

In the Heart of the Sea

By Nathaniel Philbrick

Viking / Penguin Group (USA)

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Massachusetts
Honor Book
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SUMMARY:

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In the Heart of the Sea brings to new life the incredible story of the wreck of the whaleship Essex--an event as mythic in its own century as the Titanic disaster in ours, and the inspiration for the climax of *Moby-Dick*. In a harrowing page-turner, Nathaniel Philbrick restores this epic story to its rightful place in American history.

In 1820, the 240-ton Essex set sail from Nantucket on a routine voyage for whales. Fifteen months later, in the farthest reaches of the South Pacific, it was repeatedly rammed and sunk by an eighty-ton bull sperm whale. Its twenty-man crew, fearing cannibals on the islands to the west, made for the 3,000-mile-distant coast of South America in three tiny boats. During ninety days at sea under horrendous conditions, the survivors clung to life as one by one they succumbed to hunger, thirst, disease, and fear.

In the Heart of the Sea tells perhaps the greatest sea story ever. Philbrick interweaves his account of this extraordinary ordeal of ordinary men with a wealth of whale lore and with a brilliantly detailed portrait of the lost, unique community of Nantucket whalers. Impeccably researched and beautifully told, the book delivers the ultimate portrait of man against nature, drawing on a remarkable range of archival and modern sources, including a long-lost account by the ship's cabin boy. At once a literary companion and a page-turner that speaks to the same issues of class, race, and man's relationship to nature that permeate the works of Melville, *In the Heart of the Sea* will endure as a vital work of American history.

2000 National Book Award Winner in Nonfiction

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

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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?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

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Nathaniel Philbrick, is a leading authority on the history of Nantucket Island. His books include *Away off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602-1890* (which Russell

Baker called "indispensable") and *Abram's Eyes: The Native American Legend of Nantucket Island* ("a classic of historical truth-telling," according to Stuart Frank, director of the Kendall Whaling Museum). He has written an introduction to a new edition of Joseph Hart's *Miriam Coffin, or The Whale Fisherman*, a Nantucket novel (first published in 1834) that Melville relied upon for information about the island when writing *Moby Dick*.

Philbrick, a champion sailboat racer, has also written extensively about sailing, including *The Passionate Sailor* (1987) and the forthcoming *Second Wind: A Sunfish Sailor's Odyssey*. He was editor in chief of the classic *Yaahting: A Parody* (1984).

In his role as director of the Egan Institute of Maritime Studies, Philbrick, who is also a research fellow at the Nantucket Historical Association, gives frequent talks about Nantucket and sailing. He has appeared on *NBC Today Weekend*, A&E's *Biography* series, and National Public Radio and has served as a consultant for the movie *Moby Dick*, shown this March on the USA Network. He received a bachelor of Arts from Brown University and a Master of Arts in American Literature from Duke. He lives on Nantucket with his wife and two children.

HELPFUL LINKS:

[Interview](#) with Nathaniel Philbrick

[Inspiration](#) for *In the Heart of the Sea*



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