

THE POWERS OF THE NOVEL: CONVINCING FICTION

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I emptied the ashtray, walked about, took the cups, put them in the sink, wetted the kitchen cloth, sprayed the table with detergent and was washing when Yngve came in with a carrier bag in each hand. He set them down and began to unpack. First, what we would have for lunch, which he laid out on the worktop, four vacuum-packed salmon steaks, a bag of potatoes stained dark with soil, a head of cauliflower and a packet of frozen beans, then all the other goods, some of which he stowed in the fridge, some in the cupboard next to it. A 1.5 litre bottle of Sprite, a 1.5 litre bottle of CB beer, a bag of oranges, a carton of milk, a carton of orange juice, a loaf.

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family*

... Blades, safety razors, hairpins, several bars of soap, desiccated creams and ointments, a hair net, aftershave, deodorants, eyeliners, lipsticks, some small cracked powder puffs – not sure what they were used for, but it must have been something to do with make-up – and hairs, both short curly ones and longer straighter ones, nail scissors, a roll of plasters, dental floss and combs. Once the cupboard was empty, a yellow-brown thickish residue was left on the shelf that I decided to wash last of all. The wall tiles beside the toilet seat, on which the toilet roll holder was fixed, were covered with light brown stains and the floor beneath was sticky, and these seemed to me to be most in need of attention, so I squirted a line of Jif over the tiles and began to scrub them, methodically, from the ceiling right down to the floor, Firstly, the right-hand wall, then the mirror wall, then the bathtub wall and lastly around the door. ...

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family*

... I first got three of the Seamens Chests, which I had broken open and empty'd, and lower'd them down upon my Raft; the first of these I fill'd with Provision, viz. Bread, Rice, three Dutch Cheeses, five pieces of dry'd Goat's Flesh, which we liv'd much upon, and a little Remainder of European Corn which had been laid by for some Fowls which we brought to Sea with us, but the Fowls were kill'd; there had been some Barley and Wheat together, but, to my great Disappointment, I found afterwards that the Rats had eaten or spoil'd it all; as for Liquors, I found several, Cases of Bottles belonging to our Skipper, in which were some Cordial Waters, and in all about five or six Gallons of Rack, these I stow'd by themselves, there being no need to put them into the Chest, nor any room for them.

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)



Clark & Pinck.

THE
L I F E
AND
STRANGE SURPRIZING
ADVENTURES
OF
ROBINSON CRUSOE,
Of *TORK*, MARINER:

Who lived Eight and Twenty Years,
all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the
Coast of AMERICA, near the Mouth of
the Great River of OROONOQUE;

Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, where-
in all the Men perished but himself.

WITH
An Account how he was at last as strangely deli-
ver'd by PYRATES.

Written by Himself.

L O N D O N:
Printed for W. TAYLOR at the Ship in Pater-Noster-
Row. MDCCXIX.

The editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), The Preface

I walk'd about on the Shore lifting up my Hands, and my whole Being, as I may say, wrapped up in a Contemplation of my Deliverance, making a Thousand Gestures and Motions which I cannot describe, reflecting upon all my Comerades that were drown'd, and that there should not be one Soul saved but myself; for, as for them, I never saw them afterwards, or any Sign of them, except three of their Hats, one Cap, and two Shoes that were not fellows.

