

# PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR AS A HUMAN BEING

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*William Golding: The Man Who Wrote **Lord of the Flies***, by John Carey; Faber and Faber, 2009.

USING SOURCES unavailable to others—as gatekeepers for William Golding’s family and publisher are guarding them—John Carey has written a distinguished and measured biography, which reminds us just how much Golding is a creature of the twentieth century. We can see this in how he relates to his family and publisher and nation and sexuality. We can also see it in the way each of his novels represents a religious worldview, without—judging from the biography itself—him practising any biblical faith. Many authors outside the church get this worldview wrong. Some authors inside the church get it wrong too. Getting it right is quite an achievement.

## **GOLDING AND HIS FAMILY**

GOLDING’S PARENTS were lifelong socialists, pacifists, atheists, and teetotallers. Alec Golding was a depressed intellectual and a frustrated pupil teacher until he married Mildred Curnoe in January 1906. Jose, their eldest son, was born in October that year. William was born in September 1911. Marriage and fatherhood transformed Alec. He went from hating his job as a pupil teacher to becoming an inspiring schoolmaster at Marlborough Grammar School, Wiltshire, for the rest of his working life. In 1910 he took his external London degree in botany, zoology, and animal physiology. In 1915 Cambridge University Press published his book, *An Introduction to General Geography*. He painted in oils and watercolours. He played the viola, cello, piano, flute, and violin. Less is known about Mildred. She was also a musician, playing viola and piano. She was a suffragist, not a suffragette, and towards the end of her life she’s reported as saying wistfully: “I’d really like to believe in Christianity—it must be nice.” The Goldings weren’t a demonstrative family, and there was little physical contact, but this doesn’t mean they weren’t close or were dysfunctional. Also, throughout his life, William often referred to how he and his family suffered under the class system. If it’s unwise to

downplay this class system, it's equally unwise to overplay it. Alec may have struggled with social disadvantage but he still made sure William went to Oxford.

William joined a Left Book Club in 1938 where he met Ann Brookfield, a beautiful and intelligent young woman who came from a family renowned for Communist sympathies. They married in September 1939, four weeks before the declaration of war. Anne soon fell pregnant, and William lost his job as a teacher at Maidstone Grammar School for what he believed was “an unacademic combination of drink, women and politics”. His drinking problem plagued him throughout his life; however, and the biography is circumspect about this, Ann was also a drinker—how much of a drinker is hard to tell—which would have made abstinence difficult for him. They had two children; a son, David, born in September 1940, and a daughter, Judy, born in July 1945. David developed psychiatric illness in adulthood, although the biography is as circumspect about David's eventual diagnosis as it is about Ann's drinking, since publishers are liable when biographers refer to persons still living. What's quintessentially twentieth-century about William is the way he grappled with his son's psychiatric illness. Was it because he was away at the war during David's formative years? Was he a cruel bully of a father who hadn't shown his son enough love? Was an Oedipal struggle involved? He was hostile towards Freud, whom he claims to never have read, but Freud's ideas had become part of the modern mindset, including his own. Psychoanalysis was still a science back then. Psychiatry was still treating the mind rather than the brain.

### **GOLDING AND HIS PUBLISHER**

AFTER THE WAR Golding went back to teaching, at Bishop Wordsworth's School, Salisbury, as he had no other career to follow and needed to support his young family. He lacked his father's commitment to teaching, as he wanted to be a writer. He wrote at any time and in any space he could, during class in front of his students, during breaks in an anteroom off the staffroom, during the evenings and over weekends. One manuscript, “Strangers From Within”, was written in 1951–1952. In January 1953 he submitted it to Jonathan Cape, who rejected it in early February, André Deutsch later in February, Putnam & Co. in May, Chapman and Hall early in June, Hutchinson later in June. At this point it occurred to him that an agent might be useful, but, as Curtis Brown refused to represent him in July, he sent the manuscript to The Bodley Head, who rejected it in August. He then sent it to Faber and Faber in September. A professional reader, Polly Perkins, recommended rejection, declaring it to be an absurd and uninteresting fantasy: “Rubbish & dull. Pointless.” That would have been that, if Charles Monteith, a new boy at Faber, hadn't retrieved the manuscript from the reject pile, read it, found it flawed but compelling, and convinced Faber's Book Committee to let him work with the author

towards a publishable novel. The manuscript became *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which launched both Golding and Monteith on their distinguished careers.

