

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **LORD OF THE FLIES**

William Golding

Growing Up

William Gerald Golding was born in Cornwall, England, in 1911. His mother, Mildred, was a strong supporter of the British suffragette movement. His father, Alec, was a schoolteacher and an ardent advocate of rationalism, the idea that reason rather than experience is a necessary and reliable means through which to gain knowledge and understand the world. Alec's anti-religious devotion to reason was the legacy of such scientific rationalists as T.H. Huxley and H.G. Wells. This rationalist viewpoint was not tolerant of emotionally based experiences, such as the fear of the dark that Golding had as a child. His father wielded a tremendous influence over him, and, in fact, until leaving for college, Golding attended the school where his father taught.

Education

Golding began attending Brasenose College at Oxford in 1930 and spent two years studying science, in deference to his father's beliefs. In his third year, however, he switched to the literature program, following his true interests. Although his ultimate medium was fiction, from an early age, Golding dreamed of writing poetry. He began reading Tennyson at age seven and steeped himself in Shakespeare's work. While still at Oxford, a volume of Golding's poems was published as part of Macmillan's Contemporary Poets series. Later in life, Golding dismissed this work as juvenile, but these poems are valuable in that they illustrate his increasing distrust of the rationalism he had been reared on, mocking well-known rationalists and their ideas. In 1935, he graduated from Oxford with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a diploma in education.

Career and Later Years

From 1935 to 1939, Golding worked as a writer, actor, and producer with a small theater in an unfashionable part of London, paying his bills with a job as a social worker. He considered the theater his strongest literary influence, citing Greek tragedians and Shakespeare, rather than other novelists, as his primary influences.

In 1939, Golding began teaching English and philosophy in Salisbury at Bishop Wordsworth's School. That same year, he married Ann Brookfield, with whom he had two children. With the exception of five years he spent in the Royal Navy during World War II, he remained in the teaching position until 1961 when he left Bishop Wordsworth's School to write full time.

Golding died in Cornwall in 1993.

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William Golding's Novels

The five years Golding spent in the navy (from 1940 to 1945) made an enormous impact, exposing him to the incredible cruelty and barbarity of which humankind is capable. Writing about his wartime experiences later, he asserted that "man produces evil, as a bee produces honey." Long before, while in college, he had lost faith in the rationalism of his father with its attendant belief in the perfectibility of humankind. While Golding's body of fiction utilizes a variety of storytelling techniques, the content frequently comes back to the problem of evil, the conflict between reason's civilizing influence, and mankind's innate desire for domination.

In *Lord of the Flies*, which was published in 1954, Golding combined that perception of humanity with his years of experience with schoolboys. Although not the first novel he wrote, *Lord of the Flies* was the first to be published after having been rejected by 21 publishers. An examination of the duality of savagery and civilization in humanity, Golding uses a pristine tropical island as a protected environment in which a group of marooned British schoolboys act out their worst impulses. The boys loyal to the ways of civilization face persecution by the boys indulging in their innate aggression. As such, the novel illustrates the failure of the rationalism espoused by Golding's father.

A fast, intense writer, Golding quickly followed *Lord of the Flies* with *The Inheritors* (1955), a depiction of how the violent, deceitful Homo sapiens achieved victory over the gentler Neanderthals. Although this novel is the one readers have the most difficulty understanding, it remained Golding's favorite throughout his life.

Pincher Martin followed in 1956. Like *Lord of the Flies*, it concerns survival after shipwreck. Navy lieutenant Christopher Martin is thrown from his ship during combat in World War II. He finds a rock to cling to, and the rest of the story is related from this vantage point, detailing his struggle for survival and recounting the details of his life.

Golding uses the flashback technique of *Pincher Martin* more extensively in his next novel, *Free Fall* (1959). Unlike his first three novels, *Free Fall* is told with a first person narrator, an artist named Samuel Mountjoy. The novel takes as a model Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, a collection of love poems interspersed with Dante's own commentary on the poems. Golding uses the character Mountjoy to comment on the conflict between rationalism and faith.

Issues of faith are addressed in *The Spire* (1964) as well. A fourteenth-century Dean of Barchester Cathedral decides that God wants a 400-foot-high spire added to the top of the cathedral, although the cathedral's foundation is not sufficient to hold the weight of the spire. The novel tells the story of the human costs of the spire's construction and the lessons that the Dean learns too late.

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The Pyramid (1967) provides an examination of English social class within the context of a town ironically named Stilbourne. A primary issue in this story is music, and the novel utilizes the same structure as the musical form sonata.

Golding's next publication was a collection entitled *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels* (1971). Each story explores the negative repercussions of technological progress — an idea that was in sharp contrast to the technology worship of the space age. One of the novellas had been originally published in 1956; Golding then turned the story into a comedic play titled *The Brass Butterfly*, which was first performed in London in 1958.

Golding's next novel, *Darkness Visible*, appeared in 1979. It addresses the interdependence of good and evil, exemplified in the two main characters: Sophy, who plots to kidnap a child for ransom, and Matty, who gives his life to prevent it.

Golding's 1984 publication, *The Paper Men*, was condemned by reviewers as his worst work, partly because the novel seemed to condemn literary critics. The plot concerns an elderly novelist trying to elude a young scholar who wants to write his biography.

One of Golding's most ambitious works is *The Sea Trilogy*, three full-length novels that follow the emotional education and moral growth of an aristocratic young man named Edmund Talbot during an ocean voyage to Australia in 1812. *Rites of Passage* (1980) shows Talbot's spiritual growth, *Close Quarters* (1987) depicts his emotional and aesthetic development, and *Fire Down Below* (1989) covers his political enlightenment.

Other Work, and Honors and Awards

Golding's work is not limited to fiction: He published three collections of essays which are often comic and expand upon or illuminate his novels. *The Hot Gates and Other Occasional Pieces* was published in 1966; *A Moving Target* appeared in 1982; and *An Egyptian Journal* followed in 1985.

Following the publication of his best-known work, *Lord of the Flies*, Golding was granted membership in the Royal Society of Literature in 1955. Ten years later, he received the honorary designation Commander of the British Empire (CBE) and was knighted in 1988. His 1980 novel *Rites of Passage* won the Booker Prize, a prestigious British award. Golding's greatest honor was being awarded the 1983 Nobel Prize for Literature.