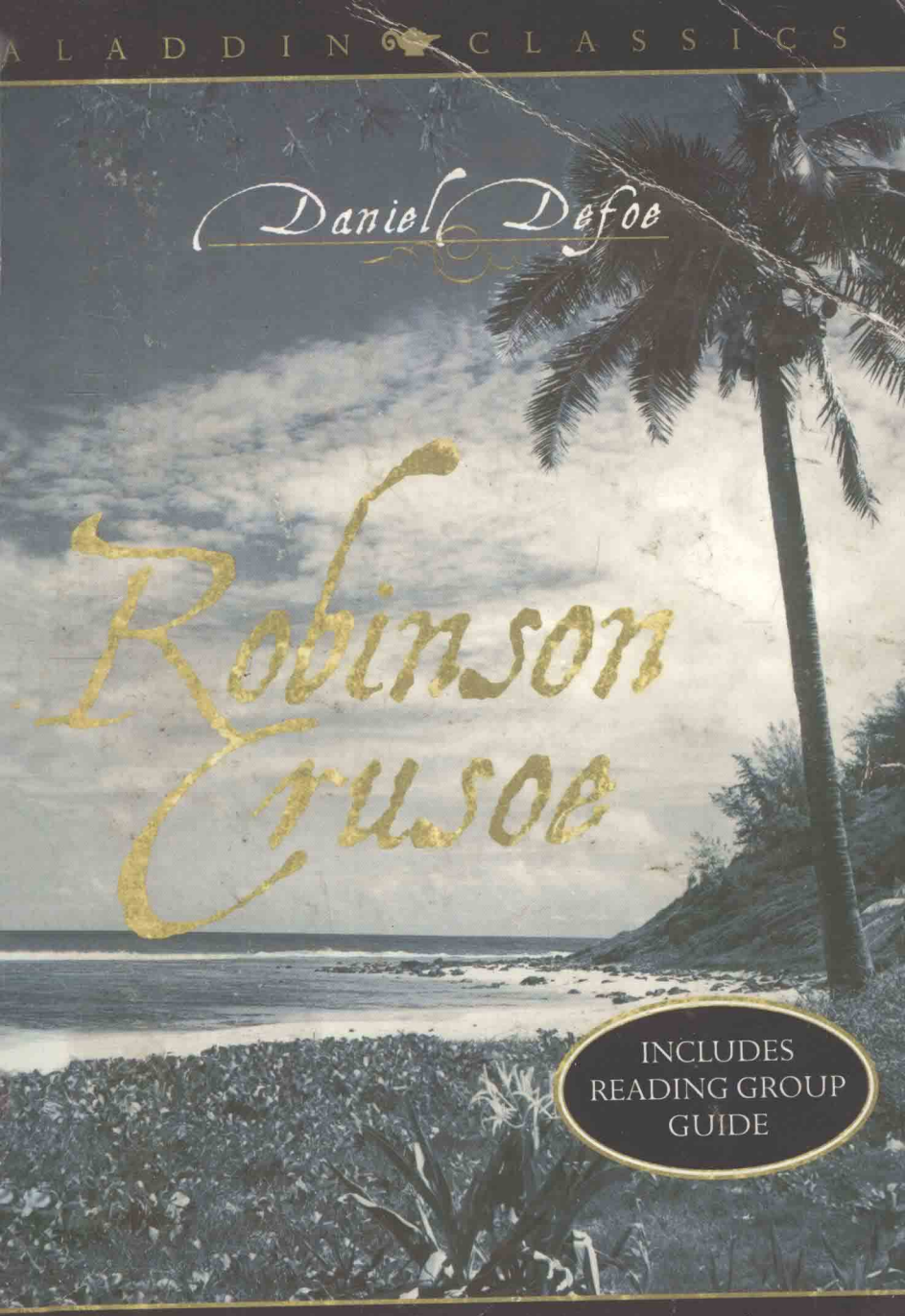
ALADDIN CLASSICS

Daniel Defoe

Robinson Crusoe



INCLUDES READING GROUP GUIDE

With a foreword by Newbery author Avi

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Foreward

The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, it can be argued, has had more impact on writing for kids than any other book in the English language.

Consider such widely read modern books as *Julie of the Wolves, Island of the Blue Dolphins,* and *Hatchet.* Even a book such as *The Wizard of Oz* falls within this sphere. What do they all have in common? These are all stories in which:

> A hero or heroine struggles to survive on their own in a world very different from their origins until such time as they return home, having learned a great deal about themselves.

Crudely put, this is the plot of *Robinson Crusoe.* But, you may protest, that's the plot for tons of children's books. Which is exactly the point: *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* was the first of its kind. And yet . . . the book was not meant for kids. In our own day it is only rarely read by kids. Yet it still influences what is read by kids.

