



## Robert Crews

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His mordant retelling of everything from American history (LITTLE BIG MAN) and Greek myth (ORRIE'S STORY) to Arthurian romance (ARTHUR REX), detective fiction (WHO KILLED TEDDY VILLANOVA?), and allegory (MEETING EVIL), have made Thomas Berger one of today's most consistently interesting and inventive novelists. His latest, ROBERT CREWS, is a wonderfully deadpan update of Defoe's classic, ROBINSON CRUSOE. Having gone through three marriages and the considerable inheritance left him by his lawyer-father, Bob Crews—alcoholic, middle-aged, ill-tempered—reluctantly and grumpily sets off on a fishing trip with his former college roommate (now a wealthy businessman) and two others. Their small plane, blown off-course by a storm, crashes in a remote lake; only Crews, the least capable and least deserving, survives to face the wilderness alone. Woefully ill-prepared, Crews, despite being on his own for the first time in his life, manages to make do without any of the Christian-capitalist scaffolding that supports Crusoe during his years as a castaway.

Crews learns through a process of comic trial and error to feed and shelter himself, build a raft, and explore the island. There is of course a footprint and a Friday (female) on the run not from cannibals but from her perhaps murderous husband. At this point the plot of Berger's novel seems a pastiche of ROBINSON CRUSOE and James Dickey's DELIVERANCE, minus the latter's Southern Gothic trappings. Thanks to his wilderness experience and his meeting up with Friday, Crews sheds his self-pity, becoming increasingly self-reliant and ultimately "honorable." Eventually, though accidentally, Crews and Friday meet up with her husband, whose proto-maleness seems nothing more than a cover for his financial dependency on his wife. There is a brief lover's triangle of conflicting loyalties, followed by Crews and Friday (now Ellen) paddling off toward civilization and a life together, each aware of the other's and his/her own frailties. The ending is upbeat yet appropriately tentative. Wittily conceived and wryly told, ROBERT CREWS accomplishes the seemingly impossible, managing to be just as emotionally arresting (in its often oddly angled way) as it is parodically funny.

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