

6b

WE LOVED ONE ANOTHER WITH MUCH FERVENCY

The Coral Island: A Bromance

There was, indeed, no note of discord whatever in the symphony we played together on that sweet Coral Island; and I am now persuaded that this was owing to our having been tuned to the same key, namely, that of *love*! Yes, we loved one another with much fervency, while we lived on that island; and, for the matter of that, we love each other still.

*The Coral Island*¹ (p.167 Original emphasis)

This ‘chapter’ is essentially an addendum to the chapter on the discourses of sex and romance in children’s literature. In that chapter I drew attention to the possible, almost certainly inadvertent, queer readings to be found in Blyton’s work, and *The Coral Island* provides further examples.

Just to remind you of the story, the book is narrated in the first person by Ralph and tells of how three boys were wrecked on a deserted Pacific island, of how they survived there, and of the adventures they had. The oldest, Jack, is 18, and the youngest, Peterkin, is 13; Ralph is 15, and once again we are in the limbo land of what counts as children’s literature, and once again the term juvenile fiction comes to our rescue, but the book certainly reads as a children’s adventure story. When it comes to queer readings we are also in ambivalent territory, and here the modern coinage ‘bromance’ seems to fit the bill. Here’s Wikipedia: ‘A bromance is a close but non-sexual relationship between two or more men. It is an exceptionally tight affectional, homosocial male bonding relationship between two or more men exceeding that of usual friendship, and is distinguished by a particularly high level of emotional intensity.’ Thus when first person narrator, Ralph, says ‘we loved one another with much fervency’, it seems plain, to me at any rate, that the definition perfectly describes the relationship between the three boys, and it is not difficult to find other quotes in the book to support such an interpretation. Even before they are wrecked, for instance, Jack has evinced ‘a peculiar fondness’ for Ralph (p.17); and the emotional bond between the three of them seems to me to be confirmed by the use of the term ‘tenderly’ in the two following quotes. Ralph has been knocked out in the course of their struggle ashore – they had managed to survive by clinging onto an oar – and wakes to find Peterkin on his knees beside him and Jack gazing into his face:

..Peterkin on his knees by my side, tenderly bathing my temples with water..

.....

“Speak to us, my dear Ralph,” whispered Jack tenderly. “Are you better now?” (pp.23/24)

Later in the story, when Jack swims down to explore a cave with an underwater entrance and is gone for some time, Peterkin becomes frantic and there is no doubting the intensity of his feelings.

“Oh Jack, Jack! he is gone! It must have been a shark, and he is gone for ever!” (p144)

(And when he reappears...)

No sooner did Jack gain the rocks, and seat himself on one, panting for breath, than he (Peterkin) threw his arms round his neck and burst into a flood of tears. “Oh Jack, Jack!” said he, “where were you? What kept you so long?” (p. 155)

Of course there is plenty enough in the peril of their situation for their feelings for each other to run high, in this case particularly since Jack is the oldest and the other two are dependent upon his leadership, but the one reading does not rule out the other. All of which is certainly confirmed in the reunion scene at the end of the book, when Ralph, having been captured by pirates, returns to the island, and jumping overboard into the sea, embraces Jack who has rushed into the sea to help him:

In another moment we met in deep water, clasped each other round the neck, and sank, as a matter of course, to the bottom! We were well-nigh choked, and instantly struggled to the surface, where Peterkin was spluttering about like a wounded duck, laughing and crying by turns, and choking himself with salt water!

It would be impossible to convey to the reader, by description, an adequate conception of the scene that followed my landing on the beach, as we stood embracing each other indiscriminately, in our dripping garments, and giving utterance to incoherent rhapsodies, mingled with wild shouts. (p. 358)

...and on the next page Jack tells Ralph of his distress when he realised that Ralph had been captured by the pirates in the first place.

“I tell you, Ralph, my boy, that I shed more tears that time at losing you, than I have done, I verily believe, all my life before.” (p. 360)

Moving on; to comment first perhaps on the treatment of nudity in the book which is certainly casual so far as the three boys are concerned as for instance on their first morning when they fling off their clothes and plunge into the sea.

(Peterkin) uttered a vehement shout, flung off his garments, and, rushing over the white sands, plunged into the water.

.....

(Jack) bounded to his feet, threw off his clothes, shook back his hair, and, with a lion like spring, dashed over the sands and plunged into

the sea with such force as quite to envelop Peterkin in a shower of spray.

.....

