

For Andrew Yates, *Daily Mail*

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It's eighty years, I realise, since Arthur Ransome published *Peter Duck* – the third in his classic Swallows and Amazons series and his first big sales success. I seem to possess a half a dozen copies but there's one that I particularly cherish. It's battered, frayed and faded – slightly grubby, if I'm honest. I can't remember when it last possessed a dust-jacket. It's the copy I used to read when I was a child – on board Arthur Ransome's *Peter Duck*.

The novel, *Peter Duck*, tells an exciting story: a sinister black schooner stalks our heroes and heroines down the English Channel and across the Bay of Biscay to a Caribbean Island where pirate treasure has been buried. There's an earthquake, a killer waterspout, giant crabs. For years I found it hard to put my toes to the end of my bed at night for fear of their nipping pincers.

Purist Ransome fans sometimes confess that they're never quite sure about *Peter Duck* – or about Ransome's other out-and-out thriller, *Missee Lee*. The children in 1932 had no such doubts. When the reviewer in a literary paper dared suggest that it was inferior to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, young readers wrote to protest. "The adventures in *Peter Duck* might happen to any boy and girl nowadays, whereas *Treasure Island* is not so real to us. We feel that we are with the children in Mr Ransome's books and that we know them as friends."

I wasn't around in 1932 but I'm sure I would have agreed. I have my own special relationship with the book and its author. It's a relationship which began long before I could read at all. It began in 1957 when I was not quite three years old. That was when my parents bought Arthur Ransome's *Peter Duck*. Not a book but a boat.

Now that I am about to publish my own third novel, a sailing adventure called *Ghosting Home*, I realise how vital this relationship has been. Ransome himself believed that behind every storyteller there was another, and another behind them. That's certainly true. Ransome borrowed the name of *Treasure Island*'s pirate captain and I have used it as well. In my case, however, it is the boat even more than the book that has provided the creative spark.

Arthur Ransome and his Russian wife, Evgenia, were people who never felt quite satisfied. They moved house often and changed boats almost as frequently. *Peter Duck* was the fourth yacht Ransome had owned. She had been built specially for him at Pin Mill on the River Orwell in Suffolk in 1946. By this time in his life Ransome, aged 62, was suffering from ruptures and stomach troubles and he planned this new boat as a "marine bath-chair" for his old age. Everything on board the 28-foot ketch was made light and easy to handle. He didn't expect he would make many voyages and joked that he would spend his time "catching eels while at anchor". He also included a writing desk in the cabin design and a special locker, which was to be his typewriter store.

The title character in *Peter Duck* was an old sailor who'd been round Cape Horn so often that he knew it "as well as he knew the crook of his own thumb." He was a reliable, reassuring personality and his name should have been perfect for the new yacht, except that Peter Duck, the "Ancient Mariner", didn't like getting old – and neither did Ransome. He kept his marine bath-chair for only a few years before selling her and retreating from East Anglia back to his beloved Lake District.

The Ransomes met my parents a few years later. Restless as ever, they had returned from the Lake District for a sailing holiday on the River Deben in Suffolk. *Peter Duck* was no longer in the area but Mum and Dad had a suitable yacht which Arthur and Evgenia could borrow.

Mum remembers rowing out in her dinghy that first evening to check that all was well. She and Dad had only been married a year and she'd put some of her best wedding present saucepans on the boat for the older couple to use. Unfortunately they were made of aluminium which Evgenia Ransome had banned as being bad for Arthur's ulcers. Mum got thoroughly ticked off and didn't stay long. All she remembers about the famous author was that he looked "rather grumpy".

The Ransomes didn't come to Suffolk again but a few years later Dad heard that their former yacht *Peter Duck* was available and hurried to buy her. He and Mum had two children now and needed more space. My father marked the occasion with a new page in his log-book. He headed it with a quotation from Ransome's novel: "Duck's my name...Peter Duck, and Duck's my nature, and I've been afloat as you might say, ever since I were a duckling."

My brother was fifteen months old and I would soon be three. We had indeed been afloat since we were ducklings. Even before *Peter Duck* entered our lives we had been taken aboard a variety of boats, strapped into carrycots or pushchairs. As soon as Dad had been demobbed after World War Two he'd set up a yacht agency and my mother had been one of his earliest customers. They began their married life in the hut by the River Deben that Dad and his brother had used from childhood – when they used to pedal miles from the family farm to learn to sail under the local waterman.

Fortunately for us ducklings, the same features that had been designed to suit an elderly author with hernias adapted perfectly for a crew of tots. The marine bath-chair became a nautical pram and she stayed in our family for the next twenty-seven years. The centre of our family life.

We had endless fun on board *Peter Duck* as we explored the rivers and the muddy creeks of Suffolk and Essex. She's a stable, sea-kindly yacht with plenty of room on deck for growing children to scamper and scramble. Her steering is particularly well-balanced and her small sails were soon within our capacity to haul. Our parents encouraged us to get involved and take responsibility from an early age.

Looking back now, in the risk-averse twenty-first century, I can't help feeling surprised when I read my father's log-book and see that I was trusted to row my younger brother to and from the shore on my own when I was little more than four. He – I notice with a stab of jealousy – steered *Peter Duck* from the Rocks (a downriver anchorage) back to our mooring when he was only 3 years, 9½ months old. Dad evidently liked to be precise about these things.

I'd hate to give the impression that my parents weren't careful and sensible. Arthur Ransome's most quoted saying comes early in *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), the first book in the series, when the children ask permission to take a dinghy to an island on the lake and camp there. Their father is away with his Royal Navy ship. At last the telegram arrives. "Better drowned than duffers. If not duffers, won't drown." "What does it mean?" one of the children asks. "It means Yes!" her younger sister explains.

