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The Wager:

A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder

By David Grann

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Discussion Questions

1.There are a lot of themes that apply to the modern day in this book: governmental policy and power, public opinion, greed, class struggles truth, and race relations. What do you think the author intends the reader to take away from the book?

2. The Wager contains several storylines based on the different status and perspectives of those involved: ambition, duty, hope, desperation, and adventure. Which individual's motivation was the most relatable to you?

3. After reading about both sides of the dispute between Captain David Cheap and gunner, John Buckley–whose side are you on? Why?

4. Were the crew members right to challenge/revolt against their captain? Why or why not?

5. This book deftly illustrates the spectrum of ways people can react in extreme and dire situations. What conditions and pressures must occur for a mutiny to take place in the 1740s compared to now in 2023?

6. How did colonialism and racism impact the events surrounding the Wager and the accounts emerging from them?

7. What was the most memorable part of this book for you? Why did it make an impression?

8. Similarly, which characters in this story are sympathetic? Which are not? What are your reasons?

9. Life onboard an 18th-century ship was perilous, as Grann amply shows. Threats included weather, enemy fire, scurvy and typhus, insurrection, starvation, and poor navigational tools to name a few. Had you been alive during this time, would you have taken the risk to make a living on the seas? Would you have had a choice in the matter?

10. Grann does a great job outlining the crew responsibilities and processes required for such a voyage–of the positions mentioned (captain, cook, surgeon, carpenter, gunner, midshipman, boatswain, navigator, quartermaster, etc?), which position sounds the most or least appealing to you? Why?

From: https://bookclubs.com/discussion-guides/the-wager-a-tale-of-shipwreck-mutiny-and-murder

Author Interview

HARVEY FREEDENBERG: Your previous books have dealt with a range of historical eras and subjects. What first sparked your curiosity about this story of a British naval expedition in the mid-18th century?

DAVID GRANN: I came across an 18th-century eyewitness account of the expedition by John Byron, who had been a 16-year-old midshipman on the Wager when the voyage began. Though the account was written in archaic English, and the lettering was faded and hard to decipher, it instantly sparked my curiosity. Here was one of the most extraordinary sagas I had ever heard of: a crew battling typhoons, tidal waves and scurvy; a shipwreck on a desolate island off the Chilean coast of Patagonia, where the castaways slowly descended into a real-life Lord of the Flies, with warring factions, murders, mutiny and cannibalism.

And that was only part of the saga. Byron and several other survivors, after completing extraordinary castaway voyages, made it back to England. (By then, Byron was 22.) They were summoned to face a court-martial for their alleged misdeeds and feared they would be hanged. In the hopes of saving their own lives, they all offered their own wildly conflicting versions of what had happened, and this unleashed another kind of war: a war over the truth. There were competing narratives, planted disinformation and allegations of "fake news." So even though the story took place in the 1740s, it struck me as a parable for our own turbulent times. And if all this wasn't enough to spark my curiosity, John Byron became the grandfather of the poet Lord Byron, whose work was influenced by what he called "my grand-dad's 'Narrative.'"

HF: Your descriptions of what it was like to be on a British man-of-war or stranded on a desolate island are so specific and vivid. What kind of research enabled you to write with this level of detail and intimacy?

DG: I was amazed that, even after more than two and half centuries had passed, there was still a trove of firsthand documents about the calamitous expedition. They included not only washed-out logbooks but also moldering correspondence, diaries and muster books. Many of these records had somehow survived tempests, cannon battles and shipwreck. I was also able to draw on court-martial transcripts, Admiralty reports, contemporaneous newspaper accounts, sea ballads and drawings made by members of the expedition. All of these sources of information, as well as the vivid sea narratives published by many of the survivors, hopefully help to bring this gripping history to life.

HF: You personally took a journey to the site of the shipwreck that stranded the crew of the Wager off the coast of South America. How did that experience enhance the telling of this story?

DG: After a couple of years of doing the kind of research most suited to my physical abilities—that is, combing through archives—I feared that I could never fully grasp what the castaways

had experienced unless I visited the place now known as Wager Island. At Chiloé, an island off the coast of Chile, I hired a captain with a small boat to guide me to Wager Island, which is about 350 miles to the south and situated in the Gulf of Sorrows—or, as some prefer to call it, the Gulf of Pain. After several days of winding through the sheltered channels of Patagonia, we entered the open Pacific Ocean, where I had at least a glimpse of the terrifying seas that had wrecked the Wager. We were caught in a storm, engulfed by mountainous waves, and our boat was tossed about so violently that I had to hunker down on the floor; otherwise, I might have been thrown and broken a limb. Thankfully, the captain was extremely capable and led us safely to Wager Island. We anchored for the night and at dawn climbed in an inflatable boat and went ashore.

