

# THE MADISONS LOST AT SEA

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## Abstract

As a child Winifred Madison was shipwrecked with her family on a deserted island. Twenty years later her life is still defined by the fallout of that experience; the struggle to survive, the fame she found upon rescue, and the way her story was co-opted by her father for his best-selling children's book *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. Drawn back into her father's orbit by his plans for a stage adaptation of the book, Winifred struggles to take control of her story and confront the truth of her past on the island.

*The Madisons Lost at Sea* is feature-length screenplay. It is a distinct entry in the classic "family reunion" format, a sub-genre of film that traditionally straddles the line between drama and comedy. Through its use of family histories, media pressures, and reconstructed pasts, it explores the stories we tell ourselves about our lives and our struggles to assert them in the face of competing narratives.

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## Introduction

It is significant that *The Madisons Lost at Sea* shares its title with the in-universe book and stage play written by John Madison, patriarch of the Madison family. This is not just the story of what happens to the Madisons - it is also the story of the story, of how events become myth and the effect those myths have on the people who actually lived them. It is about how society reduces complicated, messy humans to iconic heroes, and the impossibility of living up to those expectations.

Translating this vision into a finished screenplay proved more difficult than expected. Problems with everything from story structure to character motivations sent me back to the drawing board again and again. This current draft represents the end of a long process of discovery. After extensive work, I have written a screenplay I feel captures the spirit of my initial idea while overcoming the problems inherent in the concept. To reach this point I have had to explore countless approaches to this film, finally settling on the one you see now.

Having an idea is easy. Turning that idea into a finished screenplay is very, very, difficult. I will use this paper to document some of the challenges I faced in taking *The Madisons Lost at Sea* from raw concept to finished thesis screenplay, and what I learned about my film in the process. I will explore the genesis of the concept, provide context for the screenplay, and explain the decisions I have made along the way. By the end you will have more context for the screenplay's answers to those original questions: what effect do the stories we tell have on their subjects? Can those myths, once made, ever find grounding in reality again?

## Origins

As a writer I'm interested in the difference between the stories we tell and the lives we live. Stories have a profound ability to shape our view of the world, for better or worse. Stories can expose us to new ideas and challenge our beliefs, but they can also be used to reinforce old prejudices and power structures. My screenplay is about how we define ourselves through the stories we tell, and who is allowed to do the telling.

*The Madisons Lost at Sea* is about Winifred Madison, whose family was once shipwrecked on a deserted island. Twenty years later Winifred's life is still defined by the fallout of that experience; the struggle to survive, the fame she found upon rescue, and the way her story was fictionalized by her father in his best-selling children's book *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. Drawn back into her father's orbit by his plans for a stage adaptation of his book, Winifred finds herself struggling to take control of her story and confront the truth of her family's past on the island.

The germ of the *Madisons* concept was simple; I wanted to tell the story of an adult having to confront their traumatic childhood. The story we tell ourselves about our own lives changes constantly. As children we don't have the perspective to truly understand our situation. As adults we come to see our parents as people and recognize their flaws, but we never have full access to their personal history. We inherit trauma without ever being allowed to understand it, and we piece together a story that makes sense from the scraps of information we find. This screenplay is about dramatizing that process – it's about coming to understand your family and your past in a new light, and what you do with that understanding now that you have it.

The story-within-the-story of *The Madisons Lost at Sea* makes literal the disconnect between our personal narratives and the reality of our lives. John has created a fantasy version of the family's past because it is more comfortable than facing the truth, and in doing so he forces his family to live in the world he has built. To move forward, Winifred has to reject this narrative and replace it with her own.

Why an island? Of all the possible traumatic pasts to invent, why this one? The inspiration comes from *The Swiss Family Robinson*. The world of *The Swiss Family Robinson* is one of perfect joy, safety, and family togetherness. It is a story that looms large enough in popular culture that people are familiar with that world whether they have read the book or not. By linking John's fictional book to a real, well-known novel, the audience is encouraged to project their understanding of *The Swiss Family Robinson* onto John's story. It provides a shortcut for understanding John's book and its place in the world.

More importantly, invoking *The Swiss Family Robinson* in this way opens up another angle for examining the difference between stories and reality. Children's literature is rich for exploration due to its didactic nature. Survival stories like *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Little House on the Prairie* preach libertarian values about self-sufficiency and the power of the individual while reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. They frame men as natural masters not just of their families but of the environment itself. These sorts of stories assure us that through the power of masculine ingenuity and the nuclear family, any problem can be conquered.

The reality of survival is much messier, as seen in the historical narratives of actual castaways. These are not the light adventures of children's literature but grim tales of starvation and desperation. We tell children stories like *The Swiss Family Robinson* because we want to

believe that we are capable, that we are in charge of our own destiny, that we can build the kind of life we want no matter what the circumstances. The lived experience of actual castaways tells us that this is not the case<sup>1</sup>.

There is one other way in which I use *The Madisons Lost at Sea* to examine the gulf between stories and reality. Throughout the script great attention is paid to the media coverage the Madisons' story has received (or, in the present, is failing to receive). I did this because I wanted to explore the way stories in the media distort real people's lives. The Madisons' past has made them a media spectacle, and this puts pressure on Winifred and her siblings to accept their roles in that spectacle. Each of them is asked to live up to a version of themselves that cannot and will not ever exist in reality. But stories create a reality of their own, and it falls to each sister to reject, embrace or redefine themselves within that story.

These thematic concerns formed the core of *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. No matter what else changed throughout the drafts, these three ways of exploring "stories versus reality" - through family history, through children's literature, and through media critique - remained central to the story.



## Artist's Background

It's worth mentioning that the relationship between stories and reality is something I find endlessly fascinating, and it has become a recurring element in my work. One previous screenplay, *Steal the Show* (2013), is about indie filmmakers trying to fund their next project by performing heists they've seen in movies. Naturally, a lot of the comedy derives from how poorly movie heists have prepared them for an actual life of crime.