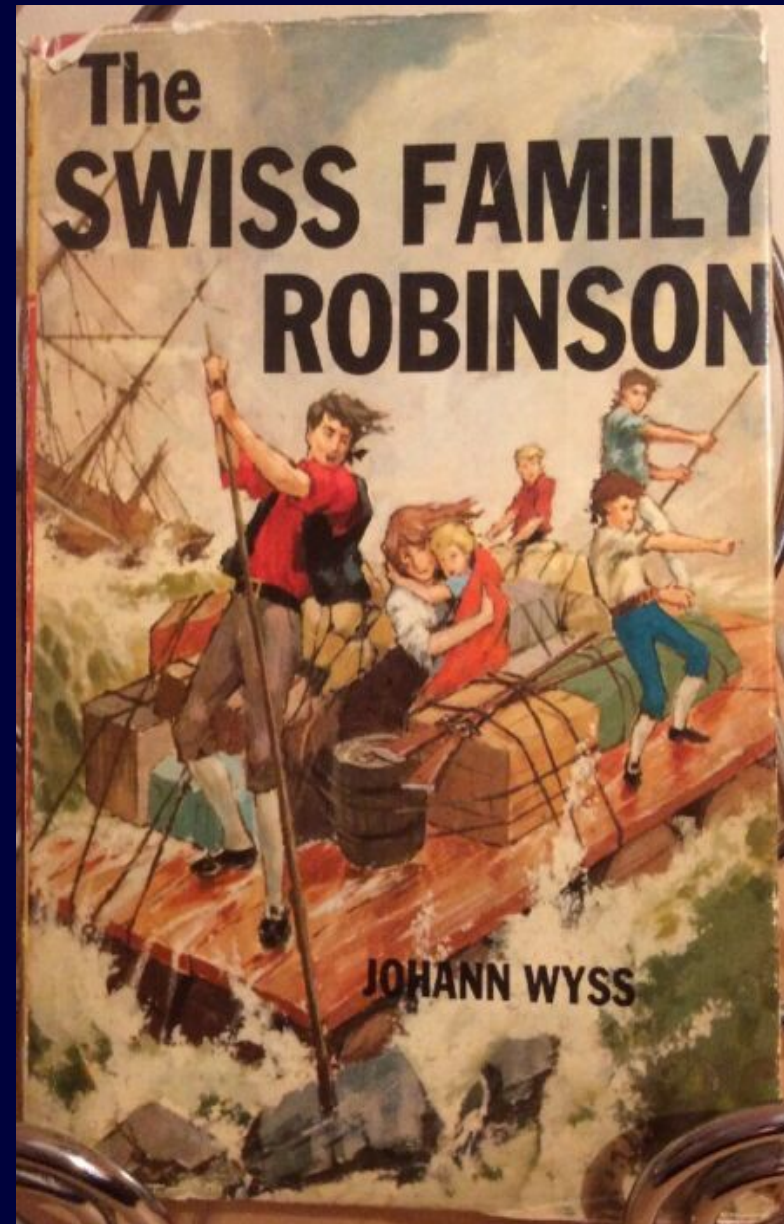
Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)



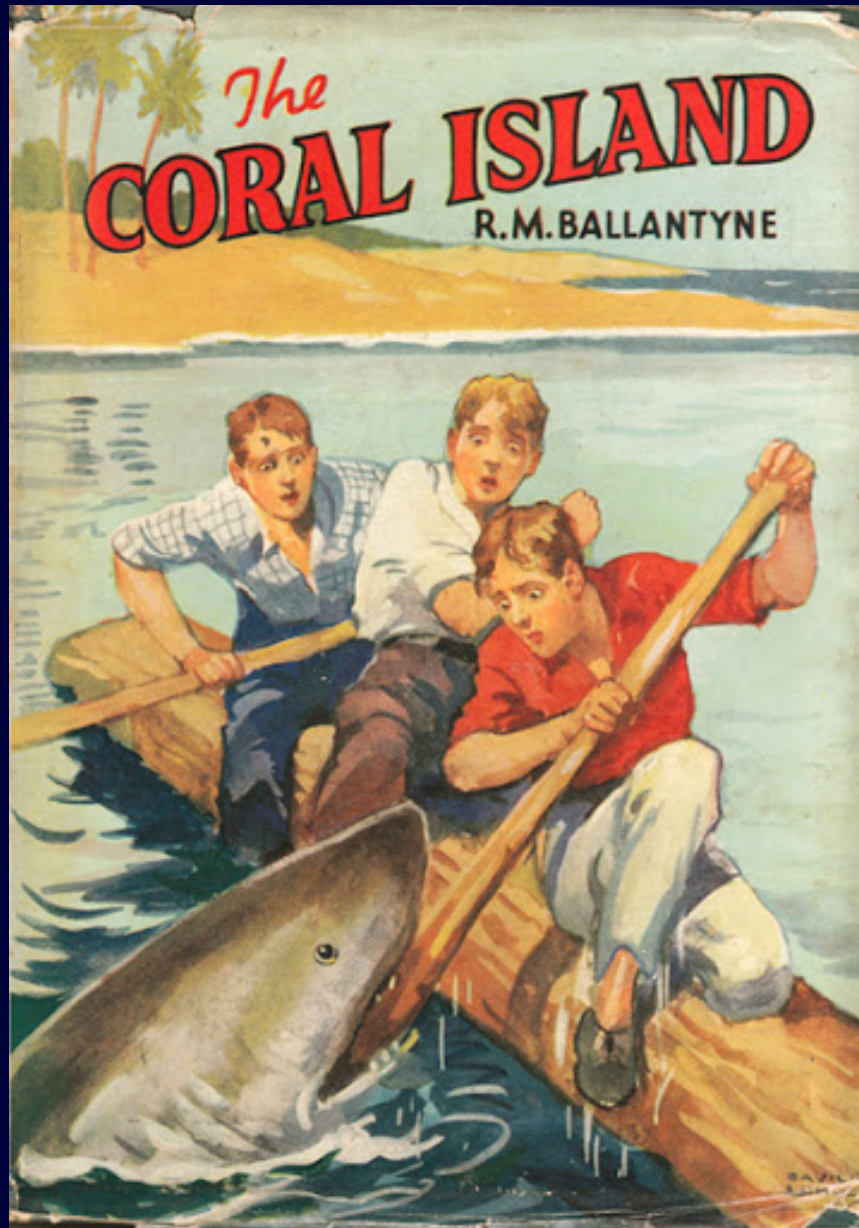
Johann David Wyss
Der schweizerische
Robinson

