

## Book Club Discussion Guide



*The Wager: a Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder by David Grann, Page 1 (March 2024)*

# The Wager: a Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder

By David Grann

## About the author:

David Grann is a #1 New York Times bestselling author and an award-winning staff writer at The New Yorker magazine.

His newest book, *The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder*, will be published in April of 2023. With the twists and turns of a thriller, it tells the true saga of a company of British naval officers and crew that became stranded on a desolate island off the coast of Patagonia and descended into murderous anarchy. The book explores the nature of survival, duty, and leadership, and it examines how both people and nations tell—and manipulate—history.

Grann is also the author of *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, which documented one of the most sinister crimes and racial injustices in American history. Described in the New York Times as a “riveting” work that will “sear your soul,” it was a finalist for the National Book Award and a winner of the Edgar Allen Poe Award for best true crime book. It was a #1 New York Times bestseller and named one of the best books of the year by the Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times,

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Entertainment Weekly, Time, and other publications. Amazon selected it as the single best book of the year.

The book has been adapted into a major motion picture directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Lily Gladstone, Robert De Niro, and Jesse Plemons, which will be released in the coming months. For middle schoolers, Grann has also released *Killers of the Flower Moon: A Young Reader's Edition*, which the *School Library Journal* called as “imperative and enthralling as its parent text.”

Grann's first book, *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*, was #1 New York Times bestseller and has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. Shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize, it was chosen as one of the best books of 2009 by the New York Times, Washington Post, Entertainment Weekly, and other publications. The book, which the Washington Post called a “thrill ride from start to finish,” was adapted into a critically acclaimed film directed by James Gray and starring Charlie Hunnam, Sienna Miller, Robert Pattinson, and Tom Holland.

One of Grann's New Yorker stories, *The White Darkness*, was later expanded into a book. Mixing text and photography, it documented the modern explorer Henry Worsley's quest to follow in the footsteps of his hero, Ernest Shackleton, and traverse Antarctica alone. The story is currently being adapted into a series for Apple starring Tom Hiddleston.

Many of Grann's other New Yorker stories were included in his collection *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes*, which was named by *Men's Journal* one of the best true crime books ever written. The stories focus on everything from the mysterious death of the world's greatest Sherlock Holmes expert to a Polish writer who might have left clues to a real murder in his postmodern novel. Another piece, “Trial by Fire,” exposed how junk science led to the execution of a likely innocent man in Texas. The story received a George Polk award and was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer in his opinion regarding the death penalty. Several of the stories in *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes* have also served as source material for feature films, including “The Old Man and the Gun” with Robert Redford and Sissy Spacek, and “Trial by Fire” with Jack O'Connell and Laura Dern.

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Over the years, Grann's stories have appeared in *The Best American Crime Writing*; *The Best American Sports Writing*; and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. His stories have also been published in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

In addition to writing, Grann is a frequent speaker who has given talks about everything from *Killers of the Flower Moon* and the importance of historical memory to the dangers of complicity in unjust systems, and from the art of writing and detection to the leadership methods of explorers, such as Ernest Shackleton.

Grann holds master's degrees in international relations (from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy) and creative writing (from Boston University). After graduating from Connecticut College, in 1989, he received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and did research in Mexico, where he began his career in journalism. He currently lives in New York with his wife and two children.

Source: <https://www.davidgrann.com/about/>

### About this book:

On January 28, 1742, a ramshackle vessel of patched-together wood and cloth washed up on the coast of Brazil. Inside were thirty emaciated men, barely alive, and they had an extraordinary tale to tell. They were survivors of His Majesty's Ship the *Wager*, a British vessel that had left England in 1740 on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain. While the *Wager* had been chasing a Spanish treasure-filled galleon known as "the prize of all the oceans," it had wrecked on a desolate island off the coast of Patagonia. The men, after being marooned for months and facing starvation, built the flimsy craft and sailed for more than a hundred days, traversing 2500 miles of storm-wracked seas. They were greeted as heroes.

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But then...six months later, another, even more decrepit craft landed on the coast of Chile. This boat contained just three castaways, and they told a very different story. The thirty sailors who landed in Brazil were not heroes – they were mutineers. The first group responded with countercharges of their own, of a tyrannical and murderous senior officer and his henchmen. It became clear that while stranded on the island the crew had fallen into anarchy, with warring factions fighting for dominion over the barren wilderness. As accusations of treachery and murder flew, the Admiralty convened a court martial to determine who was telling the truth. The stakes were life-and-death—for whomever the court found guilty could hang.

The Wager is a grand tale of human behavior at the extremes told by one of our greatest nonfiction writers. Grann's recreation of the hidden world on a British warship rivals the work of Patrick O'Brian, his portrayal of the castaways' desperate straits stands up to the classics of survival writing such as *The Endurance*, and his account of the court martial has the savvy of a Scott Turow thriller. As always with Grann's work, the incredible twists of the narrative hold the reader spellbound. Most powerfully, he unearths the deeper meaning of the events, showing that it was not only the Wager's captain and crew who were on trial – it was the very idea of empire.

Source: <https://www.davidgrann.com/books/#the-wager>

### Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the Wager crash? Was the expedition of the Wager destined to fail? Why or why not?
2. Why would someone want to join the British navy in the 1700s? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a career in the navy during this time?

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3. What are three ways that racism and colonialism impacted what happened with the Wager's crew and how they perceived their experiences? How did colonialism and racism impact events surrounding the Wager and the accounts emerging from them?
4. What was the most memorable part of this book for you? Why did it make an impression?
5. Read your favorite passage from the book out loud and explain why you liked it or what it made you think about.
6. Was this non-fiction book fun to read, or was it a little dry? Did the author need to "spice it up" or "tone it down"? How could they have managed that?
7. What made this book different than other books on this subject? Do you think it is better or worse than other books on this subject matter?

Source: <https://guides.rcls.org/c.php?g=1360096>