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KRISTINA SCHIMMELS

Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

ROBINSON CRUSOE FOR GIRLS: A LOOK AT FROM THE MIXED-UP FILES OF MRS. BASIL E. FRANKWEILER

Abstract:

The Robinsonade is a popular genre for adventure books aimed at boy readers. Seth Lerer states that this genre is "not just about adaptation or imitation. It is about completion" (2009, p. 145). The 1967 novel *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* captures the spirit of the Robinsonade tradition, but also adds to the genre by capturing a mostly girl readership by using a girl as a main character and making the all important deserted island the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. E.L. Konigsburg explores the traditions and tropes set by Daniel Defoe and other Robinsonade writers as she creates an engaging story that appeals to both girls and boys.

Keywords:

Robinson Crusoe, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, children's literature, adventure stories

Quick, name a well-known and well-loved adventure book aimed at boy readers. I'm sure the books that come to your mind are *Robinson Crusoe*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, or even one of the many books written by British author G.A. Henty. Now, name a well-known and well-loved adventure book aimed at girl readers. Take your time. I doubt anything has come up unless you are very well read and you thought of *Pippi Longstocking*. However, girl adventure books do exist, and although the girl protagonists of these books do not sail the high seas looking for adventure, they do owe much of their plot structure and characterizations to earlier texts aimed at boy readers, namely *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg relies heavily on the adventure story pattern created by Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*, and can be considered the first and best known Robinsonade for girls.

First published in 1702, *Robinson Crusoe* became an instant classic and even spawned its own genre form called the Robinsonade, a term which was first used by Johann Gottfried Schnabel in 1731. According to Seth Lerer in his book *Children's Literature: A Reader's History From Aesop to Harry Potter*, *Robinson Crusoe* became popular almost immediately after publication and was quickly used in schoolrooms around Europe, including chapbooks, abridgments, and translations. Lerer notes that forty *Robinsonaden* appeared in Germany between 1722 and 1769 (2009, p. 130). Other famous English Robinsonades include *The New Robinson Crusoe*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Coral Island*, *Treasure Island*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and *Where the Wild Things Are*. Common aspects of these books, especially in the original text, are adventures, deserted islands, relationships between parents and children, runaways and their returns (Lerer, 2009, p.131). One of the distinguishing marks of these types of stories is that Robinsonades "take the island story and reveal it as a tale not of geographical adventure, but of inner, mental exploration" (Lerer, 2009, p.142), which is what *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* does for girl readers. They are given an opportunity to wonder about their lives in the suburbs of the United States while living vicariously through the character of Claudia. Lerer further comments, "The Robinsonian tradition is not just about adaptation or imitation. It is about completion" and that "many of the Robinsonades that followed play off the novel's possibilities for endless new adventure" (145).

However, not every adult concerned with children's reading material feels that Robinsonades are appropriate for most audiences. According to Eric Tribunella in his article "Boyhood," the eighteenth century writers Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth warned parents about letting their boys read adventure stories (2011, p. 23), but they also contended that adventure books were good for girls because girls should be immune to the "seduction of exploration" (p. 24). Tribunella also makes the point that girls enjoyed early adventure books because "the entertained fantasies of boyhood freedom, indicating that boyhood is by no means only for boys" (p. 24). Therefore, the fact that some Robinsonades are aimed at girl readers should come as no surprise.

Published in 1967, nearly three hundred years after *Robinson Crusoe*, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg definitely fits into the category of a Robinsonade, but there is a new twist. The main character is an eleven-year-old girl, and the deserted island she inhabits is The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Claudia's character is slightly different than Crusoe's but very little. The main changes, other than the fact that Claudia is a pre-teen girl, is that she is the eldest child in her family and has three younger brothers. But like Crusoe, Claudia is tired of her middle class existence.

