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The Lifeboat

Charlotte Rogan, 2012

Little, Brown and Co.

288 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780316185905

Summary

Grace Winter, 22, is both a newlywed and a widow. She is also on trial for her life.

In the summer of 1914, the elegant ocean liner carrying her and her husband Henry across the Atlantic suffers a mysterious explosion. Setting aside his own safety, Henry secures Grace a place in a lifeboat, which the survivors quickly realize is over capacity. For any to live, some must die.

As the castaways battle the elements, and each other, Grace recollects the unorthodox way she and Henry met, and the new life of privilege she thought she'd found. Will she pay any price to keep it?

The Lifeboat is a page-turning novel of hard choices and survival, narrated by a woman as unforgettable and complex as the events she describes. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—ca. 1953?
- Where—N/A
- Education—B.A., Princeton University
- Currently—lives in Westport, Connecticut, USA

Charlotte Rogan graduated from Princeton University in 1975. She worked at various jobs, mostly in the fields of architecture and engineering, before teaching herself to

write and staying home to bring up triplets. An old criminal law text and her childhood experiences among a family of sailors provided inspiration for *The Lifeboat*, her first novel. After many years in Dallas and a year in Johannesburg, she and her husband now live in Westport, Connecticut. (*From the publisher.*)

Book Reviews

Charlotte Rogan manages to distill this drama about what's right and wrong when the answer means life or death into a gripping, confident first novel.... Other novels have examined the conscience and guilt of a survivor among the dead, but few tales are as thoughtful and compelling as this.

Christina Ianzito - Washington Post

Agree ???

Set at the beginning of WWI, Rogan's debut follows 22-year-old Grace Winter, a newlywed, newly minted heiress who survives a harrowing three weeks at sea following the sinking of her ocean liner and the disappearance of her husband, Henry. Safe at home in the U.S., Grace and two other survivors are put on trial for their actions aboard the under-built, overloaded lifeboat. At sea, as food and water ran out, and passengers realized that some among them would die, questions of sacrifice and duty arose. Rogan interweaves the trial with a harrowing day-by-day story of Grace's time aboard the lifeboat, and circles around society's ideas about what it means to be human, what responsibilities we have to each other, and whether we can be blamed for choices made in order to survive. Grace is a complex and calculating heroine, a middle-class girl who won her wealthy husband through smalltime subterfuge. Her actions on the boat are far from faultless, and her memory of them spotty. By refusing to judge her, Rogan leaves room for readers to decide for themselves. A complex and engrossing psychological drama.

Publishers Weekly

First-time novelist Rogan's architectural background shows in the precision with which she structures the edifice of moral ambiguity surrounding a young woman's survival during three weeks in a crowded lifeboat adrift in the Atlantic in 1914.... There are natural deaths and (reluctantly) voluntary sacrificial drownings. Dissent grows.... The lifeboat becomes a compelling, if almost overly crafted, microcosm of a dangerous larger world in which only the strong survive..

Kirkus Reviews

* Some of these questions differ from the Reading Group Guide's ones!

Discussion Questions

1. In disaster situations, is it right to save women and children first? What moral justifications exist for your answer?
2. Discuss the thought experiment referred to in Grace's trial, also known as "The

Plank of Carneades." Is either the first or second swimmer to reach the plank justified in pushing the other swimmer away?

3. What do you think of the concept of necessity as a justification for behavior that would not be condoned in ordinary circumstances?

4. If you were to ask Grace what qualities she looked for in a friend, what would she say? What would the truth be?

5. Which characters, in your opinion, hold the moral high ground?

6. Seventeenth-century political philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke postulated that humankind started off in a state of nature and gradually gave up certain freedoms in return for security, an exchange sometimes called the social contract. How does the lifeboat approximate a state of nature? Does survival in such a state require giving up personal freedom and autonomy?

7. Some modern writers assert that the advances in opportunities for women have been predicated on the requirement that women become more like men. Do you agree with this?

8. Are people more likely to revert to traditional male/female roles in crisis situations? What traditional male/female traits might help a person survive?

9. Author Warren Farrell, who writes about gender issues, has said: "Men's weakness is their façade of strength; women's strength is their façade of weakness." Does this hold true for the characters in *The Lifeboat*?

10. In his book *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*, Nathaniel Philbrick argues that an "authoritarian" leadership style is useful in the early stages of a disaster, but a "social" style becomes more important over time. Does this dynamic fully explain the power struggle in Lifeboat 14, or were other forces at work?

