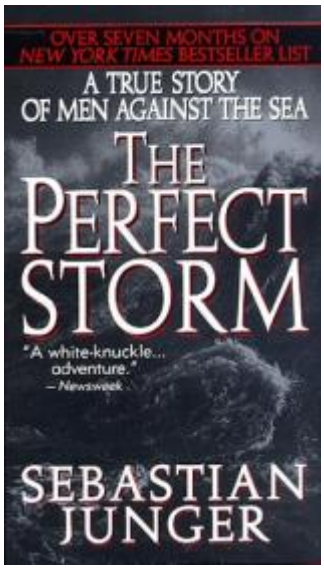
The Perfect Storm

by Sebastian Junger



About the 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 swordfishermen 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.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Sebastian Junger

BIO

Sebastian Junger is the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE PERFECT STORM and A DEATH IN BELMONT. He is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, and has been awarded a National Magazine Award and an SAIS Novartis Prize for journalism. He lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

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