

The Swiss Family Robinson Study Guide

The Swiss Family Robinson was written by a Swiss pastor who wanted his sons to learn about many topics that he felt were important to know, such as family values, self-reliance, good stewardship of natural resources, frugality, and many others. So he wrote this book and incorporated all of those lessons into the storyline.

Author: Johann David Wyss

Year Published: 1812–13

Perspective and Narrator: Father narrates the events of The Swiss Family Robinson. He tells the story as a first-person limited narrator through the journal he keeps while the family is on a deserted island.

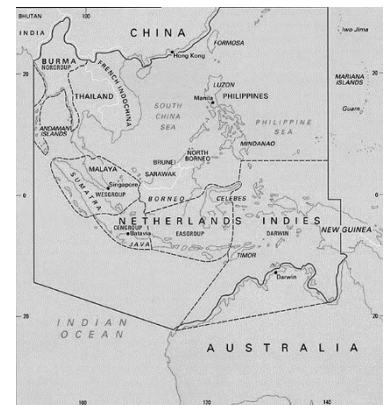
Tense: The Swiss Family Robinson is written in the past tense.

About the Title

The Swiss Family Robinson centers on the Robinson family from Switzerland. The family is traveling to Australia and a storm causes a shipwreck. The Swiss Family Robinson tells about the family's adventures and survival on a deserted island.

Overview

The Swiss Family Robinson is a fiction novel published in 1812 by Swiss author Johann Wyss. It tells of the adventures of a family of Swiss immigrants shipwrecked in the East Indies. (In those days the East Indies referred to South East Asia and the north Eastern part of Australia.) 'Robinson' is not a Swiss name, but it was inspired by the author's reading of Daniel Defoe's novel, Robinson Crusoe, (another story about being stranded on an island.)



Wyss, a Swiss minister, wrote the story as an entertaining life lesson for his four sons, which he told them orally before eventually writing it down. Years later, Wyss's son edited and published the manuscript. This book is a childhood favorite for generations, the book is the source of over a dozen film and television adaptations, including a 1960 Disney film.

Plot Summary

Set in the late 1700s, The Swiss Family Robinson recounts the ten-year adventure of Robinson, his wife Elizabeth, and their four sons, Fritz, Ernest, Jack, and Franz on an uninhabited island in the south Pacific. En route to Australia, the Robinsons' ship is wrecked in a turbulent storm. The crew escapes in the lifeboats, leaving the family stranded aboard the shattered vessel. The wreckage is wedged between rocks within sight of land, giving the family precious little time to fashion a makeshift canoe in which they make landfall on the nearby island. They establish camp on the beach and, after several trips back to the wreckage, gather enough supplies for short-term survival.

The family immediately explores the surrounding area. They arm themselves with guns and ammunition from the ship's stores and hunt for food; they retreat from the oppressive heat of the beach to a shady wooded grove where they build a treehouse; and they assemble a small sailing vessel found packed in the ship's hold. Along the way, the ever-resourceful Robinson teaches his sons about species of plants and animals, and the devout family prays regularly to thank God for the His provision and protection on the island.

As the weeks turn into months, seasonal monsoons force the Robinsons to look for warmer, drier accommodations. Exploring the cliff face along the beach, they discover a massive cave behind the rock wall. Full of useful minerals and providing excellent shelter and defense from wild animals, the cave is transformed by the family into a habitable dwelling complete with a workshop, a kitchen, and sleeping quarters. Settling in for the long haul, the family explores further inland, planting crops, amassing a menagerie of native animals as pets and pack animals, and continually finding ingenious ways to use the island's resources for their survival and comfort.

After ten years on the island, the boys are now strong, confident young men. One day, Fritz finds a pelican while in his canoe. He follows it and is led to Jenny Montrose, the lone survivor of a ship bound for England three years prior. The Robinsons quickly accept Jenny as part of the family, and she and Fritz develop a romantic relationship.

Soon after, a Royal Navy ship searching for Jenny Montrose discovers the island and rescues the family. Now settled in their new home—named by them "New Switzerland"—Mr. Robinson and his wife Elizabeth decide to remain on the island with Ernest and Jack. Fritz and Franz return to Europe.