11. Does power always involve the threat of coercion? Besides violence, what forms of power influence the characters in *The Lifeboat*?

12. The first thing a person says is often more honest than later explanations. Are there instances in the book where a character's early words are a clue to assessing the truth of a particular situation or incident?

13. Do you think Mr. Hardie stole or helped to steal anything from the sinking Empress Alexandra? Would this have been wrong, given that any valuables were destined to be lost forever?

14. Should Grace have been acquitted of Mr. Hardie's murder?

15. Comment on the use of storytelling in the novel. Does your answer shed any light on Grace's own story?

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FOOTNOTES

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*Some of these questions differ from the Lit Lovers ones!

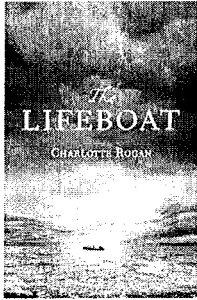
QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In disaster situations, is it right to save women and children first? What moral justifications would you use to argue your position?
2. Besides violence, what forms of power influence the characters in *The Lifeboat*?
3. If you asked Grace what qualities she looked for in a friend, what do you think she would say? And do you think she would be telling you the truth?
4. Do any of the boat's castaways hold the moral high ground?
5. Does necessity justify behavior that would not be condoned in ordinary circumstances? Does the end justify the means, if the end is one's own survival?
6. Seventeenth-century political philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke postulate that humankind started off in a state of nature and gradually gave up certain freedoms in return for security, an exchange sometimes called the social contract. How does the lifeboat approximate a state of nature? Does survival in such a state require giving up personal freedom and autonomy?

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7. Do you think Mr. Hardie stole or helped to steal anything from the sinking *Empress Alexandra*? And what was Henry's role?
8. Henry's activities on board were shaded with mystery. What do you think he was trying to hide? Or was Grace trying to hide his activities from the reader? Did you ever wonder if he survived?
9. Author Warren Farrell, who writes about gender issues, has said: "Men's weakness is their façade of strength; women's strength is their façade of weakness." Where do you see this idea at work in *The Lifeboat*?
10. Are people more likely to revert to traditional male/female roles in crisis situations? Or were there moments in *The Lifeboat* where you felt gender norms were reversed?
11. In his book *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*, Nathaniel Philbrick argues that an "authoritarian" leadership style is useful in the early stages of a disaster, but a "social" style becomes more important over time. Does this dynamic fully explain the power struggle in Lifeboat 14 or were other forces at work?
12. The first thing a person says is often more honest than later explanations. Are there instances in the book where a character's early words are a clue to assessing the truth of a particular situation or incident?
13. Should Grace have been acquitted of Mr. Hardie's murder?
14. *The Lifeboat* is narrated by Grace, and is told by her as she awaits her trial. Do you think there is a separate story underneath it all, or that her version is essentially true?

Debut Author Snapshot: Charlotte Rogan
Goodreads - April, 2012



The setting: an overloaded lifeboat adrift in the Atlantic Ocean. The dilemma: Would you be willing to kill to survive? Debut author Charlotte Rogan's characters face dire circumstances in The Lifeboat, a historical novel set in 1914 that one reviewer dubs "*Lord of the Flies* with Edwardian ladies." Readers meet narrator Grace Winter, a middle-class girl who marries into privilege and is now on trial for murder. To argue her case, she recounts the sinking of the ocean liner *Empress Alexandra*, the loss of her young husband, and a desperate power struggle aboard the over-capacity lifeboat. Not everyone makes it to dry land.

The mother of triplets, Rogan turned to writing following a career in architecture and engineering. She is now working on her second novel. The Connecticut writer shares with Goodreads nautical images that inspired The Lifeboat.



"With my father on the family boat."

Goodreads: You've said that you come from a family of sailors. Have you experienced any close calls at sea?

Charlotte Rogan: My husband and I own a little boat that we keep at my family's summer house in Maine. It is the same shape as the lifeboat in the book, but a lot smaller, and I love it because it is picturesque and graceful more than because it is particularly seaworthy. It was built by a local craftsman to both row and sail, but it is not very efficient with the sail up. It seems I can always get out of the cove, but the wind has to be just right for me to get back; often I end up rowing or waiting for the wind to change. So I have some experience with a boat that is hard to maneuver.

