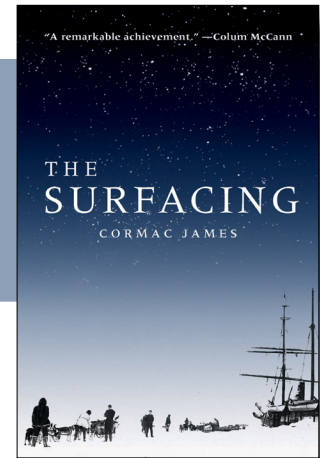




The Surfacing

A novel by Cormac James

Trade Paperback Original ISBN: 978-1-934137-92-5
eBook ISBN: 978-1-934137-93-2



“An extraordinary novel, combining a powerful narrative with a considered and poetic use of language. . . . Reading the book, I recalled the dramatic natural landscape of Jack London and the wild untamed seas of William Golding.” —**John Boyne**, author of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *A History of Loneliness*

“The great topic of Cormac James’ *The Surfacing* is the reach of human possibility. The prose is calm, vivid, hypnotic, and acutely piercing. . . . This is a book about fatherhood and all its attendant terrors. . . . A remarkable achievement, a stylish novel, full of music and quiet control.” —**Colum McCann**, author of *Let the Great World Spin* and *Transatlantic*

“I read *The Surfacing* in Gjoa Haven, where Franklin Expedition spirits seem to cry out on the winter winds, and Cormac James’ writing spoke through the midday twilight with the chill of a voice from the distant past. Like the High Arctic world that he masterfully conjures, his storytelling is beautifully stark and captivating.” —**Paul Watson**, Arctic correspondent for the *Toronto Star* and author of *Where War Lives*

INTRODUCTION

The “mute, raging world” of the Arctic is both setting and symbol in *The Surfacing*, which explores themes of masculinity and fatherhood, heroism and bravery, purpose and fate. The novel is also concerned with how we attempt to control both ourselves and other people’s perceptions of ourselves. It is a harrowing tale of psychological fortitude against impossible odds—set only in the ice and snow, with Arctic gales, midnight suns, and the utterly foreign presence of the men and their trapped ship.

Through his journals, we come to understand the flawed character of Lieutenant Richard Morgan, second in command of the *Impetus*, which is part of the search for the missing Franklin expedition. Morgan is a troubled character with a “spoiled mind” who “courts shame.” We have the sense that Morgan has committed wrongs in his past, that the Arctic is both trap and escape for him. Being confined on the *Impetus* with Kitty, and then his son, induces both frustration and pleasure and, finally, in the face of terrible ordeals, a sense of purpose and the promise of transformation.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. What and who is “surfacing” in the novel?
2. Who is lost in *The Surfacing*? What gets found? Is the search expedition a total failure? Does Morgan care about finding Sir John Franklin?
3. As the ship is trapped in the ice, and as pressure builds on its hull, so too are the characters trapped and under pressure. What are they trapped by? At the same time, there is a sense of escape for the characters. Do we ever get to know exactly what they have escaped from? Are they still trying to escape? From what? To Kitty, the officers, and the men, does life back “at home” appear as a better alternative to life on the ship?
4. It is often hard to discern characters’ motivations for their actions at the time they occur. For example, when Morgan cuts the anchor rope, or when Kitty stows away. Sometimes motivations emerge later on in the novel. And sometimes similar actions come from different motivations. Are characters’—and people’s—motivations ever clear to others or themselves?
5. The features of the natural world such as The Pack (which is capitalized as if it is a living thing) and the ocean’s currents are both symbols and setting. Is the novel an allegory? How does the language evoke the natural setting? How does the author use it to link the natural and internal worlds?



6. On the journey to Beechey Island, “a lone word showed through: Why?” Is there a point to the Beechey journey? Is there a point to the entire expedition or is it a Sisyphean task? Is there a moral intention? Does Morgan bring more a sense of purpose or a sense of futility with him to the Arctic? Does he expect his time in the Arctic to change the way he feels about himself and the world? In what other ways is the idea of purpose explored throughout the novel?
7. Is heroism a possibility in the novel? What might define it? Are heroism and bravery the same? Does bravery mean foolishness, as Morgan thinks Austin might be suggesting? And what about leadership? What are the qualities of a good leader in the novel? How do Myer and Morgan compare as leaders?
8. Thinking about Myer, Morgan reflects, “his captain could not think straight for hope and sympathy and ambition.” These qualities are normally seen as positive. Are they condemned in the novel?
9. What role does DeHaven play in the novel? Is he the voice of reason or the voice of despair? How does he affect Morgan? Why do you think he is in the Arctic?
10. Morgan watches Kitty “flaunting what it was she’d done to herself.” Has she done it to herself? Does the novel excuse Morgan from responsibility? How do Morgan’s feelings toward Kitty change throughout the novel? Is Kitty an aggressive or threatening element in the book? Does her behavior correspond to our expectations of a single Victorian woman? Why does she follow Morgan?
11. The pronoun “she” is mostly used to refer to the ship or Kitty, and it is sometimes difficult to tell which at first. Why did the author make this choice? What role does the feminine play in the novel?
12. Fatherhood is “a call to his better self” for Morgan, yet the “painful pleasure” of his son’s recognition of him is a sign that he had been “lured and trapped.” Does the novel make a point about fatherhood, or just about Morgan’s fatherhood? Does fatherhood fill the “hole” that Morgan talks about? Is it a liberation or a trap? What about motherhood for Kitty? After all, she suggests that their son might be a chance for both of them to “redeem” themselves.
13. What does Morgan feel to be the greatest threat: birth, fatherhood, responsibility, or physical danger?
14. Why is posterity so important to Morgan? Who is the audience for his journal? Who does he think will judge him? How do you judge him?
15. In a review of *The Surfacing* for the *Guardian*, Sarah Moss says, “James uses the sublime appeal of the Arctic and the extreme situation of his characters as the stage for an essentially domestic psychological novel.” Do you agree? Would you also (or alternatively) describe it as a historical or adventure novel? Does pigeonholing its genre as historical fiction, psychological study, domestic drama, or as an adventure tale, affect how you read or understand it? Is the historical context and setting essential or incidental?

OUR THANKS

This reading group guide was adapted from questions and text provided by the Text Publishing Company:
www.textpublishing.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cormac James was born in Cork, Ireland and lives in Montpellier, France, with his wife and son. *The Surfacing* is his North American debut novel. Visit his website at www.cormacjames.com.

GO BEHIND THE SCENES

Find interviews with the author and much more at www.blpress.org.