

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

In the Heart of the Sea by Nathaniel Philbrick

- The story of the *Essex* was very well known during the 19th century. (p. xiii) Why do you think it is less well known now? Does it have something to do with the fact that the Nantucketers wanted it to be forgotten? How has it been supplanted in the 20th century imagination?
- What makes *In the Heart of the Sea* different from a straight historical narrative? What else does Philbrick bring to the story? What do you think of his perspective on the story as a tragedy rather than an adventure?
- Why did the whale attack the *Essex*? The author proposes several possibilities: use of the hammer repairing the whaleboat attracted it (p. 87); the whale acted in self-defense or out of a sense of vengeance (p. 89); or destiny or some higher power used the whale as an instrument (p. 89). Which of these explanations do you think is true? Is there another reason which Philbrick does not raise?
- Captain Pollard and Owen Chase had very different leadership styles. Under the circumstances, who was a better leader? Why?
- Was Pollard a bad captain, or just unlucky? What did Pollard himself think?
- Herman Melville was enthralled by the story of the *Essex*. He interviewed Pollard (p. 220) and made extensive notes in his copy of Chase's account. (p. 204) *Moby Dick* was a critical and financial failure when it came out in 1851, however (p. 219). Why do you think that was?
- Philbrick had access to Chase's narrative, a second-hand retelling of Pollard's story (p. 189) as well as Nickerson's account which came to light in 1960 and was published only in 1984. How were these accounts different? What did each writer leave out and why? Which is the most accurate?
- Why did the *Essex* survivors avoid islands in the South Pacific like the Marquesas and the Society Islands? (p. 95-96)
- How did the *Essex* navigate? How did the whaleboats navigate? (p. 85)
- What was the social hierarchy on the *Essex*? How did it relate to the social hierarchy of Nantucket? The United States as a whole? Did race have anything to do with who lived and who died in the whaleboats? How? Is bad nutrition sufficient to explain the fact that the black crew members died first? (p. 146, 166) Did the white crew members seem to discriminate against the black crew members before the wreck? After?
- Discuss the clannishness of the Nantucketers. How was this demonstrated in shipboard life?
- Is there a certain irony in the fact that Quakers were involved in such a bloody business?
- Whaleships were not just sailing ships – they were factories. Discuss the particulars of killing and processing whales for oil. (p. 55) How did the whalers use this experience after they were shipwrecked? (p. 165)
- What do you think you would do in an extreme survival situation like the one faced by the whalers?
- Philbrick goes into a lot of detail about the effects of dehydration (p. 126), starvation (p. 158), and cannibalism (p. 170). Do you think this enriches the story?
- According to Philbrick, the custom of drawing lots was an accepted tradition during survival situations at sea. (p. 174) Why was it so particularly difficult on Pollard's whaleboat?
- After the rescue, why was Pollard able to accept what happened? (p. 202-203) What about Chase?



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February 2007

- So many of the Essex survivors went back to sea. Do you find this surprising? What other options were open to them?
- Human impact on the environment is one of the themes of this book. Talk about some of the specific instances that Philbrick mentions: Henderson Island (p. 144), the Atlantic and Pacific whale fisheries (p. 223), decrease in whale size as a result of hunting (p. 86), other whale attacks. (p. 224)