My family sailed together a lot when I was a child. I was too little to be of much help when the weather turned bad, and I remember looking nervously across a smooth expanse of calm water as the dark line of a gale approached and trusting that my father would know what to do when it reached us. He mostly did. I think it was those experiences of

battling the elements surrounded by people who were stronger than I was that allowed me to imagine what those weeks in the lifeboat must have been like for Grace.

GR: This year marks the centennial of the *Titanic* sinking. How much did that tragedy serve as inspiration for the plight of your fictional transatlantic liner, the *Empress Alexandra*? How did your story idea originate?

CR: The *Titanic* was a wonderful resource for me as I wrote *The Lifeboat*, but I wouldn't really call it an inspiration. In fact, I protected myself from reading any personal accounts of the survivors because I didn't want them to affect how I saw my own characters. The *Titanic* was extremely useful, however, when it came to researching important details for the *Empress Alexandra* and for lifeboat 14.

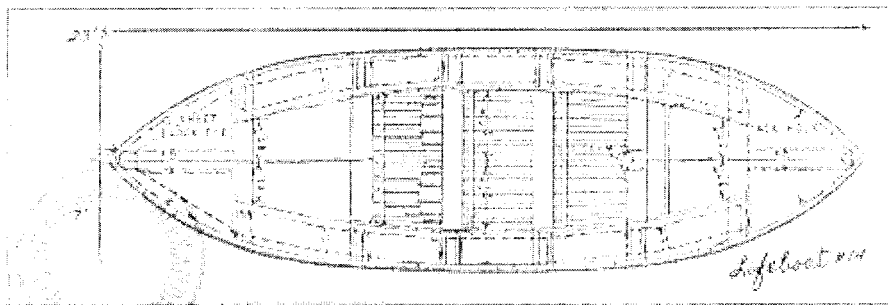


Illustration of the fictional lifeboat for the *Empress Alexandra*.

For instance, the size of the lifeboat was of critical importance for me. Most of the *Titanic* lifeboats could hold 65 people, but 65 characters would have been far too many for both author and reader. The *Titanic* also had four collapsible lifeboats (capacity 47 people) and two wooden

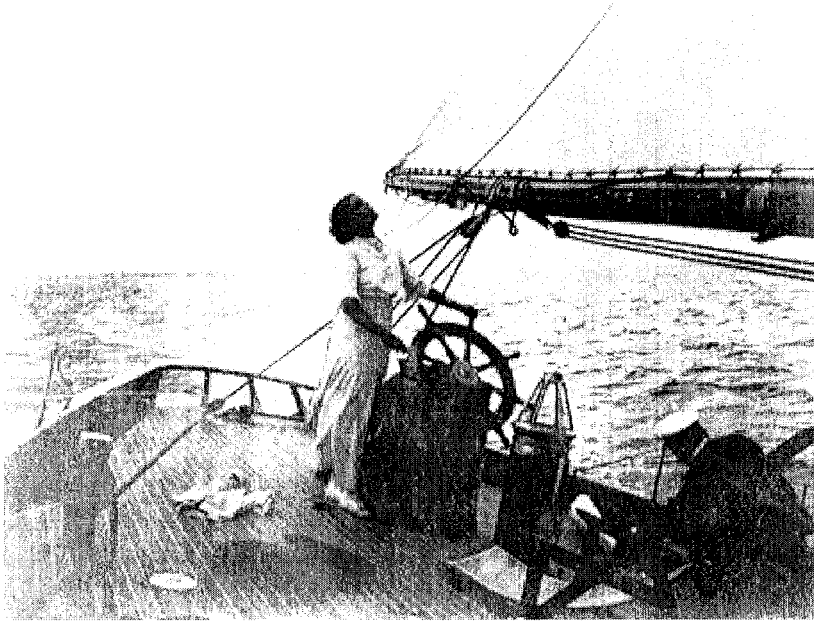
"cutters" (capacity 40 people). I modeled my lifeboat after the cutters but made the boats slightly smaller in order to make the boat overcrowded while keeping the character count manageable.

My real inspiration—the thing that caused me to put pen to paper—was coming upon an old criminal law text and reading about two cases involving shipwrecked sailors who were put on trial after they were rescued. I loved the moral dilemma, the idea that the law of society wasn't quite suited to people in extreme situations. I have always been interested in Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, 17th-century political philosophers who talked about the social contract—the bargains made when people give up some of their freedoms for security. Their work has modern-day implications for individual rights.