Comparisons between the characters of Robinson Crusoe and Claudia Kincaid abound. There are fairly distinct differences, like Claudia is a girl and lives in the twentieth century, but the similarities are strong. Both characters are born into middle class families. Crusoe states this fact in the first sentence: "I was born...of a good family" (Defoe, 1702, p. 1). Crusoe uses the word "good" three different times in the first paragraph to describe his father's wealth and his mother's family. Crusoe's father then dominates much of the first chapter in a defense of the middle class as a means of dissuading his son of pursuing a life at sea. Konigsburg is more cryptic in describing Claudia's middle class situation. In the first chapter, readers learn that the Kincaids live in Greenwich, Connecticut, a wealthier suburb of New York City and that Mr. Kincaid works in New York City. Claudia is given a modest allowance, but she complains that her friends get more each week and that it takes "her more than three weeks of skipping hot fudge sundaes to save enough for train fare" (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 3). In Claudia's case, this mere allowance and her middle class existence echoes Crusoe's feelings and needs for leaving home.

The major similarity between Crusoe and Claudia lies in their reasons for running away. Crusoe states that his father had intended for him to go into law, but "being the third son of the family and not bred to any trade, my head began to be filled very early with rambling thoughts" (Defoe, 1702, p. 1). In the long discussion between Crusoe and his father in chapter one, the elder man tries to convince his son that "the middle state, or what might be called the upper station of low life...was the best state in the world, the most suited to human happiness" (p. 2). It takes Crusoe almost a year of planning before he runs away, but he never loses his desire to go to sea.

Claudia's reasons for running away are not really defined much beyond Crusoe's "rambling thoughts" either, but Mrs. Frankweiler explains, "Claudia knew that it had to do with injustice. She was the oldest child and the only girl and was subject to a lot of injustice. Perhaps it was because she had to both empty the dishwasher and set the table on the same night while her brothers go out of everything. And perhaps, there was another reason more clear to me than to Claudia. She was bored with simply being straight-A's Claudia Kincaid" (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 2). Mrs. Frankweiler also says, Claudia was tired of "injustice, and of the monotony of everything" (p. 2). Claudia wishes to come home a different person than when she left. So, for both Crusoe and Claudia, the

desire to be different and to escape the patterns of everyday life causes them to run away.

Both Crusoe and Claudia are detailed. Crusoe is a consummate note maker (Lerer, 2009, p. 130) and much of his narrative on the island is a detailed explanation of his daily activities. Claudia also carefully plans her escape. In fact, much of the first chapter is dedicated to enumerating Claudia's plans for leaving, including forgoing hot fudge sundaes so she can save enough money for one round trip train ticket to New York City, choosing to runaway to the Metropolitan Museum of Art because she does not like camping and wanted to escape "to a large place, a comfortable place, an indoor place, and preferably a beautiful place" (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 1), and choosing her brother Jamie as a traveling partner because "he could be counted on to be quiet, and now and then he was good for a laugh. Besides, he was rich...He saved almost every penny he got" (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 1). But Claudia even creates explicit plans for their actual escape. Like with Crusoe's seemingly impulsive first attempt at jumping a ship, Claudia's plans are sped up thanks to her discovery of an unused train ticket in her father's trashcan, but Claudia is prepared. Konigsburg writes, "Planning long and well was one of her special talents" (p. 5), and "details never escaped Claudia" (p. 14). She and Jamie runaway on a Wednesday because that is music lesson day. They fill their instrument cases with socks and underwear and their toothbrushes. They hide in the bus until the driver leaves it in the parking lot. At the museum, Claudia has exquisite plans for evading the day guards. They first check their coats, book bags, and instrument cases. At 4:30, they pick up their belongings and leave the museum. They re-enter through the Children's Museum in the back (p. 33-34). But then, the plans for evading the guards during closing are just as thorough, but much simpler: they enter the appropriate restroom and stand on the toilet seat in a stall with the door unlocked and slightly ajar. Claudia even plans for this experience to be educational. She tells Jamie that they should learn everything about the museum (p. 51). They even attempt this amazing feat by blending in with classes of school children that are approximately the same age.