Daniel Defoe was born in England in the year 1660. The family name was Foe. The "De" was added much later. Defoe, as we have come to know him, was born into a puritan family at the time of the Restoration, when the monarchy was being restored to England. Puritans, who had rejected the monarchy, were not just being spurned by the new English society, but persecuted—even killed—for their beliefs.

Defoe was raised and lived as an outsider, developing, probably for self-protection, a penchant for living with many contradictory and secretive aspects. Indeed, at one time or another he was a soldier, a brick maker, even a political spy.

Beyond all else, however, he was a writer: a journalist, a pamphleteer, and most important of all, a novelist. He was the first to write a ghost story and some would say he was the inventor of the novel as we know it today.

In his novels Defoe used a journalistic technique to tell stories that simulated reality to such a degree that readers thought the tales were in fact true. They seemed so real that people could identify with both the characters and the places.

The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, first published in 1719, tells the tale of a man who, failing to follow the wise and prudent advice of his middle-class

father, becomes an adventurer, a seafarer, and a slave merchant. Almost as if God is punishing him for his sins, he is shipwrecked on an island in the Atlantic, just north of modern-day Venezuela. He remains on the island for twenty-four years.

Using only his wits and his hands to survive, Crusoe creates a life which comes close to replicating the very life he left behind in England.

In one of the great moments of literature, Crusoe comes upon a footprint in the sand. Suddenly he is no longer alone and thus he is no longer free. In short order he meets a man whom he names Friday, for the day on which he found him.

Saving Friday from cannibals, Crusoe makes Friday his companion and servant. The two go on to have a great variety of exciting adventures, including battles with cannibals and pirates.

The book, when published, was enormously popular in the European world. What appears to have captivated readers was the true-to-life character of Robinson Crusoe—specifically his ingenuity and his means of survival. While the book was—and can be—read as an adventure tale, it was also taken as a metaphor for life itself. People are "shipwrecked" on Earth, and we struggle—using our own wits and faith in God—to survive.

In that sense the book is almost a primer of puritan thinking, with its strong belief in hard work, self-reliance, Bible reading, and faith in one's own being—the sum of which brings some form of salvation.

The novel had so many imitators that it gave rise to a kind of novel, the Robinsonard. There was, among others, a Lady Robinson, a Dog Robinson, an Irish Robinson, and perhaps the best known, a Swiss Family Robinson. All had the same basic plot: castaways, dependent on their wits to survive. By extension it gave birth to the story of an individual who is, so to speak, shipwrecked in the midst of life and needs to find a means of survival.

So influential was the book that in the eighteenth century a leading education reformer and philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, suggested that all children be raised and educated along the lines of Robinson Crusoe; that is, they should learn only from their own experiences. Moreover, Rousseau suggested, young people should be allowed to read but one book—*The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe.*

Indeed, thousands of young people did read the book in one form or another. Very young readers, too. In the late nineteenth century a rewritten *Crusoe* told the tale in words of one syllable.

Today, by extending the idea of the isolated individual

who survives by his or her wits alone, we can see the essence of the story replicated in many children's books of our own time. Or is it just that we—all of us—have come to live the life that Robinson Crusoe lived: isolated, cut off from society, depending on our own wits to survive?

If so, the book you're holding in your hand told the story for the first time. And just maybe, told it best.

Avi

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A Warning

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise and, leaving off his trade, lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual corruption of words in England we are now called, nay, we call ourselves, and write our name "Crusoe," and so my companions always called me.

I had two elder brothers, one of which was lieutenant colonel to an English regiment of foot in Flanders, formerly commanded by the famous Colonel Lockhart, and was killed at the battle near Dunkirk against the Spaniards; what became of my second brother I never knew, any more than my father or mother did know what was become of me.

Being the third son of the family, and not bred to any

trade, my head began to be filled very early with rambling thoughts. My father, who was very ancient, had given me a competent share of learning, as far as house education and a country free school generally goes, and designed me for the law; but I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea; and my inclination to this led me so strongly against the will, nay, the commands of my father and against all the entreaties and persuasions of my mother and other friends that there seemed to be something fatal in that propension of nature tending directly to the life of misery which was to befall me.

My father, a wise and grave man, gave me serious and excellent counsel against what he foresaw was my design. He called me one morning into his chamber, where he was confined by the gout, and expostulated very warmly with me upon this subject. He asked me what reasons more than a mere wandering inclination I had for leaving my father's house and my native country, where I might be well introduced, and had a prospect of raising my fortune by application and industry, with a life of ease and pleasure. He told me it was for men of desperate fortunes on one hand, or of aspiring, superior fortunes on the other, who went abroad upon adventures, to rise by enterprise, and make themselves famous in undertakings of a nature out of the common road;

that these things were all either too far above me, or too far below me; that mine was the middle state, or what might be called the upper station of low life, which he had found by long experience was the best state in the world, the most suited to human happiness, not exposed to the miseries and hardships, the labor and sufferings of the mechanic part of mankind and not embarrassed with the pride, luxury, ambition, and envy of the upper part of mankind. He told me I might judge of the happiness of this state by this one thing, viz., that this was the state of life which all other people envied; that kings have frequently lamented the miserable consequences of being born to great things, and wished they had been placed in the middle of the two extremes, between the mean and the great; that the wise man gave his testimony to this as the just standard of true felicity, when he prayed to have neither poverty or riches.

