



Classics in Short No.1: Treasure Island

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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Helen Levene on Robert Louis Stevenson's **Treasure Island**.

A treasure map, the black spot, pieces of eight - it has to be ...

Treasure Island

<!--break-->

by Robert Louis Stevenson

First launched:

1881 as a serial; 1883 in book form.

Inspired by:

Robert Louis Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osborne.

In August 1881 Robert Louis Stevenson was staying at a cottage in Braemar, Perthshire, with his parents, his wife and young stepson. The weather was cold and wet and they spent a lot of time indoors. To keep the boy amused, Stevenson drew a finely detailed map of an imaginary island which he called Treasure Island. It wasn't long before he began writing a story about it, many of the ingredients for which came from Lloyd. This included his order for 'no women' - except for a brief appearance from Jim Hawkins' mother

What's it about?

It all begins at the Admiral Benbow Inn on the Devon coast where young Jim Hawkins gains possession of a treasure map, after fending off the likes of Captain Billy Bones, evil pirates Black Dog and terrifying blind man Pew.

Jim hands the map over to Squire Trelawney and Dr Livesey who decide to set sail to find the treasure, with Jim as their cabin-boy. Little do they know that their newly-hired ship's cook is none other than the villainous one-legged pirate Long John Silver who, as Jim soon overhears, is planning to seize the ship and the treasure map and get to the booty himself. Other characters include trustworthy Captain Smollett, the wicked pirate Israel Hands, (Long John's no. 2), Ben Gunn, the half-crazed sea-man marooned on the Island three years before, and of course, perched on Silver's shoulder, the eponymously named parrot, Captain Flint.

Classic qualities:

The prototype of many an adventure novel, this is a story which races along, full of excitement and memorable characters. Powerfully written, the strength lies in the utterly convincing world Robert Louis Stevenson creates for the

reader, providing pure escapism into a different time and place. **Treasure Island** could be considered to be one of the first novels to break one of the rules of literature for children, that of morals, for in his story the characters are not clear-cut 'right' and 'wrong?', and you can't help warming to the terrifying but somewhat likeable pirate of all pirates, Long John Silver.

Politically Correct?

Apart from Lloyd's insistence on no women? I'm afraid not ... **'Disability Equality in the Classroom'** (Rieser & Mason 1992) cites the depiction of Blind Pew and one-legged Long John Silver as examples of the common stereotype where people with disabilities are presented as sinister or evil.

Who's it for?

Experienced older readers who are able to follow the intricate pattern of events, the complexities of the characters and able to cope with the period flavour of the narrative, though told in the first-person, should help readers to identify with the main character of cabin-boy Jim Hawkins.

Not suitable for:

Younger children or the fainthearted.

Film versions?

Five. Avoid the hammy retelling with Orson Welles as Long John. The others are all worth getting out on video including **The Muppets Treasure Island** which is a fairly accurate retelling of the novel and brilliant fun.

Most memorable quotation:

'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!'

Who was RLS?

Born in Edinburgh in 1850, Robert Louis Stevenson was a much-loved child but his parents' possessiveness gave rise to deep family rifts. He didn't want to follow in his father's profession (engineering), or study Law, and he began writing, much to his father's dismay. He married an American, who already had a son, Lloyd, by a previous marriage. Dogged by ill-health, he spent a great deal of time trying to find a suitable climate to help his condition and in the late 1880s he settled with his family on Samoa, where he died in 1894 of a brain haemorrhage. His other books include **Kidnapped** (1886), **The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** (1886) and **The Black Arrow** (1888), **The Master of Ballantrae** (1889) and others.

Showing another side to his brilliance at writing for children he produced a collection of poems based on his own childhood memories, **A Child's Garden of Verses** (1885).

Epitaph

Here he lies where he longed to be,

Home is the sailor, home from sea,

And the hunter home from the hill.

Underwoods (1887) ?A Song of the Road?

Helen Levene

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