Of course, no Robinsonade is complete without a companion who is generally savage and uncouth, or at least savage and uncouth according to European standards of civilization and culture. Essentially, the Robinsonade is an attempt to colonize the deserted island and its people. In Crusoe's case, he has several companions during his tale – his friend with whom he jumps the ship in Hull, the boy who helps him escape from slavery, and Friday. But the companion dearest to his heart is Friday. Crusoe saves Friday from death at the hands of other cannibals and attempts – and succeeds – in civilizing him according to English definitions of civilization and culture by giving him clothes, teaching him to speak English, and converting him to Christianity, and especially knowing that he should call Crusoe "Master" (Defoe 1702, p. 219). Crusoe calls Friday a savage, and in truth, Friday is a cannibal who has no qualms about eating the men who had tried to kill him. However, it is interesting to note Crusoe's description of Friday,

which modern readers find racist but fits with Crusoe's feelings of superiority: "He had a very good countenance, not a fierce and surly aspect, but seemed to have something very manly in his face; and yet he had all the sweetness and softness of a European in his countenance, too, especially when he smiled" (p.218). Actually, Crusoe's description of Friday continues for another page in which he describes every possible physical attribute, including Friday's hair, eyes, forehead shape, and skin color. However, Lerer notes a sympathy and love for Friday as a father feels for a son, quoting Crusoe, "His very Affections were ty'd to me, like those of a Child to a Father" (2009, p. 129).

Claudia has no less of a job "civilizing" Jamie on their deserted island. In Claudia's mind, Jamie is as much of a cannibal and savage as Friday is, and she describes him in less than glowing terms. As Claudia begins to explain the runaway plan to Jamie, he looks "like a miniature, clean-shaven Neanderthal man" (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 10). We also discover in that the main reason why Jamie has much money is because he cheats his best friend at cards. And, just as Crusoe feels like he needs to teach Friday the English language, Claudia feels the same onus with Jamie's use of English, including this following example after one of Jamie's comments: "'Break up, not bust up. Indecent, not undecent,' Claudia corrected" (p. 11). One of Jamie's favorite phrases is the mile expletive, "Oh, baloney," which he repeats several times in the novel. At first, Jamie is disappointed that they are running away to a museum in New York City instead of the woods - which is the common trope in Robinsonades - but then he is consoled when he is allowed to wear sneakers instead of shoes, which is also a nod at Friday's preference to be naked. And he is excited about the prospect of eating the note Claudia gives him with her plans. However, that plan falls apart when he realizes that paper is bland and the ink turns his teeth blue (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 17). Claudia also considers Jamie's frugality uncivilized. She becomes extremely angry with him when he decides that they will walk the forty blocks from the train station to the museum instead of taking either a taxi or a bus because they cost too much (p. 28), and is frustrated when he allots each of them ten nickels for breakfast each day (p. 48). But, like Crusoe, Claudia and Jamie bond in a way they didn't expect:

What happened was: they became a team, a family of two. There had been times before they ran away when they had acted like a team, but those were different from *feeling* like a team...You might call it *caring*. You could even call it *love*. And it is rarely, indeed, that it happens to two people at the same time (p. 41).

Claudia, like Crusoe, learns to appreciate the uncivilized companion in her adventure.

At the heart of all Robinsonades is the deserted island. In the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, the island is absolutely deserted for twenty-five years, except for random cannibal landings and a Spanish shipwreck in which the sailors die. Until Friday arrives, Crusoe is utterly alone. Konigsburg plays with the notion of a deserted island, however. Claudia and Jamie are together the entire time, and even though they have run to an actual island,

Manhattan is one of the most densely populated islands in the world. Even their eventual island is an island within an island. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the most visited places in the world. According to the *Mixed-Up Files*, “On any ordinary Wednesday over 26,000 people come” (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 32.) But as Jamie says, “New York is a great place to hide out. No one notices no one” (p. 31), and the next paragraph states, “guards always count the people going into the museum, but they don’t count them going out” (p. 31). Claudia and Jamie are able to blend in with the school groups visiting the museum. They are able to be isolated and deserted without the complete loneliness that Crusoe suffers.