The island remains a place of wild desolation—mountainous, rain-drenched, freezing, wind-swept and utterly barren. Unlike the castaways, who had only scraps of clothing, I was bundled up in a winter coat with gloves and a wool hat. Yet I was still bone cold. Near the area where the castaways had built their encampment, we found some stalks of celery, like the kind they had eaten. But there was virtually no other nourishment. At last, I grasped why one British officer had called the island a place where "the soul of man dies in him."

HF: Many of the scenes in The Wager have a novelistic immediacy. What are some of the techniques you used to bring those scenes to life while hewing to the facts as you discovered them?

DG: The most important technique, I think, was simply the narrative structure. The book shifts among the competing perspectives of three people onboard the Wager: the captain, David Cheap; the gunner, John Bulkeley; and the midshipman, John Byron. Because of all the underlying research materials, I tried my best to let the reader see and feel history unfolding through their eyes.

HF: Speaking of novels, you note that the story of the Wager influenced well-known writers such as Herman Melville and Patrick O'Brian. How did that play out?

DG: Occasionally, a great teller of sea tales would be drawn to the saga of the Wager. In his 1850 novel White-Jacket, Melville notes that the "remarkable and most interesting narratives" of the castaways' suffering make for fine reading on "a boisterous March night, with the casement rattling in your ear, and the chimney-stacks blowing down upon the pavement, bubbling with rain-drops." In 1959, O'Brian published The Unknown Shore, a novel inspired by the Wager disaster, which provided a template for his subsequent masterful series set during the Napoleonic Wars. And it wasn't only novelists who studied the reports of the expedition; so did philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, as well as the scientist Charles Darwin.

HF: In an author's note, you write, "I've tried to present all sides, leaving it to you to render the ultimate verdict—history's judgment." In the chapters that follow, you remain scrupulous about

allowing readers to decide for themselves what happened on this ill-fated mission. What made you decide to take that approach?

DG: I thought it was the most honest and transparent way of documenting the murky truth. Each survivor from the expedition was shading or eliding the facts, hoping to emerge as the hero of the story and avoid being hanged. Whereas one officer might only admit that he had "proceeded to extremities," another witness would disclose, in his own account, how that officer had actually shot a seaman right in the head. By considering each competing account, readers can hopefully discern how the historical record was being manipulated, and see the past in a fresh light.

HF: You describe great heroism and real depravity, along with a range of other character traits, exhibited by the crew of the Wager. What does this story tell us about how human beings succeed or fail in the face of extreme hardship?

DG: The story illuminates the contradictory impulses of people under duress. When the castaways worked together, they improved their chances of survival, building an outpost on the island with shelters and irrigation systems. But many of the men eventually succumbed to their own desperate self-interest and became pitted viciously against one another, which only fueled their destruction. The unpredictable nature of humans, including the good and the bad, was what surprised me most while researching and writing this book.

HF: Near the end of the book, you write, "Empires preserve their power with the stories that they tell, but just as critical are the stories they don't—the dark silences they impose, the pages they tear out." What does the story of the Wager say specifically about empires and colonialism?

DG: The history of the Wager underscores the ravaging nature of imperialism and colonialism. British authorities seemed to recognize that the scandalous Wager affair threatened to undercut the central claim used to justify the ruthless expansion of the empire: that its civilization was somehow superior. The Wager's officers and crew, these supposed apostles of the Enlightenment, had descended into a Hobbesian state of depravity, behaving more like brutes than gentlemen. Some of those in power thus tried to put forward their own versions of events and rewrite history.

I think the Wager affair also shows how some people's stories are erased from the history books. Unlike many of the survivors, one man named John Duck, who was a free Black seaman on the Wager, could never share his testimony. After enduring the shipwreck and a long castaway voyage, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. There is no record of his fate. His story is one of the many that can never be told.

HF: Congratulations on the release of Martin Scorsese's film adaptation of your book Killers of the Flower Moon this May. There are reports that Scorsese has also optioned The Wager for a movie. Can you discuss that?