Another project, *King Island* (2015), is a murder mystery/comedy that draws heavily from the 'kid detective' genre typified by *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*. It follows the beats of a mystery while at every step emphasizing how unqualified a real teenager is to be solving crimes.

Where *The Madisons Lost at Sea* departs from these projects is in how it approaches this relationship. Both *Steal the Show* and *King Island* use the disconnect between their source stories and reality as an engine for generating humour. They subvert genre expectations and twist tropes as a way of playing games with the audience. It's a wink-and-a-nod approach to writing; "we both know you're expecting this, so what if I did this instead?"

*The Madisons Lost at Sea*, on the other hand, is more interested in exploring the consequences of that disconnect. What does it do to us when the stories we tell stop reflecting the reality of our lives? Why do we find genre tropes so comforting that we repeat them again and again? Though the film does find comedy in the disconnect between the fiction of the Madisons and the reality of Winifred's life, its main focus is the drama generated by that disconnect.

*The Madisons Lost at Sea* therefore explores this theme in a depth my previous projects never attempted. It engages with the topic and makes it the core of the story, rather than just providing a surface layer of jokes.

My desire to deal with this subject more seriously comes in part from life experience. Prior to joining the York MFA Screenwriting program I worked in reality television. The company I worked for produced shows that could best be described as “tough guys doing tough jobs”. It’s a popular sub-genre of reality TV that lionizes people who work with dangerous machinery in harsh conditions (think shows like *Deadliest Catch* or *Ice Road Truckers*).

I saw first-hand how these shows took the complicated reality of people’s lives and turned them into easily digestible stories. I saw how people were simplified into heroes or villains for the sake of entertainment. And I saw how these people were affected by the exposure media attention brings, how the existence of that artificial version of themselves in the public eye reshaped their personal lives.

I’m not going to mince words here. What these shows did was unethical. They took people we knew to be abusive or racist and turned them into heroes with a media platform. A particularly vivid example is the day publicity photos came in from the field. There was a problem with the photos from one worksite - all of the equipment was covered in white supremacist logos. I was told to go through the photos and edit out these symbols so we could send them to the broadcaster. They needed these people to look good, after all.

This was the day I decided I had to quit.

I think about this a lot. About how irresponsible the company was for holding these people up as role models. About the damage I was a party to by working there as long as I did.

About the president who goes on Twitter to threaten nuclear war, and who for years had a reality show that championed him as someone to look up to.

This is what happens when our stories get away from us. What happens when we prioritize stories that are comforting or profitable over stories that are real. We elevate those who are already privileged in society. We erase their crimes and the people they've victimized. We tell people that the status quo is okay, that to try to change it is as foolish and impossible as trying to stop the setting of the sun.

Anyway, that's why I decided to start examining this disconnect seriously, rather than just treating it as a tool for comedy. It felt important to be responsible in my storytelling.

## Genre

*The Madisons Lost at Sea* exists as part of the “family reunion” sub-genre. In these films some major event - a birth, a death, a wedding, an anniversary - brings an estranged family back together, forcing them to confront whatever deep-seated issue had previously kept them apart. Central to the conflict in these films is whether the dysfunction inherent in the family will disrupt the event, or if they will be able to resolve their issues and have a successful wedding/funeral/anniversary/etc.

A typical example of this genre is Noah Baumbach’s *Margot at the Wedding* (2007). In this film Margot returns to her childhood home for her sister Pauline’s wedding. Margot and Pauline’s relationship is strained by a lifetime of petty rivalry, and Margot’s disdain for Pauline’s fiancé causes her to try to talk her sister out of the marriage. Margot succeeds in disrupting the event and Pauline calls off the wedding, though at the very end Pauline decides to try to work things out with her fiancé anyway.

While in *Margot at the Wedding* the family has multiple causes for its dysfunction, in other family reunion films there is often a specific secret at the heart of everything. In Thomas Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* (1998), the 60th birthday of a respected businessman is disrupted when his son reveals that he and his sister were sexually abused by their father as children. The revelation throws the birthday party into disarray, forcing family members and guests to take sides. Here the secret, and the consequences of it being revealed, are what drives the conflict of the film.

It took time to figure out the specifics of the ‘event’ and the ‘dysfunction’ that would underpin *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. Over the course of development the event that brought the family together took many forms, including:

- A reunion on the 25th anniversary of their rescue from the island
- A publicity event to promote the re-release of John’s book
- John’s funeral
- John wedding to a new woman after his separation from Nora

The problem with all of these events was that, while they provided a pretext for getting the family back together, they did not create the right kind of conflict. While a funeral makes a good venue for struggles over story and legacy, it left the antagonist of that struggle out of the conflict. A reunion or publicity event lets the family re-litigate the past, but what are the stakes in the present?

This was fixed by having two events bring the family together; one large and public, the other personal and private. The stage play plot allows Winifred and John to fight over not just what happened in the past, but how the story will be told in the present. It gives Winifred something she can fight for and take control of. Meanwhile, John’s illness gives an otherwise reluctant Winifred a reason to actually take part in the reunion. The two events inform each other. John’s illness motivates him to create the stage play to secure his legacy, and while the stage play puts Winifred in opposition to her father, his illness pushes her to try to make peace. Underpinning her choices is the question: if Winifred pushes too hard against John’s vision, will it ruin her last chance to reconcile with him?

As for the dysfunction, it was clear from that start that John's handling of the Madisons' story would be a major source of tension between him and Winifred. However, it was difficult to convey the extent of the trauma Winifred faced as a survivor without spending a huge amount of time on the island. Rather than burdening the film with dozens of flashbacks, a single traumatic event would be needed that could stand in for all of John's failures as a father.

