Swallows & Amazons
– A resource pack for families and schools –
Arthur Ransome

Who was he?

Arthur Mitchell Ransome was born in Leeds in 1884 and educated in Windermere and Rugby. As a child his family spent wonderful holidays at Nibthwaite, which is a village at the southern end of Coniston Water.

In 1902, Ransome left his studies unfinished and got a job as publisher's office boy in London. But, what he really wanted to be an author and he published his first book *Bohemia in London* in his own name in 1907.

Because of his interest in folklore Ransome went to St Petersburg in 1913. There he found that he was ideally placed to observe and report on the Russian Revolution. He knew lots of the Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin, Radek and Trotsky. He was so close to the Russian leaders that he was accused of being a spy for both the Bolsheviks and Britain, although this was never proven.

Ransome married Evgenia Shvelpina, Trotsky’s secretary and returned to England in 1924. They had their first home in Winster Valley near Newby Bridge in the 1920s he worked as journalist he also wrote a lot about fishing.

In April 1928 Ransome made contact with an old friend Dora Altounyan, who had come back to live in Coniston from Syria with her husband Ernest and their five children. Arthur and Ernest provided two small boats, *Swallow* and *Mavis*, for the children to sail in.

When the family returned to Syria, Ransome began to work on an adventure story that involved Swallow and Mavis (renamed Amazon) and children loosely based on the Altounyans. The book he wrote *Swallows and Amazons* was published in 1930 and was followed by 11 more novels in the series.

Arthur Ransome died in June 1967 and is buried at Rusland in the Lake District.
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The Characters

The Walkers

Mother
Mother is the head of the house whilst Father is away, and the children treat her with the utmost respect and love, as she does them. All grown-ups in the children’s games are called as Barbarians, apart from Mother; she becomes “Queen Isabella”. Mother plays along with the children’s games and even joins them in taking revenge on Captain Flint.

John
John, twelve, is the oldest of the family, John feels he is responsible for the rest of his brothers and sisters. He feels that, whilst his Father is away, he is the man of the house, and he takes that responsibility seriously. He is the most experienced of the Swallows at sailing, and the younger Walkers look up to him to lead them on their adventures.

Susan
Aged eleven, Susan is the eldest of the girls in the Walker family. She enjoys playing the role of homemaker. The other children prefer to be out and about exploring. She takes care of her family, and wants everyone to get along, to look after each other and to play nicely. She doesn’t take too kindly to the Blackett sisters at first, due to their wild nature, but they become good friends by the end.

Titty
Titty, aged nine, is the middle child in the Walker family. She is the wildest of the Walkers, and the idea of being an explorer and a pirate sometimes leads her imagination to go wild, which causes a few problems for her along the way.

Roger
Roger, seven, is the youngest of the boys. He is pleased that he is no longer the baby of the family because of their new sister Fat Vicky, but his older brothers and sisters still take care of him, and, even though he tries really hard to be able to do everything the others can, sometimes he can’t.

Father
Though Father is never seen during the performance, his presence is there. John mentions him lots of times, as he wants to make his father proud and to prove that he can be responsible.

Fat Vicky
Fat Vicky’s real name is Bridget Walker; she’s just a baby so she stays home with mother.
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The Blacketts

Nancy
The older of the two sisters, Nancy is the fearless leader of Amazon. Her real name is Ruth, but as is mentioned in the play, "Uncle Jim said that Amazons are ruth-less, so we had to change it".

Peggy
Peggy is the younger of the two, and her real name is Margaret. She and Nancy enjoy bickering and fighting so much that their uncle Jim calls them ‘wild-cats’.

James Turner/Uncle Jim/Captain Flint
A writer, Uncle Jim hasn’t been able to play with the Nancy and Peggy at all over the summer because he’s been writing his book. The children call him Captain Flint because they (make) believe that he is a pirate who buried his pirate treasure and killed all of his crew to keep it a secret from everyone.

Other grown ups

Mr. Jackson
The near silent Mr Jackson is the owner of the farm on which the Walkers are staying.

The charcoal burners
The charcoal burners are a mysterious bunch. They sit and burn coal all day to make charcoal.

