

# From Utopia to Weslandia: A Voyage inside your Head

OR

## 'Island' Literature as Edenic Fantasy

*Siobhán Parkinson*

*'We need a place,' she said, 'just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it. ... It might be a whole secret country ... and you and I would be the rulers of it. ... How about right here?' she asked. (Bridge to Terabithia p 49)*

Empowerment of the hero through being pitted against the challenges inherent in the castaway situation is the essential island-story plotline from *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2002). And yet, in popular speech (and particularly in the world of advertising) the word 'island' seems to attract the qualifier 'paradise' almost as readily as it does 'desert'.

The notion of the island as a kind of paradise is not new and it may even have some basis in fact, though it depends upon your island, of course (tropical ones being best for the paradise paradigm). Here, for example, is Christopher Columbus writing to the king of Spain in 1493, describing his landfall in the islands now known as the Bahamas:

This island ... [is] filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, so that they seem to touch the sky. I am told that they never lose their foliage, and this I can believe, for I saw them as green and lovely as they are in Spain in May, and

some of them were flowering, some bearing fruit, and some at another stage, according to their nature. The nightingale was singing and other birds of a thousand kinds, in the month of November, there where I went. There are six or eight kinds of palm, which are a wonder to behold on account of their beautiful variety, but so are the other trees and fruits and plants. In it are marvellous pine groves; there are very wide and fertile plains, and there is honey; and there are birds of many kinds and fruits in great diversity.

Columbus is describing a physical paradise (though I make no claims for his veracity, especially not in view of his addressee). Another strand of imagery gives us the concept of the island as a political paradise, what we might call the Utopia model. Consider, for example, this brief prescription for how to run an island:

Had I the plantation of this isle, my lord ...  
And were the king on't, what would I do? ...  
I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries  
Execute all things: for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
Letters should not be known; wealth, poverty,  
And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;  
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;  
No occupation, all men idle, all,  
And women too; but innocent and pure:  
No sov'reignty. ...  
All things in common nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,  
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine  
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,  
Of its own kind, all foizon, all abundance  
To feed my innocent people!

The island in question is not, in fact, Utopia (where, to the contrary, the people are 'constantly engaged in trade both by land and by sea', p 40). Nor is it anything like the islands of the (much

later) Robinsonnade tradition, where there are plenty of knives, guns and engines of all sorts, not to mention 'use of service', 'bound of land', metal, corn, wine and oil; indeed, this extract could be a photographic negative of Robinson Crusoe's island, where there is almost nothing but occupation – in at least two senses – tith and sovereignty.

This is the unnamed island of *The Tempest* (II.i, 143–60), but what Gonzalo is describing is not the actual island upon which he is standing. His speech is, rather, a fantastic projection of how an island might be governed. In truth, what he is describing, even if he doesn't acknowledge it, is the Garden of Eden, where islanders are fed 'without sweat or endeavour' – the very reverse of the condition of the world into which Adam was banished with the specific admonition that he should earn his keep 'by the sweat' of his brow.

This island of Gonzalo's speech is clearly a fantasy; even as he speaks, Sebastian and Antonio are mocking what he says, quite sensibly pointing out the unrealistic nature of Gonzalo's projection, for the whole speech is posited on the notion that Gonzalo is 'king on't' – and yet he says he would have 'No sov'reignty' on his island.

In Carol Ann Duffy's poem, 'In your mind' (first published in a collection in 1990), a much more personal fantasy than Gonzalo's, there is, I believe, a distinct appeal to a sort of generalised, fantastic idea we have constructed in this culture, from island literature and from visual and media images, of the island as an

idyllic place that is metaphorically as well as physically apart. I do not claim that the poem is actually a piece of island literature – the ‘other country’ functions primarily as a metaphor for the past (they do things differently there) – but it has much in common, in structure and imagery, with the classic island story, and I propose to read it now against a paradigm of the island novel and in particular alongside Enid Blyton’s *The Secret Island* (1938).

*The Secret Island* is a thoroughly conventional, child-sized Robinsonnade, closely modelled on the typical island-story structure familiar from other novels in the genre. Blyton has, rather cleverly in my view (though unfortunately in execrable prose), taken the essentials of this familiar and successful genre and scaled it with absolute precision to the childish imagination.