SALZWASSER
VERLAG

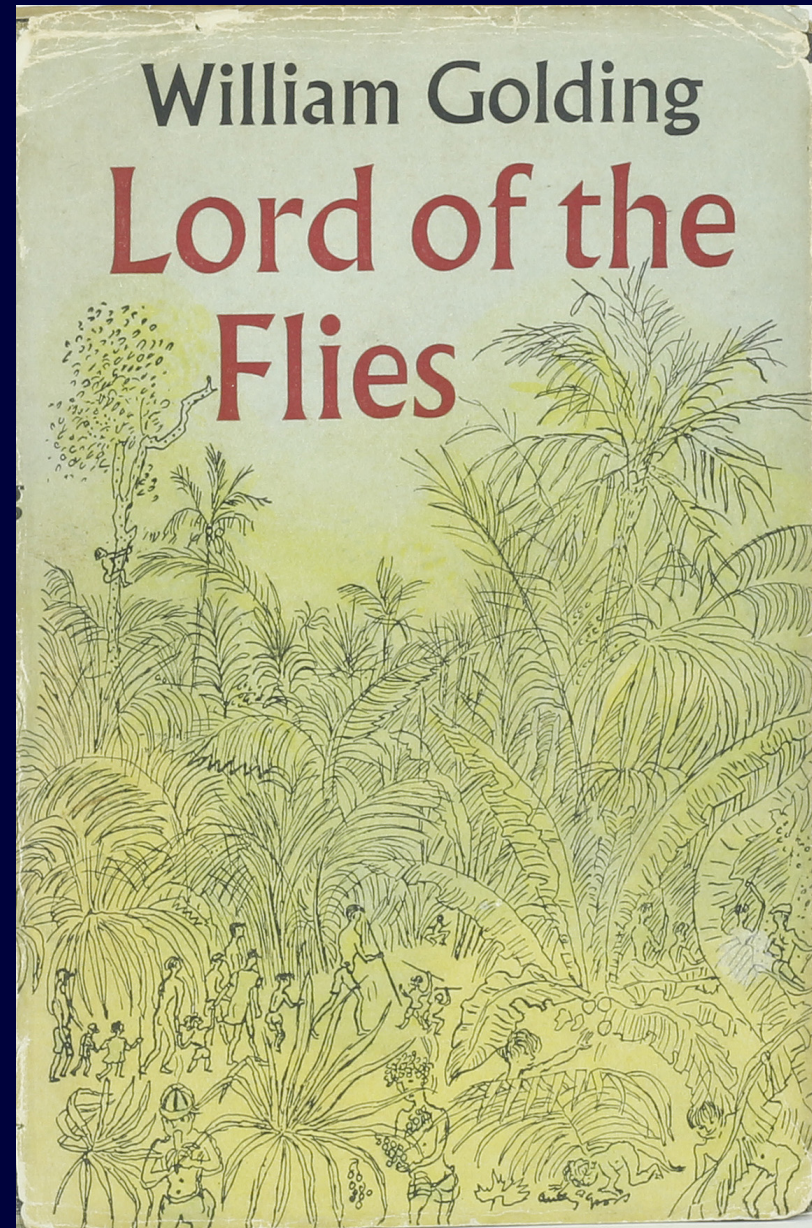
Der schweizerische Robinson (1812)