I, too, hastily threw off my garments and endeavoured to imitate Jack's vigorous bound . . (pp.51/52)

There is no hint of eroticism in the account and basically the question of the nudity of the three boys is a matter of no interest at all. Later the nakedness of the native islanders when they appear *is* a matter of interest, as for instance when Ralph watches as two groups land on the island, the one group pursued by the other, the latter setting about slaughtering the former, and for all that 'a species of fascination seemed to hold me down and glue my eyes upon the combatants'(p.231) the ostensible reason for his fascination is in the way that their nakedness emphasises the devilishness of their appearance and the horror of their behaviour.²

As they were almost entirely naked, and had to bound, stoop, leap, and run in their terrible hand to hand encounters, they looked more like demons than human beings. (p.231)

As far as more overt sexual content is concerned, though I suspect covert is the word, there is certainly some material that lends itself to such readings, some certainly tendentious and specious, some without doubt contentious, some symbolic, and some, more entertainingly, a tad more outrageous. I shall start with examples at the more specious end of the spectrum: in the opening pages Ralph, who had previously been an apprentice on a coasting vessel, tells of how his shipmates used to describe him as 'a queer, old-fashioned fellow'(p.13). Green's on-line Dictionary of Slang³ suggests that the first use of the word queer to mean homosexual dates from 1915, so clearly here queer is being used in its older sense, but, though Ralph spends a couple of sentences ruminating about the description and pondering 'wherein my old-fashioned-ness lay'(p.13), he does not ponder about wherein his queer-ness lay; we must presume then that even if Ralph does not think of himself as being homosexual, he is happy enough to be thought of as being peculiar. Similarly Peterkin's surname, he's Peterkin Gay, catches the modern reader's eye, and though it should perhaps be noted that even at the time the word gay, as well as meaning cheerful, had apparently also come to have secondary connotations of dissipation and promiscuity, those connotations were only to evolve into the current meaning of homosexual in the earlier years of the 20th century. But were they aficionados of the novel who first coined the modern usage of the word? We shall never know, but it's an interesting speculation. But now to a more vulgar example: on the voyage out, Jack tells Ralph,

"I think we shall be good friends for I like the look o' you."

Jack was right. He and Peterkin afterwards became the best and staunchest of friends that ever tossed together on the stormy waves.

Again Green is informative, telling us that the use of the term 'tossing off' meaning to masturbate can be dated back to the mid 17th century. Outrageous? of course! Tendentious? almost certainly! But still and all it does catch the eye. Elsewhere, however, there is no doubt that the author's symbolic Freudian slip is showing. To start with Peterkin: he is 13 when he joins the voyage, and, we may perhaps presume, reaches puberty within the time scale of the

book. Suffice it to say that in the course of the story he acquires a spear, and a long one at that, which, even though it is too heavy he refuses to have shortened, and which he uses enthusiastically and indiscriminately. Here is Jack to start with, emphasising its phallic power:

“Well if length constitutes power,” said Jack, “you’ll certainly be invincible.” (p.97)

.....

...nothing would induce Peterkin to have it shortened (p.101)

.....

Peterkin wished very much to run about and stick his spear into everything that passed.(pp.97/101/102)

. . . and this particular little narrative strand climaxes, if that is the right word, when they discover a series of holes in the rock which lead down to the underwater cave, up through which shoot spouts of water:

Suddenly there came a loud hiss or snort; a fierce spout of water burst up between Peterkin’s legs, blew him off his feet, enveloped him in its spray and hurled him to the ground. (p.108)

But for a more outrageous example, let me finally return to the start of the book just after the boys had struggled ashore after being wrecked. As I noted above, Ralph has been knocked out but wakes to find that in the course of the wreck that he had hung on to the telescope that he happened to have in his hand at the time. Peterkin complains that,

“You’ve almost knocked out all my teeth, and more than half choked me..

And when Ralph asks him to explain, Jack tells him the story of what happened,

“You recollect that after the ship struck, we three sprang over the bow into the sea: well I noticed that the oar struck your head and gave you that cut on the brow, which nearly stunned you, so that you grasped Peterkin round the neck without knowing, apparently, what you were about. In so doing you pushed the telescope – which you clung to as if it had been your life – against Peterkin’s mouth –

“Pushed it against his mouth!” interrupted Peterkin; “say crammed it down his throat. Why, there’s a distinct mark of the brass ring on the back of my gullet at this moment!” (pp.25/26)

And if it crosses one’s mind that a telescope is extended when it is in use and is contracted when it isn’t, then it is clearly time to draw a discrete veil over the proceedings and move hastily on to the next chapter!

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¹ Ballantyne 1858 p.167

² At a deeper level, a glance at Wikipedia confirms that much has been written about the ways in which nudity and the potential sexual threat that goes with it is associated with evil in the belief systems of a number of religions, in particular the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but that would be for another investigation in another place and at another time.

³ Green's Dictionary of Slang 2018 <https://greensdictofslang.com/>