The thieves
Only seen in Titty’s dream, the thieves are a small but very important part of the story.

The policeman
The policeman is a representative of authority who breaks-up the children’s game, spoils the fun and brings them all back to reality with a bump.
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Themes and Philosophical Questions

1. Family

Within the story there is a strong sense of family. The children are from two different families and hold strong loyalties to one another. They take care of each other, and understand the roles that each member of the family plays.

Being part of a family in the play also means that certain expectations are placed on or taken on by the characters. Examples of this happen when we see how John wants to live up to his father’s expectations of him to be the leader of the house and how Susan works hard to be the homemaker. This means that John and Susan bear the weight of responsibility, which leads to questions of fairness.

Some philosophical questions to explore:

Older children (8 – 12)
- What is fairness?
- Is it fair if one person does all of the work and another person does all of the playing?
- Is it fair for the oldest person always be in charge?
- Is being tidy always a good thing?
- If you make a mess, who should tidy up?
- Are men better at some jobs than women?
- Are women better at some jobs than men?
- If you’re better than someone else at doing something – should you always be the one to do it?

Teenagers
- Is it fair for some people to do more than others?
- If someone in authority does something that you know isn’t very nice – is it ok for you to do it too?
- If you like untidiness and someone else likes tidiness, who should do the tidying?
- Should our parents / adults always set a good example? (Why? Would it be fair to expect them to?)
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2. Peer pressure / Bullying

Ask the children to think about moments in the performance when they thought there were examples of peer pressure or bullying (e.g. when John pressures Susan into continuing with their attempt to capture Amazon, even though Susan believes that it’s dangerous and that they should return to the island.)

Discuss what happened, what the consequences were and what the consequences might have been. Invite them to consider what they would’ve done in that situation.

Some philosophical questions to explore:

Older children (8 – 12)
- Should you always do as you are told? (Why / not?)
- Should you always follow the exact instructions?
- Should you always be able to choose what you want to do?
- If someone says that they’ll only be your friend if you do something that they tell you to, should you do it? (What if you really want them as a friend?)

Teenagers
- Is being popular important?
- Whose wishes are the most important?
- When is peer pressure a good thing?
- If a teacher tells you to do something that you know is wrong, should you do it?
- Can doing the wrong thing ever be right?
3. Adventure

The children sing songs about the bold adventurers who have inspired them. Invite your children to talk about adventures, the types of adventures you can have. Share your thinking about all of the things that the Walkers and the Blacketts did – how safe were they being?

What does having an adventure actually mean?

Some philosophical questions to explore:

Older children (8 – 12)
- What is an adventure?
- Can adventures ever be a bad thing?
- Does an adventure have to be dangerous?
- Can you be an adventurer at home?
- How do you know if you’re having an adventure
- Who decides what is an adventure?

Teenagers
- Are all adventurers heroes?
- Can you be a hero and a bad person at the same time?
- Can you discover new lands?
- Should ‘discovered’ lands be given back to the people who lived there first?
4. Lies

Titty liked to use her imagination to have fun and play games. But do we know when it’s okay to play and when we have to stop? Do we know what the boundaries are and the importance of those boundaries? What is the importance of telling the truth? How can we learn to tell the difference between using our imagination and telling lies?

Some philosophical questions to explore:

Older children (8 – 12)

Are you telling a lie if:
- You say you don’t mind even though you do?
- You smile when you’re feeling sad?
- You pretend you’re listening even though you’re not?
- You make up a story,

Other questions
- If you make a mistake by saying 5 x 5 is 20 (even though you know it is 25) then is that telling a lie?
- Should you tell the truth even if it will hurt someone’s feelings?
- If you do a magic trick on someone, is that the same as lying?

Teenagers
- If you know that someone is not telling the truth and you let them get away with it – have you told a lie?
- Can someone who tells lies all of the time still be a good person?
- Is it ok to lie to someone who has lied to you?
- Is telling a lie to a friend the same as telling a lie to someone you don’t like?
- Can you think of an example of a good lie?