However, the museum is not without its dangers. There are night guards that they must outmaneuver and they suffer from stomach gnawing hunger. According to Claudia, “Being hungry was the most inconvenient part of running away” (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 62). Fortunately, they are able to stay civilized on this deserted island. They sleep in an ornate sixteenth century bed that is not only beautiful, which speaks to Claudia’s need for beauty, but is also the place where a murder occurred, which appeases Jamie’s savagery (p. 39-49). But even among the dangers of living on this island, Claudia, like Crusoe, insists on following cultural expectations. They change their underwear every day, which forces them to head to the laundromat after three days. The children even take a bath in the fountain at the restaurant in the museum (p. 89-90). Crusoe never loses his strong faith in Christianity during his isolation, which is a major theme and focus in *Robinson Crusoe*, but basically a side note in *From the Mixed-Up Files*, but Jamie and Claudia also struggle with keeping their faith in God alive. As Jamie mentions on the Sunday they spend in the museum, “Sunday is still Sunday. It *feels* like Sunday. Even here” (p. 97). Claudia suggests finding a church when they leave the museum, but Jamie answers, “Well, let’s say a prayer in that little room of the Middle Ages. The part with the pretty stained glass window” (p. 97). So, the children pray in the chapel.

One of the common techniques used in Robinsonades is the first person narrator. He, because the main character is usually masculine, is the man who represents the power structures in society. He determines how the reader encounters this new world of the deserted island and how the reader should judge those whom the narrator meets. However, *The Mixed-Up Files* plays with this tradition. The first person narrator of this text is a powerful societal force who clearly understands Claudia’s personal mission to be different after this escapade and eventually holds the answers about the statue that Claudia and Jamie are searching for. But this narrator, though active in the story near the end of the novel, makes her presence known for most of the text through asides to her lawyer Saxon. Actually, the narrator’s identity is not unknown. We know that she is Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler because of her note directed to Saxon at the beginning of the story in which she sets the frame of the narrative as an attempt to “explain certain changes I want made in my last will and testament. You’ll understand these changes (and a lot of other things) much better after reading it” (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 1). Unlike other

Robinsonades, this novel is a frame story, and Mrs. Frankweiler's basis for writing is to explain changes in her will. However, except for the introductory letter and asides, this novel follows a third person limited narration. Essentially, Claudia and Jamie have described their experiences to Mrs. Frankweiler, and she has recounted them for Saxon, who is, ironically, the children's grandfather. So, we have a convoluted narration process. Jamie and Claudia are first person narrators in relation to Mrs. Frankweiler, who then relates their story to Saxon (and the reader).

Along with the actual comparisons of character and events, these two texts also relate to each other thematically. The main theme in these novels is the theme of self-discovery. Crusoe discovers that he is more than just the third son of a good family, and returns to England as a very wealthy man and a stronger Christian, while Claudia also goes home different. Because of her encounter with both the angel statue and Mrs. Frankweiler, she is able to return home and deal with the drudgery and possible injustice of everyday existence. As Mrs. Frankweiler explains to Jamie: "Returning with a secret is what she really wants. Angel had a secret and that made her exciting, important. Claudia doesn't want adventure. She likes baths and feeling comfortable too much that kind of thing. Secrets are the kind of adventure she needs. Secrets are safe, and they do much to make you different" (Konigsburg, 1967, p. 167). Mrs. Frankweiler also notes that Claudia enjoyed the act of planning running away and the details of hiding in the museum because those were also secrets, things that she never had to share with anyone else, except Jamie, who could appreciate the secret and the adventure together (p. 168). Claudia has a secret that she can keep forever and has discovered a happiness and contentment to allow her to return home.

The novel *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* carries on the long tradition of Robinsonades while changing the genre a bit to include a girl character and a story that attracts a mostly-girl readership, a readership that has already become acquainted with the Robinsonian tradition if the Edgeworths were correct. The fact that this novel can build on a text written more than three hundred years ago proves not only the continuing appeal of *Robinson Crusoe* but also the need readers have to escape the ordinariness of their lives for some sort of adventure, even if that adventure is lived vicariously through a book.

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