When talking about the family's life on the island it is important to acknowledge the other genre influencing *The Madisons Lost at Sea* - survival fiction, particularly children's castaway literature. As previously stated this project owes a huge debt to *The Swiss Family Robinson*, which informs the contextual background for the Madisons' story. It is an archetypal fantasy of survival. "Everyone dreams of finding a golden island where they can begin a new life"<sup>2</sup>, explains the making-of documentary for Disney's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1960) film. The book, and to an even larger extent the movie, present the fantasy of a fresh start free from the stresses of modern life, where you and your family can turn an untouched island paradise into a model of domestic bliss.

Judith Schalansky's *Atlas of Remote Islands* provides an excellent examination of this mythology. "The island," she states, "seems to be in its element, still in its natural state, unchanged since the beginning, paradise before the fall from grace, innocent and unblushing"<sup>3</sup>. Overwhelmed by the pressures of modern civilization, we fetishize the idea of a place that is 'pristine' and 'untouched'. Yet ironically that same fetishization drives us to go to these islands, to build there and remake them in the very image of the places we are fleeing.

But the promise remains. Castaway stories remain popular because there's always a more remote island, always a place we can convince ourselves is pure and uncontaminated. "It is the longing for an unnameable moment in the past, for a distant land, for a long-lost home" that

makes these stories so appealing. “A feeling, scattered like these islands, the yearning for a place that is at once everywhere and nowhere”<sup>4</sup>.

Besides *The Swiss Family Robinson*, this screenplay draws inspiration from *Little House on the Prairie* - both the book itself and the real-life circumstances surrounding its creation.

Though not typically considered survival fiction, *Little House on the Prairie* shares many traits with the genre. It takes place in a then-remote part of the world, far from ‘civilization’. It is intensely preoccupied with the day-to-day practicalities of survival; the building of shelters, the digging of wells, the search for food. And, like *The Swiss Family Robinson*, it shows a family gradually taming their environment and building their new home into something like the one they left behind.

But whereas *The Swiss Family Robinson* is purely fiction, the *Little House* series is Laura Ingalls Wilder fictionalizing her actual childhood for public consumption. The first draft was actually written for an adult audience, but in subsequent rewrites Wilder removed the most upsetting elements of the story to make it suitable for children. The contrast between the happy pioneer life Wilder depicts in the *Little House* books and the tragedies she experienced in her actual childhood are illustrated by *Pioneer Girl*, a meticulously-researched biography that draws extensively from Wilder’s original, for-adults version of her novel.

In *Pioneer Girl*, we learn that Wilder removed from the narrative a younger brother who died in infancy, as well as multiple instances where family members suffered near-fatal illnesses. Where the Wilders of the *Little House* series are self-sufficient, the Wilders of reality had to receive government food aid due to the failure of their farm. Wilder also removes neighbours and extended family who aided her family, “[focusing] on the self-sufficiency of her fictional family rather than on the reality of her personal history”<sup>5</sup>.

Besides making her fictional family happy, prosperous and more self-sufficient than her real family had been, Wilder also takes the opportunity to eliminate their personal failings. Several instances of the family's racism<sup>6</sup> are eliminated between Wilder's original draft and the published book. An incident where the family skips town to avoid paying their bills is recast in a positive light. And the ending departs significantly from reality. At the climax of *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder's father learns the government has lied to him and that the family will have to abandon their new farm. In reality, the family was knowingly and illegally squatting on an Osage reservation. The Wilders had gambled their livelihood on the belief that the government would back them in their attempt to steal Osage land. They turned out to be wrong.<sup>7</sup>

*The Madisons Lost at Sea* is heavily informed by the myth-making at the heart of *Little House on the Prairie*. Like Wilder, John Madison uses the book and the stage play to create a more palatable personal history. Both Wilder and Madison rewrite past wrongs through autobiography, then dodge concerns about accuracy by calling that autobiography a children's story. In this way the fictional John (and the real-life Wilder) are able to have it both ways, seizing control of their personal histories but renouncing responsibility for the self-serving nature of their edits. *Little House on the Prairie* thus provides material for both the narrative of the Madisons' story (the day-to-day work of survival apart from civilization) and the meta-narrative, the way John uses the telling of the story to advance his own personal agenda.



## Themes

The storylines of *The Madisons Lost at Sea* converge on a central question: “What effect do stories have on their subjects?” The book, the stage play, and the publicity tour are all ways people use stories to define Winifred. Is Winifred doomed to live in the shadow her family has cast over her? Is she forever hemmed in by society’s expectations of her? Or can she assert her story and force the world to see her as she wishes to be seen?

This isn’t just a question for semi-celebrities like Winifred. We experience it in our own lives all the time. Families are complex organisms full of history and obligation, but rarely do they know each other and the fullness of their lives. Children only know their parents as parents, and when they grow up those parents don’t always come to see them as grown adults. Both sides have reason to hide parts of themselves from the other. As a result the expectations family members have for each other are based on limited information, on the people they imagine each other to be rather than who they really are.

The existence of John’s book makes this problem literal. John, whose worldview is rooted in outdated ideas about masculinity and traditional family values, believes he can define his family as whatever he wants it to be. Through his work he has imagined a perfect family life for himself, and now he forces his family to enact it. But because he is so self-centred, John cannot truly understand the people in his family or have a meaningful relationship with them. He can’t maintain a relationship with Winifred because fundamentally he wants her to be someone else. He lives in a strange facsimile of a marriage with Nora because it’s the closest he can get to what he wants without accommodating her needs. In the same way Winifred’s life is deformed by other’s expectations, John’s life is deformed by the expectations he places on others.

This dynamic plays out in reverse in the B-plot between Nora and Anna. Where Winifred's life is defined by John's high expectations, Anna's is defined by Nora's low expectations. It is Nora who manages the *Madisons* brand, and part of that brand is having Winifred as the star. There's no room for Anna at the top, and Nora is frustrated with her for not knowing her place. But the whole reason Anna seeks fame is to win the attention and respect her family has denied her.

