

THE PERFECT STORM

About this book:

With its nail-biting suspense and nonstop action, *The Perfect Storm* has the makings of a superb thriller. But this story of a once-in-a-century meteorological occurrence, the lives it changed, and the lives it claimed is achingly real. Sebastian Junger's account of the fate of a group of sword fishermen battling a storm off the Newfoundland coast opens a door into the world of commercial fishing, historically among the most dangerous of occupations. Junger reveals how a finite supply of fish forces boats farther out to sea, and in increasingly hazardous conditions. He explains the unique set of circumstances that led to a storm of unpredictable strength and how even the most advanced technology cannot warn or prepare us for the whims of nature. And he shows us the sea in all its power: the gray horizon at dawn; the maelstrom of wind, water, and rain that make up a nor'easter; and the precise structure of a tidal wave the size of an office building as it curves and falls, playing havoc with any ship that dares to cross its path.

For some the life of a fisherman is a necessity; for others a necessary challenge. Junger profiles with compassion and empathy the people whose lives intersected with that incredible storm: those lucky enough to dodge it, those who fought it and won, and those who disappeared. The crew of the *Andrea Gail* left no message in a bottle, no clues about their final thoughts and actions. But Junger's careful piecing together of similar experiences, and his vivid depictions of a storm the likes of which had never before been witnessed, place us in the moment and in the hearts and minds of these doomed men. We know the fate of the *Andrea Gail's* crew before we turn the first page, and yet we find ourselves hoping they'll survive. Such is the power of Junger's account--and we find that fact is often more incredible, more thrilling, and more affecting than fiction.

EXCERPT FROM THE PERFECT STORM

GLOUCESTER, MASS., 1991

The Antiquary, Chapter 11

A soft fall rain slips down through the trees and the smell of ocean is so strong that it can almost be licked off the air. Trucks rumble along Rogers Street and men in t-shirts stained with fish blood shout to each other from the decks of boats. Beneath them the ocean swells up against the black pilings and sucks back down to the barnacles. Beer cans and old pieces of Styrofoam rise and fall and pools of spilled diesel fuel undulate like huge iridescent jellyfish. The boats rock and creak against their ropes and seagulls complain and hunker down and complain some more. Across Rogers Street and around the back of the Crow's Nest, through the door and up the cement stairs, down the carpeted hallway and into one of the doors on the left, stretched out on a double bed in room number twenty-seven with a sheet pulled over him, Bobby Shatford lies asleep.

He's got one black eye. There are beer cans and food wrappers scattered around the room and a duffel bag on the floor with t-shirts and flannel shirts and blue jeans spilling out. Lying asleep next to him is his girlfriend, Christina Cotter. She's an attractive woman in her early forties with rust-blond hair and a strong, narrow face. There's a TV in the room and a low chest of drawers with a mirror on top of it and a chair of the sort they have in high-school cafeterias. The plastic cushion cover has cigarette burns in it. The window looks out on Rogers Street where trucks ease themselves into fish-plant bays.

It's still raining. Across the street is Rose Marine, where fishing boats fuel up, and across a small leg of water is the State Fish Pier, where they unload their catch. The State Pier is essentially a huge parking lot on pilings, and on the far side, across another leg of water, is a boatyard and a small park where mothers bring their children to play. Looking over the park on the corner of Haskell Street is an elegant brick house built by the famous Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch. It originally stood on the corner of Washington and Summer Streets in Boston, but in 1850 it was jacked up, rolled onto a barge, and transported to Gloucester. That is where Bobby's mother, Ethel, raised four sons and two daughters. For the past fourteen years she has been a daytime bartender at the Crow's Nest. Ethel's grandfather was a fisherman and both her daughters dated fishermen and all four of the sons fished at one point or another. Most of them still do.

The Crow's Nest windows face east into the coming day over a street used at dawn by reefer trucks. Guests don't tend to sleep late. Around eight o'clock in the morning, Bobby Shatford struggles awake. He has flax-brown hair, hollow cheeks, and a sinewy build that has seen a lot of work. In a few hours he's due on a sword fishing boat named the Andrea Gail, which is headed on a one-month trip to the Grand Banks. He could return with \$5,000 in his pocket or he could not return at all. Outside, the rain drips on. Chris groans, opens her eyes, and squints up at him. One of Bobby's eyes is the color of an overripe plum.

Did I do that?

Yeah.

Jesus.

She considers his eye for a moment. How did I reach that high?

They smoke a cigarette and then pull on their clothes and grope their way downstairs. A metal fire door opens onto a back alley; they push it open and walk around to the Rogers Street entrance. The Crow's Nest is a block-long faux-Tudor construction across from the J. B. Wright Fish Company and Rose Marine. The plate-glass window in front is said to be the biggest barroom window in town. That's quite a distinction in a town where barroom windows are made small so that patrons don't get thrown through them. There's an old pool table, a pay phone by the door, and a horseshoe-shaped bar. Budweiser costs a dollar seventy-five, but as often as not there's a fisherman just in from a trip who's buying for the whole house. Money flows through a fisherman like water through a fishing net; one regular ran up a \$4,000 tab in a week.

Bobby and Chris walk in and look around. Ethel's behind the bar, and a couple of the town's earlier risers are already gripping bottles of beer. A shipmate of Bobby's named Bugsy Moran is seated at the bar, a little dazed. Rough night, huh? Bobby says. Bugsy grunts. His real name is Michael. He's got wild long hair and a crazy reputation and everyone in town loves him. Chris invites him to join them for breakfast and Bugsy slides off his stool and follows them out the door into the light rain. They climb into Chris's twenty-year-old Volvo and drive down to the White Hen Pantry and shuffle in, eyes bloodshot, heads throbbing. They buy sandwiches and cheap sunglasses and then they make their way out into the unrelenting greyness of the day. Chris drives them back to the Nest and they pick up thirty-year-old Dale Murphy, another crew member from the Andrea Gail, and head out of town.

