

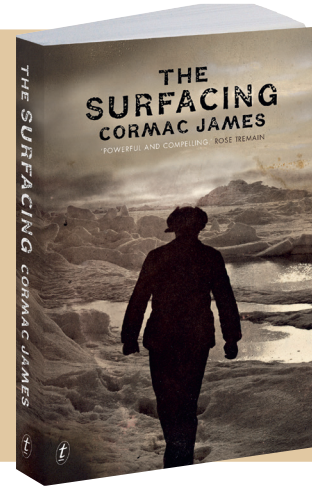
The Surfacing

Cormac James

ISBN 9781922182517

RRP AUS \$29.99, NZ \$37.00

Fiction Trade Paperback



Praise for *The Surfacing*

'Extraordinary...Reading the book, I recalled the dramatic natural landscape of Jack London and the wild untamed seas of William Golding. Cormac James' writing is ambitious enough to be compared with either.'
John Boyne

'The cool precision of James's writing draws you on as surely as if you're there, trapped in that claustrophobic interior with the vast northern landscape stretching forever outside.'
Irish Times

About Cormac James

Cormac James was born in Cork, Ireland, and now lives in France. His first novel, *Track and Field*, was published in 2000.

A reader's introduction to *The Surfacing*

The 'mute, raging world' of the Arctic is both setting and symbol in this novel, which explores themes of masculinity and fatherhood, heroism and bravery, purpose and fate. It is also concerned with how we want to control both ourselves and other people's perceptions of ourselves. And it is a character study of the flawed Lieutenant Richard Morgan. James has brilliantly sustained a novel set only in the ice and snow, with Arctic gales, midnight suns, and the utterly foreign presence of the men and their trapped ship.

The Arctic is a self-imposed testing ground for Morgan. Second in command of the *Impetus*, which is part of the effort to search for the missing Franklin expedition, Morgan is a troubled character with a 'spoiled mind' (16) who 'courts shame' (162). We have the sense that Morgan has committed wrongs in his past, that the Arctic is both trap and escape for him. Being trapped on the *Impetus* with Kitty and then his son brings both frustration and pleasure.

The journeys across the snow and ice Morgan must (or chooses to) undertake are terrible ordeals, but bring him some satisfaction as he sets out to prove

himself. He never achieves the purpose for which he sets out (to communicate with the ships at Beechey or to find help for the trapped ship), but he does sometimes find purpose in them. He compares himself to his heroes; is pleased that he is suffering as they did. And always, he is concerned to create a narrative in his own journals (and sometimes in Myer's) that reflects well on himself.

When his final journey to find help fails, he turns back to the ship. In the end we do not know his fate

Questions for discussion

1. What and who is 'surfacing' in the novel?
2. As the ship is trapped in the ice, and as pressure builds on its hull, so too are the characters trapped and under pressure. What are they trapped by? At the same time, there is a sense of escape for the characters. Do we ever get to know exactly what they have escaped from? Are they still trying to escape? From what? Has Kitty trapped Morgan or liberated him? When Morgan first sees Kitty he thinks of undoing her tightly pulled back hair, and later unbuttons her mis-buttoned dress. Does Morgan liberate Kitty?
3. Discuss the way in which the features of the natural world such as The Pack (which is capitalised as if it is a living thing) and the currents are both symbols and setting. Is the novel an allegory?
4. Discuss other symbols, for example, the empty birdcage, or the pelvis DeHaven makes out of whale bones. Are the symbols always obvious (such as when Morgan steps in bootprints that are larger than his own), or do they have more subtle effects?
5. It is often hard to discern characters' motivations for their actions at the time they occur. For example, when Morgan cuts the anchor rope, or when Kitty stows away. Sometimes motivations emerge later on in the novel. And sometimes similar actions come from different motivations. Are characters'—and people's—motivations ever clear to others or themselves?

6. On the journey to Beechey Island, 'a lone word showed through: Why?' (154). Is there a point to the Beechey journey? Is there a point to the entire expedition or is it a Sisyphean task? Is there a moral purpose? Discuss the idea of purpose in the novel.
7. 'Looking back it seemed not to matter if they'd done one thing or its contrary. The final amount was the same' (126). Are the characters, especially Morgan, in control of their fate? How much choice do they have? Is patience the best approach to their situations?
8. Is heroism a possibility in the novel? What might define it? What about beyond the novel? Are heroism and bravery the same? Does bravery mean foolishness, as Morgan thinks Austin might be suggesting (92)?
9. What about leadership? What are the qualities of a good leader in the novel and outside it? How do Myer and Morgan compare as leaders?
10. Thinking about Myer, Morgan reflects 'his captain could not think straight for hope and sympathy and ambition' (87). These qualities are normally seen as positive. Are they condemned in the novel?
11. What role does DeHaven play in the novel? Is he the voice of reason or the voice of despair? How does he affect Morgan? Why do you think he is in the Arctic?
12. Morgan watches Kitty 'flaunting what it was she'd done to herself' (119). Has she done it to herself? Does the novel excuse Morgan from responsibility?
13. Discuss Morgan's changing feelings towards Kitty.
14. When Morgan is in Disko, he smells Kitty's chair to find something 'beyond flesh and even sweat, for something more earthy, beyond the animal—something more than the merely uncivilized' (21). Mostly the pronoun 'she' is used to refer to the ship or Kitty, and it is sometimes difficult to tell which at first. What status does the feminine have in the novel?
15. Fatherhood is 'a call to his better self' for Morgan, yet the 'painful pleasure' of his son's recognition of him is a sign that he had been 'lured and trapped' (249). Cabot is undone by the death of his little boy. Does the novel make a point about fatherhood, or just about Morgan's fatherhood? Does fatherhood fill the 'hole' that Morgan talks about (336)? Does the meaning of a man come in fatherhood? Is it a liberation or a trap? What about motherhood for Kitty? After all, she suggests that their son might be a chance for both of them to 'redeem' themselves (190).
16. Why is posterity so important to Morgan? Who is the audience for his journal? Who does he think will judge him? How do you judge him?
17. The men go to great efforts to stay alive; but Cabot kills himself, and the ship's boy slips easily to his death. Are the men's efforts at self-preservation worthwhile? Are they instinctual or deliberate?
18. How does the language evoke the natural setting? How does James use it to link the natural and internal worlds?
19. Do you think historical fiction is a good way to appreciate past events? Or does it lead to a confusion between facts and invention?