While both Winifred and Anna begin the film trapped by these expectations, they eventually find ways to transcend them. Anna rejects her opportunity to be the face of the Madisons when she realizes her parents can't give her the validation she seeks, and so she decides to support Winifred rather than step over her. Anna makes a role for herself outside of her parents expectations. And Winifred is eventually able to refute John's story and replace it with her own, using the stage play as a way to redefine herself to the world.

Neither of these changes comes without cost. To take control of their lives Winifred and Anna have to irreparably alter their relationships with their parents. The dynamic John and Nora created has been destroyed, and it remains to be seen if a healthy relationship can be built to take its place. Though defining oneself is both possible and necessary, doing so requires sacrifices.

## **The World of *The Madisons Lost at Sea***

The present-day of *The Madisons Lost at Sea* takes place largely in our world, with the existence of John's book as the key point of difference. The audience is meant to understand that while the John's book was big in its day its cultural significance has dwindled since then. The book is fondly remembered, but it's not important to anyone's day-to-day life - no one but John and the family, that is.

The backstory of the film, on the other hand, exists in a deliberate state of timelessness. John's opening narration gives the island a 'once upon a time' storybook quality. The reconstructions we see in the stage play evoke *Gilligan's Island* and the film version of *The Swiss Family Robinson*, both products of the 1960s. And the anachronistic use of 8mm film in the opening sequence lends it the nostalgic feeling of an old home movie<sup>8</sup>.

The world John invented on the island isn't part of the timeline. To tie it to a specific timeframe would create a context that ruins the illusion. It can only exist as memory, as legend, as the promise that things were better in some nameless moment in the past. By deliberately obscuring the timeframe of the Madisons' rescue, the film gives credence to John's lie - which makes the shock greater when Winifred reveals the truth.

## Characters

*The Madisons Lost at Sea* was conceived as an ensemble film. Though Winifred was always meant to be the viewpoint character, the original plan was for each character's storyline to carry equal weight. As development progressed, it became clear that this approach wasn't working; the storylines felt separate from each other, and they failed to coalesce in a satisfying way. To make the film work I had to narrow the focus onto Winifred as *the* protagonist and John as *the* antagonist, with the other characters supporting this conflict.

Each character is defined by their distinct relationship with John's book *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. John sees their time on the island as their glory days and is trying to relive an idealized version of their past. Winifred, who suffered the most on the island, actively resists this idealized portrait and struggles with her father for control of the story. Anna and Nora both align with John against Winifred; Anna for the attention her father's work offers her, and Nora for the comfort and stability its financial success brings. Lizzie, whose only memories of the island come from her father's stories, finds herself caught in the middle between the father she trusts and the sister she idolizes. Each family member has a stake in how the story is told and whether John or Winifred will end up in control of it.

## Winifred Madison

Winifred was one of the most difficult characters to develop. As mentioned above, Winifred's role was originally that of the viewpoint character in an ensemble. But the decision to focus the story on her conflict with John meant she could not merely be an observer; she had to actively drive the story.

Winifred is the oldest of the three Madison sisters, and the one who best remembers the hard, desperate reality of their life on the island. As the oldest child it fell on her to be one of the adults and make sacrifices for the good of the family. Years later she's still doing the same thing, bottling up her feelings rather than revealing the secret that could blow their lives apart.

The script draws a distinction between "Winnie", the heroic protagonist of John's book, and the actual Winifred Madison. The Winnie of John's imagination is an archetypal children's book protagonist<sup>9</sup>; clever, capable, and utterly confident in her ability to navigate the world. She is a wish-fulfillment character. The Winnie we see in Winifred's memory, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by the danger surrounding her on the island. "It's funny," Winifred tells a character who believes in the heroic Winnie of John's book, "I remember being scared all the time."

But even though Winifred doesn't believe in that heroic Winnie, she still feels a pressure to live up to her. The world knows her as the plucky little girl from her father's stories. There's a version of her out there that's *better*, brave and confident in a way she can't be, and it's impossible not to measure herself against that. The anxiety that Winifred exhibits throughout the script stems in part from her inability to be the person the world expects her to be.

In order to make Winifred an active character rather than an observer, it was necessary to find a way to dramatize these feelings, to use them as the basis for the conflict between her and John. It wasn't enough for the two to argue about the past, there had to be something tangible they both wanted in the present. Hence the matter of the book rights. Winifred is literally fighting for control of the story, though what she intends to do with it is not revealed until later. When it becomes clear she can't have what she wants - to quietly make the story go away - she decides to blow the whole thing up by finally revealing the truth about her past.

It's not enough to reject John's story. To truly take control, Winifred has to tell her own. She needs to define who she is and who she wants to be going forward. Hence the final act, where she collaborates with Park and the actors to change the play. Winifred reconstructs the story into something truer, something that she can live with, and this is what finally allows her to move on.

## **John Madison**

John is an adult man who never stopped being a ten-year-old boy. He's enthusiastic, adventurous, and friendly, but he's also self-centred and has little capacity for understanding other people's feelings. His book has helped keep the Madisons famous, but it has also made his version of the story the official one in the public eye. The rest of the family has been forced to live in his orbit, defining themselves in relation to how he has portrayed them.

John's cancer was a relatively late addition to the story. It puts John in a place where he is reflective about his legacy, trying to decide what to do with the time he has left. To John, the most important thing is always the island. John's portrayal of life on the island is far sunnier than

what any of his family remembers. To him it was the last time the family dynamic functioned, when they were a traditional nuclear family and everyone worked together. As much as he wants the stage play to secure his legacy, it is also his attempt to recreate that sense of family - a family where he is in control of everything. He doesn't understand or care that this is manipulative, and because of that he can't understand why Winifred resents him.

John's cancer also heightens the tension between John and Winifred. It creates a deadline; if they don't reconcile now they never will. But reconciliation is harder than either of them imagines. From the beginning I've been committed to the idea that John would not change significantly from his experiences in this film. John's worldview is by necessity static, trapped in a nostalgia for a bygone era. This is not his story, not his opportunity to learn and grow. Instead we see him through Winifred's eyes as she learns that she can't force her father to be the person she needs him to be.

