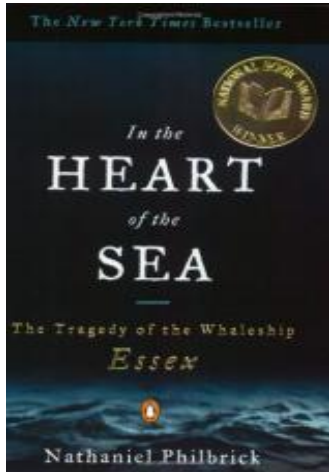

In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex

by Nathaniel Philbrick



About the Book

The ordeal of the whaleship Essex was an event as mythic in the nineteenth century as the sinking of the Titanic was in the twentieth. In 1819, the Essex left Nantucket for the South Pacific with twenty crew members aboard. In the middle of the South Pacific the ship was rammed and sunk by an angry sperm whale. The crew drifted for more than ninety days in three tiny whaleboats, succumbing to weather, hunger, disease, and ultimately turning to drastic measures in the fight for survival. Nathaniel Philbrick uses little-known documents—including a long-lost account written by the ship's cabin boy—and penetrating details about whaling and the Nantucket community to reveal the chilling events surrounding this epic maritime disaster. An intense and mesmerizing read, **In the Heart of the Sea** is a monumental work of history forever placing the Essex tragedy in the American historical canon.

Discussion Guide

1. In 1820, Nantucket was a Quaker town. What do Quakers believe? Was it hypocritical of a Quaker community to embrace such a violent occupation as whaling?
2. Given their proximity to the shipwreck, why did the Essex survivors avoid the South Pacific islands? What factors—historical, cultural, and otherwise—contributed to the decision to take a longer route home?
3. With what you've learned about the people of Nantucket and the whalers in particular, can you explain their fearlessness in the face of nature? And, conversely, their great fear of strange human beings? How is our world different today? Does this account somewhat for our contemporary fascination with tales of man versus nature?
4. The book discusses a few potential reasons why the whale attacked the Essex. What are these and which do you believe to be true? Why was the notion of a vengeful whale so terrifying to Owen Chase? How do you think

contemporary views of whaling differ from those in 1820? How would you explain this change in attitudes?

5. There are moments in the book where natural events are viewed by the author as metaphorical to the men's experiences. Choose one or two and discuss how the metaphors illuminate the story. Also, discuss their importance to the narrative.

6. What was the difference in the leadership styles of George Pollard and Owen Chase? Did these differences contribute to the demise of the Essex or the eventual loss of lives? If so, how? Who do you think made a better leader and why?

7. What was the established hierarchy on the Essex? How did this reflect the social stratification of Nantucket?

8. In 1820, what options did a captain have for navigating his ship? Which of these were available to the Essex? How did "dead reckoning" work? How have navigational tools evolved since then?

9. Did race have anything to do with who lived or died on the Essex? How?

10. **In the Heart of the Sea** has been optioned by a production company to be made into a feature film. Imagine you are the screenwriter chosen to adapt this book. What are the central dramatic situations you would choose and who would be your main character? Is there a clear protagonist? Is there a clear antagonist?

Author Bio

Nathaniel Philbrick grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and earned a BA in English from Brown University and an MA in America Literature from Duke University, where he was a James B. Duke Fellow. He was Brown University's first Intercollegiate All-American sailor in 1978, the same year he won the Sunfish North Americans in Barrington, Rhode Island. After working as an editor at *Sailing World* magazine, he wrote and edited several books about sailing, including **THE PASSIONATE SAILOR**, **SECOND WIND** and **YAAHTING: A Parody**.

In 2000, Philbrick published the *New York Times* bestseller **IN THE HEART OF THE SEA**, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction. The book is the basis of the Warner Bros. motion picture *Heart of the Sea*, directed by Ron Howard and starring Chris Hemsworth, Cillian Murphy, Brendan Gleeson, Benjamin Walker, Ben Wishaw and Tom Holland. The book also inspired a 2001 "Dateline" special on NBC as well as the 2010 two-hour PBS "American Experience" film *Into the Deep* by Ric Burns.

Philbrick's writing has appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Boston Globe*. He has appeared on the "Today" show, "The Morning Show," "Dateline," PBS's "American Experience," C-SPAN and NPR. He and his wife live on Nantucket.

Critical Praise

"Fascinating...One of our country's great adventure stories...when it comes to extremes, **In the Heart of the Sea** is right

there."

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