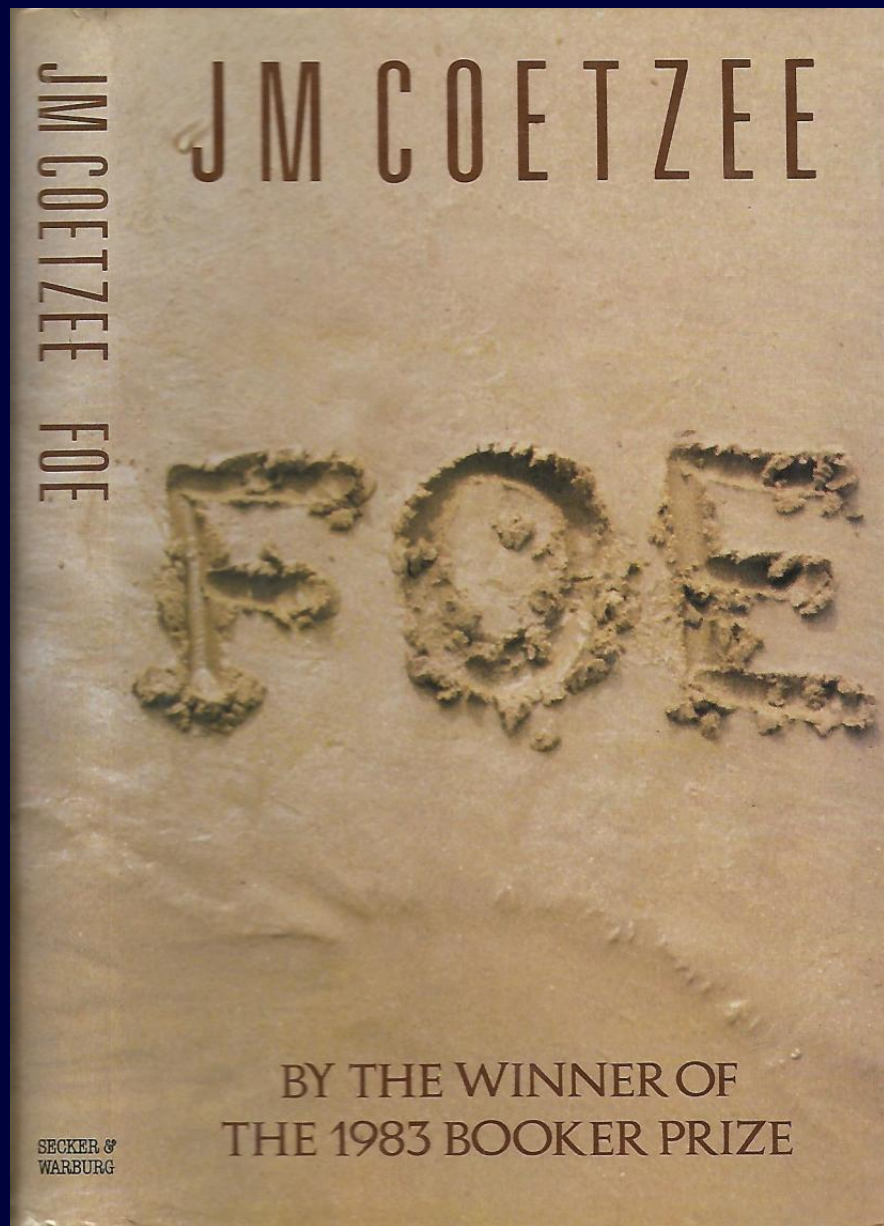
Swiss Family Robinson (1814)



The Coral Island (1857)



Lord of the Flies (1954)



Foe (1986)



Oryx and Crake (2003)

To hear Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened and excited face; would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.