In real life people change slowly, and that change can rarely be forced on them from the outside. John is stuck in his ways, and no climatic third act realization is going to change that. And because it's not John's story, that's okay. This is about Winifred realizing she's never going to have the kind of relationship with her father that she wants. In the end all she can do is decide if she wants to build something - something small and rickety, but something - out of the little bit of understanding they have.

## Nora Madison

Nora was always meant to be an antagonist, but it was important that she create a different kind of conflict than John. If she didn't represent a unique vector of threat her role in the story would be redundant. Determining the nature of her relationship with John was also a challenge; they had to represent a united front when it came to the *Madisons* series, but this ran the risk of making her seem too deferential to John. To be an interesting character she had to be independent and equal, with her own motivations for being involved, while still going along with John's plans.

Hence Nora's status at the start of the film. Her work as business manager of the *Madisons* brand gives her power, stability, and control over her life, but it has also kept her tied to John. Not too closely, though - they are divorced, and Nora makes it clear it happened on her terms. This separation gives Nora more independence and emphasizes that her participation in John's schemes is her choice. Though she cares about John in her own way, she's involved because this is the area of her life where she has the most control.

In fact, "control" is probably the best word for understanding Nora. As someone who was stranded on an island and has spent years putting up with John it is important to her to feel in charge of her own destiny. She has no compunction about manipulating her daughters into doing what she wants, whether it be through her constant undermining of Anna or by letting Winifred believe that the contract for the book rights is legitimate. As much as she tries to justify her actions as 'making sacrifices for the good of the family', this is just the excuse she uses to bully her children into doing what she wants.



Like John, Nora's arc does not end in enlightenment and catharsis. This is not a story about a family learning to put aside their differences and love each other. Some behaviours are too ingrained, some betrayals too unforgivable. Ultimately Nora's attempts to control everything end in her losing control of everything; of the stage play, of her children, and of the way the Madisons' story is perceived.

### **Anna Madison**

More than any of the Madisons, Anna fell in love with the limelight. Her father's book gave her a modicum of fame and she's spent her entire life clinging to it. As of the start of the film she's trying to leverage her fading star into a career as a social media personality. To Anna, the stage play is her last chance to become the celebrity she knows she was always meant to be.

Anna has a lot of middle-child syndrome going on; she feels like her sisters get more attention than her and that she needs to work hard to outshine them. In particular she's resentful of Winifred for being the main character in *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. From Anna's perspective John handed Winifred the greatest gift in the world, and Winifred neither recognizes nor appreciates it. Jealousy drives most of their interactions.

With all this in mind, it was initially difficult to make Anna into a sympathetic character. Unlike John and Nora I wanted Anna to be redeemable, which meant finding ways to humanize her in spite of her vengeful, self-destructive instincts. To do so, it was important to show how her negative qualities stemmed from the pain caused by her childhood.

An early scene where Anna fails to make a fire illustrates this approach - Anna is so desperate, needs so badly to be recognized, that it's hard not to at least feel bad for her. Later,

when Anna talks to Nora after learning John is dying, I went out of my way to show both Anna's concern for her father and how hurt she is that John would tell Winifred but not her.

Near the end of the film Anna admits that she does remember how bad life was on the island, but she keeps it to herself because she fears no one will pay attention or care. These little moments of weakness help to counteract Anna's mean streak. If nothing else, an audience can usually be counted on to empathize with someone they see struggling.

Anna spends most of the film trying to ameliorate these feelings of inadequacy by pursuing fame, but in the end what she needs is not the adoration of millions but a real connection with her sisters. Showing her struggling and failing keeps the audience on her side long enough for her to go through her personal transformation.

### **Lizzie Madison**

Lizzie is the character who lost the most screen time between the early "ensemble" version of the story and the final script. However, the core of her storyline has always been the same. Lizzie was an infant when she was on the island and therefore has no memories of her time as a castaway. With no role in her family's big adventure - and thus, no role in the book that has since defined them - it's up to Lizzie to make a place for herself in the family.

Early drafts spent more time fleshing out Lizzie's life between the island and the present. A reference to backpacking in the current script was originally a more fully-developed backstory about how Lizzie had travelled the world looking for an adventure to make up for the one she missed as a baby. The cost of this soul-searching left her broke at 25 and living with her parents again, which is where she found herself at the start of the film. Though this backstory helped to

establish Lizzie's motivations it was necessary to cut it from the final screenplay. Once the decision was made to focus the story on Winifred, Lizzie's backstory became irrelevant to the main conflict.

Lizzie motivation for helping with the stage play is to stake a claim to the family story. It is a chance to finally carve out an identity for herself. Her desire to be a part of her father's world is subtly reflected by her decision to use the "children's book" version of her name - while "Winnie" now goes by Winifred and "Annie" by Anna, Elizabeth is still little Lizzie Madison.

Ultimately there's no room for the adult Lizzie in the world John created. To really be a part of her family she has to reject the false promise the *Madisons* story represents. Rather than integrating into the fake but perfect family of John's stories, she finds a role for herself in the complicated but real family her sisters offer.

## **Supporting Characters**

Shifting the focus of the story onto Winifred, John, and the stage play solved a number of narrative problems, but it also caused the size of the supporting cast to balloon. The play would need actors, a director, and production crew, and these new characters needed to carry some of the weight of the plot to justify their existence.

**Park**, the director of the play, is an objective observer. He's savvy enough to know John's story can't be true, but because of his career prospects he's stuck doing things John's way. Because Park has no personal stake in the Madisons' story he is able to serve as an ally and confidant to Winifred. He is someone outside of the family she can be honest with. This

connection is what influences Park to risk his career to help Winifred tell the real story of the Madisons.

**Madison**, the young actress who plays Winnie, is someone who believes John's book entirely. She is too young and naive to recognize that the story is fake. Through her we see how the story is viewed by the children it was written for.