GR: The reader begins to notice clues that Grace Winter may be an unreliable narrator. How did you decide what to reveal, and with so many moral questions at play, how did you avoid passing judgment on your characters?

CR: I am interested in your phrasing of the question—you zero in exactly on the relationship between passing judgment and revelation. I think that if I had revealed everything that Grace did and didn't do, I would almost necessarily have come across as judgmental. The fact that we don't really know what she did or why is part of what allows us to engage so fully with her and her story.

What to reveal, what to hint at, and what to explicitly state is a careful balance for a writer. Too many



"A photo of my grandmother sailing circa 1914, the year in which The Lifeboat is set."

unresolved mysteries can be frustrating for the reader, but books that spend the final pages tying up all the loose ends always seem anticlimactic to me. This can leave a final impression of dissociation rather than engagement, completely undoing the imaginative connection that was made in everything that went before. I tend to dislike pages of exposition and explanation at the beginning and end of the books; my bias was against doing that in The Lifeboat.

This also gets at something of my process as a writer. Both the characters and the story develop organically for me. It is only through writing the story that I

come to know my characters, and often I am surprised by what they decide to do. I remember being so excited when I first thought to myself, "Oh my goodness, Grace isn't telling the truth!" This was closely followed by the thought, "Well, who does?" And it is that line—between the usual sort of prevarication and a more extreme sort of lying—that I find so fascinating.

GR: What's next for you as a writer?


CR: I am superstitious about talking about my work, so I will only say that I am well into another novel, this one set in South Africa, where my husband and I were lucky enough to live for nearly a year.

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A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLOTTE ROGAN

MaryAnne Kolton interviewed Charlotte Rogan
for the August 2012 issue of *January Magazine*.

Readers always crave more knowledge about the personal side of the authors they read. Can you tell us what books you read as a child? Who encouraged you to read, and what was your home life like?

Story time was sacred when I was growing up. My family did not get our first television set until long past the time I was able to read for myself, and books represented the door to two magical kingdoms: the realm of the imagination and the world of education and ideas. My family cared about both. Part of the fun of visiting relatives was having an aunt or a grandmother read to whatever assortment of children she found piled on the couch or gathered at her feet. My grandmother, who was born in India, loved Rudyard Kipling; my mother, who was tough and adventurous, loved *Robin Hood* and *The Call of the Wild*; my father could recite “Jabberwocky” from *Through the Looking-Glass* and “Concord Hymn” by Ralph Waldo Emerson. I was excited by the stories, but I also loved the rhythm of the words and the distinct

voices and interpretations brought to the texts by different readers.

The other sacred thing in our lives was the outdoors. My parents were self-taught naturalists, and it wasn’t unusual for me to open the freezer looking for ice cream and find instead a dead fox or woodpecker that my mother had found somewhere and planned to take to the nature center she and my father helped to start. My siblings and I looked under rocks and examined samples of water from the pond behind our house. We spent hours in whatever scrap of woods we could find, acting out stories we had read about in books.

Interestingly, the imagination implied in reading and writing was roundly squashed by my primary and secondary education. We read for detail; we wrote in a rigid format to answer specific and not very interesting questions; we knew there were correct answers to the questions, and I got very good at guessing right. On going to college, I was astonished to find whole departments filled with people who took creativity very seriously, but it took me until my midthirties to return to literature in an attempt to finally learn how to write.

You wrote three unsatisfying novels plus The Lifeboat over a period of several years without anyone knowing. Will you explain why you wrote in secret for such a long time?

In the twenty-five years since I started writing, I have completed a total of four novels besides *The Lifeboat*, but I wouldn’t call them unsatisfying at all. While the first is probably the typical practice novel and deserves to stay in its

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drawer, and another is perhaps too quiet to find a wide audience, I think the other two have real possibilities. Time will tell whether I go back to them or not.

I imagine people vary greatly as to when they decide to declare themselves as writers, but I didn't do it until I sold *The Lifeboat* to Little, Brown. For one thing, writing is a quiet thing—I could either talk about it or I could do it. For another, I am not the kind of person who needs a lot of interim feedback on my projects. As anyone knows, there is a huge difference between a second-to-last draft and a last draft, so showing unfinished drafts to people didn't seem like a useful exercise to me. Of course, once I had a professional agent and an editor on board, I found their input extremely valuable in taking my work to the next level of completion.

As for the writing itself, I liked doing it, and I knew I was getting better with each attempt. That was enough to keep me going. Writing not only focused my reading, but it directed my research. Crafting a novel is like working on a giant puzzle: it can be difficult and frustrating, but it is also a lot of fun.

