

“Motherly Girls”: Babysitting, Shipwrecked Subversion and the Return of Depression-Era Conservative Myth-Making in Carol Ryrie Brink’s 1937 *Baby Island*

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Abstract: In an unexpected addition to the literary tradition of *Robinson Crusoe* (“robinsonade”), American author Carol Ryrie Brink offers an exotic babysitting guide and a model of adventurous, “ideal” girlhood in her 1937 *Baby Island*. Brink’s preteen protagonist castaways pair exploring with strict adherence to traditional domesticity, caring for the four rambunctious “babies” in their shipwrecked care as well as a host of new animal “children,” all while maintaining an island home. Resonating with several aspects of the robinsonade’s complex history, Brink’s text acts most evidently as a didactic work of children’s literature, modelling appropriate girlhood and babysitting values. The adventurous girls flirt with subversively gender-traversing new roles and characteristics in the text’s first half, but these “little mothers” ultimately return eagerly to a traditional family structure and gendered labor-division. They achieve this reversal by successfully reforming the adult “seaman” they meet on the island into the “contented picture of a family man.” This paper argues that, written in 1937, these self-reliant girls mirror the women who left their homes to work in the social upheaval of the Great Depression, who intentionally or unintentionally challenged traditional ideas of male breadwinning and the centrality of the home for women. Situating the text in the context of the immense conservative backlash of the 1930s in media, popular fiction and public policy, this charming yet didactic shipwreck tale has much company in contemporary narratives and emerges as a girl-oriented depiction of the patriarchal family as the quintessential social and economic institution. By situating Brink’s depression-era “girls’ book” in first its literary context, as an American, female and child-centered robinsonade, and then in its historical context, as both a part of the social mechanism of babysitting, and one of many depictions of the return to traditional femininity during the socially tumultuous 1930s, the girls and their reformed “seaman” emerge as at once subversive and deeply conservative figures.