Madison's relationship with Winifred is particularly strange. Madison embodies the perfect version of Winnie that John has created in his book. When Winifred watches Madison perform she's looking at the person she's supposed to be made flesh. When Madison tries to teach Winifred how to act like the real Winnie, it is a copy of a copy trying to teach the original how to act like the real thing. In short, Madison opens up a lot of avenues to explore how John's story intrudes back in on reality.

The remaining characters serve various plot functions. **Avery** and **Tilda** portray John and Nora in the stage play, and their dissatisfaction with John's script sets the stage for Winifred's dramatic last-minute rewrite. In addition, Avery and Tilda's love for Madison and **Gracie** (the actress portraying young Anna) provides a model for the kind of family the Madisons could have been. **Elle** and **Ted**, the play's publicity team, supply the media attention Winifred was so desperate to avoid... only to reveal later that the media doesn't actually care about the Madisons' story anymore. Finally, the **Claims Agent** Winifred runs into at the airport demonstrates how the public feels about Winifred both before and after the truth about her life on the island comes out.

## The Development Process

As I stated earlier, writing this screenplay was a difficult process. So far I've outlined my motivations, influences, and goals in writing this script. From this point forward I will talk about the challenges I faced translating those ideas into the finished story, and the changes that happened along the way as a result. Let's start with my original thesis proposal, which shows where the story stood in its earliest state:

### **Original Thesis Proposal (submitted October, 2015)**

*"The Madisons Lost at Sea* is an ensemble film about an estranged family reunited by the anniversary of the event that defined their lives. 25 years ago the Madisons survived a shipwreck and lived a *Swiss Family Robinson*-esque life on a deserted island. Eventually the family was rescued, and up on their return home the Madisons found that their story of survival had made them famous. They were the subject of news coverage, television specials, and talk show appearances. Before long family patriarch John Madison turned their story into a series of best-selling children's novels, starting with *The Madisons Lost at Sea*.

Now, on the 25th anniversary of their rescue, John is attempting to bring the family back together for a media event to promote the re-release of his novels. But the last quarter-century has not been kind to the Madisons, who have grown apart due to the pressure of the public spotlight that John has kept them in.

Reluctantly reuniting for the first time in years, the family will finally have to confront the trauma of their life as castaways and the ways it affects them today.

Though an ensemble, the film will focus on the family's oldest daughter, Winifred, who has a strained relationship with her parents and is trying to avoid making the same mistakes with her own children. In the end she will realize that is impossible to make other people into what we want or need them to be, and that the best you can do is choose whether or not to have those people in your life.”

Already the core elements of the story are in place. It is the story of a family and the event that defined their lives. It is clear that it will involve children’s literature, with *The Swiss Family Robinson* directly invoked in relation to John’s novel. And mention is made of the media circus that the Madison family will find itself involved in.

But there are major problems with this proposal, chief among them that it doesn’t explain *what the story is actually about*. It talks extensively about the backstory, but then fails to specify where the action will focus in the present. What does Winifred *do*? What is the nature of her conflict with her parents? Despite ostensibly being the main character, there is no indication of how Winifred is supposed to drive the story.

This problem extends to the vagueness about the nature of the event that will bring the family back together. I offhandedly refer to a media event for the 25th anniversary reunion, but it is unclear what this will entail. What will the Madisons do when they reunite? What do they hope to accomplish? What is at stake if they fail to accomplish it?

The lack of stakes would be a major problem throughout the early drafts; if the family is really so estranged, there needs to be something big that convinces them to get back together.

The entire film hinges on the specifics of the event and its relation to Winfred's conflict with her father, but at this point I hadn't given serious thought to either. I spent so long developing the backstory that I failed to consider the story itself.

This early proposal also differs from the final screenplay in some significant ways. Most notable is a reference to Winifred having children of her own. These two children, later cut, were major players in the first few versions of the story. Other changes include the amount of time that has passed since the Madisons escaped the island<sup>10</sup> and the fact that John has written a series of books rather than a single novel. This last detail was an attempt to justify why the Madisons were still culturally relevant - if John had written an ongoing series rather than a single book, their fame could have had a longer shelf-life. Within a few drafts it became apparent that this was not necessary, and the story was stronger if the Madisons weren't culturally relevant anymore.

As of this proposal I had the foundations for a strong first act and little else. It would be easy enough to establish the backstory and show the family reuniting, but then what? At this early stage I still did not recognize this problem.

### **First Treatment (submitted December 2015)**

Working on the treatment was when it became clear to me that I didn't really know what this film would be about. Almost as soon as the family reunited the story ground to a halt. What would the family actually do? What was the precise nature of the conflict between Winifred and John? In an effort to push forward and write through my problems I came up with easy, overly-literal answers. I won't reproduce the entire 15-page treatment here, but these excerpts should give an idea of how things developed:

“For the 25th anniversary of his first book, John wants to bring the family back to the island. There will be interviews and a photo shoot and publicity events, all meant to get the family back in the public eye and boost the sales of John’s books. Winifred balks at the idea, but John promises there will be money in it for her if she agrees.”

This is the event I decided to build the film around: John would host an anniversary event on the very island where they were once castaways. It is a premise that falls apart under the most basic scrutiny. How rich is John that he can afford this? How are the *Madisons* books so important that at least a dozen reporters are willing to take part? A massive press event on a private Pacific island would be unthinkable for a book franchise as big as the Harry Potter series, let alone for a 25-year-old children’s book that’s going back into print.

Besides being implausible, this set-up also demonstrates an extremely literal approach to answering the questions raised by the film’s premise. In order to make the Madisons face their past on the island, I put all of them back on the island. It gives the impression of addressing the problem without going through the hard work of actually addressing the problem.