In The Lifeboat, the heroine/anti-heroine is so wonderfully layered and exceptionally interesting. One could almost peel her like an onion. She gives the impression of being more intuitive than the other survivors, and yet frustratingly indecisive as well. At other times, she was downright manipulative and calculating. Does anyone really know Grace well? Do you?

I love that readers are seeing Grace in so many different and often evolving ways. That phenomenon epitomizes one of the things

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I like best about fiction—that readers become part of the story as they decide between competing interpretations of characters and events. Sometimes they make connections the author didn't envision but that are no less valid, since we are all grappling with the same paradoxes of the human condition and since some of any writer's impulses are unconscious.

Because we only have access to Grace's thoughts and feelings and because she is highly aware of herself as an observer and actor in the lifeboat, she appears in much sharper relief than the other characters. While I don't think she is smarter than all of them, she is certainly gifted when it comes to sensing social cues and nuance. It was fun to write about someone who refuses to conform to expectations and whose greatest strength can also be thought of as her greatest flaw: her ability to adapt. Does this make her inconsistent and unreliable or does this make her strong? Clearly, people who can adapt to new and extreme circumstances are more likely to survive them.

And if it makes you feel any better, even I don't know everything about Grace. One of the things I learned by writing this novel is that there are opaque parts of a character even for the author. So when someone asks me to pin down one of the unanswered questions in the book, I can only answer, "Your guess is as good as mine."

Among other perceptions, The Lifeboat is a story of indefatigable conflict: class distinctions, male versus female, man against nature, convention as opposed to necessity. Was disharmony meant to be the core of the book?

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The fundamental human conflict is with nature, and all other conflicts grow out of that. I started writing *The Lifeboat* after reading some case law about shipwrecked sailors who were put on trial after being rescued. The idea that we try to fit the human struggle to survive into legal and moral structures so we can punish and reward stayed with me, and not too long after that, I started to hear Grace's voice in my head.

The minute you confine a group of people to a small space, all sorts of conflicts are bound to arise. Human beings do not get along very well, and they get along least well with those who are most unlike themselves. You don't have to look very far to see evidence of this us-versus-them mentality—both history and the news are rife with it. In a world that has been reduced in size through population growth, immigration, and advances in technology, understanding of and tolerance for the other will be crucial if we are going to survive without more and deadlier conflicts.

While I find this sort of conflict fascinating, I did not write *The Lifeboat* with an agenda. The core of the book evolved organically as I imagined how my characters might react as the days in the lifeboat turned into weeks. Of course, I bring the person I am to the project of writing, so the things that interest me—the natural world, gender issues, law—are bound to come out.

The sea and its fierce, unpredictable majesty is definitely a main character in the book. Your descriptions truly gave it a life of its own. I read that you have spent a great deal of time on the water. Hopefully, not under these conditions.

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I grew up in a family of sailors, so the sea was a large presence. My father was highly competitive and liked to race with the other boats we saw, which had the effect of turning a casual family outing into a high-stakes, all-hands-on-deck game.

While I never experienced any truly dangerous conditions, I vividly remember encountering terrible weather and feeling both exhilarated by it and afraid. Our boat had a small cabin, and we children could go down there to escape the rain. But being below decks while the boat pitched and rolled made us sick, so my sister and I would usually ride out a storm hunched into our slickers and trying to stay out of the way. It was these experiences that allowed me to imagine what those weeks in the lifeboat must have been like for Grace.

Publishers Weekly wrote about you: "Rogan circles around society's ideas about what it means to be human, what responsibilities we have to each other, and whether we can be blamed for choices made in order to survive." *The opportunity to dine on this complex meal of philosophical and ethical ideas is one of the most captivating aspects of The Lifeboat. Did bits of your architectural training affect the addition of these structural considerations?*

A story certainly has structure. The author chooses how the relevant information is presented, and the reader moves through the chapters the way he or she might move through a series of rooms. This dimension might be thought of as the plot. The basic building blocks of the novel are of course

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words—a set of sounds endowed with both music and meaning. Through the words, the reader can see a character performing some sort of action—perhaps interacting with another character or moving toward some goal—but the words can be evocative of other things, either startling the reader or working to enrich the meaning in more subtle ways.

