

GROWING UP CRUSOE



Every summer since childhood, I try to revisit *Robinson Crusoe*, novelist Daniel Defoe's classic 1719 tale of the title character's adventures as an

island castaway.

Crusoe has been wrongly branded as a book just for boys, a discredit to a work that, like any great piece of literature, can speak to readers of all kinds. The pleasure of rereading it involves the promise of every masterpiece: namely, the possibility that the book will continue to grow with you — or, to put it more accurately, that you will keep growing with the book.

As a grade schooler, I liked best the parts about Crusoe hewing his own house from a cave, shooting game, growing a garden, building a fort. His handiness enthralled me, since I was a bookish kid who wasn't great with tools or anything else celebrated as a manly art.

In later years, though, I noticed that Crusoe also spent time crafting something that even a bookworm and novice writer might create. With pen and paper salvaged from his shipwreck, Crusoe kept a journal, recording an account of his solitary existence. That might seem like an

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indulgent act for a man struggling to survive, but Defoe clearly saw that even in the direst of straits, humans need the comforting structure of story to prevail.

That truth is affirmed in the real-life presence of the cave paintings of Lascaux, made some 20,000 years ago in what is now the Dordogne region of southwestern France. You've no doubt seen pictures of the paintings, sublime images that include bulls, felines, equines, and human figures. The paintings seem to be one of humanity's earliest attempts at recorded storytelling. I'm always moved to think that these ancient artists, living in such precarious conditions, perhaps not knowing where their next meal was coming from, would still lavishly spend their time and energy on a grand exercise in narrative.

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When I teach college writing, I begin the course with a few words about Lascaux, pressing upon my students that the work they do as storytellers is vital. Writers need this kind of pep talk because visual and language arts are routinely dismissed as the soft side of the academy, a lower priority than the STEM fields that are supposed to make the *real* world work.

But there's nothing more real in the sweeping enterprise of our species than a good story, which allows us to miraculously multiply the dimensions of our existence. Through narrative, we live an experience once in real time, again in its recording, yet again in its telling, then perhaps again and again as the story is handed down through the ages.

Stories can carry our voices far, even into the ears of those yet born. The castaway Crusoe made stories for the same reason we do — to feel, even in the darkest depths of isolation, that he wasn't alone.

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