This is a twentieth century phenomenon. There was a new publishing environment, where commercial decisions competed with ideological or aesthetic decisions, as hard-nosed sales directors argued with editorial directors at committee meetings which decided what to publish. There was a new editorial environment, where professional readers like Perkins decide the fate of aspiring authors like Golding, and where acquisitions editors could indulge in the luxury of manuscript development, provided the outcome was commercially profitable. If the nineteenth century had its own version of this corporate phenomenon, it would have looked quite different. Ultimately, Monteith's recommendations were informed and astute, and they must have had a lasting effect on the way Golding wrote, since no later manuscript required as much development, once he got the hang of what his publisher wanted, and what his readers were conditioned to expect. His only regret with *Lord of the Flies*, expressed later in life, was Monteith's resistance to the first manuscript's portrayal of Simon as a Christ-like figure: as a martyr who experiences a theophany. While Monteith realised that Simon's theophany was the foundation of the book, he wanted it buried, whether for ideological or aesthetic or even commercial reasons. Self-consciously religious allegory wasn't promoted in the 1950s. This was, after all, the age of psychological probability. The biography is fascinating, too, when telling the story of what was wanted on the other side of the Atlantic. American publishers weren't accurate in anticipating the sensibilities of American readers. They held off on publishing local editions until the local market demanded it.

### **GOLDING AND HIS NATION**

IT WASN'T POSSIBLE for Golding to give up teaching and live from his writing until 1961, two years after his fourth novel, *Free Fall* (1959), and three years before his fifth novel, *The Spire* (1964). By then he was a widely discussed and admired author in Britain, but this didn't translate into financial autonomy, and he still had many financial commitments as sole family breadwinner. The turning point was the offer of a trip to America in 1961–1962, to be writer-in-residence, and to teach in a new master's program in creative writing, literary criticism, and contemporary literature. His American publisher had allowed *Lord of the Flies* to go out of print, and his work wasn't easily available in the States; however, a local paperback edition was released in 1959, and by the time he arrived in September 1961, *Lord of the Flies* had become the rage among college students all over the country. In addition to his teaching commitments, he was deluged with offers to speak, and he became a phenomenon. Several cultural

commentators noticed that *Lord of the Flies* had replaced *Catcher in the Rye* as the bible of the American adolescent. The Trillings saw this transference—from the woes of Salinger’s spoiled and self-pitying teenager to a rigorous confrontation with original sin in Golding’s novel—as a mutation in American culture. Perhaps this phenomenon was a response to the Cold War, the construction of the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Golding’s trip to America lifted him out of stagnation and brought him wealth and fame, which created new tensions in his life. He had noticed that, at his American college, the students were rich and the servants were black, but, while on both sides there was pride in the college and goodwill towards each other, the servants lived in a nearby hamlet, public schools to the north had shut down to avoid integration, and railway waiting rooms to the south were segregated. In spite this reality, Golding’s lectures spoke of how his family had been affected by a vicious British class system that grades people socially: a theme that becomes something of a leitmotiv. He returned to England to write *The Spire*, but, before completing it, he was part of a writers’ delegation to Russia, similar to the one Manning Clark describes in *Meeting Soviet Man* (1960). On a later tour of Russia, following publication of *The Pyramid* (1966), his exposé of the vicious British class system, he hoped to convince the Russians to publish this novel. But they never did. Two things are worth noticing here. First, once Golding became wealthy and famous, while he never became a snob he did resent the increased tax levied by the British government, and considered moving overseas to a tax haven. Second, he had wanted a knighthood for a long time, badgered Monteith and Faber’s chairman, Matthew Evans, to lobby the great and the good on his behalf, and, when he was finally knighted in 1988 he felt it was long overdue.

### **GOLDING AND HIS SEXUALITY**

THERE’S NO convincing evidence Golding was homosexual and much convincing evidence he was heterosexual. That said, many suspected he was homosexual, which is inevitable, since “Is he gay?” has become a common speculation, played out in a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey way, especially with celebrities and public figures. Carey is circumspect when approaching this subject, and the evidence he presents should be considered, if only to identify Golding with the twentieth century. His earliest memories were half male and half female. Within his psyche, the scientific and the rational (masculine) collided with the spiritual and the miraculous (feminine) to form the central creative tension in his life. If he recognised the feminine in himself, came to see that what is admired as manliness is often synonymous with destruction and stupidity, and sympathised with men whose sexual natures took them across gender boundaries, that

makes him an integrated heterosexual not a repressed homosexual. During his war service in the navy, he observed the homosexual underworld and gained knowledge of its routines and vocabulary. He once reviewed Rodger's *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1986), which defended the navy against the popular assumption that it was motivated, in Churchill's words, by "rum, sodomy and the lash". While he agreed with most of Rodger's thesis, he disagreed about sodomy being rare: "There is vast oral evidence in naval speech, custom and lore," he said, "that where men are cooped up in a wooden world for weeks and months at a time unnatural acts take the place of natural ones."