Dale's nickname is Murph, he's a big grizzly bear of a guy from Bradenton Beach, Florida. He has shaggy black hair, a thin beard, and angled, almost Mongolian eyes; he gets a lot of looks around town. He has a three-year-old baby, also named Dale, whom he openly adores.

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STUDY ESSAY QUESTIONS

Two of the eight questions will be chosen by the teacher for students to write a formal essay (two pages typed) upon return in September. It is good practice to review questions before reading and taking notes as you read, as well as marking areas of importance in Your novel for use later on.

1. Throughout the book, Junger writes of complicated and risky rescue missions in which the danger to the victims is weighed against the danger to those charged with rescuing them. How do you make a decision to go ahead with an "increased risk" mission that also imperils the lives of the rescuers? What are the issues surrounding rescuing those who knowingly venture out into risky situations?
2. What did Junger's profile of the Gloucester fishing community teach you about the commercial aspects of this field? Do you think there should be more or fewer restrictions on commercial fishing? Is it up to the government to regulate these methods?
3. What qualities does it take to be a sword fisherman? How would you characterize such people as Bobby Shatford, Billy Tyne, and other members of the Andrea Gail crew? How many of these men embarked on this voyage by choice, as opposed to obligation? Does this distinction affect the way you feel about their fate?
4. Instead of "fictionalizing" the parts of his book about which he had no first-hand information or knowledge, Junger made use of accounts from people who had been in similar situations to those he was writing about. How effective is this "second source" material? Does it make the last moments of the Andrea Gail's crew--and others who perished in the storm--more or less real to you? Would you have preferred that Junger create imagined scenarios to fill in the gaps in his story?
5. Did knowing the fate of the Andrea Gail affect your reaction to *The Perfect Storm*? Had the book been a novel, how do you think the author would have approached the story differently? Did any parts of the book seem like fiction to you?
6. Originally, Sebastian Junger wrote the account of the Andrea Gail as a chapter to be included in a book about hazardous occupations. How differently do you think people who risk their lives "on the job" approach life from those in relatively safe occupations? How does facing death change the way you face life? If you have ever been in a life-threatening situation, how did it change you, either temporarily or permanently?
7. Have the technological advances of the last century made us any more powerful against the forces of nature? Do you think we have developed a false sense of security when faced with the possibility of storms or other natural disasters such as earthquakes, avalanches, or forest fires? Do you think the crew of the Andrea Gail and other boats caught in the storm relied too much on their navigational equipment and not enough on common sense?
8. In recent years, books about real-life adventure have become bestsellers and "extreme" sports are the hottest recreational trend. How do you explain our increasing fascination with dangers of all sorts? What's happening culturally, socially, and economically in our country--and in the world--to compel us to take enormous, often death-defying risks?

Questions for Discussion: Briefly summarize (formal paragraphs) questions. [History](#), [New England](#), and [fishing boats](#) are linked for review.

Even Sebastian Junger was surprised at the success of his book, a project which might seem unpromising if described in a publisher's proposal: a nonfiction work, part narrative, part [history](#), part technical description, which dramatizes the effects of a major storm which hit [New England](#) a decade earlier. For all the mixture of genres and approaches, Junger grounds his discussion in a number of traditions, including the sea disaster story and a narrative which celebrates a way of life, but also relies on carefully written set pieces about wave actions, weather phenomena, and [fishing boats](#). It is the artful combination of these elements that brought success to the project.

How does Junger locate his discussion in the tradition of the sea disaster story?

What parts of *The Perfect Storm* cannot possibly be "completely factual?"

Why do you think that people continue to become fishermen in towns like Gloucester? Discuss the disadvantages of the profession; such as its dangers and low pay scale, as well as the advantages and irrational reasons people have to choose the profession.

What could have Billy Tyne done to save his crew? Did he have viable alternatives?

A crisis such as a Force 11 storm brings out the best and worst in people. Which characters in *The Perfect Storm* showed courage and nobility under pressure? Which characters did not live up to their human potential?

Key Questions: Short Answer

1. How does Junger locate his discussion in the tradition of the sea disaster story? What reminders to the reader show the long history of disasters at sea?
2. Much popular fiction is escapist fare which avoids reminding readers of unpleasant realities. Junger goes in exactly the opposite direction, focusing on working class labor and tragic events. How does he create reader interest in an industry lacking almost all the qualities that make a profession dramatic or romantic?
3. How does Junger create sympathy for the gritty, sometimes pub-crawling fishermen whose lives he traces?
4. The book builds slowly, like the storm itself, before it gathers rhetorical force and sweeps its many subjects together. Trace this development by listing the general topics each chapter covers. Where is the climax of the book? Is the climax identical with the climax of the storm?
5. One writing problem Junger faced was an unhappy ending known from the start of the book. How does he handle this problem? Does he provide any ameliorating elements which might lessen the effect of this unhappy ending?
6. Junger's prose is highly informed and sometimes a model of technical description. Choose the passage you think best describes a difficult technical question then decide what techniques the author uses to convey complex information in interesting and comprehensible ways. Give examples to make these techniques clear.
7. Another way *The Perfect Storm* goes against the grain of current practice is in its depiction of real heroism, as opposed to the super hero antics of Hollywood action stars. What does heroism consist of in this book? What personal and psychological qualities are involved?