

Book Review: The Wager
By David Grann

If you've been on a cruise with all its amenities and activities, almost like a floating city, it's easy to take for granted how effortlessly the ship gets from point of origin to its various landing spots. How routine and organized everything is. But that wasn't the case nearly three centuries ago, where ocean travel was anything but routine.

"The Wager" by David Grann is a nonfiction account of the voyage of the HMS Wager, a British ship that left England in 1740 during the height of the country's war with Spain, on a secret mission to capture treasure aboard a Spanish ship. But the Wager never made it to its destination. And thanks to the detailed logs kept by the ship's captain and crew, Grann conveys both the hopelessness and heroism on display during the journey.

After crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship had to round Cape Horn at the southernmost point of South America. There, where the Pacific and Atlantic oceans meet, the currents are considered the strongest in the world. After a long and losing battle against the relentless elements, the crew becomes shipwrecked on a desolate island off the coast of Patagonia.

Months later, in January 1742, the shell of a makeshift vessel washes up on the Brazilian coast carrying 30 men, barely alive, nothing more than skin and bones. They tell the story of the shipwreck, of months of starvation before strapping together some boards and cloths to travel more than 100 days and 3,000 miles. Upon returning to Britain, they're labeled heroes, and their story spreads across the land.

However, six months later, an even smaller and more broken-down craft lands on the Chilean coast carrying just three emaciated men, one of whom is David Cheap, the captain of the Wager. His story, of shipwreck, mutiny and murder, is 180-degrees removed from the one told by the men who had landed in Brazil six months earlier. Upon his return to Britain, a court martial is convened to determine what elements of truth may be uncovered from the conflicting accounts.

“The Wager” is *not* a swashbuckling tale of adventure on the high seas. In many respects the story is documented history, albeit from differing viewpoints. It’s also an account of the perils of sea travel in the mid-1700s, and of man’s grit, ingenuity, and determination to survive – sometimes, the cost be damned.

And it’s descriptive. You’ll feel as though you’re clinging to the ropes on the mast as the wind and ocean spray batter you senseless. But you’ll also witness the wasting away of human bodies when food and water are virtually nonexistent. So if you’re squeamish, be forewarned.

The narrative is taken largely from the journals of those who survived, so it sometimes feels like reading a diary, which can be both revealing as well as stilted. But “The Wager” holds together well. And is a very stimulating story that has occupied a top ten spot on The New York Times Best Seller under the Hardcover Nonfiction category for the past eight months.

My rating: 4 out of 5 stars.