In the typical island novel, the hero leaves an unsatisfactory reality behind (in the poem, it’s a rainy afternoon in an English autumn; in *The Secret Island* it’s nasty adults) and goes off on a voyage. In the case of ‘In your mind’, this voyage (along with the imaginative empowerment) takes place inside the narrator’s/narratee’s head:

... in your mind  
you put aside your work and head for the airport  
with a credit card and a warm coat you will leave  
on the plane. ...

The hero arrives, one way or another – shipwreck is the usual method, but not in the case of either the poem or *The Secret Island* – on the ‘desert’ island, which is anything but a desert, of course, except in the sense that it is deserted:

We afterwards found that most of the fruit-trees on the island were evergreens, and that we might, when we wished, pluck the blossom and the ripe fruit from the same tree. Such a wonderful difference from the trees of our own country surprised us not a little.<sup>1</sup> (*The Coral Island*, p 31)

We're back in paradise here, and even Robinson Crusoe's rather grim island is naturally well endowed:

... I found different fruits, and particularly I found mellons upon the ground in great abundance, and grapes upon the trees; the vines had spread indeed over the trees, and the clusters of grapes were just now in their prime, very ripe and rich. This was a surprising discovery, and I was exceeding glad of them ... I saw here abundance of cocoa trees, orange, and lemmon, and citron trees; but all wild, and very few bearing any fruit, at least not then. However, the green limes that I gathered, were not only pleasant to eat, but very wholesome; and I mix'd their juice afterwards with water, which made it very wholesome, and very cool, and refreshing. (pp 73–4)

The Secret Island, too, is 'a fine little island' and it's abundantly supplied with fruits, like all the best 'desert' islands:

"I'll take you to the place where wild raspberries grow," said Jack. He led them round the hill to the west side, and there, in the blazing sun, the children saw scores of raspberry canes, tangled and thick.

"Jack! There are some getting ripe already!" cried Nora, in delight. She pointed to where spots of bright red dotted the canes. The children squeezed their way through and began to pick the raspberries. How sweet and juicy they were!

"We'll have some of these with cream each day," said Peggy. "I can skim the cream off the cow's milk and we will have raspberries and cream for supper. Ooh!"

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this description owes something to Columbus' letter.

“Ooh!” said everyone, eating as fast as they could. (*The Secret Island*, pp 61–2)

There are also game (rabbits) and fish, though the details, with typical Blyton-esque squeamishness about such things, are studiously suppressed.

Given the exigencies of the empowerment theme, however, food (even if it is in plentiful supply) and shelter must usually be acquired at least partly through the efforts of the castaways. Robinson Crusoe himself is the very type of postlapsarian Adam – hunting and gathering, sowing and reaping, taming and rearing animals, learning to work clay into pots, to fashion implements and to weave baskets. This is the major interest also of large tracts of *The Secret Island* (including the basket-weaving) and is a huge part of its appeal for the child-reader. It’s a cosy Blyton-esque world, but even so, in classic island-story style, the children do have an empowering survival experience, though they never have to deal with anything more uncomfortable than a cold. Both *The Cay* and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* are much more realistic about the demands of survival on an island, though no Robinsonade I have read seems to make any mention of one obvious discomfort: latrine arrangements.

‘In your mind’ is a purer, gentler fantasy, and here there is no struggle with the environment, but nevertheless we have, in the middle part of the poem, the classic concern with provisions – ‘A beautiful boy.../ serves you a drink’, ‘You swap a coin for a fish’ – and domestic arrangements – ‘a painting... renders the room yours’. The island (or the imagined territory or remembered time)

is invested with luminous, Edenic properties – ‘A moon like an orange drawn by a child’, ‘Apt sounds’, ‘The certainty of place.../turns up the scent on the air’, the image of six swans disappearing under a blue bridge.

As the hero grows more experienced in the role of islander/survivor, he or she becomes empowered (‘you love this job’) and the domestic arrangements may develop into an agricultural island economy. The children of *The Secret Island*, just like *the Swiss Family Robinson*, manage to ship livestock to the island, including a cow, and, go-ahead little Crusoes that they are, they grow their own crops also, and even engage in trade with the mainland – the lake-island model, which is not the only thing this novel shares with *Swallows and Amazons*,<sup>2</sup> means that they are not entirely cut off from the rest of the world.

