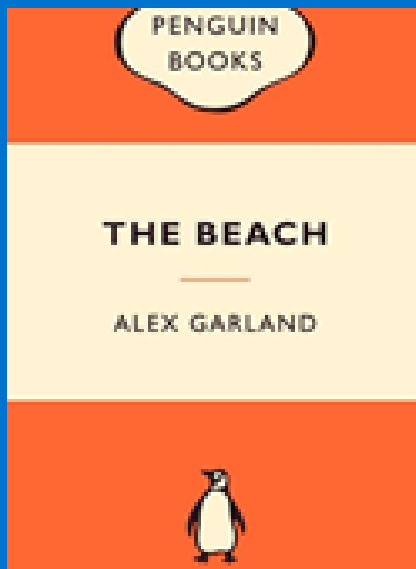


The Beach



Author Background

Alex Garland

Born: London, 26 May 1970

Alex Garland is the son of political cartoonist Nicholas Garland and psychologist Caroline Medawar. Garland's maternal grandfather, Peter Medawar, was a Nobel Prize-winning biologist whose work in immunology was regarded as the foundation for the development of tissue and organ transplantation. Garland is married to director and actor Paloma Baeza.

After leaving school, Garland spent six months in Southeast Asia—an experience which inspired his later writing. Returning to England, Garland studied art history at Manchester University. After graduating, Garland worked as an artist and writer.

In 1996, Garland's first novel *The Beach* was released to critical and popular acclaim. It was reprinted 25 times in less than 12 months and won the £12,000 Betty Trask Prize for the best first novel written by an author under the age of 35. The film rights were sold to Hollywood and in 2000 the film version of *The Beach* starred Leonardo DiCaprio as Richard. Garland's second novel, *The Tesseract* was published in 1998. Set in Manila, *The Tesseract* also received some critical praise but did not have as much success as *The Beach*.

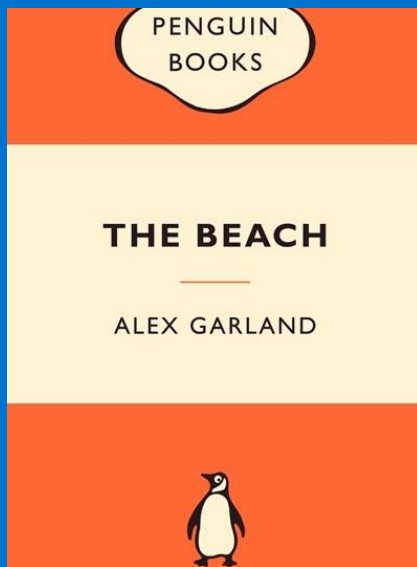
Garland received an advance from Penguin for two further novels, however in 2001 it was reported that Garland had fallen victim to writer's block and had ceased work on his third novel. It was claimed that Garland had turned to film as a way of overcoming writer's block.¹ Garland wrote the screenplay for the successful film *28 Days Later* (released in 2002). In 2004, he published his third novel *The Coma* which was illustrated by his father. (As of 2018, Garland has not published a novel since 2004.)

Following the success of *28 Days Later*, Garland wrote screenplays for *Sunshine* (2007), *Never Let Me Go* (2010), *Dredd* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Annihilation* (2018) - also directing those last two films. In 2015, Garland received an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay for the science fiction thriller *Ex Machina*.

¹Vanessa Thorpe, "Plot dries up for Beach writer", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2001

Sources: Penguin website, Fantastic Fiction website, the Society of Authors website, *The Guardian*, and *Wikipedia*.

The Beach



Book Summary

The classic coming of age novel about paradise found and lost.

