

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO WILLIAM GOLDING'S



LORD OF
THE FLIES

“The Connell Guides are brief, attractive,
erudite, and to the point. Bravo!”

SIR TOM STOPPARD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by John Carey

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Connell Guide
to
William Golding's*

Lord of the Flies

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Introduction

In 1954 William Golding was 43 years old and a nobody. He had been demobbed from the navy at the end of World War Two and returned to his pre-war job teaching English at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury – a small, single-sex boys' grammar school. He was not much good as a schoolmaster, and had never really wanted to be one. The boys at Bishop Wordsworth's called him "Scruff" because he was so untidy and disorganised. Always hard up, he lived in what he called a "lousy council flat" with his wife, Ann, and their two young children, David and Judy.

Before the war he had never thought of being a writer. He had wanted to be an actor, and got some small parts, but wasn't a success. After the war he wrote three books – one about a holiday he spent with his family in an old converted lifeboat, the second an adventure story which he later described as "Arthur Ransome for grown-ups", and the third a novel about Bishop Wordsworth's School (called, in the novel, Stillbourne Grammar). He sent them to several publishers, all of whom turned them down. They have never been published. In 1952 he finished the novel that was to become *Lord of the Flies*, and sent it to five publishers and a literary agency. They all rejected it. The sixth publisher he tried was Faber and Faber, and the professional reader they employed

to assess new work wrote her opinion on the typescript:

Time the Future. Absurd & uninteresting fantasy about the explosion of an atom bomb on the Colonies. A group of children who land in jungle country near New Guinea. Rubbish & dull.

This was followed by an R, signifying "Reject". A new recruit at Faber and Faber – he had been in publishing for only a few weeks – was a man called Charles Monteith. By chance, out of curiosity, he retrieved Golding's typescript from the reject pile and took it home to read. He was instantly impressed. But he had great difficulty in persuading the directors of Faber and Faber (who included T.S. Eliot) that it would be worthwhile for him to meet Golding and get him to revise the novel with a view to publication. In the weeks that followed he persuaded Golding to make drastic changes (described later in this book). The letters that passed between them are now in the Faber and Faber archive, and show Golding agreeing, sometimes reluctantly, to every one of Monteith's proposals.

When the revised novel was published in September 1954 the poet Stevie Smith greeted it as "this beautiful and desperate book, something quite out of the ordinary". Other reviewers praised it as "a fragment of nightmare" and "a work of universal significance". E.M. Forster put it top of his books

of the year. Sales were good, though not outstanding, but they started to soar about the time of Golding's first visit to America in 1961. (He was invited to teach for two semesters at a women's liberal arts college in Virginia.) The American paperback had sold half a million by the end of 1962.

In the early 1960s cultural commentators noted that *Lord of the Flies* was replacing Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as the bible of the American adolescent. The transference from the woes of Salinger's spoiled, self-pitying teenager to Golding's rigorous confrontation with evil amounted, it was observed, to a "mutation" in American culture. The anti-war tenor of *Lord of the Flies* helped to ensure its profound impact on the young at a time when the Cold War was hotting up. Construction of the Berlin Wall began in August 1961; the Cuban Missile Crisis came to a head in October 1962.

By the end of the 1960s UK sales had reached a million; American sales 2.5 million. Since then Golding's masterpiece has established itself as a modern classic. Appearing on countless school and college syllabuses worldwide, the novel has been translated into every major language and global sales are estimated at 20 million. In 1983 William Golding was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

A summary of the plot

The novel is set in the future, during a nuclear war. A group of English boys, from different schools, are flown to safety via Gibraltar and Addis Ababa. But the plane carrying them is attacked and the pilot releases the "passenger tube" with the boys in it. It lands on an uninhabited – and unidentified – Pacific island, where a storm carries the tube out to sea with some of the boys still inside. No more is heard of them. All this happens before the story starts.

When it does begin we meet two boys, Ralph and Piggy, on the beach. Ralph finds a sea-shell or "conch" and blows through it to attract the attention of the other survivors, who gradually appear. We never learn how many there are, and we are told the names of only a few of them. But they include a number who are scarcely more than infants (called "littluns" by the older boys) and also a cathedral choir, led by their head chorister, Jack. Among the choristers is a boy called Simon who is wiser and more mature than the others and rather solitary. He is subject to fits or seizures during which he briefly loses consciousness.

The boys elect Ralph as their leader but hostility soon erupts between him and Jack, who believes he should have been leader. The boys manage to light a fire, using the lens of Piggy's spectacles. But it gets out of control and burns part of the forest, apparently killing some of the littluns,

though it is not known how many. After that they light their fire on one of the island's peaks, hoping that its smoke may attract the attention of any passing ship. Jack and his choristers undertake to tend the fire. However, when a distant ship is sighted it emerges that Jack and his choristers had let the fire go out and had gone off hunting the pigs that run wild on the island, so the chance of rescue is lost. The enmity between Ralph and Jack intensifies after this.

