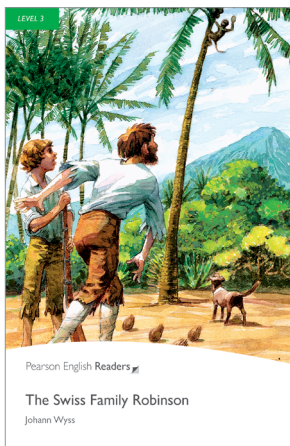


# Swiss Family Robinson

Johann Wyss



## About the author

*Swiss Family Robinson* was published in 1813 and it is sometimes attributed to Johann Rudolph Wyss. In reality, the story was actually written by his father, Swiss pastor, Johann David Wyss in order to entertain and instruct his family. Like the father in the story, Johann David had four sons, and with the didactic nature of much of the book, and explicit details on how to use the natural world to improve man's lot, the book reflects its origins as a self-help survival handbook.

Many years after Johann David had written the story, one of his sons, Johann Rudolph, persuaded his father to allow him to re-write and publish the book.

## Summary

When the Robinson family are shipwrecked on an uninhabited desert island, they find a new world of adventure and knowledge. As they learn to cope with the many problems of life on the island, they become even closer as a family.

**Chapter 1:** The Robinsons' ship hits some rocks after a bad storm. However, they decide to spend the night on the ship. The next day, the children (Fritz, Ernest, Jack and Frank) explore the ship, find useful things and animals and they make a boat.

**Chapter 2:** They arrive on the island the next day. They make a tent with sailcloth and beds with grass. They find shellfish and use the shells as spoons to eat soup. They also save the corn to sow later.

**Chapter 3:** They explore the island to look for people. They find a variety of plants, sugar cane, coconuts and gourds to make utensils. One of the dogs kills a monkey and the children take its baby to the tent.

**Chapter 4:** Father and Fritz spend two nights on the ship collecting more things. They tie barrels to the animals (a pig, a donkey, and some sheep and goats) to take them ashore.

**Chapter 5:** Mum finds a perfect spot across a river for a new house. There are huge trees and it is cool so she thinks of a tree house. They build a bridge and cleverly take their animals across.

**Chapter 6:** The children help Dad to make a rope ladder with bamboo steps. The chickens liked it. They also make a bow and arrows to save the gunpowder in case they meet dangerous men.

**Chapter 7:** They use the donkey to pull more wood. They make the floor of the tree house on two thick branches and hang a sail from a higher branch as a roof.

**Chapter 8:** They go back to the tent for some more supplies. They find potatoes in a bag but father persuades them to plant them instead of eating them. The boys get some salt from rocks near the sea.

**Chapter 9:** Mr Robinson makes a sledge to carry heavy things, but is sorry he didn't bring more from the ship. They will probably be on the island for a very long time.

**Chapter 10:** On their second journey to the ship, the Robinsons bring plants and objects which will help them on the island. Now they have to build a hut for the tools and for the animals.

**Chapter 11:** The Robinsons start work in their garden very early. They need bamboo to protect their garden and to make huts for their animals. They must go to the other side of the island. The river will carry the bamboo down to where they live.

**Chapter 12:** When the family goes up to the river, they take the dogs with them. This is a mistake because when they see a herd of buffaloes, the dogs start barking. The boys have to shoot down one of the buffaloes because the family are at risk of being attacked. They catch two young buffaloes. This is good because the buffaloes will give them milk and pull the plough. The number of animals (pigs, dogs and chicks) grows and the donkey mates a wild donkey. Now the family need more food for all these animals.

**Chapter 13:** In winter, life on the island is very harsh: the rain never stops and the family are always wet. The house on the tree is no longer as comfortable as before and

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there is little food left so they have to kill a few of their animals. The family have a very bad time.

**Chapter 14:** Winter is over and the family look for a cave to live in; they don't want to go through the same experience next winter. They find a suitable cave full of salt. Then Mrs Robinson makes clothes for the boys with plants.

**Chapter 15:** Years go by and the children grow older. Fritz wants to visit the parts of the island he has never explored so he builds himself a canoe.

**Chapter 16:** In his exploratory journey, Fritz finds pearl-bearing oysters, which will make them rich and another shipwrecked person who has been stranded for a year on a small island nearby. One day, a ship comes to rescue Jenny.

**Chapter 17:** In the end, two of them, Fritz and Jenny, leave the island, but the rest of the family decide to stay.

### Background and themes

The idea for the story was clearly taken from the earlier classic, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. The author pays tribute to his source in the title of his own book but the influence of the original goes much deeper than merely the basic plot line. Many of the incidents in the original are exactly mirrored in this story: the visits to the sunken ship at the beginning, the building of various houses, the planting of crops, learning to live with nature, and finally, the meeting with another human being.

With a modern perspective, it is sometimes remarked that the family know a great deal about survival on a tropical desert island, considering that they come from a land-locked temperate country in Europe. But in reality, ordinary people at the time the writer is describing, knew a great deal more about nature than the average person does today, and were considerably better at DIY.