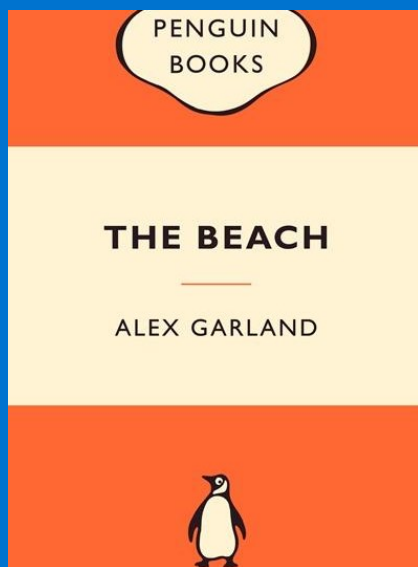
Richard, a gap-year student, lands in East Asia in search of an earthly utopia. In Thailand, he is given a map promising an unknown island, a secluded beach - and a new way of life. But with drugs and the glamorised violence of Vietnam War films haunting his perception of his Thai paradise, Richard soon finds the hideaway becomes a nightmare.

A compulsive adrenaline rush, *The Beach* is an adventure you'll never forget.

Alex Garland's *The Beach* was published in 1996 to immediate acclaim, and has since become a bestselling cult classic and a Hollywood blockbuster.

Source: Penguin website.

The Beach



Discussion Questions

1. Fast-paced adventure or deep reflection on the human search for utopia? What was your overall impression of *The Beach*?
2. What did you think of the character of Richard? Did you find him likeable?
3. Did the plot take you by surprise, or did you find it predictable?
4. *The Beach* has been compared to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* which is about a group of schoolboys left stranded on a deserted island after a plane crash. Both novels present disturbing visions of how humans behave without the constraints of civilised society. Whilst reading *The Beach*, were you reminded of *Lord of the Flies* or any similar novels?
5. *The Beach* was Alex Garland's first novel. Were you impressed by Garland's early literary talent?
6. What is your idea of utopia? How might your idea of utopia succeed where the utopia of *The Beach* failed?
7. The 2000 film adaptation of *The Beach* was filmed on the Thai island, Ko Phi Phi Leh. During production, the film company altered sand dunes and removed vegetation, causing environmental damage to the idyllic beach at Maya Bay.¹ In more recent times, damage has been caused by crowds of tourists visiting the film's location.² Discuss how our enthusiasm for idyllic locations can so easily spoil the places we "love".

Just for fun

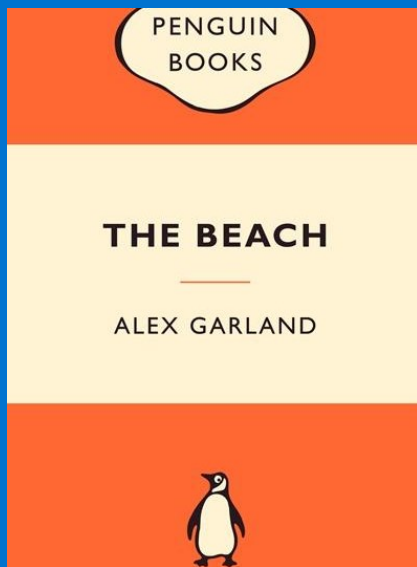
8. In 2001 Garland experienced writer's block, forcing him to temporarily abandon his third novel and turn instead to a different project – writing the screenplay for the successful film *28 Days Later*. Subsequently, Garland has built a career in film – writing screenplays, directing and producing. Have you ever experienced an obstacle (such as Garland's writer's block) which led to you taking a different path in life? In hindsight, are you glad you were diverted?

Source: Some questions based on information from *Wikipedia* and *The Guardian*.

¹ *Wikipedia*

² Will Coldwell, "Thailand's Maya Bay, location for *The Beach*, too close to tourists", *The Guardian*, 14 February 2018.

The Beach



Reviews

An eerie echo of Jack Kerouac's rambunctious 1957 novel, *On the Road*, begins to sound about halfway through *The Beach* ... by British writer Alex Garland, 27. The reason it takes half of Garland's moody tale for Kerouac's ghost to tap the reader on the shoulder is that the feel of the two novels could not be more different. *On the Road* was loony, funny, electric; *The Beach* is listless, pallid, drifting without object.