Max Brooks said, “Lies are neither bad nor good. Like a fire they can either keep you warm or burn you to death, depending on how they’re used.”

Is Max Brooks right (or was he telling a lie)?
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5. Danger

What kind of dangers did the Walkers and the Blacketts find or put themselves in? Risk assessment is a vital skill that all children and young people need to learn.

Some philosophical questions to explore:

Older children (8 – 12)
- What is danger?
- Can something be dangerous and still be fun?
- Should you ever do anything dangerous?
- Is being safe the most important thing?
- When is being safe a bad thing?

Teenagers
- Can you ever be too safe?
- Can something dangerous be risk free?
- If you think that doing something isn’t dangerous, but someone else thinks it is, should you do it?
- Who decides if something is dangerous?
- Can someone do something dangerous and not know it?

6. Reality/ Fantasy

It is important that we understand the difference between what is real and what is not, however, giving over to our imaginations is also good.

Some philosophical questions to explore:

Older children (8 - 12)
- When you look in a mirror, is your reflection real?
- Are stories real?
- Is what’s real for you, the same as what’s real for your friends?
- Can something be real and not real at the same time?
- What's the difference between reality and perception?
- What are the connections between reality, truth and fact?

Teenagers
- Can something that doesn’t exist be real?
- What’s the difference between reality and virtual reality?
- What is real about reality TV?
- If something hasn’t happened yet, but it is inevitable that it will, is it real?
- What did Albert Einstein mean when he said: “Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one”?
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Activities

1. Discussion

Of course children need to fantasise, imagine and dream, but it is also good if they can come up with criteria for the difference between real, pretend, fake, alive, and so on. Collect together some items that are both real and unreal, for example, a plastic banana, a dream, monopoly money, magic and stories. These all seem to be unreal but in different ways, discuss the ways in which they’re both real and unreal.

2. Code-breaking

What is the difference between a code and a cipher?

The words code and cipher are used as if they’re the same thing, but there is a real difference between the two. Something is a code when whole words in a sentence are replaced with something else, a cipher is when you change each individual letter and give it a different letter or symbol.

On the next few pages you can see some examples of simple codes, ciphers and signals you can learn. It’s absolutely necessary to any adventuring Swallow, Amazon or other pirate who wants to keep their secrets safe!
Nature trail signs and symbols
Learn these signs and symbols and use them to create a treasure hunt or adventure trail for your friends to follow!
Semaphore

Semaphore was widely used by sailors as a way to communicate with each other before the invention of radio and telecommunication. They would have had flags which had different meanings so they could, for example, give quick warnings. They also had this alphabet system seen here, which also helped them.

Why don’t you take turns to spell out a word and see if the rest of your group can guess it?

If you make a mistake, signal E eight times.
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Pigpen

If you want to keep your secrets safe from the barbarians or that dastardly Captain Flint, then Pig Pen is the code for you!

1. Draw a noughts and crosses shaped board, just like the one below. Then divide the letters of the alphabet into threes (with just two left in the bottom corner)
2. Place one dot over the second letter in each section and two dots on the third. (just like below)

Each letter now has a shape with a unique mark on it. For example, A will be written like this: | because of where it sits in the grid. M would look like this: ☐, whilst N would be like this: ☐. So if I were to write John, it would look like this:

Think you’ve got it? Try and crack the code below. Once you’ve got that, try writing some of your own secret messages!
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Caesar cipher

Another way of playing around with codes is by using what's known as the Caesar cipher. As you can see by the image below, letters are replaced by other letters, three places along from where the originals sit in the alphabet.

So in order to break this code, the first thing to do is write out the letters of the alphabet. Then, underneath those letters write the letters that you'll use as a replacement. So if you follow the diagram, A becomes X, B becomes Y, C becomes Z, D becomes A and so on. This continues until all of the letters have a replacement. So BAD would become YXA, and CAT would be ZXQ.

Think you've got it? Try and write a message to your partner.

Cipher Wheel

Following on from the Caesar cipher, a cipher wheel is something you can make and carry around with you to be used by you and your crew. It works in the same way as the Caesar cipher, except you can choose any start point in the alphabet and then follow the wheel round.

