



Jabberwocky

Islands in fiction for young people: A brief introduction

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Ben is a routine contributor to children's literature conferences around the globe, and this article was originally delivered in the form of a paper at the 2018 Children's Literature Association (ChLA) Conference in San Antonio, Texas. Ben's first book Reading Otherness in Contemporary British Fiction for Young People is forthcoming in 2019. Part of a larger project Ben is currently undertaking, this article surveys a selection of novels focusing on the 'island experience' as it is negotiated by young protagonists in children's and YA fiction.

*What is cosier than the shore
Of a lake turned inside out?
How do all these other people
Dare to be about?*

W.H. Auden – *Bucolics 5. Islands II. 25-28*

Islands have been a setting for a great deal of children's literature, both historically and in present times. A number of the classic works of the genre have been tantalisingly set on island shores, for example: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Robert Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1882), J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911), and Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* (1930). However, it is worth also noting the continued popularity of such settings in more recent works, for example: Scott O'Dell's *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960), Mollie Hunter's *A Stranger Came Ashore* (1975) and Jane Eagland's *Wild Song* (2012), in addition to other more contemporary texts this article will introduce and explore.

Islands in fiction are often depicted as liminal sites. This is perhaps partly why children's literature critics such as Mary Thompson view them as: "fertile spaces for the exploration of the shifting sands of identity" (19). Such a preoccupation with 'identity' is a consistent concern for many of the writers introduced throughout this article, and I suggest that the islands explored could even be viewed as a metaphor for childhood and adolescence itself. Indeed, these are periods in life in which we often feel unanchored and adrift en-route to being swept away by the 'rising tide' of adult experience. W.H. Auden once described islands as being like sea "turned inside out" (208). Children's literature set on, or featuring islands may focus on voyages to islands on which characters embark, the lives they lead on them, or their entry or departure from islands. Crucially, however, it often returns to characters' experiences of being, as Auden phrased it, "turned inside out" - having their lives thrown into disarray by their experiences of island life. Islands can be exciting, exotic and adventurous places, but they are frequently also perceived through the lens of darkness and danger. With this in mind, let's plot a course through often turbulent waters, to experience these "accursed islands" (298) to quote Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*, perhaps the preeminent island novel. We will see how various characters, like the rocky outcrops they find themselves inhabiting, become "shaped" (102) by the sea.

As Jim Hawkins prepares to set sail at the start of *Treasure Island*, he describes his island destination initially, as it exists in his "mind's eye":



I approached that island in my fancy from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface; I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spy-glass, and from the top enjoyed the most wonderful and changing prospects. Sometimes the isle was thick with savages, with whom we fought, sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us (36).

Islands envisaged in characters' imagination before they take their full form in the novel's reality are a recurrent device in children's fiction. But this is also suggestive of the *type* of spaces islands routinely become in such fiction. Initially featuring as chimerically-influenced sites of escape and end points of epic journeys, time-and-time again islands in children's fiction ultimately become spaces in which the division between fantasy and reality are spectacularly erased. In this way, such islands can be viewed through the lens of what Michel Foucault terms "heterotopias" (1967). Acknowledging the concept of 'utopia' as the ideal situation characters imagine awaits them upon dropping anchor at their island destination, or indeed, the situation they (generally unsuccessfully, as we will see in terms of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*) attempt to create once on the island, Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' draws upon the reality of attempting to emulate a utopic system. However, heterotopias differ from utopias because they allow for the inherently unpredictable nature of human contexts to disrupt this space. Secondly, islands allow authors to traverse the line between reality and illusion. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), for example, Caliban and Prospero both understand and interact with the island setting differently, performing different versions of self upon it. Here it is possible for a magician to represent a duke, while Caliban the castaway has clearly been both physically and mentally shaped by the "folly" of the unfortunate place to which he has been exiled. As Trinculo in *The Tempest* puts it:

...The folly of this island! They say there's but five upon this isle: we are three of them; if th' other two be brained like us, the state totters (iii.ii).

The idea of utopia, whilst it may be the ideal characters initially believe themselves to be searching for *before* arriving on the island, is swiftly abandoned upon dropping anchor. As Thompson argues, "the physical entity that is Stevenson's Treasure Island is entirely bereft of any aesthetic or progressive qualities; it is no paradise, no utopia" (14). The pirates' dismal selection of rations (goat meat, a few medicines and an already dwindling supply of powder and shot), fail to give the reader a great deal of faith in Hawkins and Silver's crew's ability to sustain themselves for any length of time. This is particularly the case given the character Ben Gunn's unfortunate condition - emaciated, dressed in tatters, and having evidently "gone mad" as a result of his time on the island. Treasure Island has the potential to essentially 'break' people then, or to turn them "inside out", to refer back to Auden's words. Jim Hawkins airs his concerns in his dialogue with Dr Livesey:

"Is this Ben Gunn a man?" he asked.

