

Talking about *The Swiss Family Robinson*

by Johann David Wyss · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/swiss-family-robinson/

Warming up

Easy openers. Anyone at the table can answer these, including the youngest.

1. The family names everything: Falconhurst, Rockburg, Shark's Island, Cape Disappointment. If we had to rename this house, this street and the nearest park today, what would we call them?
2. Jack rides a buffalo. Ernest has a monkey that picks coconuts. Franz has a bull called Grumble. Which animal on that island would you want, and what would you name it?
3. You are allowed one more trip back to the wreck before it breaks up. What are you going back for?

The real conversation

Pick two or three, not all of them. Parents answer too, honestly.

1. The father never asks the family whether they want to stay. He decides they have found paradise, names the island New Switzerland, and builds. Ten years later he is surprised that some of his sons want to leave. When has somebody decided something good for you without checking?
2. Ernest is the lazy one. He would rather sit and think than fetch and carry, and the others tease him for it — and he is right about the natural history nearly every time, and he is the one who works out how to launch the boat. Is being useful the same as being busy?
3. When the boa takes Grizzle, the father will not let anyone shoot, because a wounded snake would come for them next. He is right, and it costs them the donkey, and the boys have to watch. Have you ever been made to stand still while something bad happened because moving would have made it worse?
4. Nobody in this book is unkind to anybody. There are no villains, no thieves, no arguments that last more than a page. Does that make it a better story or a duller one — and what do you think a family looks like from the inside to the person writing it down?
5. In the last chapter, Fritz sails for England and Ernest and Jack stay. If our family found a place that was entirely ours and then a ship came, who at this table would get on it, and who wouldn't?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

The father spends ten years making things this family needs and one thing it doesn't — a written record. He hands the journal to his eldest son and asks him to have it printed, because 'it is very possible that it may be useful to other young people.' What is our family making right now that somebody who isn't in this room might one day be glad of?

Do it *together*

Map New Switzerland. Get a big sheet of paper. Between you, draw the island from the book — Safety Bay, Tentholt, Falconhurst up its tree, the salt cave at Rockburg, Flamingo Marsh, Jackal River, Prospect Hill, Shark's Island, the Gap in the cliffs. You will disagree about where things go, which is the point: put in what the book actually says and mark the rest with a question. Then turn the paper over and do the same for a place you all know — the walk to school, the back garden, the block — and name everything on it the way this family does, after what happened there. Cape Disappointment got its name because they climbed it looking for the ship's boats and saw nothing.