Winifred’s motivation for participating also reveals a failure to think seriously about the problems inherent in the pitch. While Winifred needing money makes sense as a way to get her involved, it doesn’t relate to her conflict with John in any meaningful way. Whether or not Winifred gets paid has no bearing on if she will reclaim her story. The solutions I came up with succeeded in moving the narrative from event to event, but they did not create story.



“As the family argues, the weather starts to get worse and worse. A journalist announces that an unexpected storm has swept in and is about to strike the island. Everyone scatters to their tents.”

Because I had so far failed to create meaningful conflict, the story quickly ran out of momentum. In this draft the Madison family argued about the past, but there was nothing pushing them to take action in the present. Because the event would be over in a few days and they could all go home after, the emotional stakes were very low.

In the treatment, I “solved” this by hitting the island with a hurricane. All of the event infrastructure is destroyed, recreating the conditions of the Madisons’ original shipwreck and stranding everyone on the island. After spending 25 years hearing a fake story about the Madisons survival, everyone is now forced to live the brutal reality. And because the Madison family can no longer walk away from the event, surely the stakes of the conflict must be higher.

This is, again, a very literal-minded approach to the conflict of the story. If Winifred’s problem is that no one knows what it’s really like to be stranded on a deserted island, I’ll just have a platoon of media and guests get stranded on a deserted island with the family. Then they can all see things from her point of view. While this does prove Winifred right, it is a bad approach because she lacks any agency. Her story may be vindicated, but it is not due to any action on her part. Winifred is along for the ride, just like everyone else stranded by the storm.

As the treatment goes on events fail to coalesce into actual conflicts. Winifred has to protect her children now that they’re castaways, but this doesn’t tie back into her conflict with John in any significant way. Characters argue, but the things they say don’t lead to decisions or action. There are complications with the stranded media people, complications with Anna,

complications between John and Nora, but none of it amounts to anything. It's an ensemble film where the storylines don't come together in a meaningful way.

The treatment staggers to a weak ending. Winifred's daughter gets bitten by a snake, but in the end they're rescued by a passing ship. As they return home Winifred overhears John spinning what happened to them as another thrilling tale of adventure, and realizes that he's learned nothing. Events happen, but none of it is really conflict. And most importantly, Winifred never has to make a decisions during any of it. She passes from one end of the movie to the other without ever taking any real action.

This first treatment was almost completely unusable. I hadn't grappled with any of the real problems with the story, and so there ended up not being a story. There were, however, a few things that could be salvaged from the draft. The opening sequence, where John narrates the story of their rescue, remains largely unchanged even in the final draft. The sequence clearly established everything it needed to - the history of the Madisons, that the story we hear is John's version of events, and that this film will be the story of that story.

Other elements made it into the final draft in a heavily repurposed form. Anna's introductory scene, as a D-list celebrity guest on a daytime talkshow, eventually transformed into Winifred's disastrous appearance on The Jill Green Show. A scene where Winifred is recognized at the grocery store is replaced with a scene where Winifred is recognized at the airport. Aspects of Winifred's children, particularly the reverence they show John's book, were eventually given to Madison. And even at this early stage the massive *Swiss Family Robinson*-style treehouse was an important concept. Though in this draft the treehouse was constructed on the island rather than as a theatre set, it serves the same role in both stories: capturing the misguided nostalgia at the heart of John's crusade.

## **Finding the Story (January - December 2016)**

At this point it was clear that I had to go back to square one. In fact, I would go back to square one multiple times over the course of the next year, going further and further off course in my effort to find the story.

The first major cut was Winifred's children, Emily and Henry. I had wanted to use them as another avenue for exploring how Winifred relates to her past. Winifred would refuse to talk to her children about her life on the island, wanting to protect them from the harshness of reality in a way her own parents had failed to protect her. As a result the children would only know their mother's story from John's book.

Though the children offered some interesting storytelling opportunities, they added to the overall clutter of these early drafts. None of the storylines were coming together in a meaningful way, so it was necessary to cut down and refocus. It was better in this case to pass up some opportunities in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed by them.

This is also when I began to reconsider what the event at the core of the film would be, leading to new and vastly different treatments. In one version John had recently died and the conflict centred around Nora and Winifred trying to plan for his funeral and legacy. In another, the film was almost entirely flashbacks to life on the island, with a framing structure where Winifred told her story in the present. For a moment I considered centring the film on Winifred's children as they ran away from home in an attempt to recreate their mom's big adventure. Needless to say, I was departing significantly from my original vision for the story.

Talking to my supervisor helped me refocus on the story I wanted to tell. Around this time I came up with the stage play as a way to show the island in the present without flashbacks

or other overly-literal conceits. However, I still had fundamental problems to address. After discussing the issue it finally became clear that the core problem across all versions of the story had been a lack of conflict.

In every version of *The Madisons Lost at Sea*, Winifred's objective had been to regain control of her life story. But this was a thematic, intangible goal. It didn't imply story events - what does Winifred *do* to achieve that goal? It doesn't have a clear endpoint - how will the audience *know* if Winifred has achieved it? The lack of a clear objective also lead to a lack of clear antagonism. If Winifred wasn't pursuing her goal, there was no reason for John to do anything to stop her.

A film I thought about a lot during this period was *Young Adult*, written by Diablo Cody. It has a few thematic similarities to *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. Both involve characters who avoid dealing with reality by fictionalizing their lives in children's books. Both feature characters stuck in the past, trying to recreate their glory days. But where in *The Madisons Lost at Sea* the conflict was fuzzy, in *Young Adult* it was crystal clear.

In *Young Adult* the protagonist (Mavis) sees high school as her golden era, and her goal is to recapture that faded glory. Like Winifred's goal this is thematic, but the film finds a way to pair this with a concrete objective. Mavis' active goal in *Young Adult* is to get back together with her high school boyfriend (and break up his marriage in the process) - and she believes that by achieving this, she will regain her former glory.

This is a good goal. It creates story events - to achieve her goal Mavis has to return to her hometown, reunite with her ex, attempt to seduce him, etc. There is a clear endpoint - we will know if Mavis achieves her goal because she will be in a relationship with her ex. This active

goal carries the thematic weight of "regaining former glory", but it creates story events in a way that the thematic statement of the goal doesn't.