### Discussion activities

#### Chapters 1–3

##### Before reading

**1 Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the following in small groups. If you could choose four other people i.e. doctor, lawyer, priest, carpenter, to be shipwrecked with on a desert island, who would they be? Each group must agree on their list and have reasons for choosing each person. Elicit the lists from each group and the reasons then decide which list is the best.

##### While reading

- 2 Discuss:** (p. vi) Ask students to comment on other books they have read involving a family facing a difficult situation.
- 3 Write:** (p. 1) Ask students to write some of the questions that the children might ask before going to sleep. Then ask students to get into pairs and use the questions to role play a conversation between a son and the father.

##### After reading

- 4 Group work:** Remind students that the family had problems bringing the animals from the ship. Ask students if they have ever heard the story of the wolf, the goat and the cabbage. If they have not, read out the problem situation.

*You are on a ship which is wrecked on some rocks. There is a wolf, a goat and a cabbage – don't ask me why! There is a boat which can take you to the beach, but it is very small: it will only take you and one of the animals or the vegetable. But you need to take them all. You know that wolves like to eat goats and goats like to eat cabbages so you can't leave the wolf with the goat or the goat with the cabbage. This means you must take the goat first. At least you know the wolf won't eat the cabbage.*

Then ask students to solve the problem in groups. If they find it too difficult, read out the next part of the problem and ask students to solve it.

*You have taken the goat to the beach, and returned to the wolf and the cabbage. But you still have a problem. If you take the wolf to the other side now, and come back for the cabbage, the wolf will eat the goat. If you take the cabbage to the other side now, and come back for the wolf, the goat will eat the cabbage.*

#### Chapters 4–5

##### Before reading

- 5 Pair work and guess:** In pairs, ask students to read the title of the next chapter and make a list of the things they might find in the ship. They share them with the class.

##### While reading

- 6 Discuss:** (p. 9) Father says that "it's always a good idea to prepare for the future." Ask the class as a whole to discuss this and give examples of how you can prepare for the future.

##### After reading

- 7 Check:** Get the students to go back to their lists from activity 5 and see if they were right.
- 8 Discuss:** Ask the class as a whole to discuss the following: Is the tree house a good idea? Why/why not?

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### Chapters 6–8

#### Before reading

**9 Guess:** Ask students to read the titles of the three chapters and decide if the family could finally make the tree house. They must account for their answers.

#### While reading

**10 Pair work:** Ask students to work in pairs and use these words to explain how they made a rope ladder. Clue: They didn't use one of these things!

bamboo nails sticks thick rope  
thin rope wood

#### After reading

**11 Pair work:** Ask students to make a list of the things father says they should do to plan for the future.

### Chapters 9–11

#### While reading

**12 Pair work:** (p. 21) Ask students to work in pairs. Mr Robinson says, "Why didn't I think of other, more important things?" *What important things didn't he bring on his journey to the ship?*

#### After reading

**13 Discuss:** Get the students to answer the following questions:

- What new animals came to the family?
- How did the new animals arrive?
- How could the new animals help the family in the future?

Ask them to consider the pros and cons of having brought the animals from the ship (e.g. the monkey, the chicks, the donkey etc.).

**14 Write:** Ask the students to write the 'to do list' the family prepare after Mr Robinson comes back from the ship.

### Chapters 12–13

#### Before reading

**15 Guess:** Ask the students to predict what happens to the family when they go up the river. *Will they bring the bamboo down the river? Is that an easy way to do so?*

#### While reading

**16 Discuss:** (pp. 32–33) Get the students to discuss how the Robinsons get ready for the rainy season. Ask them to make a list of the things they do to be ready for winter.

#### After reading

**17 Pair work:** Ask students to work in pairs.

Mr Robinson believes taking the dogs was a mistake. Ask the students to get into pairs and discuss why. Get them to discuss whether making huts for all the animals, including the pig and the donkey, was also a mistake.

**18 Group work:** Put students into groups to answer these questions:

- Was Mr Robinson right or wrong when he thought the family were ready for winter?
- How did they find answers to some of their problems?

Get each of the groups to share their opinions with the whole class.

### Chapters 14–15

#### Before reading

**19 Guess:** Ask the students to read the title of Chapter 14 and predict what the chapter is about. Get them to compare a Tree House with a Cave House.

#### While reading

**20 Pair work:** (p. 43) Ask students to work in pairs and compare the Robinson boys.

### Chapters 16–17

#### After reading

**21 Role play:** Ask the students to role play the conversation when Jenny arrives on the island. Get students to work in groups of six, four boys and two girls.

**22 Pair work:** Get students to work in pairs. Ask them to answer these questions about the end of the story:

- In what way was Jenny important in the end of the story?
- Who stayed on the island?
- Who left the island?

#### Extra activities

**23 Remember:** Ask students which practical skills from the book they can still remember.