In Golding's novels, homosexuality is metaphorical, and the homosexual character is a trope. In *Free Fall* (1959) the eponymous Father Watts-Watt struggles to repress his sexuality in the service of his faith; the metaphysics he represents has nothing meaningful to offer his young ward, Sammy, the novel's hero. In *Darkness Visible* (1979), the eponymous Sebastian Pedigree is predatory and exercises his sexuality in an inappropriate way; the metaphysics he represents has nothing meaningful to offer his young pupil, Matty, the novel's hero. In *Rites of Passage* (1980) a young chaplain, Robert Colley, dies of shame after becoming drunk and performing fellatio on a crewmember he had wanted to "save". These novels aren't real life; these characters aren't real persons; they are the creations of a novelist who—like other post-war novelists—moves between late-modernism and post-modernism, such as Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark and Patrick White. Father Watts-Watt and Sebastian Pedigree are similar-but-different commentaries on classical metaphysics—and perhaps its sterility or impotence are being noticed too—while Sammy and Matty represent something other than classical metaphysics. Robert Colley may simply be an example of a young man who couldn't face the truth about himself when confronted with it—or couldn't face the social consequences of being homosexual in a society hostile to homosexuality—but even Colley can be understood as a commentary on classical metaphysics, if that means noticing the difference between conscious illusions and unconscious realities.

### **GOLDING AND THE HIS RELIGION**

WHILE GOLDING'S parents were atheists, he became a profoundly religious man. Through a fellow undergraduate at Oxford, he was attracted to Steiner's anthroposophy, which seemed to offer a reconciliation of his father's scientific rationalism and his own spiritual experiences. Eventually he rejected anthroposophy although Steineresque ideas left a permanent trace on his beliefs. His awareness of the dark side of the human character—including his own—and his experience of the war, convinced him of the truth of the fall and original sin, themes he re-worked in all his novels. While he never

claimed to be a Christian, some of his students recall what he said about religion having a profound effect on them. One student, who later became an Anglican priest, detected a living spirituality in him that could communicate itself to others. He believed life had a spiritual purpose beyond the material. Truth, he asserted, is to be found in art, not in reductivist theories—such as those of Marx and Darwin and Freud—which construct iron cages for the human spirit. Further, there must be infinite universes and infinite hells, because “it would deny the nature of our own creativity, let alone the infinitude of God’s creativity” if there were not. That said, he resented the critical tendency to subject him and his stories to “Freudian analysis, neo-Freudian analysis, Jungian analysis, Roman Catholic approval ... protestant appraisal, nonconformist surmise, Scientific Humanist misinterpretation” and the critical failure to treat him as, above all, a storyteller.

William Golding died in June 1993. John Carey ends this understated and deeply moving biography with a description of Golding’s memorial service, held in Salisbury Cathedral, on 20 November 1993:

It was a dark and bitterly cold day. At the start, Tim Brown played the Prologue from the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* by Benjamin Britten, and at the end he played the Epilogue. The cathedral choir sang Raymond Leppard’s “Kyrie Eleison” from the film score of *Lord of the Flies*, and Bishop Wordsworth’s School choir sang Psalm 98. David read the lesson, I Corinthians 13, and Judy read a passage from *The Spire*, Wayland Kennet gave the address and spoke of Golding as “the cleanser of the imagination and the guardian of mercy”. He was a “theist”, who believed in “the crashing ascendancy of some sort of God” but did not think himself good enough to be a Christian. At about the midpoint of the service Ted Hughes read, unforgettably, from *The Inheritors*. As preface, he said that, though Golding wrote in prose, he was a poet with a “tragic imagination” who sensed the presence of another life, a “mythic life”, behind our personalities. Then he read a long passage about Lok, bewildered and alone, and as he read his voice seemed to grow gigantic, and the raw, colossal syllables boomed and echoed around the cathedral’s freezing columns.

On hearing of her husband’s death, Ann Golding had a stroke, from which she never fully recovered, and died on New Years Day 1995. Charles Monteith, Golding’s lifelong editor and friend, died of a heart attack in May 1995.

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