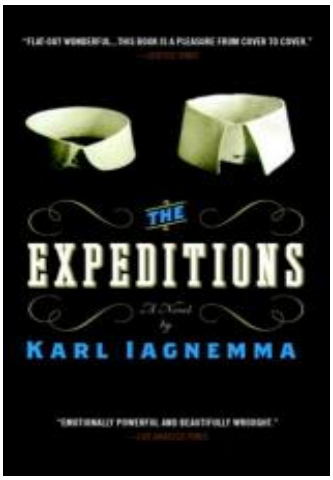
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The Expeditions

by Karl Iagnemma



About the Book

From Karl Iagnemma, recipient of the Paris Review Plimpton Prize, comes a fierce and gorgeous story of an estranged father and son?s unlikely journey though the wilderness of nineteenth-century America.

The year is 1844. Sixteen-year-old runaway Elisha Stone is in Detroit, a hardscrabble frontier town on the edge of the civilized world. A canny survivor with the instincts of a born naturalist, Elisha signs on to an expedition into Michigan?s vast, uncharted Upper Peninsula. The party is led by two charismatic adventurers: Silas Brush, a ruthless land-grabbing ex-soldier, and George Tiffin, a quixotic professor desperate to discover proof of his unorthodox theories about the origins of man.

On the eve of the expedition?s departure, Elisha pens a heartfelt letter to his mother in Newell, Massachusetts. But it is Elisha?s estranged father, the Reverend William Edward Stone, who opens the envelope. Grief-stricken by the recent death of his wife --- a death Elisha could not have known about --- Reverend Stone is jolted into action: he must find his son.

What follows is a powerful narrative about the complex love between fathers and sons and an evocative portrait of an era of faith, wonder, and violence. While Elisha?s journey draws him deeper into uncharted territory, Reverend Stone must navigate through a country in turmoil as he moves toward an inevitable reunion with a son who has become a stranger. A first novel of uncommon wisdom, **The Expeditions** is the confirmation of an extraordinary talent.

Discussion Guide

1. What outlook on humanity is captured in the epigraph from Walt Whitman?s poem ?With Antecedents?? How might the novel?s characters have responded to these lines?

2. Which historical details in the novel surprised you? What cultural aspects of Elisha?s world remain part of the contemporary American experience?

3. Discuss the varying quests presented by the novel?s expeditions. What essential motivations do the characters share in embarking on their journeys? Whose quest is filled most successfully?

4. In Chapter Two, Part One, Reverend Stone listens to a draft of a sermon read by Edson, the deacon, concerning geology and religion. What approaches to religion and science are captured in that scene? How do they compare to Professor Tiffin?s notions of Native American genesis, and to other images of religious fervor portrayed in the novel?

5. In Chapter One, Part Two, Elisha compares the expedition to his time collecting specimens with Alpheus Lenz. How comfortable is he with the role of apprentice? Does his relationship with his father have any bearing on the way he relates to other men in positions of authority?

6. What transformation takes place in Reverend Stone when Adele gives him messages from his wife, Ellen, at the end of Chapter Two, Part Two? How does her illness affect him? How does it affect Elisha?

7. How does the story of Adele and Jonah Crawley?s marriage shape Reverend Stone?s journey? Did his shifting perceptions of Jonah correspond to yours?

8. What does Susette teach Elisha about trust, attraction, and his capacity for saving someone he cares for? Why is he able to confront Ignace Morel while others hesitate to defend her?

9. Near the end of Chapter Four, Part Two, Reverend Stone drinks cider in a Detroit bar and contemplates whether is it possible to live without faith. Did that question have greater significance in the nineteenth century, when hardships such as Stone?s stolen money and severe illness posed an even greater threat than they would today?

10. Discuss the differences between Professor Tiffin and Mr. Brush. In what ways is Tiffin?s biracial marriage a barometer for compassion among his colleagues? How does Elisha?s perception of the world differ from Tiffin?s and Brush?s?

11. How might the arrival of Professor Tiffin and Elisha have unfolded if it had been described from the Chippewas? point of view? What fundamental aspects of Chippewa culture were incomprehensible to those on the expedition?

12. In Chapter Two, Part Three, Reverend Stone recalls his distant, reticent father, who told him, ?You know who you are when you know what you fear.? What fears are at the root of his anguish, and Elisha?s?

13. How would you have fared on a journey like Reverend Stone?s, decades before the communication age, traveling uncharted terrain? Has twenty-first-century ingenuity eased the timeless human struggles of mourning and family strife?

14. Elisha attempts to make sense of his decision to run away from his family, while Reverend Stone struggles with anguished guilt. What was the essence of their estrangement? Would they have ever reached a point of reconciliation if Ellen had survived? Why was she able to forgive her son more easily?

15. What themes of longing and identity run through both this novel and the stories collected in *On the Nature of Human Romantic Interaction*?

Author Bio

Karl Iagnemma is a principal research scientist in the Mechanical Engineering department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He holds a B.S. from the University of Michigan, and an M.S. and Ph.D. from MIT, where he was a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow. He has performed postdoctoral research at MIT, and has been a visiting researcher at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the National Technical University of Athens (Greece). He currently serves on the editorial board of the IEEE Transactions on Robotics and the Journal of Field Robotics.

Dr. Iagnemma was chosen as one of 16 people who redefined science in 2003 by SEED magazine. He was a 2005 nominee for a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

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