"I do not know, sir," said I. "I am not very sure whether he's sane."

"If there's any doubt about the matter," returned the doctor. "A man who has been three years biting his nails on a desert island, Jim, can't expect to appear as sane as you or me. It doesn't lie in human nature. (120)

In keeping with the theme of "human nature" and how exile on a desert island is hardly the ideal situation for maintaining one's sanity, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) provides a harrowing look at the ease with which order can break down into chaos. The children who have been abandoned on a seemingly deserted island after a plane crash, consider what key aspects societies require to function successfully: "Which is better--to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill?" [...] "Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?" (200) they muse. The boys decide on a conch shell to gesture towards a semblance of democracy. Only the person holding the shell at any given moment may be allowed to speak. Inevitably however, with the ultimate "smashing" of the conch, the main 'tie' to civilisation disintegrates. *Lord of the Flies* is technically *not* children's fiction, in that it was never written nor marketed for children. In this novel however, Golding is deeply interested in how children interact with each other in the absence of adults, and an island setting allows this theme to be explored particularly insightfully. The children on the island are "shaped" by their



situation and, despite attempts made to coordinate things by Ralph and Jack (their 'elected' leaders), the boys swiftly become increasingly feral and out of control. Notably, upon the shattering of the conch, democracy on the island gives way to Jack's bullying tyranny, until the arrival in the final chapter of a British Air Force officer who expresses grave embarrassment that "a pack of British boys couldn't put up a better show" (248). Arguably, the issue facing Jack and Ralph in *Lord of the Flies* relates to the organisation of space on the island. Heterotopias attempt to encourage transition from a space of chaotic governance and leadership to a mapped, organised one. Heterotopias in fiction demonstrate that space is never static, and, as Ryan Storment puts it, "there is a danger in a shifting definition or possible undoing of a site" (2007). This is exactly what we observe happening in Golding's novel, where even the crude vestiges of civilisation the boys have managed to uphold ultimately give way to anarchy.

The Swiss-Australian writer and illustrator Armin Greder's picture book *The Island* (2007) focuses on the arrival of a stranger, who washes up on an unnamed island only to be confronted by the townspeople's harsh and prejudicial treatment. The illustrations explore this dynamic in a particularly harrowing manner, with Greder's expressionistic drawings referencing, in one haunting frame, Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* (1893). The picture book explores fear and hatred of the Other, and collective behaviour in relation to island communities. Perhaps inevitably, there are also potential discussions stemming from this work in relation to migration and the treatment of refugees, and it has been used as a text to facilitate such dialogues in classroom contexts in both Australia and the UK. The theme of prejudice is particularly pervasive in this book, and even individuals who, we might assume, would be figures of decency, for example, the priest and teacher, become complicit in the cruel treatment of this stranger on the island. Not a single islander decides to break rank and come to the aid of the stranger, who is taunted, bullied and, in the final sequence, rejected fully and banished, once again into the ocean.

Lucas (2002), written by British YA author Kevin Brooks, focuses on many of the same themes as *The Island*, albeit in novel form. The novel focuses on the treatment of newcomers in small communities who, certainly in terms of the titular character, Lucas (a homeless Irish traveller seeking sanctuary on the island of Hale in southern England), become objects of fear and prejudice – seemingly a threat to the social order of the island on which the novel is set. In 2014, subsequent to his winning of the Carnegie Medal for his controversial novel, *The Bunker Diary* (2013), I was able to interview Brooks. (See *The Looking Glass*, [Vol 17, No 3, 2014](#)). Among other things, I questioned Brooks on the role of the island setting in *Lucas*:

Ben: I thought the description of place and landscape was particularly visceral in *Lucas*. What made you decide to set the novel on an island?

Kevin: One of the main themes in *Lucas* is the way societies react to outsiders and people they don't understand. The island setting in *Lucas* allowed me to focus on, and emphasise, the notion of an isolated culture. Similarly, this allowed me to explore the perspective of an outsider. To step back and look in at the world (through the eyes of the outsider-narrator), to me is much more interesting and enlightening, than if you belong to the world you're writing about. But also, on a personal level, it's just very natural for me to take the outsider's point of view (2014).

The notion of 'belonging' has evidently been of interest to Brooks personally then, which perhaps explains his interest in authoring a character such as Lucas in the eponymous novel. He also attributes the perspective of the 'outsider-narrator' to Caitlin who we initially meet when she and her father are en-route home to the island of Hale following a shopping trip to the mainland. Caitlin can be viewed as an outsider in various ways in the novel, but this is particularly evident in her refusal to participate in the islanders' collective mind-set of prejudice and hatred concerning Lucas. Throughout the novel, Caitlin displays the ability "to step back and look in at the world" and provides an astute commentary on Lucas's arrival and solo existence on the island, and the community's overtly negative reaction to his presence.