The island of the Robinsonnade tradition, in its role as a locus of empowerment of the hero, can generally be relied upon to provide plenty of dangers, Calibans, as we might call them, or ‘the Other’ – unfriendly natives or wild dogs, monkeys, sharks, tigers – for the hero to face and defeat or enslave, as a necessary condition of his/her empowerment. Empowerment, after all, is not necessarily an entirely positive process, at least not for the hero’s antagonists. Peterkin’s cheerfully contemptuous attitude to the Coral Island’s putative ‘black inhabitants’

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<sup>2</sup> The Secret Island children say ‘Ay, ay, sir’ rather a lot to Jack, although this is resolutely not a messing-about-in-boats book, as Ransome’s is. The children in both books read *Robinson Crusoe*. In both cases the main party of ‘castaways’ consists of two boys and two girls; in *S&A* they are all siblings, and in *Secret* most of them are. The Secret Island children have splendid adventurous parents, who fly a private plane; the Swallows’ father is a seafarer; both fathers have the title ‘Captain’. The island in both cases is on an English lake.

“... We’ve got an island all to ourselves. We’ll take possession in the name of the king; we’ll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of course we’ll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries. You shall be king, Jack... ”

is perhaps no worse than we might expect from a Victorian boy-hero, but it does make it shockingly clear how dependent the empowerment of the hero is on the subjugation of the native population in the typical Robinsonnade. Thus the fantasy of the idyllic island, at least for the modern reader, comes apart at the seams almost as quickly in the island story as in history. It is after all not so very surprising that even the worthy Gonzalo cannot imagine an Edenic island without assuming that he is in charge of it.

Still, we can try. In *The Cay* (1969), for example, the hero has brought his personal ‘savage’ with him to the island. I do not mean that the old black man, Timothy, who travels with Phillip, is a ‘savage’ – though Phillip himself might have been inclined to that view – but that Phillip’s personal savage or demon is his own racism. So far, so politically correct; however, it does seem to me that inventing the character of (black) Timothy expressly in order to afford our hero (white) Phillip a lesson in the evils of racism might be considered just a more subtle form of subjugation of the natives, however well-intentioned the novel. The redemptive moral is rather heavily drawn here, and the image of the disconsolate Phillip, returned to his normal world at the end of the story and wandering around the marketplace, looking for black people to remind him of his lost island companion, is unsettling if not risible.

In *The Secret Island*, it is adults, as is typical of Blyton, who are the threatening 'Other'. This seems precisely appropriate: adults, at least cruel, exploitative ones, *are* children's natural enemies, and by making adults the threat here Blyton provides the child-reader with just the kind of villain they understand. There is, rather unrealistically, little conflict among the children (one might wish there were more, for the sake of the characterisation), but it is not all sweetness and light. An analogue to the enslavement of the natives can perhaps be traced in the subjugation of young Nora, who is subjected to mild, paternalistic bullying by the children's leader, Jack (and can there be a proper island book without a character called Jack?), with the approval of the narrator ('She was rather a lazy little girl', p 39).

That cleverly conceived island novel, with its island-story-within-an-island-story structure, *Island of Ghosts*, turns the whole treatment of the 'Other' in island literature on its head. Here, it is the native islanders who are the heroes. When the characters sail from the home island to the Island of Ghosts, which functions in the story as the 'desert' island, the usual situation is reversed: the 'natives' (of the archipelago) become the castaways, and it is Bardál (correctly, Mr Webb, no savage but a learned gentleman from the mainland), in the role of the threatening 'Other', who subjugates the castaways, rather than the other way around. In other words, we are seeing the story from the opposite point of view from the traditional one, from the point of view of the (Irish) colonised rather than the (presumably English) coloniser. There is a serious interrogation of the Edenic island fantasy here. Bardál's

vision of island life, when read out of context, appears quite innocent and Robinsonesque:

'... We're building a dam for irrigation. We're going to have a turbine on the stream for electricity, to work our spinning and weaving machines. We'll be able to weave our own cloth. We make our own cheese already...' (p 129)

(So, no doubt, do most colonisers' ideas of their own project.) But it turns out to be a deranged blueprint for the enslavement of Bardál's four young hostages. Dillon treats the character of Bardál with more sympathy than he seems to deserve (he is a much more sinister threat than the exploitative adults of *The Secret Island*: today he would be identified as a child-abuser), but in doing so she presents us with a far more complex 'Other' character than is available in any other island story I can think of, and perhaps the only one to be rehabilitated by the end of the story.

