

## Boats, Birds, and Amazons: Arthur Ransome Our Contemporary

Arthur Ransome, winner of the first Carnegie Award, engages with water in a multitude of forms, both nurturing and terrifying. In his 12-volume “Swallows and Amazons” series, young readers encounter the Cumberland lake which the four Walker children (John, Susan, Titty, and Roger) explore in their dinghy “Swallow” and the two Blacketts (Nancy and Peggy) in “Amazon,” as well as the marshy Norfolk Broads where Dick and Dorothea learn to sail, the storm-driven North Sea where the Swallows face a life-or-death challenge in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, and the coasts of the Hebrides in *Great Northern?* In *Winter Holiday*, all eight children must deal with ice and snowstorm—in *Pigeon Post* with the *absence* of water in a season of drought and raging wildfire.

A British classic, the series deserves American rediscovery—perhaps especially now. When strong young female characters are urgently called for, Ransome presents not a single type but an array of individuals—sensitive, intuitive Titty; stolid, competent Susan; dreamy would-be novelist Dorothea; Captain Nancy, the fearless leader who loves to “stir things up.” In the days of *Caddie Woodlawn* and *The Good Master's* Kate, when tomboys must still be “tamed” by the last chapter, Ransome's girls were truly revolutionary. No single character moreover, girl or boy, is allowed to dominate the story. Instead, the varied outlooks, personalities, interactions, and hierarchical shifts among both female and male characters give Ransome's readers much the same complex pleasures as Louisa May Alcott's March sisters and E. Nesbit's Bastables.

In a time of increasing concern for the natural world and its remoteness from many children's lives, Ransome's characters are deeply connected with it—and to the point of activism. When Dick, a young scientist, becomes interested in birds, he also becomes a budding environmentalist. The entire plot of *Great Northern?*—the final book of the series—hinges on his discovery of a pair of rare birds nesting in the Hebrides. When a ruthless collector learns of the birds, Dick is determined to save them—and his crewmates stop at nothing to help him.