DG: Scorsese and his team worked with such care in adapting Killers of the Flower Moon; they worked closely with members of the Osage Nation to faithfully render this important part of history. And so I'm honored that Scorsese has decided to team up again with Leonardo DiCaprio to develop the story of The Wager.

HF: What can you tell us about your next project?

DG: Well, I am looking now for a new book subject, so please send any ideas!

From: https://www.bookpage.com/interviews/david-grann-interview-wager

Author Biography

David Grann is a #1 New York Times bestselling author and an award-winning staff writer at The New Yorker magazine.

His newest book, The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder, will be published in April of 2023. With the twists and turns of a thriller, it tells the true saga of a company of British naval officers and crew that became stranded on a desolate island off the coast of Patagonia and descended into murderous anarchy. The book explores the nature of survival, duty, and leadership, and it examines how both people and nations tell—and manipulate—history.

Grann is also the author of Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI, which documented one of the most sinister crimes and racial injustices in American history. Described in the New York Times as a "riveting" work that will "sear your soul," it was a finalist for the National Book Award and a winner of the Edgar Allen Poe Award for best true crime book. It was a #1 New York Times bestseller and named one of the best books of the year by the Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, Time, and other publications. Amazon selected it as the single best book of the year.

The book has been adapted into a major motion picture directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Lily Gladstone, Robert De Niro, and Jesse Plemons, which will be released in the coming months. For middle schoolers, Grann has also released Killers of the Flower Moon: A Young Reader's Edition, which the School Library Journal called as "imperative and enthralling as its parent text."

Grann's first book, The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon, was #1 New York Times bestseller and has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. Shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize, it was chosen as one of the best books of 2009 by the New York Times, Washington Post, Entertainment Weekly, and other publications. The book, which the Washington Post called a "thrill ride from start to finish," was adapted into a critically acclaimed film directed by James Gray and starring Charlie Hunnam, Sienna Miller, Robert Pattinson, and Tom Holland.

One of Grann's New Yorker stories, The White Darkness, was later expanded into a book. Mixing text and photography, it documented the modern explorer Henry Worsley's quest to follow in the footsteps of his hero, Ernest Shackleton, and traverse Antarctica alone. The story is currently being adapted into a series for Apple starring Tom Hiddleston.

Many of Grann's other New Yorker stories were included in his collection The Devil and Sherlock Holmes, which was named by Men's Journal one of the best true crime books ever written. The stories focus on everything from the mysterious death of the world's greatest Sherlock Holmes expert to a Polish writer who might have left clues to a real murder in his postmodern novel. Another piece, "Trial by Fire," exposed how junk science led to the

execution of a likely innocent man in Texas. The story received a George Polk award and was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer in his opinion regarding the death penalty. Several of the stories in The Devil and Sherlock Holmes have also served as source material for feature films, including “The Old Man and the Gun” with Robert Redford and Sissy Spacek, and “Trial by Fire” with Jack O’Connell and Laura Dern.

Over the years, Grann’s stories have appeared in The Best American Crime Writing; The Best American Sports Writing; and The Best American Nonrequired Reading. His stories have also been published in the New York Times Magazine, Atlantic, Washington Post, Boston Globe, and Wall Street Journal.

In addition to writing, Grann is a frequent speaker who has given talks about everything from Killers of the Flower Moon and the importance of historical memory to the dangers of complicity in unjust systems, and from the art of writing and detection to the leadership methods of explorers, such as Ernest Shackleton.

Grann holds master’s degrees in international relations (from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy) and creative writing (from Boston University). After graduating from Connecticut College, in 1989, he received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and did research in Mexico, where he began his career in journalism. He currently lives in New York with his wife and two children.

From: https://www.davidgrann.com/about/

Reviews

In his new book, David Grann tells a classic sea yarn in a new way, overthrowing an old colonial story. Along the way, he charts a course for other tellers of modern adventure tales.

From a distance, The Wager looks like an old-fashioned thing. And in some hands the story might have heaved along like the ship itself: a relic of the 18th century, worn and worm-eaten, wearing only a new coat of paint. But Grann is one of America's most meticulous narrative nonfiction writers, whether describing a septuagenerian bank robber for the New Yorker, or a French serial impostor, or a man trudging alone across Antarctica.

