



Photo credit: Bruno de Hamel

## BIOGRAPHY

Richard Hughes (1900–1976) was a British writer whose most popular work was *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1929). It was turned into a 1965 film starring James Coburn and Anthony Quinn; the author Martin Amis played one of the children. Hughes also wrote a short novel about a ship caught in a storm (*In Transit*, forthcoming from NYRB Classics) and *The Fox in the Attic* (1961) and *The Wooden Shepherdess* (1973), the first two volumes of an unfinished trilogy that revolves around the story of Hitler's rise to power. Hughes was educated at Oxford and worked as a journalist before marrying the painter Frances Bazley, with whom he had five children. The family lived for a time in a castle in Wales; Dylan Thomas was a close neighbor. Hughes also wrote plays, short stories, and poems, as well as a collection of stories for children. In 1946 he was awarded the Order of the British Empire.

# A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA

by Richard Hughes

Introduction by Francine Prose

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“An adventure, a psychological deconstruction of childhood innocence, a fever dream, a laugh-out-loud comedy, and there are also Captain Blood-style fight scenes.” —Alice Sebold, “The Book You Want to Read,” *Entertainment Weekly*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica* is a sinister yet spirited adventure on the high seas that has been hailed by the Modern Library as one of the hundred best novels of the twentieth century.

The Bas-Thornton family is from England but lives on a neglected estate in Jamaica in the nineteenth century. When a hurricane destroys their home, Mr. and Mrs. Bas-Thornton decide to send their five children back to England, while they remain behind. The Bas-Thorntons, along with two other children, are entrusted to the bumbling and depraved Captain Marpole to ensure their safe passage to England. They are not long at sea, however, before their ship is captured by pirates and, in an absurd twist, the children are left behind with the pirates—to the latter's considerable dismay.

Merry savages that they are, the children adapt to life on the schooner astonishingly quickly and a complicated mutual affection develops between pirates and children. But the pirates' next conquest spurs a shocking act: in the first instance of bloodshed ever on board the ship, the captain of the captured vessel is brutally murdered by one of the children, and from then on, the mood aboard the schooner grows swiftly more menacing. Up until its violent conclusion, this provocative masterpiece calls into question the very nature of guilt and innocence.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. Adults have a tendency to sentimentalize childhood, and Mr. and Mrs. Bas-Thornton frequently misunderstand their children. What are some instances of these misunderstandings? What do they prove about the children? How separate are child and adult spheres in the novel? Do you think the book offers a realistic portrayal of children and childhood?
2. The Parker sisters make a cameo appearance in the first few pages of the book and then are not heard from again. Why did Hughes include them? What effect does their story have on our expectations of human nature and the environment the children are growing up in? How does the description of them help to set the tone for the book?
3. “It is a fact that it takes experience before one can realize what is a catastrophe and what is not. Children have little faculty of distinguishing between disaster and the ordinary course of their lives” [p. 43]. The children's memories of their former life fade and they adjust to life on the pirate schooner remarkably quickly. Except for Margaret, they seem largely oblivious to the traumas they have suffered. Does this seem believable? Is their fondness for the pirates realistic? How does Emily prioritize the significance of her experiences? What events loom largest for her? Is this surprising?

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

**The Fox in the Attic**

Richard Hughes  
(introduction by Hilary Mantel)

**The Wooden Shepherdess**

Richard Hughes  
(introduction by Hilary Mantel)

**The Go-Between**

L. P. Hartley  
(introduction by Colm Tóibín)

**Alfred and Guinevere**

James Schuyler  
(introduction by John Ashbery)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*

Bhapsi Sidwa, *Cracking India*

J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

## OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

**A High Wind in Jamaica**, starring Anthony Quinn and James Coburn, directed by Alexander Mackendrick (film, 1965), 1970)

4. Captain Jonsen is not the fearsome pirate typically depicted in literature. He is a “clumsy great fellow with a sad, silly face” who shuffles around the deck in a pair of gigantic Moorish slippers [p. 72]. How else does he fail to conform to the stereotype of a pirate? By thwarting our expectations, what does Hughes seek to do? How does the relationship between the pirates and the children change over time? How do their dealings with one another become increasingly morally complex?

5. When Captain Jonsen stops in Santa Lucia to auction the cargo stolen from the *Clorinda*, the children take an active role in auctioning the goods and “thoroughly enjoyed themselves,” prancing around in turbans and fancy dress [p. 100]. They later help the pirates trick the crew of the Dutch steamer and they fantasize about becoming pirates when they grow up. What are we to make of the cheerful depravity of the children? How unwitting are they really? What does their complicity say about human nature?

6. Margaret, who is the eldest child, is alienated from the other children almost as soon as they are kidnapped. Describe how her initial reaction to the kidnapping differs from the other children’s. Why are the other children so cruel to Margaret?

7. What were Captain Jonsen’s intentions on the day that Emily bit his thumb? On what level was she aware that something was awry when he approached her? Why did their interpretations of the event differ? How threatened did Emily ever really feel? What are some examples of other sexual undercurrents that run through the book?

8. John’s unexplained disappearance is taboo among the children: “Yet, as if by some mute flash of understanding, no one commented on his absence” [p. 111]. How are the children seemingly able to forget him? Do they really? Why don’t they tell anyone about him after they are rescued by the steamship? What are other examples of repression in the novel?

9. Animals figure into the novel a great deal, from the lizards Emily captures in Jamaica to the violent death of Tabby, the monkey with the gangrenous tail, the beloved pig who is eventually slaughtered, and the lion and tiger captured from the Dutch steamship. What significance does each of these animals have in the story? What do they tell us about the nature of the world described in the novel?

10. Childhood is described as an “incessant, automatic discharge of energy” [p. 186]. Describe how Emily’s growing self-awareness changes her and makes the above statement less true about her. How developed is her conscience in contrast to those of the younger children? What implications does this have for her choice about which information to reveal and which to disclose, first on board the steamship and then in London?

11. Emily is described as being young for her age “due to, not in spite of, the adventures she had been through” [p. 191]. How is this true? How much of a burden on her is the secret that she keeps about the murder?

12. The lawyer for the children tells their father that children can never be counted on in a trial: “They say what they think you want them to say. And then they say what they think the opposing counsel wants them to say too—if they like his face” [p. 269]. How has this been true throughout the story? Is the remarkable fluidity with which the children adapt to both new environments and adult expectations a sign of fragility or resilience?

13. Soon after the children are reunited with their parents in England, Mr. Thornton begins to question Emily’s innocence and to fear her: “He realized, with a sudden painful shock, that he was afraid of her!” [p. 271]. On the way back home after the trial, “He even shrank back, physically, from touching his child Emily” [p. 276]. Do you think his feelings are fair? Do you think that Emily knew what she was doing at the trial? How culpable is Emily in the death of the Dutch captain? Why does Emily betray the pirates? Does she do it only to save herself, or was she genuinely ignorant of the consequences of her actions? Do you think that the pirates deserved to die? Are the children more amoral than the pirates?

14. Hughes’s novel has a nightmarish quality. How does the language and imagery help to create this effect? What are instances of particularly stunning imagery?