

“To Be Born is to be Wrecked on an Island’: Dreams, Nightmares and Drowning in Children’s Literature”

In his Introduction to an edition of R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* in 1913, J.M. Barrie begins, “To be born is to be wrecked on an island.” Obsessed with the Robinsonade as it appeared in Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (originally serialized in *Young Folks* between 1881 and 1882), Barrie created Neverland as an island composed of the intricacies of all children’s dreams. William Golding transforms the Coral Island in *Lord of the Flies* (1954) into a realm of nightmare rather than fantasy, using the children’s actual dreams to create images of the beast that will kill them though the beast lives within the children themselves. Peter Pan, the boy who can never die because he is on some level already dead, nearly drowns to death with the incoming tide on the Marooner’s Rock where he realizes, “To die will be an awfully big adventure.” In 1921, one of the Llewelyn Davies boys on whom Barrie based the character of Peter Pan really did most likely drown himself as part of a mutual suicide pact in Sanford Lasher, a few miles from Oxford, with his beloved friend Rupert Buxton. The terror of drowning returns throughout children’s literature from Carroll’s Alice who risks drowning in a pool of her own tears to Harry Potter himself in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016) due to the intervention of his son in his own past trials in the Triwizard Tournament. In my paper, I look specifically at the way dreams and nightmares function within stories that at once tantalize children with the thrill of swimming (or swimming through the air—flying) and drowning, focusing in part on stories involving voyages to Barrie’s “wrecked islands.” What I conclude has urgent repercussions today as we struggle to reconcile images of tropical paradise with the devastating knowledge of the deteriorating planet on which we live where brutal hurricanes threaten coastal areas in an unprecedented way.