The smaller boys are terrified that there is a "beast" on the island, which perhaps comes up out of the sea at night. The older boys ridicule this idea. One night, unknown to the boys, there is an air-battle high above the island and a dead airman lands by parachute on one of the island's peaks. His parachute tangles in the trees and keeps him upright, so he seems to be sitting, as if alive. Making a search of the island, Ralph and Jack come upon his corpse and both flee in terror, thinking it is the beast.

At an assembly, which Jack calls, he demands another vote to see if the boys now want him, not Ralph, as leader. However, he loses a second time, and runs off in anger to make his own camp. He and his choristers become half-naked, spear-carrying "savages", their faces daubed with war-paint. In a raid on Ralph's camp they carry away burning wood to light their own fire. They hunt and kill a wild pig and, lured by Jack's offer of roast

pork, most of the other boys go over to his side, leaving only Piggy, Simon and a few others with Ralph. When Jack invites everyone to a roast pork feast even Ralph and Piggy accept. Jack leaves part of the pig's carcass as an offering to the beast, and he impales its head on a stake stuck into the ground.

Meanwhile Simon has gone off alone, and comes across the impaled pig's head, which, in a mysterious scene, seems to speak to him. He loses consciousness for a time. When he recovers he climbs the mountain and finds the dead airman. He is not afraid, however, but calmly loosens the parachute cords so that the wind will carry the corpse out to sea. He then goes to join the others and tells them that the beast does not exist. However, he arrives in the middle of a terrifying thunderstorm and the boys, mistaking him in the darkness for the beast, set upon him and beat him to death.

Afterwards Jack and his followers retire to their mountain stronghold, but they make a night-time raid on Ralph's camp to steal Piggy's glasses, leaving him almost blind. When Ralph, with Piggy, approaches the stronghold to parley, one of Jack's followers dislodges a great rock that comes bounding down the mountain and kills Piggy. Ralph runs away, alone, and is hunted by Jack and his savages. In an attempt to smoke him out of his hiding place they set the whole island ablaze. Exhausted and closely pursued, Ralph reaches the

beach and stumbles. He – and we – expect he will be killed. But he looks up and there is a Royal Navy officer. Behind him, out at sea, is a cruiser, and drawn up on the beach is a cutter with a rating holding a sub-machine gun. The smoke from the burning island has brought rescue.

What is *Lord of the Flies* about?

The usual answer is that *Lord of the Flies* is about original sin. Golding said in a 1985 interview:

I'm convinced of original sin. That is, I'm convinced of it in the Augustinian way. It is Augustine, isn't it, who was born a twin, and his earliest memory was pushing his twin from his mother's breast? I think that because children are helpless and vulnerable, the most terrible things can be done by children to children.

Original sin is the Christian doctrine that mankind is inherently sinful as a result of Adam eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The doctrine dates from the 2nd century and has been variously interpreted by theologians. St Augustine (354-430) was a leading exponent of the doctrine.

Golding's reference to him does not suggest that he knew much about Augustine. It is a muddled misremembering of a passage in the *Confessions* where Augustine writes:

I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. He could not yet speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at his brother sharing his mother's milk.

Augustine believed that, because of original sin, infants who die unbaptized will be damned. Asked about this in the 1985 interview Golding quickly dissociated himself from all such theological issues, declaring that theology was “useless” because it dealt with “questions that cannot be answered”.

He went on to protest that he had been “rather lumbered with original sin”, implying that he resented the idea that he was a one-subject novelist. In fact, *Lord of the Flies* is about other things beside original sin, as we shall see, and it is not about original sin in the strict theological sense, which was of no interest to Golding.

All the same, “terrible things” being done “by children to children” would be an accurate summary of *Lord of the Flies*. What's more, Golding seems to imply that small children are by nature cruel, and that it is only adult discipline that teaches them to restrain their natural cruelty.

How does Golding show that small children are by nature cruel?

One passage that shows this comes in Chapter 4. Three of the smallest boys (“littluns”), Henry, Johnny and Percival, are playing when two older boys, Roger and Maurice, who happen to be passing, deliberately kick over their sandcastles. Sand gets into Percival’s eye and he begins to whimper:

Maurice hurried away. In his other life Maurice had received chastisement for filling a younger eye with sand. Now, though there was no parent to let fall a heavy hand, Maurice still felt the unease of wrong-doing. At the back of his mind formed the uncertain outlines of an excuse.

The implication here is that what we call morality is not innate but the consequence of conditioning – in this case, the imposition of an adult code of behaviour that prohibits cruelty to younger children.

Golding reinforces the point by showing, at the end of the next paragraph, that a child too young to have been subjected to such conditioning is cruel by nature. The child is Johnny. He was the first child to appear when Ralph blew the conch in



James Aubrey (left) as Ralph and Hugh Edwards (right) as Piggy in Peter Brook's 1963 film adaptation of Lord of the Flies

Chapter 1. We are told there that he is “perhaps six years” old, and that he is “innocent”. However, in Chapter 4 we find he is not. After Maurice has left, it is Johnny who takes over as Percival’s tormentor:

Percival finished his whimper and went on playing, for the tears had washed the sand away. Johnny watched him with china-blue eyes; then began to fling up sand in a shower, and presently Percival was crying again.

So although Golding said he had no patience with theology, he seems to agree with Augustine that