A few years ago I wrote my own first sailing adventure, *The Salt-Stained Book*, and sent it to a well-known literary agent. The reply came back that she really didn't think my hero would be

able to sail without a proper course of lessons and it was completely implausible that adults would lend a dinghy to a 13-year old without being constantly present to supervise. Somehow I knew that she and my story weren't meant for one another.

My parents kept up a constant refrain on *Peter Duck* during my childhood. "Is that seamanlike?" they would ask. The answer had to come from our own good sense and knowledge. When you are dealing with forces as variable as the wind and water – and the capabilities of your vessel – there is no single rule to cover all eventualities. But there are principles, which all children or adults who go sailing must recognise and respect.

There is also experience. John, in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, has to learn that it is "dufferish" to sail through rock-infested waters in complete darkness with a strong wind and no-one knowing where you are. I remember doing something similar when I went absent from school as a teenager to get an afternoon's sailing on my own. Caught by a sudden, violent squall, perilously close to the mouth of the river, I had just enough time to realise that I had been thoroughly "un-seamanlike" and then work out what to do – which was pull up the centreplate and drive myself safely onto the mud.

My mother and father were good at teaching us to sail. When my turn came, as a parent, I wasn't as confident in my abilities so I took my youngest children to a reservoir where they could learn the methods approved by the Royal Yachting Association. I was amazed and delighted to see how soon a class of six-year olds could set off on their own in neat little Optimist dinghies. Perhaps the spirit of *Swallows and the Amazons* wasn't extinct after all? When I began to plan my first novel I kept that scene in mind.

I realise, now, how lucky I was as a child. *Peter Duck* had only been designed to sleep two but we became a family of five. My youngest brother had to sleep in an old fashioned pipe-cot, lashed above our mother's bunk: my middle brother slept in the foc'sle, where Ransome had planned to store ropes and spare sails, but I, the oldest, weeded my way into possession of the quarter-berth. This is a deeply recessed space beneath *Peter Duck*'s port deck where any small bookworm could curl up and read to her heart's content. (No prizes for guessing the title of my favourite story!)

I also have vivid memories of listening to stories from my favourite berth. When we had all settled into bed after a day's sailing, Mum and Dad used to take turns reading aloud. They'd choose something that we would all enjoy – including Arthur Ransome novels, of course. I also remember C.S. Forester's *Hornblower* series as being a particular favourite. This shared family reading brought us together with a whole range of mutual jokes and references.

I can almost feel the slight prickliness of my cotton and feather sleeping bag as I lay there sniffing the wood-smoke on a hill above Lake Windermere or thrilled by a daring moonlit raid against the French. It wasn't until I was an adult that I discovered that the berth that was so special to me had been built above the locker where Ransome used to store his typewriter.

So much had changed in the intervening years. My father had died in 1983; we children had grown up and my mother decided that keeping this quintessentially family possession without the family to enjoy it was simply too painful. *Peter Duck* was sold and then sold again. She found new, more adventurous owners – who, as soon as the Cold War was over, sailed her to St Petersburg, the city where Arthur and Evgenia Ransome had met in the distant years of the Russian Revolution.

Our treasured *Peter Duck* seemed to have gone for good. I didn't even want to think about her. There's an excellent small scene at the beginning of Ransome's novel *Secret Water* when the Swallows, who have only a borrowed rowing boat, are watching other children who have sailing dinghies and a yacht. " 'Pudding faces!' said Roger, angrily."

In 1999, however, we heard that *Peter Duck* was returning from Russia to England and would be put up for sale. My youngest brother and I rushed to Suffolk to welcome her home. It was an unforgettable moment. She looked so weathered, so wrinkled – so gallant. No longer either the bath-chair or the pram. Her sea-going capabilities had been used to their utmost and she had the flags of nine nations in her locker. The old sailorman who gave her his name would have been so proud.

My partner, Francis Wheen, decided there and then that we must buy and restore her – no small task after those Russian winters. As soon as my bare feet touched her decks it was as if my childhood came flooding back to me. By the spring of 2000 she was ready to be re-launched and I had surreptitiously begun to try some story-scribbling of my own.

Ransome wrote the Swallows and Amazons series relatively late in life but he already had a wealth of experience in journalism and literature, and no family responsibilities. I had five children and a part-time background in bookselling and education. I wondered what boats and the sea – our national heritage – might have to offer twenty-first century children. It took me several years to be clear what it was that I wanted to say.

In the end it was anger that shocked my thoughts into focus. I had been working with vulnerable families, parents and children whose lives were quite unlike the happy homes of the Swallows and Amazons. I had been observing how often the official interference, which was intended to make people's lives better, actually made them worse.

This week is Learning Disabilities Awareness Week. I had seen, at first hand, and with horror, how frequently children whose parents were disabled in some way were not helped to grow up within the family unit but were removed from it and taken into care. This is the situation of my hero in the *Strong Winds* trilogy.

I had had too much fun as a child to want to write either a complaining or a campaigning tract. I wanted my readers to be as excited as I had been when I read *Peter Duck* or *Treasure Island*. I would like today's children to feel that the adventures in my stories "might happen to any boy and girl nowadays". I'm confident that there are many of today's children who possess the same qualities of self-reliance and adventurousness, which sailing requires and which Ransome had celebrated - and which my brothers and I had learned on board our very own *Peter Duck*.

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Ghosting Home, the third novel in Julia Jones's *Strong Winds* trilogy, is published by Golden Duck at £7.99.