Characters

Father

Father is the narrator of the story and the leader of the Robinson family. He has read many survival stories and has vast knowledge of the local plants and animals. The information he has gathered about survival and the local resources as well as his gentle instructions to the rest of the Robinson family ensure their survival after being shipwrecked on a deserted island in the South Pacific. He grows to think of the island as home and chooses to stay when there is a rescue opportunity.

Mother

Mother's bravery and resourcefulness play a large role in the Robinson family's survival on the deserted island in the South Pacific from the beginning. She brings supplies from the wrecked ship that Father and the boys would not have thought to get, and she continually surprises the rest of the family by thinking of ways to make their lives easier on the island. She loves the island and chooses to stay when there is a rescue opportunity.

Fritz

Fritz is 14 when the ship wrecks on the deserted island. He already knows several things about survival and how to hunt and contributes greatly to the Robinson family's success especially in the beginning. Fritz is compassionate and enjoys taming interesting animals the family finds on the island.

Ernest

Ernest is 12 when the ship wrecks on the deserted island. He is interested in plants and animals and studied them before the shipwreck. His knowledge helps the family identify the local flora and fauna and tame several animals. He also helps care for the animals while on the island. Ernest remains on the island when there is a rescue opportunity.

Jack

Jack is 10 years old when the ship wrecks on the deserted island. Jack assists with various tasks around the new home on the island and is an adventurous explorer. He is also innovative and contributes to the family's welfare with several new tools such as a harpoon for catching fish. He remains on the island when there is a rescue opportunity.

Franz

Franz is six years old at the time of the shipwreck. He plays on the deserted island and loves growing up on the island. One of his tasks is to look after the goats and sheep, and he helps Mother and the other boys with various tasks on their island home. He returns to Europe when there is a rescue opportunity.

Symbols

The Treehouse

The treehouse is a symbol of the family's new life on the island. It is the first permanent structure that the family builds. The family camps in a tent made of sailcloth when they first reach the island. The tent is not adequate protection from wild animals, and Mother believes that the family should find a more permanent home. Father knows that ships do not travel the ocean near their island often, and he agrees that the family should have a strong home. Mother notes after discovering the large trees, that they could attach their tent to one of the trees, making a home that was safe from wild animals. Father agrees after Mother shows him the grove of trees.

The family builds the treehouse several days after arriving on the island. Their first permanent home on the island proves to be their favorite because of its beauty and the life it represents. The family builds several more shelters on the island later but always uses the treehouse and the rock cave as their primary dwelling places. Mother comments after a long stay in the rock cave.

The Cave

The rock cave is a symbol of protection and safety. The treehouse that the family made as their first home is beautiful and provides most of their needs, but it is unprotected from the rain and wind during the rainy season. The family hopes to stay at the tree house during the rainy season using a shelter built under the tree roots, but after the first rainy season they realize that the treehouse does not provide enough shelter from the elements even though it is a good refuge from most wild animals.

The cave is large enough that the family and all of their livestock can comfortably stay in it. The size of the cave gives them protection from any wild animal that may happen to come near them. A boa constrictor comes near the cave, and the family uses the cave for protection. No wild animal can get through the rock, although the boa constrictor may have been able to get through the openings they had made, if they had not killed it.

Themes

Family

The Swiss Family Robinson is primarily about family. Each member of the Robinson family cares about the others and wants the others to succeed. The family works well together enabling them to not only survive on the deserted island, but flourish.

The family works together for survival. Father and Mother work as a team to make important family decisions. They respect each other's opinions and openly listen so that they can make the best decisions for the family. Father and Mother listen to the children as well. Fritz, Ernest, Jack, and Franz are each knowledgeable in several areas and work as a team to discuss ideas and create innovations that help the family in some way.

The Robinson family welcomes new people as family without hesitation. Fritz finds Jenny Montrose after the family has been on the island for over 10 years. They also welcome the ship's captain who stays with them for a few days.