The encounter with the 'Other' in 'In your mind' is much less problematic – the 'beautiful boy' who brings the exotic drink presumably speaks that other 'language ... muffled by the rain' – for the poem is free of the colonising imperatives of the traditional island novel. The poem ends, circular fashion, with a return to the unsatisfactory world that the hero left at the outset – 'And then a desk. A newspaper. A window. English rain.' In children's island books, however, the moral imperative seems to favour the island adventure as a redemptive experience involving not only the empowerment but in some cases the enlightenment of the hero and return to a reality that is improved by the hero's transformation. But in *The Secret Island*, the resolution is pure

fantastic gratification in the grand Blyton style, when, with no plot justification whatsoever, the children's missing parents re-appear, *deus ex machina*, the cruel relations dissolve away, and the children all live happily ever after.

Duffy's poem is quite explicit about the fact that its subject-matter is fantasy. The title, 'In your mind' (which has echoes of the popular expression, 'in your dreams', to indicate something desirable but unlikely in the extreme), clearly locates the events of the poem in an *imagined* space. This contrasts with the traditional island story – in which the narrator is generally bent on convincing the reader that this is a true account, and indeed many island stories have a basis in reality.<sup>3</sup>

If 'In your mind' is self-consciously a fantasy and *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, is earnestly pretending not to be, then *Swallows and Amazons* with its constant tongue-in-cheek references to island literature, is a celebration of play. Ransome's children are neither castaways nor runaways, but the cherished children of a mother who is every child's dream of a jolly good sport, entering with the greatest of ease into the children's fantasy world to play her role as 'native' with great good humour and a lot of savvy. This is an essentially safe family world. The children face real but known dangers, and ones with which they are equipped to deal ('If not duffers will not drown' is the text of their father's telegram, granting the children permission to sail to and camp on the

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<sup>3</sup> *Robinson Crusoe* is not the only one. *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is based on a documented news story; I believe *The Cay* also has a real-life source, but I have not been able to verify this.

island); and it all takes place within a carefully constructed framework of parental solicitude.

*The Secret Island*, which appeared some eight years after *Swallows*, has one huge advantage for its readers over its (much better written and wittier) predecessor – and I don't just mean that you don't have to wade through pages of thwarts and jibs and painters to get to the good bits. *The Secret Island*, like all Blyton's books, is based on every child's fantasy of a life independent of controlling adults, but Blyton as narrator never for a moment suggests that her children are playing, beyond constant assurances that it is all a great deal of fun ('What an adventure this was!'). Blyton's characters are presented not as children 'playing islands', but as the victims of cruel adults, whose flight to the Secret Island is a necessary survival tactic; and as a result of this framing reality, which informs the whole story, this novel has a continuing tension that is absent from *Swallows and Amazons*, where we are constantly reminded that it's all essentially a game. Blyton demands of her readers complete suspension of disbelief, and concomitantly she allows herself no admission of self-consciousness, or the spell might be broken. (There is, however, a surprisingly intertextual moment in *The Secret Island*, when the children read from *Robinson Crusoe* and they rather coyly joke that they could easily write down their adventures and make a book out of it too.)

Paul Fleischmann and Kevin Hawkes's picturebook *Weslandia* is a fantasy that mirrors very closely children's own elaborate fantasy-

based games, but unlike *Swallows and Amazons*, which uses a roughly analogous idea, there is no acknowledgement here of the fantasy, but rather complete collusion with the hero's viewpoint.

The book follows the classic island novel structure quite closely, beginning with the unsatisfactory reality that frames the story, and coming full circle to the improved 'real' world at the end. Wesley is neither a castaway nor a runaway, but an outcast, and the 'island' experience, as in *The Secret Island*, is his response to his uncongenial situation. We might note a certain self-satisfaction, however, in Wesley, even in his outcast role: he is an outcast partly because he is clearly a person of superior tastes to those around him (Alexander Selkirk springs to mind) and there is a markedly condescending tone on the part of the narrator about the popular culture of pizza and suburbia from which he is alienated.

As the book progresses, Wesley's garden game (described in the text, which is generally more deadpan than the illustrations, as his summer project) develops into a complex fantasy world, with clear allusions to familiar island literature. As the story develops, the broadly realistic pictorial representation of Wesley's suburban home and back garden is gradually collapsed into the fantasy world that is Weslandia. This is truly a voyage 'in your mind': in fact, there is no voyage, and we simply enter the imaginary 'island' space with the hero without ever being aware of crossing a threshold or beaching a boat.

