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## A Talent for Writing, and Falling Into Things

By DWIGHT GARNER

It may not be a surprise to learn that the British novelist William Golding, whose “Lord of the Flies” (1954) supplanted “The Catcher in the Rye” as the bible of tortured adolescence in America, did not have a happy childhood. But the details will put a sweat on your forehead. “He was oversensitive, timid, fearful, lonely,” John Carey writes in this excellent biography, the first to be written about Golding (1911-1993). “He was alienated from his parents and his brother and had no friends.”

Golding’s alienation spun into class rage. His father, an impoverished intellectual, taught at a mediocre grammar school that had the misfortune to be not far from Marlborough College, an elite private school. That school’s privileged and preening young men made Golding feel “dirty and ashamed,” Mr. Carey writes. Golding became a writer partly to seek revenge. “The truth is my deepest unconscious desire would be to show Marlborough,” Golding wrote, “and then piddle on them.”

Golding’s sense of social inadequacy never left him. He attended Brasenose College, Oxford, where he shook with resentment. The school’s placement interviewers privately noted that he was “N.T.S.” (not top shelf) and “Not quite” (not quite a gentleman). Small wonder Golding would later write, in a book review, that he wished that he could sneak up on Eton, perhaps England’s most exclusive private school, “with a mile or two of wire, a few hundred tons of TNT, and one of those plunger-detonating machines which makes the user feel like Jehovah.”

In his fiction Golding would become a laureate of humiliation, writes Mr. Carey, a well-known British literary critic, biographer and academic. (He is emeritus Merton professor of English literature at Oxford.) But Golding was also in touch with his darkest impulses, especially his own sublimated bent toward cruelty.

“I have always understood the Nazis,” Golding said, “because I am of that sort by nature.”

It was “partly out of that sad self-knowledge,” he added, that he wrote “Lord of the Flies,” about a group of British schoolboys stuck on a deserted island and about how culture and reason fail them.

“We’re not savages,” one of the boys declares. “We’re English.” The sound you hear, emerging from behind that line, is Golding’s demented laughter.

This all sounds a bit bleak, doesn’t it? Well, it’s among Mr. Carey’s achievements that this plump and well-researched biography sits lightly in the lap; it reads like a picaresque novel. Mr. Carey tidily lays out the whole picnic: Golding’s youth; his education; his years in the Royal Navy (he commanded a rocket-firing ship off the coast of Normandy on D-Day); his struggle to write his first books while teaching; his slow path toward success; and ultimately his [Nobel Prize, awarded in 1983](#), which brought Golding the kind of esteem that he felt had long eluded him. Mr. Carey walks you adroitly

through Golding's fiction and lays out the case for many of his lesser-known novels, including "The Inheritors" (1955) and "Pincher Martin" (1956).

To this picnic he has also brought a magnum of Champagne — or, to salve Golding's class sensibilities, let's say a box of very cold ale. Running beneath Mr. Carey's biography, "William Golding: The Man Who Wrote 'Lord of the Flies,'" there is a lively counternarrative, one that portrays Golding, a man of constant sorrow, in a warm, fondly comic light. Part modern-day Job, part existential Charlie Brown, part long-suffering hero out of [Bernard Malamud](#) or [Ian McEwan](#), Golding was a man for whom things constantly went wrong, yet he resolutely soldiered on.

During one of his first sexual experiences, the girl asked him, mortifyingly, "Should I have all that rammed up my guts?" ("Yes," Golding stammered.) While in the Navy, he caused an explosion in his pants by placing bomb detonators and a battery in the same pocket. Luckily, no important bits were blown sideways. When he was a schoolteacher, writing his first novels during class in assignment books, the other teachers would tweak him, asking, "How's the masterpiece coming on?"

Golding was scared of heights, injections, crustaceans, insects and all manner of creeping things. "He was scared," Mr. Carey writes, "of being alone at night." He was an accomplished sailor yet had almost no sense of direction. One of his boats sank. In a car, he'd get lost a few miles from home. "He was always hitting his head on doors, car boots and other projections," Mr. Carey writes.

He was no luckier with hobbies. He adored cameras, but they broke the moment he picked them up. He loved gardening but suffered for his foliage. "He stocked his pond with decorative fish, and they were eaten by herons," Mr. Carey writes. "He bought an innocent-looking aquatic fern called azolla, and it spread with such monstrous vigor that he was soon dredging it out by the wheelbarrow-load, and feared it might end up damming the English Channel."

Golding was obsessed with early chess computers; his gout was so excruciating that he felt like something "out of [Charles Addams](#)"; his students nicknamed him "Scruff" because of his grizzled beard and unkempt dress. A friend described him as "a cross between Captain Hornblower and St. Augustine," noting that he was "stocky, heavily built, short, very thick in the shoulders, with a slight nautical roll."

Many of Golding's misadventures involved drink. He fell a lot, missing couches he meant to sit on. After a 1971 dinner party, Golding destroyed a puppet of [Bob Dylan](#) that belonged to his host, the writer Andrew Sinclair.

"He had woken in the middle of the night, attacked it under the impression that it was Satan, and buried it in the back garden," Mr. Carey writes.

The wonderful if dark human comedy in this biography aside, Mr. Carey takes Golding's fiction very seriously indeed, and vigorously defends him against criticisms that it was pretentious and joyless. Mr. Carey is a shrewd reader, reminding us of what was perhaps Golding's greatest gift as a novelist, his ability to go into "Martian mode, showing familiar things from an alien viewpoint." We get a sense of Golding the nonalien as well. He married his wife in 1939; they were married still at his death in 1993.

Golding was an intensely private man, one who gave few interviews and did not want a biography written during his lifetime. He's lucky now to have Mr. Carey, here to restore him in our minds with intelligent sympathy and wit.