Survival

The Swiss Family Robinson is a story of survival. The Robinson family survives the shipwreck that leaves them stranded at the beginning of The Swiss Family Robinson. The ship is damaged but stays afloat so that the family is not injured. The Robinson family's first effort at survival is in leaving the ship. They find a way to do that by building a raft with barrels from the ship. The family's innovation allows them to survive the ship and raft to land.

The Robinson family is able to find plentiful food on the island that aids their survival. They take guns from the ship and hunt wild game. Father had studied plants. That knowledge allows the family to have enough fruit and vegetables to supplement the meat.

Father, Mother, Fritz, Ernest, Jack, and Francis are able to survive for years on the island by working together and thinking through every problem to arrive at the best solution. Each member of the family is considered a valuable part of the team. Father and Mother provide

the children with a valuable education in finding food and protecting themselves from danger.

Providence

Providence is a theme throughout *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Providence is another word for the Christian God. In earlier days, Christians used 'Providence' to specifically name God's power of sustaining and guiding human destiny. Father is a pastor who believes in the power of Providence and encourages the family to seek God's help and guidance. The family prays together during the storm on the ship. Father and Mother teach Fritz, Ernest, Jack, and Francis to worship and trust in God.

The family thanks Providence throughout *The Swiss Family Robinson*. They build their treehouse and are able to find plentiful resources on the island. Father makes sure that they observe the Sabbath or holy day. The Sabbath is a day specified as a day of rest and worship in the Bible. Father considers teaching his children about God to be the most important thing he can do for them.

Father thanks Providence after 10 years on the island. He does not believe that the family was lucky to be stranded on an island with so many resources but believes that God took care of them by providing plentiful food.

Activities

Questions on Chapter 1

1. Describe the setting of the story as Chapter 1 begins.
2. What are the first names of all four boys in the Robinson family?
3. How did the dogs get from the ship to the island?
4. If you were stranded alone on a desert island, what would be your first three priorities and why?
5. If you were stranded on a desert island, and you could only bring ten items along in your backpack or suitcase, what would you bring?

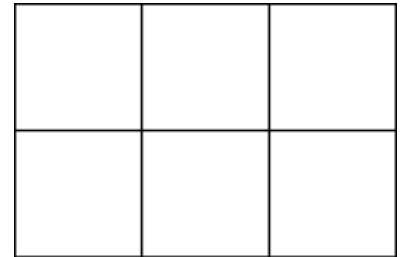
Further Questions:

1. The family finds many plants and animals on the island. List as many of these plants and animals as you can.
2. When the ship runs aground on the rocks, what happens to all the ship's crewmen?
3. What is the first thing the family does when they land?
4. Why do you think the island is located near the equator?
5. Throughout the book, Father offers many words of instruction to his children. List at least three examples of advice that Father gives to his sons.

Extension Activity: Storyboard

A storyboard is a series of pictures that tell us about an important event in a story. A storyboard can tell the story of only one scene – or the entire novel.

Complete the storyboard below illustrating the events described in the first 3 chapters of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. You may wish to practice your drawings on a separate piece of paper. For each chapter, divide your paper into 6 squares.



Questions for discussion

1. How old are the family members in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?
2. What moral values are presented in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?
3. How did the family reach the tropical island?
4. How did they build their first home?
5. In *The Swiss Family Robinson*, what are the differences between the Rock Cave House and Falconhurst?
6. What made the Swiss Family Robinson change their residence?
7. How did the Swiss family Robinson build their second home?
8. How did the family work together as a team during crisis? What does this tell you about the importance of a family?
9. How do the chickens and dogs get to shore?
10. What were the most important things learned by the Robinson family?
11. What is the setting of *The Swiss Family Robinson*?
12. What were some foods found on the island?
13. How do the characters make their utensils in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?
14. Discuss any problems encountered by the family.
15. What unusual purpose does tobacco and a pipe serve in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?
16. Whose pet is the ostrich and how did he use it?
17. How does Fritz learn about another victim forsaken on a faraway island?
18. What is the female sailor's name in "*The Swiss Family Robinson*"?
19. How does the adventure come to a happy end?
20. What could be another ending for *The Swiss Family Robinson*?
21. Who do you admire the most in the *Swiss Family Robinson* and why?
22. What is the main theme in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?