

Discussion Guide for The Wager by David Grann

1. How does the 18th-century geopolitical landscape between Britain and Spain shape the events in "The Wager"?
2. In what ways does the author, David Grann, bring the historical setting to life? How does he balance historical accuracy with storytelling?
3. Dive deeper into the challenges the Wager faced, particularly in navigating Drake's Passage. How did these challenges contribute to the shipwreck, and could better preparation have prevented it?
4. What motivations drive Captain David Cheap to join the navy and rise through the ranks? Do you sympathize with his character, or do you find his actions questionable?
5. Consider Cheap's decision to attack Spanish colonies despite the hardships faced by the crew. Was this driven solely by duty, or were there personal motivations at play?
6. What did you think about Bulkeley's qualities as a leader? How does his leadership style differ from Captain Cheap's, and why did the crew rally behind him during the mutiny?
7. How do Cheap's leadership style and decisions contribute to the escalating tensions and mutiny on Wager Island?
8. Analyze John Bulkeley's character evolution throughout the story. What qualities make him a natural leader, especially in contrast to Captain Cheap?
9. Discuss the ethical dilemmas Bulkeley faces during the mutiny. Do you agree with his decisions, and how do they reflect the challenges of survival and loyalty?
10. What motivated Bulkeley's decision to build a shelter and lead the mutiny to return to Britain? Were these actions driven more by survival instincts or a sense of justice?
11. Explore the theme of "The Romance of the British Navy." How does Grann depict the contrast between the romanticized ideals of a sailor's life and the harsh realities faced by the crew of the Wager?

12. How do the sailors' expectations, fueled by stories of explorers like Sir Francis Drake, clash with the grim experiences on Wager Island?
13. Examine Captain Cheap's motivations for maintaining strict order, even resorting to violence. How do his actions reflect the mindset of a British naval officer during the 18th century?
14. In what ways does Grann highlight the flaws and consequences of British Imperialism and Colonialism? Discuss the impact on both the colonizers and the indigenous populations encountered by the Wager survivors.
15. How does the encounter with the Kawésqar people serve as an example of the negative consequences of colonialism?
16. Analyze the mutiny led by John Bulkeley. Do you think it was a justifiable response to Captain Cheap's leadership, or were there better alternatives for resolving the conflicts?
17. Consider the court martial that follows the survivors' return to England. Why do you think no one was held responsible for the shipwreck or the events on Wager Island?
18. How does the narrative emphasize the power of storytelling? Discuss instances where characters, particularly John Bulkeley, use storytelling to control the narrative.
19. In what ways do narratives influence public opinion, as seen in the court of public opinion after the survivors' return to England?
20. Explore the moral choices faced by the characters in their struggle for survival. How do the harsh conditions on Wager Island force individuals to make morally challenging decisions?
21. Discuss instances of cannibalism and its portrayal in the novel. How does it contribute to the broader themes of survival and desperation?
22. Reflect on the psychological toll of characters who made difficult choices for survival. How did these experiences shape their perspectives and actions? Consider parallels between the European colonial mindset portrayed in the book and present-day challenges in understanding and addressing historical injustices.
23. Discuss the representation of Indigenous cultures in the narrative. How does Grann navigate the portrayal of the Kawésqar people, and what impact does their interaction with the British survivors have on the overall narrative?

24. Consider the impact of historical forgetting in the narrative. Why do you think the story of the mutiny on Wager Island was suppressed? How does this reflect on the reputation of the British Navy?
25. What is the role of storytelling in preserving or erasing historical events? How does this theme resonate with contemporary discussions on historical narratives?
26. Evaluate David Grann's writing style. How does he engage readers in a true historical account while maintaining a compelling narrative?
27. Consider the use of multiple perspectives in the storytelling. How does it contribute to a nuanced understanding of the events and characters?
28. Grann's journalistic background influences the narrative of this novel. In what ways does his expertise in crime and historical exploration shape the storytelling?