In The Lost City of Z, he told the story of Capt Percy Fawcett, who in the 1920s disappeared into the Amazon searching for a hidden civilization. In Killers of the Flower Moon, he wrote of Oklahoma's Osage tribe, whose members were murdered for their oil money. Across a span of work writers tend to reveal patterns, purposefully or not, and Grann seems drawn to people too obsessed for their own good, grinding themselves away, so focused on each step they never look up to see the horizon. That pattern holds true in The Wager.

Here's what Grann gives away, right at the beginning of his tale. We meet the cast of sailors and their officers in the mid-18th century, during the absurd-sounding War of Jenkins' Ear, so named because it arose from the allegation a Spanish sailor cut off a British sailor's ear. Really it was a clash of empires, as the British and Spanish grabbed as much of the New World as they could, then snatched it from each other. In 1740, His Majesty's Ship The Wager set sail across the Atlantic. Its covert mission was to intercept a Spanish treasure ship off the Chilean coast.

The sailors endured hardships as they rounded Cape Horn, where the strongest currents in the world pounded the ship so hard even veterans reeled. That was also where scurvy set in, and typhus. At this early point in the story Grann begins to deviate from the romance of old sea-faring literature. He relates the physical and psychological toll of the voyage.

"As the scourge invaded the sailors' faces, some of them began to resemble the monsters of their imaginations. Their bloodshot eyes bulged. Their teeth fell out, as did their hair." Their breath stank. Their bones rattled, in a literal sense. "The cartilage that glued together their bodies seemed to be loosening."

Grann begins weaving into the story references to older forms of sea poetry and narrative, for reasons that don't become fully clear until later. As the sailors round the Horn, they see a great albatross and Grann relates the tale of another doomed voyage in the same spot. An officer on that ship shot an albatross, cursing the crew and inspiring Samuel Taylor Coleridge to write The Rime of the Ancient Mariner:

And I had done a hellish thing,

And it would work 'em woe:

For all averred, I had killed the bird

That made the breeze to blow.

Herman Melville, too, begins to appear in the story. Melville made his own hellish journey around Cape Horn and in 1850 described it in White-Jacket: “Impracticable Cape! You may approach it from this direction or that – in any way you please – from the east or from the west; with the wind astern, or abeam, or on the quarter; and still Cape Horn is Cape Horn … Heaven help the sailors, their wives and their little ones.”

The Wager aimed for Robinson Crusoe Island, in the Pacific, but shipwrecked instead on a remote island off Patagonia. And there – without giving anything away – the real struggle for survival begins. The two most central figures are Capt David Cheap and the ship’s gunner, John Bulkeley. One an aristocratic officer, the other an intuitive leader. They clash in a deadly contest to win the loyalty of the 145 survivors.

Eventually – again, Grann gives this away early – some of the survivors do return to England. They’re court-martialed, called to present their accounts of what happened aboard The Wager and on the island. Was it really a harrowing but simple tale of survival? Or something more insidious and menacing: mutiny?

That’s when the beauty of The Wager unfurls like a great sail. Grann’s book is not about romance but truth and he has prepared the reader. It’s a story about the stories we tell ourselves – that empires and nations tell themselves – and how they shape us. His literary references suddenly come into focus and lift the book to become something greater than an adventure tale.

Here’s what I mean: earlier in the 18th century another British officer, Alexander Selkirk, found himself marooned off Patagonia. His story inspired Daniel Defoe to write Robinson Crusoe. The men aboard the The Wager placed all their hope on Robinson Crusoe Island, because they knew the novel. Their voyage inspired Melville, who wove elements into his work. During Grann’s research, as he rode in a small boat to Wager Island, he listened to Melville’s Moby-Dick.

We make our stories, until they make us. So many of Grann’s predecessors wrote of colonial adventures in a way that glorified violence, exploitation and enslavement. But recognizing the power of story, Grann seeks to burnish nothing, instead presenting the truth. He fixes his spyglass on the ravages of empire, of racism, of bureaucratic indifference and raw greed. In doing so, he frees himself to acknowledge the valor, the curiosity and the sheer adventure of the age.

There’s an expectation, in reviewing a book like The Wager, to balance its strengths with some discussion of its flaws. But The Wager is one of the finest nonfiction books I’ve ever read. I can only offer the highest praise a writer can give: endless envy, as deep and salty as the sea.

From: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/29/the-wager-review-david-grann-shipwreck-epic