So the question became "how can Winifred's intangible goal be made tangible?" After a long time, it occurred to me that there was already something tangible in the story that represented Winifred's inability to control her life story - John's book. The most direct way for Winifred to pursue her thematic goal would be through the tangible goal of trying to get control of the book rights. It made sense; with John sick and dying, "what happens to the book rights?" would be a pertinent question.

With this, the last major element of the story fell into place. While the focus would still be on the stage production, Winifred now had a clear motivation for being involved - this would be her chance to get the literal rights to her own story. The internal conflict would come from Winifred wanting the rights, but being forced to pretend John's story is true in order to get them. The external conflict comes from John exerting pressure on Winifred to stay in line, threatening to not give her the rights unless she does exactly what he says. Finally there was a clear conflict that could sustain the film.

### **The Final Draft**

From this point forward things proceeded slowly but smoothly. I wrote a new 34-page step outline that, barring some necessary adjustments and clarifications, became the basis for the finished screenplay you see today. From there I turned the outline into a first draft, then a second draft, and so on. Though revisions were necessary, the fact that the story was fundamentally sound meant that these revisions now occurred at the scene level rather than the structural level.

The current story configuration is the closest I have been able to come to realizing my original concept. Centring the “event” around the stage play, with John’s illness as a catalyst, allows the film to explore how John has distorted the past in a direct, visual way. Characters are able to see, interact with, and argue over the presentation of the past in the present, which creates more active conflict. Winifred has something to fight for that drives her to act, while John is able to provide obstacles both through his attempt to control the story and his willingness to exploit his illness to get what he wants.

That fight over the truth of John’s story is streamlined in this draft by narrowing the focus down to the moment the Madisons are rescued. The film deliberately privileges John’s point of view in the opening. It begins with John framing the story of their rescue, and Winnie’s climb to signal the boat appears to be the great moment of heroism in their adventure. But as the film goes on we are exposed more and more to Winifred’s point of view, culminating in her telling the same story of their rescue on *The Jill Green Show*. This time we get additional context, and we see how Winnie’s great moment of heroism comes about only through John’s neglect and failure as a father. The opening scene of the film, framed triumphantly by John’s narration, becomes inverted in Winifred’s telling, and this single moment of betrayal and trauma is able to stand in for their entire experience on the island.

## Future Plans

As I have illustrated, writing this screenplay was a process. It took a lot of wrong turns and narrative dead-ends before I could write this draft. The process has given me a greater understanding of how conflict operates in a screenplay, how backstory can be made present and active, and how to bridge the divide between thematic goals and the tangible story elements needed to achieve them. It has also, I hope, led to a deeper examination of the thematic goals I had in the beginning - of the unequal power structures that determine who gets to tell stories, and how the simplified, comforting stories we tell ourselves never contain the whole truth.

Going forward, I plan to do at least one more draft of *The Madisons Lost at Sea*. In particular I'd like to tighten up the 3rd Act and give it the attention it deserves. I believe that the ending can do more to acknowledge that stories are complicated for the people living them, and that life rarely provides clearcut endings, while at the same time still providing some sense of closure.

Beyond that, I plan to submit the script to various screenwriting competitions in hopes of it getting some attention. The reality of the industry is that as an early-career screenwriter without representation, this script is more of a calling card than a project likely to go into production.

Working on *The Madisons Lost at Sea* has undoubtedly made me a better writer. It has given me a greater understanding of how to craft conflict and how to create dynamic, active characters. If nothing else, I am thankful that I have had the time and support necessary to see this concept develop into the script it has become.

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<sup>1</sup> This project drew on a number of accounts of real-life castaways, including those found in Anthony Brandt's *The Tragic History of the Sea* and Judith Schalansky's *Atlas of Remote Islands*. Particularly valuable was *The Last Voyage of the Lucette*, an autobiography by shipwreck survivor Douglas Robertson. At age 18 Robertson and his family were shipwrecked while sailing around the world. Trapped on an overburdened life raft for 38 days, the family quickly expended their emergency rations and fresh water. In order to survive they were forced to drink the blood of captured sea turtles, consume contaminated rainwater via enema, and take turns sitting in the raft's one dry seat (the rest being partially submerged in water).

Besides discussing the practical hardships of survival, Robertson's story is also a jarring account of the emotional trauma of life as a castaway. Robertson describes his father as becoming verbally and then physically abusive as their situation grew more desperate, eventually striking another survivor in the raft. In one scene Robertson describes how his parents, convinced death was imminent, had him write a goodbye letter and seal it in a bottle so that some record of their struggle would be left behind. Though Robertson's book was written nearly 40 years after the shipwreck, the lingering effects of that emotional trauma are clear. This first-hand account proved to be a valuable source when modelling the trauma of the Madison family.

<sup>2</sup> *Swiss Family Robinson: Adventure in the Making*. Screenplay by Mark Young. Walt Disney Productions, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Schalansky, Judith. *Atlas of Remote Islands*. London: Penguin Books, 2010. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Schalansky 38.

<sup>5</sup> Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Though not all - Wilder's depiction of the Osage nation in *Little House on the Prairie* is highly inaccurate and relies more on colonialist preconceptions than actual history.

<sup>7</sup> The family's attempt to steal Osage land is discussed in *Pioneer Girl*, though a fuller examination can be found in Frances Kaye's article "Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve".

<sup>8</sup> In the timeline of the film the Madisons would have been stranded sometime in the late 1990s, meaning footage of their rescue would likely have been shot on a camcorder.

<sup>9</sup> While "Winnie" draws from a long tradition of children's book protagonists, one particularly helpful model was Claudia Kincaid from E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Basil E. Frankweiler*.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically stated to be twenty-five years. In the final draft the timeframe is left vague but is closer to twenty years.



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