



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on May 12, 2020

## Lord of the Flies? What REALLY Happened When Six Boys Were Stranded on a Deserted Island

If you've attended school during the last half century, you likely know the story: Supposedly civilized schoolboys are stranded on an uninhabited island, organize and make plans to survive, but soon descend into barbarity, warfare, and murder as the "beast" within asserts its primal influence.

That's the fictional tale presented in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), anyway, considered by many one of the 20th century's great novels. But the real story of what happened when a group of boys was stranded on a deserted island, just 11 years after the book's publication, is quite different. It's an amazing, touching story of not just survival, but also faith, kindness, resolve, and discipline. In fact, it can make you wonder whether *Lord of the Flies* (LOTF) had as much "to do with Golding's twisted psyche," as American Thinker's Andrea Widburg [puts it](#), as with anything reflecting man's nature or modern civilization.



As Widburg [writes](#), "Golding's book is in the news again because [an article in The Guardian](#) looks at 'The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when six boys were shipwrecked for 15 months.' It turns out that nice boys, raised in a traditional Christian environment, survive surprisingly well."

"The article's author, Rutger Bregman, had read Golding's book as a teen, and wondered, as everyone does, whether we all have a bit of Nazi hiding within us," Widburg continues. "After all, Golding himself confessed, 'I have always understood the Nazis because I am of that sort by nature.' For most Westerners, the book was a 'We have met the enemy, and he is us' sort of read."

So Bregman wanted to learn if Golding's thesis had ever been put to the test in real life. He was shocked to find it had, in 1965, when six Catholic schoolboys from Tonga found themselves drifting helplessly in the Pacific Ocean in a boat disabled during a storm.

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Bregman was able to track down and interview two of the people involved: Australian sea captain Peter Warner, who stumbled upon the boys' island and rescued them; and Mano Totau, one of the shipwrecked lads. As Bregman relates:

"We drifted for eight days," Mano told me. "Without food. Without water." The boys tried catching fish. They managed to collect some rainwater in hollowed-out coconut shells and shared it equally



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between them, each taking a sip in the morning and another in the evening.

When they finally spotted land, it turned out to be just a little speck in the Pacific named 'Ata. As Bregman also tells us, "These days, 'Ata is considered uninhabitable. But 'by the time we arrived,' Captain Warner wrote in his memoirs, 'the boys had set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gymnasium with curious weights, a badminton court, chicken pens and a permanent fire, all from handiwork, an old knife blade and much determination.'"

The character and discipline necessary to create the above little society were also illustrated by Bregman:

The kids agreed to work in teams of two, drawing up a strict roster for garden, kitchen and guard duty. Sometimes they quarrelled, but whenever that happened they solved it by imposing a time-out. Their days began and ended with song and prayer. Kolo fashioned a makeshift guitar from a piece of driftwood, half a coconut shell and six steel wires salvaged from their wrecked boat — an instrument Peter has kept all these years — and played it to help lift their spirits. And their spirits needed lifting. All summer long it hardly rained, driving the boys frantic with thirst. They tried constructing a raft in order to leave the island, but it fell apart in the crashing surf.

Worst of all, Stephen slipped one day, fell off a cliff and broke his leg. The other boys picked their way down after him and then helped him back up to the top. They set his leg using sticks and leaves. "Don't worry," Sione joked. "We'll do your work, while you lie there like King Taufa'ahau Tupou himself!"

They survived initially on fish, coconuts, tame birds (they drank the blood as well as eating the meat); seabird eggs were sucked dry. Later, when they got to the top of the island, they found an ancient volcanic crater, where people had lived a century before. There the boys discovered wild taro, bananas and chickens (which had been reproducing for the 100 years since the last Tongans had left).

By the time Warner found the kids, they'd been given up for dead and funerals had been held for them. But as much as their rescue was joyous, their story is uplifting, belying the dark portrayal of man's nature in LOTF.

That dark view isn't surprising, though, coming from Golding. Widburg points out how Golding admitted in private papers that he tried to rape a 15-year-old girl when he was 18.

"Further revelations are equally grotesque and disturbing," she writes. "Golding, a schoolteacher, also confessed that he enjoyed dividing his students in gangs and encouraging them to attack each other."

"His vaunted novel reflected *him*," Widburg concludes, "not the still-civilized parts of the Western world."

In fairness, I suspect the truth lies somewhere in the middle. First, there are differences between the Tongan boys' and Golding's stories. The LOTF involves lads 12 and under, while the Tongans ranged in age from 13 to 16; moreover, the latter were half a dozen in number, while the LOTF's (though specificity isn't provided) involved perhaps a couple dozen or more boys.

Another major difference is that the Tongans were boys of faith, as evidenced by their twice-daily songs and prayers. And as someone close to me once put it, "People are barbarians without God."

The truth is that man is capable of brutality and beauty, vice and virtue, heinousness and holiness. The Tongan event is reality; the LOTF is realistic.



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My major issue here isn't with LOTF; it's that it shouldn't be taught in schools. Don't get me wrong, from what I remember, it's a well-written, captivating book. But the question is: What do kids actually learn from it?

LOTF is much like *The Catcher in the Rye* or *The Little Prince*: a trendy work that entered curricula because it became akin to a fad. As an ex-Ivy League academic who grew up reading *The Catcher in the Rye* when it was still fresh in the '50s told me, "We all wanted to be Holden Caulfield" (a teenager and the book's main character).

So the kids back then thought it was cool, grew up but not wise, and those who became educators started teaching it. It's much like a *Hunger Games* fan becoming a teacher and putting that work in the curriculum.

The issue is that none of these books effectively teach what must be instilled in all people, those things that would be on the ingredients label if morality came in a jar: virtues. These were taught many years ago — when virtue was still recognized and valued (before we started talking only about "values") — via poems such as "[Casabianca](#)" or Rudyard Kipling's "[If](#)." (I examined this "killing" of our heroes in "[Where Have You Gone, George Washington?](#)")

But in those days, people could believe in the reflections of Truth called "virtues" because they believed in Truth. Today, awash in relativism, they exchange the true for the trendy, the eternal for the ephemeral.

Experiencing can be believing, though (with virtues as with anything else). A good start might be to, instead of teaching *Lord of the Flies*, have kids read about some Tongan boys who worshipped the Lord. After all, whom would we rather they copy?

*Image: KieselUndStein/iStock/Getty Images Plus*

*Selwyn Duke (@[SelwynDuke](#)) has written for The New American for more than a decade. He has also written for The Hill, Observer, The American Conservative, WorldNetDaily, American Thinker, and many other print and online publications. In addition, he has contributed to college textbooks published by Gale-Cengage Learning, has appeared on television, and is a frequent guest on radio.*



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