“There’s the Parrot!” cried Scrooge. “Green body and yellow tail, with a thing like a lettuce growing out of the top of his head; there he is! Poor Robin Crusoe, he called him, when he came home again after sailing round the island. ‘Poor Robin Crusoe, where have you been, Robin Crusoe?’ The man thought he was dreaming, but he wasn’t. It was the Parrot, you know. There goes Friday, running for his life to the little creek! Halloo! Hoop! Halloo!”

Then, with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his usual character, he said, in pity for his former self, “Poor boy!” and cried again.

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Stave II

There was a library in Coketown, to which general access was easy. Mr. Gradgrind greatly tormented his mind about what the people read in this library: a point whereon little rivers of tabular statements periodically flowed into the howling ocean of tabular statements, which no diver ever got to any depth in and came up sane. It was a disheartening circumstance, but a melancholy fact, that even these readers persisted in wondering. They wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker.

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), Book the First, Ch. VIII

... the Child had a little Necklace on of Gold Beads, and I had my Eye upon that, and in the dark of the Alley I stoop'd, pretending to mend the Child's Clog that was loose, and took off her Necklace and the Child never felt it, and so led the Child on again; Here, I say, the Devil put me upon killing the Child in the dark Alley, that it might not Cry; but the very thought frightened me so that I was ready to drop down, but I turn'd the Child about and bad it go back again, for that was not its way home; the Child said so she would, and I went thro' into *Bartholomew Close*, and then turn'd round to another Passage that goes into *St. John's-street*, then crossing into *Smithfield*, went down *Chick-lane* and into *Field-lane* to *Holbourn-bridge*, when mixing with the Crowd of People usually passing there, it was not possible to have been found out; and thus I enterpriz'd my second Sally into the World.

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722)

THE
FORTUNES
AND
MISFORTUNES

Of the FAMOUS
Moll Flanders, &c.

Who was Born in NEWGATE, and during a
Life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years,
besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a
Whore, five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her
own Brother) Twelve Year a *Thief*, Eight Year a
Transported *Felon* in *Virginia*, at last grew *Rich*,
liv'd *Honest*, and died a *Penitent*,

Written from her own MEMORANDUMS.

LONDON: Printed for, and Sold by W.
CHETWOOD, at *Cato's-Head*, in *Russel-*
street, Covent-Garden; and T. EDLING, at
the *Prince's-Arms*, over-against *Exeter-Change*
in the *Strand*. MDDCXXI.

A
JOURNAL
OF THE
Plague Year:
BEING
Observations or Memorials,
Of the most Remarkable
OCCURRENCES,
As well
PUBLICK as PRIVATE,
Which happened in
L O N D O N
During the last
GREAT VISITATION
In 1665.

Written by a CITIZEN who continued all the
while in *London*. Never made publick before

L O N D O N :
Printed for E. Nutt at the *Royal-Exchange*; J. Roberts
in *Warwick-Lane*; A. Dodd without *Temple-Bar*;
and J. Graves in *St. James's-street*. 1722.

... for, where the reader is told that such a person was the posthumous son of a tanner, that his mother married afterwards a Presbyterian schoolmaster, who gave him a smattering of Latin, but, the schoolmaster dying of the plague, that he was compelled at sixteen to enlist for bread – in all this, as there is nothing at all amusing, we conclude that the author could have no reason to detain us with such particulars but simply because they were true. To invent, when nothing at all is gained by inventing, there seems no imaginable temptation.

Thomas De Quincey, *Blackwoods Magazine*, October 1841

Since my last, my Master gave me more fine Things. He call'd me up to my old Lady's Closet, and pulling out her Drawers, he gave me Two Suits of fine Flanders lac'd Headcloths, Three Pair of fine Silk Shoes, two hardly the worse, and just fit for me; for my old Lady had a very little Foot; and several Ribbands and Topknots of all Colours, and Four Pair of fine white Cotton Stockens, and Three Pair of fine Silk ones; and Two Pair of rich Stays, and a Pair of rich Silver Buckles in one Pair of the Shoes.

Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (1740), Letter VII

This season young men carry their effects in soft pale leather bags, in imitation of the agents for the Fugger bank, who travel all over Europe and set the fashion. The bags are heart-shaped and so to him it always looks as if they are going wooing, but they swear they are not. Nephew Richard Cromwell sits down and gives the bags a sardonic glance.