But I think of the third dimension—the depth—as probably the most interesting one available to a novelist. At any moment in a person's—or character's—life, there are a hundred things going on, and fiction can get at these in a way that nonfiction or film cannot. The character is, both consciously and unconsciously, motivated by past successes and failures, by deeply held and sometimes conflicting beliefs, by loves and disappointments, by things he or she has learned or heard about, by unarticulated hopes and fears. The best fiction works on many levels at once, so that readers are drawn in by the action but find themselves making connections and asking questions far beyond—or maybe beneath—the level on which that action takes place.

You have said: "Writing is my attempt at reverence—for the natural world and for the thing in people that will sometimes do the right thing in spite of the consequences to themselves and in spite of the cacophony of voices claiming privileged insight into what the right thing is." How did you come by this bit of philosophy? Can you elaborate on why you feel this way?

To write about the world, you have to observe it very closely. That alone is an act of reverence. Choosing words that do

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justice to the beauty around us is another way of paying tribute to it. The best writing opens a person's mind rather than closing it. Understanding people like ourselves is no great trick, but fiction can put us in someone else's shoes and allow us to question our assumptions in a way that makes us better people. Mostly, doing the right thing starts with asking questions rather than blind obedience to dogma, and one of the things fiction does best is to ask questions.

You appear to have a very naturalistic point of view and you describe it beautifully. Are you working on something new and would you care to share anything about it with us?

I am superstitious when it comes to talking about unfinished projects, but I will tell you that it is set in South Africa. My husband and I spent the better part of a year in Johannesburg, and we fell in love with the country and the people.

Plank of Carneades

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

In ethics, the **plank of Carneades** is a thought experiment first proposed by Carneades of Cyrene; it explores the concept of self-defense in relation to murder.

In the thought experiment, there are two shipwrecked sailors, A and B. They both see a plank that can only support one of them and both of them swim towards it. Sailor A gets to the plank first. Sailor B, who is going to drown, pushes A off and away from the plank and, thus, proximately, causes A to drown. Sailor B gets on the plank and is later saved by a rescue team. The thought experiment poses the question of whether Sailor B can be tried for murder because if B had to kill A in order to live, then it would arguably be in self-defense.

The Case of the Speluncean Explorers

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Fuller's hypothetical case involves a group of speluncean explorers, also known as cavers because they engage in the exploration of caves. The hypothetical examines how the law could treat an extreme response by the trapped cavers to the risk of death from starvation.

The Case of the Speluncean Explorers is a hypothetical legal case described in a 1949 *Harvard Law Review* article by Lon L. Fuller. It largely takes the form of five judicial opinions, which are supposedly written by the judges of the fictitious Supreme Court of Newgarth in the year 4300.

The hypothetical involves five cave explorers who are caved in by a landslide. They learn via intermittent radio contact that they are likely to starve to death by the time they can be rescued. The cavers subsequently resort to killing and eating one of their number in order to survive. After the survivors are rescued, they are indicted for the murder of the fifth member. Fuller's article proceeds to examine the case from the perspectives of five different legal principles, with widely varying conclusions as to whether or not the spelunkers should be found guilty under the law of Newgarth.

Fuller's account has been described as "a classic in jurisprudence"^[1] and "a microcosm of [the 20th] century's debates" in legal philosophy,^[2] as it allowed a contrast to be drawn between different judicial approaches to resolving controversies of law, including natural law and legal positivism.

Facts[[edit](#)]

The facts of the case are recounted in the first judicial opinion, which is given by Chief Justice Truepenny.^[3]

Five cave explorers become trapped inside a cave following a landslide. They have limited food supplies and no sources of nutrition inside the cave. Substantial resources are spent to undertake a rescue, with 10 workmen killed in subsequent landslides near the blocked entrance. Radio contact is eventually established with the cavers on the 20th day of the cave-in, and the cavers learn that another 10 days would be required in order to free them. They then consult with medical experts, who inform them that they are unlikely to survive to the rescue given the likelihood of starvation.

1

In the Case of the Speluncean Explorers, the person to be eaten was chosen by throwing a pair of dice. This method had also been suggested for choosing the victim in the similar real-life case of *R v Dudley and Stephens*.

One of the cavers, Roger Whetmore, then asks on the cavers' behalf if the cavers could survive 10 days longer "if they consumed the flesh of one of their number". The medical experts reluctantly confirm this to be the case. Whetmore then asks if they should draw lots to select a person to be killed and eaten. No one outside the cave is willing to answer this question. Radio contact is subsequently lost.

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