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(00) How Charles Crumb's childhood obsession with Stevenson's *Treasure Island* finally drove him crazy.

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(01) *Treasure Island* came out in the United States on July 19, 1950. Of course I'm talking about Walt Disney's very first live-action movie, entirely shot in England (not at all in the Caribbean). The 1950 feature directed by Byron Haskin had spectacular production values, with splendid scenery in Technicolor. Its box-office receipts were equally spectacular with over 4 million dollars worldwide for an initial budget of 1.8 million dollars.

(03) The Welsh actor Robert Newton's histrionic rendition of Long John Silver popularized the West Country accent as a hallmark of big-screen larger-than-life pirates as of the 1950s—all the way to Geoffrey Rush as Captain Barbosa in the early 21st-century *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. Jim Hawkins was played by the American child actor Bobby Driscoll, who was 12 when the movie was shot. Driscoll's two main claims to fame were his roles as Jim in *Treasure Island* **(04)** and as the voice and close-up model of *Peter Pan* in the eponymous animated feature film of 1953. Peter Pan was his last « major » role before severe acne put a halt to his acting career and added his name to the long list of child actors whose big-screen bankability died once they were hit by puberty.

(05) The movie aired on US television in the ABC network's weekly anthology series *Walt Disney's Disneyland* in two parts on January 5 and 12, 1955. By our present-day standards, that TV show was a rather anti-climactic experience: the glorious Technicolor film released in theaters five years earlier appeared as a slightly blurry black-and-white flick shown on a diminutive screen.

(06) Yet, for the children of the Crumb household in Oceanside, California (a seaside town 60 kilometers north of San Diego), the viewing of the Walt Disney movie was a momentous event. The Crumbs were a typical 1950s white lower middle-class family: the father, Charles, was a former US Marine turned salesman in a latex factory; the mother, Beatrice, a neurotic homemaker addicted to dexedrine, the amphetamine drug that at the time used to be widely prescribed by physicians to overweight people; and five children born between 1941 and 1945... The eldest and youngest siblings, Carol and Sandra, will be only mentioned in passing here. But the three boys — Charles, Robert, Maxon — will be at the center of our story.

(07) The second boy, Robert, is someone you may have heard of—he is the world-famous underground cartoonist R. Crumb. You will have heard of his two brothers only if you know the 1994 documentary about him directed by his friend Terry Zwigoff. The documentary deals with the human and artistic trajectory of Robert Crumb, an American baby-boomer from a very ordinary background, who never went to college nor held a steady job after 1967 yet went

on to become one of the most influential illustrators of the Sixties counter-culture. (08) One of the main points addressed in the documentary is how Robert was influenced into becoming a self-taught cartoonist by his older brother Charles, a kid obsessed with comics who literally compelled his younger sibling to share in his obsession. All three Crumb boys had issues, but Charles was the one whose life was eventually most impacted by them.

(09) The viewing of Walt Disney's *Treasure Island* on TV in January 1955 was a pivotal experience for the three kids. Robert Crumb's first retelling of it appeared in 1978 as "Treasure Island Days," a two-page feature in *Lemme Outa Here*, a one-shot underground comic collecting stories about life in the suburbs from the late 1940s to the 1960s. In this piece, Crumb recalled how the three brothers' fascination with the *Treasure Island* movie turned into a protracted role-playing game for Charles. For weeks he proceeded to dress up as Long John Silver and walk on one leg with a makeshift crutch, and invent activities inspired by the movie for the three brothers. The ending of "Treasure Island Days" suggested that Charles gave up the Long John Silver routine after a few weeks, after getting into trouble with other kids who were not amused by his Robert Newton impersonation.

R. Crumb's 1978 two-pager was implicitly autobiographical. But years later, as segments of Crumb's life story were laid bare in Terry Zwigoff's documentary, it became clear that "Treasure Island Days" was autofictional rather than autobiographical, and based on a more complex and unsettling reality

in the pasts of the three Crumb boys. The real story, pieced together in the documentary, was subsequently complemented in two texts by Maxon Crumb. This was how R. Crumb presented the genesis of his 1978 comic in Terry Zwigoff's documentary (**Clip 1 - 50s**).