He bid me observe it, and I should always find, that the calamities of life were shared among the upper and lower part of mankind; but that the middle station had the fewest disasters, and was not exposed to so many vicissitudes as the higher or lower part of mankind; nay, they were not subjected to so many distempers and uneasinesses either of body or mind as those were who, by vicious living, luxury, and extravagances on one hand,

or by hard labor, want of necessaries, and mean or insufficient diet on the other hand, bring distempers upon themselves by the natural consequences of their way of living; that the middle station of life was calculated for all kind of virtues and all kinds of enjoyments; that peace and plenty were the handmaids of a middle fortune; that temperance, moderation, quietness, health, society, all agreeable diversions, and all desirable pleasures, were the blessings attending the middle station of life; that this way men went silently and smoothly through the world, and comfortably out of it, not embarrassed with the labors of the hands or of the head, not sold to the life of slavery for daily bread, or harassed with perplexed circumstances, which rob the soul of peace and the body of rest; not enraged with the passion of envy or secret burning lust of ambition for great things; but in easy circumstances sliding gently through the world, and sensibly tasting the sweets of living, without the bitter, feeling that they are happy and learning by every day's experience to know it more sensibly.

After this, he pressed me earnestly, and in the most affectionate manner, not to play the young man, not to precipitate myself into miseries which Nature and the station of life I was born in seemed to have provided against; that I was under no necessity of seeking my bread;

that he would do well for me, and endeavor to enter me fairly into the station of life which he had been just recommending to me; and that if I was not very easy and happy in the world, it must be my mere fate or fault that must hinder it, and that he should have nothing to answer for, having thus discharged his duty in warning me against measures which he knew would be to my hurt. In a word, that as he would do very kind things for me if I would stay and settle at home as he directed, so he would not have so much hand in my misfortunes as to give me any encouragement to go away. And to close all, he told me I had my elder brother for an example, to whom he had used the same earnest persuasions to keep him from going into the Low Country wars, but could not prevail, his young desires prompting him to run into the army where he was killed; and though he said he would not cease to pray for me, yet he would venture to say to me that if I did take this foolish step, God would not bless me, and I would have leisure hereafter to reflect upon having neglected his counsel when there might be none to assist in my recovery.

I observed in this last part of his discourse, which was truly prophetic, though I suppose my father did not know it to be so himself; I say, I observed the tears run down his face very plentifully, and especially when he spoke of my brother who was killed; and that when he

spoke of my having leisure to repent, and none to assist me, he was so moved that he broke off the discourse and told me his heart was so full he could say no more to me.

I was sincerely affected with this discourse, as indeed who could be otherwise? and I resolved not to think of going abroad any more but to settle at home according to my father's desire. But alas! a few days wore it all off; and in short, to prevent any of my father's farther importunities, in a few weeks after I resolved to run quite away from him. However, I did not act so hastily neither as my first heat of resolution prompted, but I took my mother, at a time when I thought her a little pleasanter than ordinary, and told her that my thoughts were so entirely bent upon seeing the world that I should never settle to anything with resolution enough to go through with it, and my father had better give me his consent than force me to go without it; that I was now eighteen years old, which was too late to go apprentice to a trade or clerk to an attorney; that I was sure, if I did, I should never serve out my time, and I should certainly run away from my master before my time was out and go to sea; and if she would speak to my father to let me go one voyage abroad, if I came home again and did not like it, I would go no more, and I would promise by a double diligence to recover that time I had lost.

This put my mother into a great passion. She told me she knew it would be to no purpose to speak to my father upon any such subject; that he knew too well what was my interest to give his consent to anything so much for my hurt, and that she wondered how I could think of any such thing after such a discourse as I had had with my father, and such kind and tender expressions as she knew my father had used to me; and that, in short, if I would ruin myself there was no help for me; but I might depend I should never have their consent to it; that for her part she would not have so much hand in my destruction; and I should never have it to say that my mother was willing when my father was not.

Though my mother refused to move it to my father, yet as I have heard afterward, she reported all the discourse to him, and that my father, after shewing a great concern at it, said to her with a sigh, "That boy might be happy if he would stay at home, but if he goes abroad he will be the most miserable wretch that was ever born. I can give no consent to it."