In The Heart of the Sea by Nathaniel Philbrick

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.


About the Author: Nathaniel Philbrick is a leading authority on the history of Nantucket. He is director of the Egan Institute of Maritime Studies and a research fellow at the Nantucket Historical Association. His other books include Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602-1890 and Abram's Eyes: The Native American Legacy on Nantucket Island. He is a champion sailboat racer and lives in Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Questions for Discussion

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 whalemen 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?

(Questions from Penquin.com)