

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* @300
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Over 300 years ago, Daniel Defoe immortalized the story of Robinson Crusoe with the publication of *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*—creating long tradition of stories about being marooned in an inhospitable place understood as the Robinsonade genre. While the intimate details of *Crusoe*'s story might be unfamiliar, many of its adaptations like *The Martian* or *Cast Away* still persist. Those are just a few, if you look closely enough, there are religious, survivalist, social gospel, colonizationist and anti-colonial, martially masculine, feminist Robinsonades, in overlapping circles emanating out from this central text. The best estimates place these variants in the hundreds. Yet the original novel provides the reader with a gauntlet of historical baggage ranging from colonialism and slavery to climate change and industrialization—forcing us to confront not only our past, but how we represent it in the present. What, then, is *Crusoe*'s legacy at 300, and what do its retellings tell us about how we think of our past and our future? When you start to notice the Robinsonade, it appears everywhere, and you start to realize you cannot put the horse back in the stable when it comes to *Crusoe*.

Long before the days of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Lena Dunham, *Crusoe* became an international phenomenon on the star power of its writer, Daniel Defoe, who much like a prolific Tweeter, “seemed to have strong opinions about everything, and wrote about almost everything in his world and his time,”¹ with topics ranging from economics, politics and history to space travel.² While Defoe wrote over 500 books, pamphlets, addresses and letters in his lifetime, *Crusoe* became his most well-known and well-read work.³ *Crusoe* was a major hit right from its first printing, it was so well received that Defoe quickly produced a sequel within only a few months after publication of the first. Not only did *Crusoe* sell well, but no less a luminary than Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote an early Robinsonade in *Emile, or On Education* (1762). This work, which Mary Wollstonecraft critiqued in her famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (179), influenced how education systems were constructed in the late 18th century. Which called for a more interactive education system based on all the skills *Crusoe* learned by trying to survive on an island for 28 years. What Rousseau's work and the popularity of publication of *Crusoe* tells us is that the impact of *Crusoe* was immediate and social.

We might think that *Crusoe* and its adaptations have weakened their hold of culture over the last 300 years, but stories like John Allen Chau, who claimed to have been inspired to explore the unknown by *Crusoe*⁴ and was ultimately killed by an indigenous tribe on an island in the Indian Ocean, tells us that this text still has power today. In the novel, Crusoe meets one of the natives of the island, Friday, and proceeds to try to convert him to Christianity. Crusoe's first attempt at conversion fails because he is unable to explain to Friday how evil exists in the world, but

¹ Richetti, John, Editorial Matter in, *The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

² See Defoe, Daniel. *The Consolidator*. Vol. 2. Baen Publishing Enterprises, 2013.

³ See Green, Martin. "The Robinson Crusoe Story." *Imperialism and juvenile literature*. Manchester University Press, 2017.

⁴ In a [2014 interview](#) on a wilderness website, *The Outbound Collective*, Chau was asked: “What first drew you to the outdoors?” With which he answered: “Growing up, I remember dusting off a massive tome in my dad's downstairs study titled Robinson Crusoe.”

eventually, Friday becomes converted to Christianity. It is unsurprising then that many other Robinsonades place the conversion at the center of the story and are much more successful, like *The Female American* (1767), *The Children's Robinson Crusoe* (1816), and the 1963 film, *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*—all seemingly refocusing our attention on the act of missionary work on islands. A key difference between these adaptations and the original is that the colonizer is better at convincing the natives of Christianity's benefits. The religious Robinsonade persists exactly because religious belief still plays a key role in how we read texts and reveals something about what we still value about *Crusoe* in 2019.

If the persistence of certain *Crusoe* tales is indicative of what we value, then the survivalist Robinsonades tells us that we highlight the story of *Crusoe* and ignore the collateral damage of his narrative. Sometimes what we want is to forget the injustices of the past and move towards the future, but can we do that when we are simultaneously compelled to reenact the same survivalist tale? The feel-good family friendly Disney's *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960) seems alien when compared to the original *Robinson Crusoe* describing selling children into slavery, exploiting nature to benefit mankind, converting native peoples to Christianity, disobeying God and becoming rich nonetheless, but yet they share the same narrative world. Within this context, the reframed Disney Robinsonade forces us to define the line between whitewashing the past and confronting it. By jettisoning the historically problematic components of Defoe's original *Crusoe*, *Swiss Family Robinson* might help us to forget the past, but by perpetuating the legacy of *Crusoe*, it only reveals our inability to cope with our past. If another Robinsonade like Netflix's *Lost in Space* (2018) attempts to call attention to the colonialist ideology of the original *Lost in Space* (1965) by rewriting the robot as a member of another race of beings, it also participates in that ideology by continually exploiting the robot for Will Robinson's desires. It seems we cannot escape the narrative pull of *Crusoe*, even if we rewrite it, then would it be more effective to erase *Robinson Crusoe* from the literary cannon completely?

Books like Muriel Spark's *Robinson* (1958), Michel Tournier's *Friday or, The Other Island* (1967), and John Maxwell Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) understand this and attempt to rewrite and reframe the story in order to highlight the problems of representation, violence, and exploitation that pepper our contemporary readings of *Crusoe*. Instead of trying to erase and whitewash *Crusoe*, these writers force us to deal with the past and the present, in often compelling and effective ways. In *Foe*, written in South Africa in the 1980s, provides us with a Friday that has no voice (his tongue was cut out), which calls attention to the lack of agency Defoe gives Friday and how people of color were silenced during Apartheid. Tournier provides us with a more complete Friday, one that is no longer mediated by *Crusoe* and Spark calls our attention to the whitewashing of *Swiss Family Robinson* by teasing out the racial tensions on the island. Instead of obscuring the present's link to the past, these Robinsonades open up old wounds and allow us to examine their contours. Stories like *Foe* tell us that we cannot heal the past but provide a roadmap for dealing with our past.

The Robinsonade allows us to see the past in all its ugliness, but also look forward to a future where we can write our own stories and deal with the violence of history. One of the reasons there are still adaptations about *Crusoe* 300 years after it was first published is because we are still dealing with our past, but we haven't given up on trying to rewrite it yet. Lines between fiction and fact, history and myth, were imbedded in this story from the start, Defoe took the

real-life shipwreck story of Alexander Selkirk and fictionalized it in *Crusoe*. The consequences of this fictionalization are still being felt, in 1966 the Chilean government renamed the island that Selkirk shipwrecked to was called Más a Tierra (Selkirk's island) into Robinson Crusoe Island, even though the story of *Crusoe* takes place off the coast of Brazil—on the other side of south America. Defoe once referred to the novel as truth, claiming that “The Editor [Defoe] believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it.” He could have never imagined that his novel would become the basis for so many retellings that it became indistinguishable from history itself.

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