Caitlin introduces her island home by describing its natural beauty. Its "unmistakeable light" and "iridescent sheen" (13) contrasts starkly with the rather less celebratory actions of its inhabitants, who ultimately collude in trying to pursue Lucas off the island. She describes the island's severance from the mainland: "There's a high tide and the estuary rises a half a metre or so above the road and nothing can pass again until the tide goes out, then you know it's an island" (14). Thus, by the very nature of being an island, Hale is physically 'cut off' – 'other' from the mainland. In this way then, Brooks foregrounds the novel in what Maria Nikolajeva terms an "Othered setting" (89). In this way, an island such as Hale can again be interpreted as a heterotopia, a site of divergence; or, to again cite Foucault, of "deviation" (1967). This suggests why Brooks chose a setting such as Hale for the arrival of Lucas, whose status as Other (a homeless "gypsy" [158] traveller) suggests such a deviation from the static, settled culture of the mainland. If, however, Lucas seeks out Hale assuming that islands, due to their physical disconnectedness, will be more tolerant towards Otherness, he is unfortunately mistaken. His attempts to locate sanctuary are thwarted by a community suspicious of what Lucas describes as "things that don't fit":

"People don't like it when they don't know what you are. They don't like things that don't fit. It frightens them. They'd rather have a monster they know than a mystery they don't [...] The fear takes hold and spreads. It feeds on itself..." (148)

It is this sense of a 'collective mind' with its oppressive and exclusionary behaviours that, Caitlin suggests, has such an insidious influence on the island. In Dara Goldman's *Out of Bounds: Islands and the Demarcation of Identity* (2008), the author considers the inherent "Otherness of the island" (195) and discusses the manner in which notions of community and belonging are particularly concentrated in this "social space": "Within the community, shifting definitions of social space govern practices of inclusion and exclusion, internal hierarchies of privilege and access [and] codes of behaviour" (34). Apart from the link to the functioning of "heterotopias of deviation" (Foucault 1967), we might also consider the freighted nature of the language used in terms of how geographical distinctions could be said to mirror "social space". Islands are, by their definition, separate from the land-mass termed the 'mainland'. In fact, this label is alluded to on several occasions in *Lucas* (for example, pp. 15, 279, 282), and the use of the term 'main' can be interpreted as indicative of *mainstream* attitudes, or, to refer back to Goldman, "codes of behaviour" that an island may be viewed, (or view itself) as being outside of. In this way, 'main' can also be read as being indicative of normativity. Therefore, because an island is geographically removed from the 'mainland', this removal could be said to result in the development of a different 'kind' of community, and different types of attitudes regarding who does or does not belong.

In *Lucas*, the islanders' "codes of behaviour" are associated with their insularity and feelings of ownership: "This is our island. We live here, most of us were *born* here. This is our home ... you don't let shit into your own home, do you? You keep it out – right?" (188) For Brooks then, the island setting offers a unique microcosm through which to explore the attitudes of homogenous communities towards the Other. Hale also differs from the mainland in its lack of a functioning police force to address the behaviour of the islanders. As the novel progresses, the community's agenda becomes increasingly defined – to rid the island of the stranger in their midst. In the penultimate chapter, the "mob", described at this point by Caitlin as a "pack of jackals" (339), chase Lucas off the island and, echoing Greder's *The Island*, into the sea.

Ultimately in this article, I have shown how islands, far from being the sites of freedom and liberation the protagonists of these books initially hope for, in fact often become sites of imprisonment. On the islands explored, few rules govern existence other than what Martha Rainbolt terms "survival of the fittest" (223); order promptly disintegrates into chaos, power hierarchies can change in the blink of an eye, and mob rule dictates the fate of newcomers. Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" presents a pertinent illustration of the way in which the notion of 'utopia' is frequently disrupted in these texts, and how islands (envisioned as both physical and social spaces) present a particularly fertile setting for such subversion. Island narratives such as *Treasure Island*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Island* and *Lucas* each in their own way interrogate a number of key dualities inherent to the human experience – sameness and difference, power and control, order and chaos. In doing so, like the sea in the initial quotation from Auden, the reader witnesses characters becoming turned "inside out" (in terms of their



morals, beliefs and codes of behaviour), by virtue of their interactions(s) with island settings. Indeed, if as Roberta Seelinger-Trites argues, the fundamental duty of writing for young people is to “disturb the universe” (1998), I would argue that encounters with islands in children’s and YA fiction, certainly achieve this.

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