The starting point of it all was the strong impression left on the boys by the Walt Disney *Treasure Island*—nothing really surprising for US male viewers aged 13, 12, and 11 in the mid-1950s. The longterm aftereffects of the viewing were unforeseen though. Shortly after seeing the movie, the youngest boy, Maxon, decided to apply his DIY skills to the making of a crutch similar to Long John Silver's : for the 11-year-old, a stick found in the father's garage and an empty toilet paper roll were enough to put together a convincing crutch. When he was done, Maxon ran excitedly upstairs to the bedroom where his two older brothers were confabulating when they were not drawing comics. Then the following scene happened, again in Maxon's words :

Leaning my weight on the crutch, I kicked my leg rear-ward, foot into butt, and hobbled back into the room on one leg.

"Ar-Har," I exclaimed. Then, nervously, with a mouse squeak in it, "What be this, mates?!"

I squinted and growled, "Eeyah!"

Charles' face expressed... what? (...)

My voice had been, as said, uncertain and weak; his was like the report of eight shotgun rounds at once. "Avast there, George Merry, be you standin' for Cap'n here? By the Powers, I'll teach you better!" (CBTI)

Charles grasped the crutch and proceeded with an impression of Robert Newton's Long John Silver that left his brothers first speechless then roaring with laughter. It was the start of a role-playing routine that did not last weeks but

years. To improve his brother's act, Maxon took it upon himself to make more authentic-looking wooden crutches and provide Charles with two toy flintlock pistols. Beyond the pirate's voice, crutch and guns, the costume was another DIY masterpiece:

an old green-dyed camel hair overcoat of my Mother's and a red (with white pinstripes) straw spring hat, stripped of its femme decor and with its wide brim pinned up in three places to fashion an 18th-century three-corner hat. (CBTI)

To complete the illusion, a few adroitly devised stage props :

a couple of wood boxes and cheaper crates. On the wood boxes, Charles wrote receiving notices as if sent by a delivery agent from Bristol, England. We even found two or three small wooden kegs in a plowed field somewhere that had wooden spigots on 'em and as yet, contained an inch of water.

Charles put a promo and logo for "Jamaica Rum" on one. (CBTI)

Charles' playacting was a hit with his two brothers, naturally, but also with their young friends, as he « hobb[ed] around the neighborhood on a crutch ... bellowing orders » « in his ragged old pirate costume ».

This is the part of the story that dovetails with R. Crumb's 1978 comic. While the children the same age as or younger than Robert were thrilled with the oldest brother's antics, Charles more than once got into troubles when he stubbornly stayed in character with teens that were absolutely not willing to play along into his fantasy. Charles even went so far as to get his siblings and a few of their younger neighbors entangled in a pitched battle with a gang of local white trash kids armed with sticks, bats, toy guns while Charles, always dressed as a one-legged pirate, kept up a raving banter in West Country lingo (CFC 95-96).

The rest of the story is also unsettling. I have already said that the eldest Crumb boy was obsessed with comics, to the point of literally bullying his brother Robert into co-creating with him dozens and dozens of what they called “two-man comics.” Charles’ fixation upon the *Treasure Island* protagonist lasted for years and manifested itself through his erratic playacting, frantic Robert Newton/Long John Silver memorabilia collecting (Thompson: 66, 68, 119), and comics-making. The chronology is somewhat fuzzy because in Zwigoff’s documentary, Robert claims that the *Treasure Island*-inspired playacting lasted 6 or 7 years. It is probably an overstatement: the available evidence suggests that Charles’ obsession with the *Treasure Island* characters lasted until 1962, the year when he stopped making comics once and for all. **(11)**

The two brothers began drawing *Treasure Island*-themed material only in 1959 in the never-published, single-copy notebooks that they titled *Notes*, *Almanac* or *Arcade*¹. **(Clip 2 — 51 seconds-on)**

(12) Almost two decades before R. Crumb’s two-pager in *Lemme Outa Here*, “Treasure Island Days” was the title of a story “by C and R Crumb” that had at least two parts: the first one, reprinted in *The Complete Crumb Comics* vol. 1, was simply dated 1959 without indication about its source; the second one appeared in a notebook titled *Almanac #20 July 1, 1959* owned nowadays by James Halperin, a major collector of US original comic art. **(13)** A third

¹ Cf. examples under “Charles Crumb” in the website of the James Halperin collection (<http://www.jhalpe.com/>).

story, thirteen pages long, « The Adventures of Long John Silver », appeared in a notebook titled *Arcade*, undated but produced in late 1961.

