

The Swiss Family Robinson Short Guide

The Swiss Family Robinson by Johann Rudolf Wyss

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Overview

Although *The Swiss Family Robinson* may seem to be old-fashioned in its outlook, it is still widely read and available in several different editions. For all its quaintness, it is a wonderful tale of adventure. A family of six are tossed upon an Edenlike island, where they gradually find everything they need for their comfort. The worst disaster that occurs during their ten-year stay is the loss of their donkey to a thirty-foot boa constrictor, the only monster in the entire story.

The story proceeds episodically through ten years of adventures. It is quite possible to choose a chapter to read at random without considering the rest of the story, for the central plot is slight. The family—a father, mother, and four sons—is based on the Wyss family.

The characterizations are not strong, but young readers easily identify with the group. The reader can easily become any of the children living in the fabulous tree house or in the wonderful cave during the rainy season. For the young person with a creative imagination, *The Swiss Family Robinson* is a wonderful storehouse of entertainment.

About the Author

Johann Rudolph Wyss was born in Bern, Switzerland, on March 4, 1782. He was educated in Germany and became a philosophy professor at the Bern Academy. He enjoyed studying Swiss history and folklore, and he published several books and articles on the subject in literary magazines. He wrote the words to the Swiss national anthem, "Rufst du, mein Vaterland" ("Callest Thou, My Fatherland"). He died in Bern on March 21, 1830.

It is almost certain that Johann Rudolph Wyss is not the actual author of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. He had the novel published in 1812 with his own name on the title page as the author, but in a second edition, he credited his father, Johann David Wyss (1743-1818), with "all that is original, instructive, and best in this book."

Johann Rudolph Wyss probably edited, adapted, and revised the work. The original manuscript is in his father's handwriting.

The story of the composition of this work, as discovered by critics and historians, is a fascinating one. Johann David Wyss was the pastor at Bern's Protestant Cathedral. He had four sons on whom he lavished a great deal of time and attention. An unusually close-knit family, they played sports and read and studied together.

The boys were fond of travel and adventure books, especially Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the tale of a man stranded on a desert island. When their father heard a factual account of a Swiss pastor marooned on an island near New Guinea, he was inspired to create his own narrative, with his own family as characters. The story was a great success with the family, and Wyss began to write it down, continuing until he had a manuscript of 841 pages, including sixty illustrations by the third son, Johann Emanuel. The story was composed orally, with the sons apparently adding their own ideas as they went along. Thus the finished tale is truly a family collaboration.



Setting

The story begins on the seventh day that the Robinsons spend confined to a wrecked ship. The father gathers together his wife and four young sons and starts planning their escape from the ship, which now rests on a reef. There is never any doubt that they will succeed.

Creature comforts come first: they must have a good supper. Then in a remarkably short time the father designs and builds a raft of half-tubs, and taking everything useful they can possibly carry from the wreck, the family sails from the reefed ship to the island paradise where they spend the next ten years.

Nature smiles upon the family from the very beginning. They find a natural harbor, where it is easy to beach their raft.

In no time at all they have pitched a comfortable tent, and the mother is once again busy preparing supper.

The island itself is so important to the story that it almost assumes the stature of a character. Every possible need of the family is satisfied. The island is a most unlikely place; there are flamingoes pen, guins, giant turtles, coconuts, gourds, cotton—all in a wondrous disarray.

Through the ten years of their isolation, the family devote their efforts to adapting to the environment and using the natural resources to construct a comfortable life. The possibility of rescue is practically never mentioned, so that the eventual arrival of an English ship does not constitute a climax to the story but just another quiet unfolding. Two sons return to Europe; the father, mother, and two other sons remain in the new land they have created: "may New Switzerland flourish and prosper— good, happy, and free!"

Social Sensitivity

In no way do ten years of isolation destroy the social fabric of the Robinson family. The children and adults are essentially happy; there is never any lack of work or play or sport. The children are not merely lectured about old-fashioned morality and purity, they learn from the parents' example. Obedience to parents and hard work are the keys to happiness.

Some readers may object to scenes that portray the killing of animals. Some may be alarmed at the freedom the four young Robinson boys have with firearms, always shooting first and asking questions later; one wonders that they do not shoot one another. Attempts to make light of the death of a mother monkey are not really successful, and the massacre of the great ape is revolting, as are some other passages about the riddance of objectionable birds.

Many commentators have noted that when they read *The Swiss Family Robinson* as adults, the deficiencies of the work become so obvious that it becomes difficult to take the book seriously, but that in spite of all its shortcomings, those who love the work as children continue to enjoy it as adults.

Literary Qualities

The Swiss Family Robinson belongs to a class of stories that became popular throughout Europe after the publication of Robinson Crusoe in 1719. The success of Defoe's book attracted many imitators. Epic fiction in the manner of Defoe's masterpiece was known at that time as "robinsoniad."