The primary characteristic of Wesley's fantasy territory is a mysterious 'crop', which may stand for the abundance of the island environment in the conventional island story. The 'crop' has exotic and beautiful flowers, its fruit and roots are both good to eat, it yields a juice that functions multiply as a refreshing drink, suntan lotion, ink and mosquito repellent, its fibres can be woven into hats and clothing and its stalks have several uses. (Bardál would be delighted with it.)

Wesley is at first illustrated wearing ordinary clothing, and as the story progresses, he turns into a Robinson Crusoe figure,<sup>4</sup> oddly dressed and behatted in 'island' products. Wesley's marginal oddity in the real world is replaced by an outrageous oddity in the fantasy world, but this marked oddity is acceptable now, because it *is* a fantasy, inhabiting a space about which the hero can claim he is indeed 'king on't'.

We have also a strange language (here unmuffled by rain) with its own alphabet (as in *Utopia*), devised by Wesley himself, and we have the Edenic island experience, for in truth 'Apt sounds/mark the passing of the hours... A flute/practising scales' ('In your Mind', 16–18) as Wesley swings in his hammock under the stars and plays a flute fashioned from a 'swist' stalk; for, in *Swiss Family* and indeed Edenic tradition (Genesis 2: 20), Wesley gives a name to his crop from the sound the breeze makes as it rustles through the plant stalks.

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<sup>4</sup> The illustrator makes this specific analogy in an interview made available by the publishers on their website. The full URL can be problematic; it's easier to do a search for the title *Weslandia* on the Candlewick website, [www.candlewick.com/cwp](http://www.candlewick.com/cwp), and then choose to 'download an article' (accessed January 2004).

The essential point of this story is that our hero is empowered through his imagined experience of self-sufficient living. Note that his parents, who were to the forefront at the start of the story, disappear from the pages once the fantasy starts (though they make a brief reappearance towards the end – rather as in *The Secret Island*), so that Wesley is isolated (in its root meaning of en-islanded) in his fantasy space for most of the book.

Friday is as inevitable as Caliban, however, and Wesley's Other, with convincingly 'savage' (Mohican-style) haircuts, are his real-world enemies, the children who tormented him at the start of the story – but they come now in friendship, it seems, won over by the lure of the fantastic world Wesley has created. He succeeds in incorporating them into his fantasy economy, and his empowerment is complete.

There is no express suggestion that Wesley's empowerment through his non-violent, vegetarian island fantasy has sinister aspects, though anyone whose view of the island fantasy has been adjusted by reading *Island of Ghosts* may see that even Wesley's innocent 'other country' is compromised in some ways. Can the co-operation of the 'savages' (note the Mohican-haired boy fanning Wesley with a palm branch) be entirely voluntary, and is engagement in capitalist pursuits (selling his mosquito repellent to his former tormentors) really the best way to achieve personal empowerment? – or is the artist simply poking fun at the island trope? In any case, we are almost as far here from Gonzalo's

idyllic projection of how an island might be run as in any traditional Robinsonnade.

Truth to tell, there is an air of smugness about the New Empowered Wesley (perhaps he will grow up to be Pastor Wyss), but we can hardly grudge it to the boy, even if the author must lay on the resolution a bit heavy-handedly: 'In September, Wesley returned to school. He had no shortage of friends.'

The point is in any case well taken: the power of the 'island' fantasy to provide a locus and a means whereby the child-hero can confront his demons/savages and, by opposing, end them – or at least overcome them by assimilation.

Terabithia is perhaps the only fantasy territory to come near to living up to Gonzalo's prescription, the only Eden not to succumb to the Fall. Perhaps the reason is that Terabithia is not, in fact, an island, and it has no 'savages', either, to be colonised or enslaved, only a vaguely suggested Utopian population. In effect, the Terabithian fantasy is all 'in your mind'. Like Gonzalo's projected island, Terabithia is never described, merely imagined. Terabithia is a pure fantasy space – it has a physical location but it has no geography – and as such it affords the hero not merely empowerment but redemption. *Pace* Gonzalo, there is sovereignty here, but the hero/king, though suffering a terrible bereavement, overcomes it sufficiently to become capable, in a hugely generous gesture at the very end of the novel, of sharing the sovereignty of Terabithia with a child who until now has played only a minor role:

'Can't you see 'um?' he whispered. 'All the Terabithians are standing on tiptoe to see you... There's a rumour going around that the beautiful girl arriving today might be the queen they've been waiting for.' (p 142)

## **Sources**

*Date of first publication is given first; where a particular edition is cited from, the edition in question, if different, is given second*

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