The Lifeboat

Charlotte Rogan, 2012
Little, Brown and Co.
288 pp.

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

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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*

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. Dissention grows.... The lifeboat becomes a compelling, if almost overly crafted, microcosm of a dangerous larger world in which only the strong survive..

*Kirkus Reviews*

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?
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?

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?
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.

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.

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
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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Comments (showing 1-47 of 47) (47 new)

message 1: by Jeff (new)
Apr 03, 2012 08:57pm

18 likes · like
Reading Group Guide

Voices and Interpretations Brings To the Texts by Different Reader's
I love that readers are seeing Greece in so many different and often evolving ways. The phenomenon of experiencing characters in so many different and often surprising ways is a testament to the power of imagination. But it is also a lot of fun to explore my research, creating a novel that works as a giant puzzle: putting together clues to unfold the story. When I first read my novel, I was struck by how the characters emerged from the pages. My research was nearly forgotten, but my imagination was点燃. Writing is not only about my research but also about the characters who come to life on the page. Each character is a puzzle piece, and the more I write, the more the story begins to unfold. It can be a difficult and frustrating process, but it is also incredibly rewarding.

Reading Guide

1. The Iliad is a story of unbreakable bonds. The Phoenician epiphany of one of the characters.
2. Why does the author use imagery of the sea in the novel?
3. How does the author use imagery of the sea in the novel?
I read that you have spent a great deal of time on the water. I hope you enjoyed your experience. Your description of the life of your character in the book is quite vivid.

The sea and its forces, unpredictable and vast, are a force to be reckoned with. The author chooses to depict how the human spirit is bound to overcome these forces.

While I find this sort of conflict fascinating, it is not without its drawbacks. We often compare the events in the story to our own lives and experiences, which can be challenging. The author must be careful to ensure that the conflict is not too overwhelming or unrealistic.

Reading Group Guide

Reading Group Guide
Choosing words that do

To write about the world, you have to observe it very closely. Can you

What do you feel this way?

How did you come by this bit of philosophy?

Can you

You have said: "My thing is my attempt at reverence—for the natural

The world of the conscious is the world of the thing itself. It is the

end. The best writing opens a person's mind rather than

Reading Group Guide

Reading Group Guide
Plank of Carneades

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
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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 Spelunecean Explorers

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Fuller’s hypothetical case involves a group of spelunecean 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 Spelunecean 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" and "a microcosm of the 20th century's debates" in legal philosophy, 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.

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.

In the Case of the Spelunecean 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.