Probably the most amazing feature of The Swiss Family Robinson is that it has been a popular success for such a long time, even though it has little literary merit. The deficiencies simply do not matter. There is not much discernible plot in the conventional sense; the story begins with the shipwreck on the tropical island and proceeds placidly and episodically through the next ten years.

There is no rising action. Some adventures are slightly more exciting than others; some episodes are interrupted by long instructive digressions. At the end of the story an English ship arrives, and two of the children plan to return to Europe, the oldest son with a fiancée whom he has rescued from "a burning rock." This incident could be considered the climax of the tale, but it is really scarcely more than a ripple on the serene surface.

This episodic style has its merits. For instance, many young readers of The Swiss Family Robinson enjoy rereading parts of the story. It is easy to enjoy reading just a favorite chapter or two, because what precedes and what follows scarcely matters.

Other weaknesses include the unconvincing characterizations and the father's constant moralizing and didacticism. But most readers are very tolerant of the novel's shortcomings.

Even today, one is likely to find old translations of this work in libraries.

Some of them have an appealing quaint style, but other stylistic devices soon become wearisome. For instance, in the 1940 translation edited by William H. G. Kingston and published by Grosset and Dunlap, almost everything that occurs is described as "capital": "it [a gourd] makes a capital soap tureen" or "that's a capital plan of yours, father." Many newer editions of the story have adjusted the language for various reading levels, providing a variety of versions of the original novel.

Themes and Characters

The Robinson family consists of a father, a mother, and four sons: Fritz, Jack, Ernest, and Franz. The characterizations of the sons are vague, although they do have some unique qualities. The mother is strong and quiet with virtually no discernible personality.

The pastor-father occupies the chief role. He has an incredible knowledge of nature and identifies every tree, herb, and flower for his sons. He uses the Socratic method to teach his family, helping them find their own answers to their questions.

Often the action of the story is interrupted for one of the father's moralizing digressions. He keeps a journal through the ten years of their confinement on the island, and at the end of the tale he gives the manuscript to his sons who are leaving for Europe. His remarks as he hands over his journal reflect the purpose of the book, as well as late eighteenth-century ideas about religion and morality: It will make me happy to think that my simple narrative may lead some [children] to observe how blessed are the results of patient continuance in well-doing, what benefits arise from the thoughtful application of knowledge and science, and how good and pleasant a thing it is when brethren dwell together in unity, under the eye of the parental love.

Several commentators have noted the influence of the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) on the didactic, or moralizing, purpose of the narrative. Rousseau's ideas are particularly evident in the lack of method in the education of the boys, the mildly rationalistic religion of the pastorfather, and the emphasis on the useful and the practical. In fact, Rousseau had become particularly interested in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the host of imitations that followed it. Rousseau regarded civilization as the root of all evil and believed that humans in their natural state were good. Thus, he was much interested in Defoe's story. *Robinson Crusoe* had to learn just as Rousseau thought children should learn: nature, kind to *Crusoe*, was the teacher.

All these ideas are reflected in Wyss's didactic tale.

Adaptations

There are several film versions of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. A Walt Disney color version, made in 1960, directed by Ken Annakin, and starring John Mills and Dorothy McGuire, is available from Disney Films, Inc. A black-and-white version from RKO (1940) was directed by Edward Ludwig. It stars Thomas Mitchell and Edna Best and is available from Budget Films. The weakest adaptation was a 1975 made-for-television movie directed by Harry Harris and starring Martin Milner and Pat Delany.



Topics for Discussion

1. Consider the many different kinds of animals and plants found on the island. Do you think that such a place might actually exist, or is it a complete fantasy?
2. One critic, Charles Nodier, has asserted that the Robinson family's adventures represent the entire history of humankind: "time summed up in a brief succession of years—the prolonged and patient tale of humanity set forth in the internal economy of a small household."

What do you think of this theory?

3. There is so much instruction about some of the discoveries on the island that sometimes the action of the story comes to a stop for a lesson. Do you find this annoying? Would you like to take out some or all of the lessons?
4. Do you have a favorite character among the four sons? Does any of them seem to have a more fully developed personality than the others?
5. Why do you think that *The Swiss Family Robinson* has been such a popular novel for so long?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and compare it with The Swiss Family Robinson.
2. Write a short report about the authorship of The Swiss Family Robinson. You may want to consult Robert L. Wyss's "The Real Swiss Wysses," published in Life 37 (December 27, 1954): 63-64.
3. Johann David Wyss is believed to have been influenced in his writings by Jean Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher who believed that people are good in their natural state and are corrupted by society. What adventures in the novel seem to you to be influenced by this view? You might want to have a look at some of Rousseau's writings, such as The Social Contract (1762) and Emile(1762).
4. The father of the family uses what is referred to as the Socratic method in his instructions to his sons. What is this method of education? How does he adapt it? Imagine yourself as a science teacher and plan a lesson or two of instruction on one of the subjects found in The Swiss Family Robinson.
5. Watch one of the film versions of The Swiss Family Robinson and compare it to the book. What has been changed?

Why? Do you prefer the film or the novel?

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