(14) The Crumb brothers' Treasure Island comics initially « embellish[ed] on the movie's established characters » (Pahls, x): Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, Jim, etc. were all there but the protagonist of their funnies was always Long John Silver. **(15)** As time passed, two directions emerged. Robert created a non-canonical character: Mabel, a tall busty blonde who first appeared as a prostitute then barmaid, became an evident love interest of Jim Hawkins in stories mostly or entirely authored by Robert. After a while he completely gave up drawing Treasure Island stories but kept Mabel and Jim in stories set in the present. Mabel was the very first Crumb girl, the source of all the other luscious female creatures that peopled R. Crumb's comics in the following decades.

(16) Charles' comics took a very different direction. First he gradually developed a disturbing graphic style with omnipresent wrinkles, including in the faces of some characters. **(Clip 2)** Secondly, his comics increasingly focused on the relationship between Long John Silver and Jim, the rest of Stevenson's original cast having been evicted from his strips. He stopped drawing forever during the year 1962. The rest of his life was pathetic: he never left the family home, never finished college, was never able to hold a job for long, had a few very short-lived relationships that never reached the point of sexual intimacy. Following a suicide attempt in the early 1970s he was diagnosed as schizophrenic and became a shut-in stabilized by neuroleptics, leaving his

parents' house only for medical appointments, until he took his own life in 1992 at the age of 50.

“What does Charles Crumb’s wretched life story have to do with *Treasure Island* ?”, you may ask. Well, a lot actually. **(Clip 3)**

(17) Charles discovered his homosexuality when he discovered Bobby Driscoll in *Treasure Island* in a theater in 1950. He was the only one of the three Crumb boys that saw the movie before the TV airing of January 1955. By then, when he was 13, he had become aware of the pedophilic tendencies that attracted him to younger boys, whose epitome was the 12-year-old Bobby Driscoll in the Walt Disney movie. Years later, in a letter written to Robert circa 1981 (CFC 30), Charles told him about his discovery in a Philadelphia library in 1959 of a dictionary of motion picture actors, in which he carefully copied down the list of all the movies featuring Driscoll before « frantically stuff[ing] it into his trouser pocket. » He confessed :

At that moment, I wanted above all to keep what I was doing a secret from others. I didn't want anyone to know that I was a homosexual pedophilic with a hopeless crush on a little boy actor who no longer existed in the realm of reality (you probably won't answer this letter, but in cas you do, remember that it will be read by Mother). I would have been dreadfully ashamed and felt unspeakably guilty if anyone had found out. (CFC 30)

(18) Brief conclusion to this long story: Charles Crumb’s fixation with Long John Silver, which was activated when his kid brother Maxon brought his makeshift crutch to his older brothers, was the tree overshadowing the forest of

Charles' hidden secrets, a lifetime of guilt over unfulfilled homosexual pedophilic urges and schizophrenia. Its early signs were a conspicuous obsession with a fictional larger-than-life one-legged character whose disability hid a lifetime of crime ; this obsession itself concealed Charles' « abnormal » libidinal urges, socially and legally unacceptable in the postwar lower middle-class America. Charles lost his fixation on Long John Silver by the early 1960s but until his suicide, he was tormented by what he himself called his « sexual desire for little boys » (CFC 31), which he never acted out. As it were, to paraphrase the comics critic and historian Jeet Heer, for Charles Crumb, the « youthful play » that arose from the viewing of *Treasure Island* « foreshadowed unsolvable adult tendencies towards self-destruction. » (19)

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