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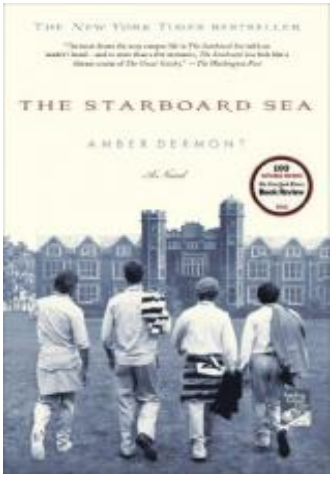
The Starboard Sea

by Amber Dermont



About the Book

Amber Dermont's powerful first novel about life and death, friendship and love, as one young man must navigate the depths of his emotions.

Jason Proper grew up in the elite world of Manhattan penthouses, Maine summer estates, old-boy prep schools, and exclusive sailing clubs. A smart, athletic teenager, Jason maintains a healthy, humorous disdain for the trappings of affluence, preferring to spend afternoons sailing with Cal, his best friend and boarding-school roommate. When Cal commits suicide during their junior year at Kensington Prep, Jason is devastated by the loss and transfers to Bellingham Academy. There, he meets Aidan, a fellow student with her own troubled past. They embark on a tender, awkward, deeply emotional relationship.

When a major hurricane hits the New England coast, the destruction it causes brings with it another upheaval in Jason?s life, forcing him to make sense of a terrible secret that has been buried by the boys he considers his friends.

Set against the backdrop of the 1987 stock market collapse, **The Starboard Sea** is an examination of the abuses of class privilege, the mutability of sexual desire, the thrill and risk of competitive sailing, and the adult cost of teenage recklessness. It is a powerful and provocative novel about a young man finding his moral center, trying to forgive himself, and accepting the gift of love.

Discussion Guide

1. From **The Catcher in the Rye** to **A Separate Peace**, **Prep** and **Skippy Dies**, writers have often been drawn to the world of prep schools. What do you think attracts writers to the prep school setting? What attracts you as a reader? How is Bellingham Academy different from any other prep school you may have read about? Why do you think the author chose to set the novel in a school that caters to troubled teenagers?

2. Sailing plays a major role in the novel. Whether you are familiar or unfamiliar with the sailing terms how does Jason?s sailing partnership with Cal help you to understand the closeness of their relationship? How do the language and nomenclature of sailing and celestial navigation serve as metaphors throughout the book?

3. The novel begins with a quotation from Captain John Paul Jones, ?I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast for I intend to go in harm?s way,? and another quotation from a poem by Dan Chiasson, ?You know/what you did. You know you know/what you did./No one is hearing your ornate confession.? After reading the novel, how do these two epigraphs inform your understanding of the character of Jason Kilian Prosper? Why does Jason put himself in harm?s way? Is the novel Jason?s attempt at a confession and if so, how do you feel about his confession?

4. Aidan, Cal, and Jason all have questions about their own sense of attraction, their sexuality and desire. What do you think the author is attempting to say about the nature of human sexuality, especially among teenagers?

5. The characters in **The Starboard Sea** come from tremendous privilege and often squander or take for granted their privilege. Do you know people who are similar to the characters in this novel? Was it challenging for you to empathize with their troubles or did you recognize their teenaged vulnerability?

6. The novel is set in 1987 and there are important references to the Black Monday Stock Market Crash, Baby Jessica, and the Robert Chambers Preppie Murder Trial. Why do you think the author chose to set her novel in the past? Those of you who are familiar with this time period, how well did the author capture the late 1980s? Whether you are familiar or unfamiliar with this time period, how might this setting mirror the current cultural and economic landscape?

7. Throughout the novel, the author references several literary works, **O Pioneers!, The Awakening, The Scarlet Letter, Moby Dick, The Sun Also Rises, The Motion of Light In Water**. Many of these books are often read in high school. Why do you think the author references these works in particular? How do these books resonate within the lives of the characters?

8. What did you think of the adults in the novel? Are any of them suitable role models for their children or their students?

9. Both Chester Baldwin and Yazid Yazid face different forms of prejudice. How does the novel handle issues of race, racism, and bullying?

10. Aidan, Nadia, and Diana are all anagrams. Why do you think the author gave these characters these names? How might these characters be connected through these anagrams?

11. The novel takes place over the course of a single school year and not all of the questions raised about the characters? lives are resolved. How does the novel?s ending make you feel?

Author Bio

Amber Dermont received her MFA in fiction from the University of Iowa Writers? Workshop. Her short stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies, including Dave Eggers?s BEST AMERICAN NONREQUIRED READING 2005, Francis Ford Coppola's ZOETROPE: ALL-STORY, and Jane Smiley?s BEST NEW AMERICAN VOICES 2006. A graduate of Vassar College, she received her Ph.D. in creative writing and literature from the University of Houston. She currently serves as an associate professor of English and creative writing at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia and is also the author of the story collection DAMAGE CONTROL.

Critical Praise

"Vividly written. Dermont shows real spark in her sensual descriptions of sailing and her realistic depiction of the malevolent dynamics among sophisticated teens."

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Publication Date: January 29, 2013
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin
ISBN-10: 1250023432
ISBN-13: 9781250023438