



Lord of the Flies

by William Golding

In a Nutshell

Lord of the Flies was first published in 1954 by [William Golding](#), an English writer. It took awhile to gain wide readership, but by the 1960s it was a big success and Golding was off on his writing career that would include a [Nobel Prize for Literature](#) in 1983. According to the prize committee, Golding's novels "illuminate the human condition of the world today." Not bad.

This particular novel is about what happens when a bunch of young boys are stranded on an island and left to fend for themselves. *Lord of the Flies* is an allegory (essentially a story with a moral), about...well, it's about something. People can't seem to decide exactly what. It's either about the inherent evil of man, or psychological struggle, or religion, or human nature, or the author's feelings on war (he was in the [Navy](#) during WWII), or possibly all of the above.

The whole boys-being-stuck-on-an-island thing is nothing new, and it seems Golding used this scenario to respond to another novel, [The Coral Island](#), written by [R.M. Ballantyne](http://www.athelstane.co.uk/ballanty/ballabio.htm) in 1857. *The Coral Island* depicts some white, European boys who end up on an island and use Christianity to "conquer" the "heathen ways" of the [Polynesian](#) natives. Naturally, this was a huge success in [Victorian England](#). Golding read it and got all fired up, and wrote *Lord of the Flies* using many of the same names for his characters that Ballantyne did. Unlike *The Coral Island*, *Lord of the Flies* shows the British boys as savage and, to use a technical term, rather "sketch."

Why Should I Care?

For as far back as we can see into the annals of history, culture has embraced and promoted physical violence.

"No," you protest, "surely we've evolved past the days of gladiatorial combat and public executions?" When's the last time you were in a movie theater? Played a video game? Watched TV? From *Hostel* to *Resident Evil 4*, humanity has an attraction to violence. Now, supposedly, civilization masks all of these violent tendencies we have.

We come up with "proper" ways to vent our bloodlust, ways like WWF and [football](#) and thumbwrestling on the six-hour school trip to D.C. BUT, put a bunch of kids on an island, with no governing authorities, no societal structure, and no consequences, and "civilization" breaks down.

Does this sound like the stuff of unrealistic literary fiction to you? In 1971 [Philip Zimbardo](#),

a professor of psychology at [Stanford University](#), decided to run an experiment with faux (or fake) prisoners and faux guards. The plan was to take some volunteer undergraduates and stick them in a simulated prison in the basement of the psychology building for two weeks.

Some were guards, and some were prisoners.

The guards were armed with wooden batons, uniforms, and mirrored-sunglasses.

The prisoners were forced to wear different clothing and referred to only by numbers.

What happened? The "guards" became real guards in their own minds, and the prisoners also internalized their roles.

The experiment got way out of hand way too fast, with "prisoners" suffering abuse, degradation, and humiliation from the newly sadistic "guards." There were hunger strikes and restrictions to solitary confinement.

Supposedly, the participants suffered significant psychological violence.

How long did this all take? Six days.

It seems that college students being stuck in a basement isn't a situation so unlike young boys stranded on an island.

So before you write off *Lord of the Flies* as unrealistic, think about how much we respond to violence and struggles for power.

It can be ugly stuff, this human nature, and it's novels like this one that ask us to look at it, rather than turn a blind eye.