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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **The Wager** by David Grann

#### Summary

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 nearly 3,000 miles of storm-wracked seas. They were greeted as heroes.

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.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss your understanding of the reasons for the *Wager's* expedition. How is the War of Jenkins' Ear defended, and undermined, as a motive in the years that follow the shipwreck as different accounts of the mutiny are brought to light?
2. Compared to today's technology, the resources available to the crew of the *Wager* and other similar vessels could be considered primitive. How were they able to achieve such feats of exploration, travel,

and military victory? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this particular ship and maritime technology in general, such as poor sanitation, nutrition, medical care, leadership, etc.

3. Discuss the quality of life among the sailors and officers while at sea, including the reflection that “Death is at all times solemn, but never so much so as at sea. The man is near you—at your side—you hear his voice, and in an instant he is gone” (64). What other losses are heightened at sea?

4. Which members of the crew stood out to you as unsung heroes of the journey? Who surprised you in their assertiveness, or cowardice, once they arrived on the island?

5. How might the men have fared if they had respected their relationship with the Kawésqar? What belief systems and limitations of their physical and mental state contributed to their abuse of this (potentially, limited) life-saving connection?

6. Grann calls in various now-named and documented trauma-induced conditions—the effects of starvation indicated by the Minnesota Starvation Experiment; refeeding syndrome seen in concentration camp survivors during WWII—in describing the extreme behaviors of the men moored on the island. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a situation where your survival was on the line? How did you react? Even if on a smaller scale, could you relate to any of the accounts of the men’s desperation?

7. One of the more extreme acts of survival the men enact is cannibalism—eating the remains of deceased crew members, and contemplating the killing of one for food. Have you heard of other instances of humans being forced to eat other humans for survival? What would you do if you were in that situation?

8. How does Bulkeley set himself up to become the leader of the mutinous crew? Do you think there would have been a shift in power even if Cheap hadn’t shot Cozens?

9. Why was Byron so compelled to remain loyal to Cheap? Discuss the pull of naval law versus personal beliefs on the men’s sense of morality and righteousness, based on what we can glean from their records. As Grann interprets, for Byron: “to play a role in totally deserting his commander—no matter how flawed and tyrannical he was—threatened the romantic image of himself that he had clung to despite the horrors of the voyage” (215).

10. If you were among the survivors of the shipwreck, which side would have supported—defending Cheap or mutiny? Why?

11. Did you agree with the scale of the accusations set against both sides of the *Wager*’s survivors? Where did the law seem rightfully upheld, and where could there have been more leeway? Discuss how you’ve seen similarly blurry interpretations of the law—martial or otherwise—if your lifetime or in other historical moments.

12. Were you surprised by the outcome of the trial after Cheap et al returned to London? What does this suggest about the British Empire’s priorities at the time—and what other crimes might have been exonerated for convenience’s sake? Consider these interpretations from a historian quoted in the book—“a munity is like a horrible, malignant disease and the chances that the patient will die an agonizing

death are so great, that the subject cannot even be mentioned aloud” (199)—and Grann’s analysis—“A munity, especially in times of war, can be so threatening to the established order that it is not even officially recognized as one” (306).

13. Discuss the various accounts of the *Wager*’s experience as written by Bulkeley and others, along with narratives like Reverend Walter’s (of the *Centurion*), and the nonexistent narrative of Black seaman John Duck. What do the subjectivities and manipulations behind these accounts suggest about the nature of history? What stories do you know of the past—global, national, familial—that have multiple and/or competing versions?

14. Besides its content, Bulkeley’s published account of the events on the island stood out for its “crisp” and “plain maritime style” reflective of its author’s social position and personality (258). Do you think his confidence in not altering his voice influenced readers’ trust in his evidence, including government officials’? Compare this to some of the reflections we hear from Byron in the book, a noted romantic and a mere boy when he first sets out to sea.

15. In the book’s Epilogue, we learn that Captain Anson is chiefly remembered by history as the “Father of the British Navy.” What other figures do you know from history who have made legitimate contributions to society, worthy of celebration, alongside darker and more malicious behaviors? Who decides which facets of “heroes” or “villains” are remembered?

16. What does Bulkeley’s fate in America suggest about his character? Do you think he would have ventured to the colonies if he hadn’t led the mutiny?

17. Are you aware of other forgotten narratives from history that are now being exhumed and for which restitution is being demanded? How do they compare to the circumstances of this mutiny?

18. Many different groups of people experience enslavement during this time period for economic and political reasons. How did this history expand your understanding of the scope of slavery during the colonial era?

19. “Empires preserve their power with the stories that they tell, but just as critical are the stories they don’t—the dark silences they impose, the pages they tear out,” writes Grann (312). Do you suspect there are holes even in this historical account based on what the Empire silenced at the time?

20. The documentation of the *Wager*’s trials is admittedly incomplete and full of contradictions and subjectivities. How do you imagine the author of this book going about sorting the “truth” of what happened? Have you ever tried to piece together a narrative—historical, familial, personal—from fragments of memory or documents?