

Golding on Learning

In “Billy The Kid” and “The Ladder and the Tree” (both published in *The Hot Gates*, 1965), William Golding describes his own experience as a schoolboy. His novels are full of descriptions of people learning, often unexpectedly. He tried very hard to be a better piano player, to become fluent in French and Spanish, to be able to read Greek without a crib or a dictionary, to write Latin verse. Despite changing from Natural Sciences to English Literature at Oxford, he retained a life-long fascination with science, and in his later years was enthralled by the space race, by science programmes on television, and by the process of working out how things were made and how they worked. His life-long fascination with the sea and sailing was in part a question of practicality: how did it work?

Golding studied in unexpected contexts, at sea in the war, for example:

“In ’42 it was I believe, I was sent to New York to officer a minesweeper which had not yet been built. We crossed in the Queen Elizabeth, a ship which officially (that is, as far as the general public was concerned) did not exist at all. My own official existence was Ty Lieutenant W G Golding, RNVR, though I had never been in any reserve and was only temporary in the sense that I had no say as to when the navy would dispense with my services. I had a first class cabin which I shared with eleven other low ranking officers. I had the great luck to cross with another Ty Lieut. who had done Greats. I had an India Paper copy of the Oxford Book of Greek Verse with me and together we read a great deal in the six or seven days we were on board.”

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Much of Golding’s fascination with learning may stem directly from his father, a man so captivated by the glorious scientific wonder of the universe that he saw no need for anything more mysterious. But Golding himself was incessantly curious: like a lot of writers he would ask you what something had felt like. However, he was often very capable of working things out for himself. Whether it was a question of how to build a cathedral spire, or how to clear weed from the hull of a boat at sea, his imagination would provide him with the answer -- a solid, visual and often complex solution, but with an added dimension through being imagined.

In his essay, “Fable” (*Hot Gates*, 1965), he answered, or re-cast, many of the questions he was asked frequently about *Lord of the Flies*. He ends the essay with a reference to the irony of his role as a schoolmaster – a role he sought to avoid by becoming a writer, only to see it return in the worldwide reaction to *Lord of the Flies*. **“Fable” is an excellent starting point for a study of *Lord of the Flies*.**

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