To make your wheel:
1. Print off the page below.
2. Cut out the two circles.
3. In each section of the wheel on both the small and larger circles, write out each letter of the alphabet.
4. With a pencil, carefully pierce a whole in the middle of both circles and fasten them together with a paper fastener/ split pin.

Start your message off with a number, so that your partner knows how many letters from your start point you've jumped. So, for example, we see in the Caesar cipher, the letters jump 3 away from the original, meaning A becomes X. Using the wheel, your letter could jump 5 away, meaning A would be V. Try and see if you can use it to make and break your friends' codes!
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3. Make a Flag

If you were to have your very own ship, what would you call it? Why? Think of a picture that best describes your ship’s name and draw it, or just draw your best version of the *Swallow* or *Amazon* flag!

Use this flag to draw inside and then cut it out to have your very own flag. You can even use a pencil, stick, or lollypop stick to tape it to and have your very own flag!
4. Make your own bird puppet

In our performance of *Swallows and Amazons* you will have noticed that Polly the Parrot, the Cormorants (or Harpies as Titty calls them) and the Owl aren’t real. They are in fact, puppets that were made especially for the performance. Why don’t you try making some bird puppets of your own so that you can test out your puppeteering skills?

To make a simple bird puppet you will need:
1. Paper or card
2. Pens or pencils
3. Lollypop stick
4. Pipe cleaners
5. Scissors
6. Sticky tape or glue

**Step 1:** Fold your piece of paper in half. Draw the outline of half a bird.
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Step 2: Cut out the bird shape, you should notice that the other half of the paper is in a bird shape too, making it a full bird.

Step 3: Colour in or draw on or decorate your bird however you like. Remember it has two sides!
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Step 4: Fold down the bird's wings

Step 5: Cut a small slit into the middle of your bird, and put the lollypop stick through. Glue or sticky tape the middle of your bird together, so that the stick is now the base of your puppet.
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**Step 6**: Use the pipe cleaners on each wing by taping them together underneath. You can then bend the pipe cleaners down so that when you pull and push them they will make the wings flap.

You have your puppet! As you can see below, the easiest method is to hold the stick in one hand and the two pipe cleaners in the other; with an up-and-down motion of the pipe cleaners you can make the wings flap.
5. Storytelling

As we all know, the Swallows and the Amazons all had brilliant imaginations when they were playing their games and told each other lots of great stories. Here are a few games that you can play to get your creative juices flowing and come up with some great stories of your own!

One-word stories

This is a good brain warm up to get us thinking.

For this game you will need at least two players. The players will take it in turns saying one word at a time. You can add in full stops whenever you like, and it is up to you to decide when the story is finished.

Keep pushing yourself further and further and see where your imaginations take you.
If you’re a bit stuck, as a starting point you could perhaps begin with “Once upon a time...” or “There once was a...” and see where they lead.

Three-word stories

If you enjoyed the one-word story exercise, then try the three-word story.
The same rules apply from the previous game, except this time, each person can say three words at a time.

Short story exercise

Now that we’ve warmed up our creative brains let’s see if we can come up with some stories of our own.

Take these ten words, and see if you can use them in a story of your own:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pirate</th>
<th>Treasure</th>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Storm</th>
<th>Tree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ball</td>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Key</td>
<td>Parrot</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you’re working in a group and you’ve enjoyed writing that story, why not make up ten words together and each write a new story? Or each give a partner ten words to make one with?
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6. Adventure Kit

If you were deserted on an island, what would you need with you to survive? Write a list of your perfect adventure kit- think of all the tools you will need and any gizmos or gadgets that would help you on your island stay.

7. Island Diary

Imagine that just like Titty and Robinson Crusoe, you are stranded on a desert island. With no immediate ways for you to escape, there is nothing you can do but attempt to survive. In order to stay sane, you decide that you must keep a journal of your time there.

Write down a day in the life for you on the island. Use your imagination- what do you have with you? What do you need to do to survive? Have you found ways to keep yourself entertained? What is there on the island- any wildlife or food of any kind?