Each novel, in its style, captures the style of its generation, and can be read by bemused elders as a shrewd caricature of disaffected post-childhood wanderers desperate to avoid adulthood. Garland's characters are young European and American backpackers who circle like dead leaves in an eddy through the guesthouses of Southeast Asia.... Garland writes as they travel, without emotion or opinion or allegiance.

.... [Richard's] tone is one of mild regret, which seems to be the author's view as well, though that's hard to say. If Garland is aware that he has written satire, he gives no sign of it.

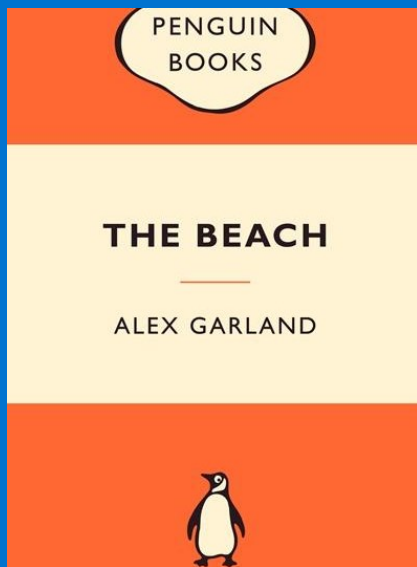
John Skow, *Time*, 1997

Alex Garland, who was born in London in 1970 and has traveled widely in Asia, has a clear, engaging storytelling style and a vivid imagination. Deftly, he uses real-life travel details - smells, optical effects, quirks of language, social rituals - to keep the reader's disbelief at bay. For about two-thirds of the way, his novel is a genuine page turner, full of color and menace. Unfortunately, it bogs down toward the end, with busy, episodic action instead of one clearly emerging denouement. Having seemed to promise several explosions of plot and theme, Mr. Garland hesitates among them. Too many fuses burn at once and a few sputter out - although the final chapters are suitably nightmarish and exciting.

Still, *The Beach* is impressive in its group portrait of a new generation of young vagabonds. Raised in an era of diminished confidence, they have set out in search of something that feels genuine and fulfilling. What they find turns out to be not utopia but hell.

David Sacks, *NY Times*, 1997

The Beach



Reviews (continued)

Already something of a hit in England, this impressive debut by a 26-year-old British writer could well achieve the cult status of William Golding's nightmarish 1954 classic, *Lord of the Flies*, with which it shares a theme - the dark side of human nature that's exposed when the thin veneer of "civilization" is rubbed off through an encounter with raw nature. ... Highly recommended.

David Sowd, *Library Journal*, 1997

At times, Garland seems to be trying to say something powerful about the perils of desiring a history-less Eden. But his evocations of Vietnam, Richard's hallucinatory chats with the dead Mr. Duck and various other feints in the direction of thematic gravity don't add up to much. Garland is a good storyteller, though, and Richard's nicotine-fueled narrative of how the denizens of the beach see their comity shatter and break into factions is taut with suspense, even if the bloody conclusion offers few surprises.

Publishers Weekly, 1997

"*I do not want to die here*," Étienne says to Richard, terrified as they hide from the armed marijuana farmers. The line is straight out of any number of war movies.... However, for generation X in 1996, there were no wars to fight. Only the war against boredom.

Part of the novel's astonishing success at the time (a bestseller and then a movie...) was its hot-wiring of the zeitgeist. By 1996-97, it wasn't just the trust-fund kids from WWII: everyone was backpacking in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. But ... briefly touching the zeitgeist is no guarantee of still being in print 20 years later. What will the generation that reads the novel now ... find in its pages? They will find what generations before them found in the pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, as their protagonists drank and smoked and gazed at the landscapes of Italy, or Spain, or Africa: characters damaged by where they have come from, looking for release – or correction, or illumination – in strange new corners of the world and finding only disaffection, ugliness, self-absorption and ego. Finding only the things they have brought with them.

John Niven, *The Guardian*, 2016 (published after the title's re-release)