Do you know if Mantel has manufactured or borrowed from the record this information about the fashionable Fugger bag? In some sense, it doesn't matter, because the writer has made a third category of the reality, the plausibly hypothetical. It's what Aristotle claimed was the difference between the historian and the poet: the former describes what happened, and the latter what might happen.

James Wood, rev. of *Bring Up the Bodies*,
in *The New Yorker*, 7 May, 2012

The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real.

Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (1785), Letter VII

Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), II ix

He's cleaning up the kitchen, wiping his mess from the central island into a large bin, and scrubbing the chopping boards under running water. Then it's time to tip the boiling juice off the skates and mussels into the casserole. When that's done he has now, he reckons, about two and a half litres of bright orange stock which he'll cook for another five minutes. Just before dinner he'll reheat it, and simmer the clams, monkfish, mussels and prawns in it for ten minutes. They'll eat the stew with brown bread, salad and red wine. After New York, there's the Kuwait-Iraq border, and military trucks moving in convoy along a desert road, and our lads kipping down by the tracks of their tanks, then eating bangers next morning from their mess-tins. He takes two bags of mâche from the bottom of the fridge and empties them into a salad tosser. He runs the cold tap over the leaves. An officer, barely in his twenties, is standing outside his tent pointing with a stick at a map on an easel. Perowne isn't tempted to disable the mute — these items from the front have a cheerful, censored air that lowers his spirits. He spins the salad and tips it into the bowl. Oil, lemon, pepper and salt he'll throw on later. There's cheese and fruit for pudding.

[she] laughs sexily when I order, as an appetizer, the monkfish and squid ceviche with golden caviar; gives me a stare so steamy, so penetrating when I order the gravlax potpie with green tomatillo sauce I have to look back at the pink Bellini in the tall champagne flute with a concerned, deadly serious expression so as not to let her think I am too interested. Price orders the tapas and then the venison with yogurt sauce and fiddlehead ferns with mango slices. McDermott orders the sashimi with goat cheese and then the smoked duck with endive and maple syrup. Van Patten has the scallop sausage and the grilled salmon with raspberry vinegar and guacamole.

Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991), 'Harry's'

lets, and Out-parts, took the same Method: As I remember, the Orders for shutting up of Houses, did not take Place so soon on our Side, because, as I said before, the Plague did not reach to these Eastern Parts of the Town, at least, nor begin to be very violent, till the beginning of *August*. For Example, the whole Bill, from the 11th to the 18th of *July*, was 1761, yet there dy'd but 71 of the Plague, in all those Parishes we call the *Tower-Hamlets*; and they were as follows.

<i>Aldgate</i>	14		34		65
<i>Stepney</i>	33	the next	58	and to the	76
<i>White Chappel</i>	21	Week was	48	1st of <i>Aug.</i>	79
<i>St. Kath. Tower</i> ¹¹⁴	2	thus.	4	thus.	4
<i>Trin. Minories</i> ¹¹⁵	1		1		4
	71		145		228

It was indeed, coming on a main; for the Burials that same Week, were in the next adjoining Parishes, thus,

<i>St. Len. Shoreditch</i> ¹¹⁶	64	the next Week	84	to the 1st.	110
<i>St. But. Bishopsg.</i> ¹¹⁷	65	prodigiously en-	105	of <i>Aug.</i>	116
<i>St. Giles Cripp.</i>	213	creased, as	421	thus.	554
	342		610		780

This shutting up of houses was at first counted a very cruel and Unchristian Method, and the poor People so confin'd made bitter Lamentations: Complaints of the Severity of it, were also daily brought to my Lord Mayor, of Houses causelessly, (and some maliciously) shut up: I cannot say, but upon Enquiry, many that complained so loudly, were found in a Condition to be continued,¹¹⁸ and others again, Inspection^a being made upon the sick Person, and the Sickness not appearing infectious, or if uncertain, yet, on his being content to be carried to the Pest-House, were released.

Daniel Defoe,
A Journal of the Plague Year
 (1722)

I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a seashore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags. That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I had lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing her in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon

across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Ch. Twenty-Two