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Their Inner Beasts: ‘Lord of the Flies’ Six Decades Later

“Lord of the Flies” was published in 1954, the year that I turned 17, and I read it not long after. I was in the habit then (as I still am today) of finding, in each book I read, the fictional character with whom I identified — the one with whom I would travel. If you are new to this book, as I was then, you will meet Ralph right up front. I felt an immediate kinship with Ralph, even before I knew his name. He is the first character introduced, and for a few pages he is called only by his description: “the fair boy.” I could relate to that. I was also “fair,” which I took to mean blond, and, though I wouldn’t have thought this through at the time, I played fair. I followed the rules. It seemed Ralph did too.

Yes, Ralph: Soon he also had a name. And soon thereafter, he began to have a personality, and it was one that I found likable; he had a sense of humor, chortling with laughter as he blew farting sounds into the conch. And then — yes, this appealed to me greatly — he took charge. He established order, made rules, saw to everyone’s well-being and, with very little opposition, was chosen to be chief. Me? I was a follower, always, not a leader; but I secretly yearned to be the kind of kid who would be chosen as chief.

Next you meet Piggy. Piggy made me squirm a little. I sympathized with him; he was clearly bright and well intentioned, but needy. And in some ways he was uncomfortably like the parts of me that I thought needed changing. Like Piggy, I was something of an outsider, always. In the previous four years I had attended four different schools, and the process of learning to fit in was too familiar to me; now, as a young student at a very large university, I felt as vulnerable as Piggy and disliked him for that reason — he revealed too much about my own self.

As for Jack? It was clear to me right off that Jack Merridew was not to be trusted; for one thing, the black cloak he wore gave me the creeps. And he was described as ugly, with a “crumpled and freckled” face and eyes that could turn angry.

If Jack was scary, and Piggy was pitiful, what about Simon? You may not notice Simon at first. I myself found that there was an intriguing quality to Simon, who seemed so quiet — something of a loner, as I was, and still am — and who had, without any explanation, fainted briefly and then revived with a smile. I could tell he was probably someone worth paying attention to. But no, I had chosen Ralph. I stuck with Ralph. Ralph was my guy.

And, oh my, the island was my place: the waterfalls and butterflies, the endless edible fruit, the soft sand, the clear blue pools and the pink cliffs. I settled in comfortably. I was in a New England college dorm room in winter, but I might have been smeared with sunscreen and lying on a towel; it felt that luxurious, that comfortable.

Until.

I have not been as jolted, before or since, by a shift in a book’s tone, by the ominous awareness that things are going to turn very, very bad. Thinking about it now, I try to identify the passage that first brought me up short. It happens early. It happens when Jack, he of the crumpled face and angry eyes, fails to kill a piglet: “He snatched his knife out of the sheath and slammed it into a tree trunk. Next time there would be no mercy.”

A piglet would eventually die. And others would as well. No mercy.

As the boys in the book deteriorated further and further into chaos and violence, I began to notice Simon more and more. Furtive, quiet, he seemed to be trying to alert my guy, Ralph, and by extension, me, the reader, to something. “Maybe there is a beast,” Simon suggested. “What I mean is . . . maybe it’s only us.” Beasts? All of us?

Today’s young readers, inundated as they have been recently by violent apocalyptic books, probably cannot imagine the effect William Golding’s novel had on the innocent and introspective girl that I was then. I would look down from my dormitory room window onto a campus dominated by fraternities with their obscure, occasionally cruel, rituals. Golding’s fable began to take on a more complicated meaning for me. I was shocked.

And rereading it today, more than 60 years later, in the midst of global saber-rattling, I still am. I no longer identify with Ralph and his helpless attempts at order and civility. I no longer even pity Piggy, clutching his broken “specs” and blindly following the nearest leader. I have little sympathy now for the smallest boys — the “littluns” — who prance behind whoever promises most.

I am left with only one character whom I loathe, and will always. He appears only briefly — I leave you to find him on your own — and he above all the others makes me question what civilization actually means: a spotless uniform, a dignified posture and a set of elaborate rules? How dare he?

But as for the children, I find myself if not forgiving them, at least despairing that circumstances led them to such a hell. I see all of them too often today — posturing for the cameras. And my heart goes out now to Simon, who knew, who tried to say, of the Beast, “it’s only us,” and no one would listen.

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A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 29, 2016, on Page 29 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: ‘Lord of the Flies’ 60 Years Later.

1. Annotate the article above.

2. Summarize the article in three sentences or more in the space below.

3. As one of the young readers Lowry talked about, did the violence affect you in a similar way?

4. Do you see connections from the book Lord of the Flies to the world around you?

5. Who do you think is the one character Lowry “loathes” or hates? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_