A Town Beached on Pessimism
A Review of *Coastliners* by Ron Charles

Who says you can't go home again? For the narrator of Joanne Harris's charming new novel, Coastliners, you can't do anything else. Even when you're not wanted.

Home for Madeleine is a tiny island off the coast of France called Devin, "the single place for which there can be no substitute." Her mother wrenched her away from this dot of land when she was a little girl, leaving behind a husband and a town sinking fast into depression. Now, a decade later, Madeleine has buried her mother and returned to reclaim her father, who never answered her letters or fulfilled her dreams.

Harris leapt to stardom three years ago with Chocolat, a creamy feminist novel that inspired an even sweeter Hollywood movie starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp. With Coastliners, she's moved away from the food themes of her earlier works, but she's still interested in how a determined woman can invigorate a stagnant community.

"Le Devin is no beauty," Madeleine confesses, with its "rough primitive look." It's suffering from two corrosive forces: First, a long-standing feud between the rich end of the island and the poor end, where Madeleine's father still lives, renders any cooperation impossible. Second, a devastating shift in the tides is gradually sweeping her hometown into the sea.

Harris is something of an expert on how a community's beliefs conspire to limit its citizens' actions and prospects. These poor people practice a kind of "naturalized Catholicism" that makes them fatalistic and passive. As their homes and graves slowly wash into the sea, the residents have grown ever more devoted to charms, symbols, incantations, and rituals.

(No doubt the inevitable movie version of this cinematic book will caramelize the role of religion into something more palatable, just as the repressive priest was replaced by a stern nobleman in Hollywood's Chocolat.)

Madeleine returns home during the annual festival of Sainte-Marine-de-la-Mer, when the townspeople carry a statue of their patron saint down to the shore for baptism. It's a last-ditch effort for a community desperate to turn the tide, but Madeleine's appearance startles her father and causes the statue to fall into the sea. This is a sure omen of another Black Year, hardly the homecoming she wanted.

Harris takes some interesting risks with this plot. The most daring is her long delay of the reunion between daughter and father, a man so depressed that he can no longer speak. Even when they finally do meet, their reunion is surprisingly muted and anticlimactic, yielding none of the joy and certainly none of the resolution Madeleine was naive enough to hope for. The novel remains painfully honest to the conflicted feelings of exasperation and love inspired by caring for an odd, difficult parent who must now be parented.

But Madeleine isn't particularly honest with herself. She thinks of herself as jetsam, tossed about on the waves, but in fact she has a deep-keeled will. Her father may not respond to her prescriptions for recovery, but she's determined to save the town by transforming it into a tourism attraction.

While these well-drawn curmudgeons whine bitterly about their inevitable decay, Madeleine argues for strategic sandbags and breakwaters. These are people intimately involved with the sea, but it's taken too many of their loved ones for them to be in love with it. And their thought is too deeply invested in miracles to do anything to save themselves.

Finally, Madeleine turns to a shadowy beachcomber who eschews her direct assault on the town's beliefs for a more effective, if decidedly unethical, manipulation of their gloomy superstitions.

Of course, even hard-won victories over the tide are bound to be temporary. But if sandy shores can't be reformed for good, grains of thought prove more malleable. Madeleine, meanwhile, must consider if there's an undertow beneath her civic activism, a deeper, more selfish motive for saving these people's homes and businesses. By the end, the plot is awash in enough last-minute twists and familial revelations for a Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

The death of small towns is a worldwide anxiety in this age of globalization. Back in April, Kate Grenville released, The Idea of Perfection, a romantic comedy about a tiny Australian town determined to save itself by promoting its Bent Bridge as a must-see tourist destination. Ironically, isolated communities rendered economically irrelevant in the new marketplace are finding salvation by clinging to their peculiarities and marketing them to a world of numbing homogeneity. Good novelists deliver a far more complex examination of this phenomenon than economists ever could.

Harris is fast becoming one of the most reliable writers of appealing, idea-driven fiction. This affecting story about community resilience blends environmental and social themes with her signature wit and élan. By the end, when Madeleine cries, "This was how it feels to be an islander; this is how it feels to belong," we know just what she's talking about.