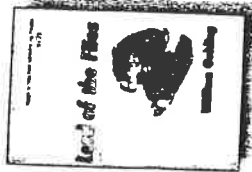


Hearts of darkness

50 years later, 'Lord of the Flies' still resonates as it examines the loss of innocence

By Alan Cheuse



The first time around—that was in 1954—everyone seemed to know that William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" was an important book. E.M. Forster praised it, Malcolm Bradbury praised it, and The New York Times praised it, all of the voices speaking about the novel's uni-

versality and the success of its paradigm: A planeload of British schoolboys crashes on a remote tropical island, and the boys quickly revert to barbarism despite some desperate moves by a few of them to stand in the way of the downward slide.

Fifty years—and a rereading—later, the novel still holds high its emblem of our social despair, that "obscene thing," as Golding calls it, the Lord of the Flies, a fly-covered boar's head that one of the more brutish boys impales on a sharpened stick, with its "white teeth and dim eyes" and "the blood," which expresses "the ancient, inescapable recognition" that without the safeguards we desperately need to protect ourselves, humankind can go nowhere but down.

The political pessimism that spawned such a dark novel as this has its roots in the 20th Century's two awful world wars and the passive-aggressiveness of the Cold War period that followed World War II. The literary motif of the marooned man on a tropical island goes back, of course, to Robinson Crusoe. But Golding himself may have been thinking about darkly revising the old 19th Century children's classic by R.M. Ballantyne called "The Coral Island," an adventure novel about some schoolboys who survive a shipwreck on a Pacific island.

Whatever his sources, Golding certainly makes this classic fable his

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own, beginning with the island's light and climate, a subject, in other hands, easily turned to romantic fluff. But not here.

"The first rhythm that they [the marooned boys] became used to was the slow swing from dawn to quick dusk. They accepted the pleasures of morning, the bright sun, the whelming sea and sweet air, as a time when play was good and life so full that hope was not necessary and therefore forgotten. Toward noon, as the floods of light fell more nearly to the perpendicular, the stark colors of the morning were smoothed in pearl and opalescence, and the heat—as though the impending sun's height gave it momentum—became a blow that they

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