

Whalefall

by Daniel Kraus

About the Book

When Jay sets out on a recovery mission, alone in the vast ocean, he will find a universe that connects him to his past, present, and future. Ultimately, Jay finds that running away from his failed relationship with his father will lead him back to the open waters of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Monastery Beach. In an attempt to redeem and mend the fractured relationships in his life, Jay will face insurmountable challenges of survival that will surpass his adolescent anger and resentment.

Can the depths of the ocean provide him with a lifeline of love and hope? Can he put his pride aside and listen to the universe around him? Can he ascend the depths, or will he drown with the ghost of his past?

Prereading Questions: The following questions may be used to foster student motivation, to activate prior knowledge and/or experiences, to help readers engage with the text, and to increase comprehension and intentional/purposeful reading.

1. Do parents have an obligation to get parenting “right”? Why or why not?
2. Do children have a responsibility to conform to parental expectations? Why or why not?
3. When you think about the statement “survival of the fittest,” what are the first associations that come to mind? Is there more than one type of survival? Explain your responses.
4. What is the difference between survival and life?
5. What is something on this planet that you don’t want to lose?
6. What does the title of the book suggest or mean to a reader?

Discussion Questions: The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Whalefall* as targeted questions for discussion and reflection; or, alternatively, they can be used as reflective writing prompts.

1. Describe Jay’s upbringing, including his efforts to protect himself from his family dynamic. How did his relationship with his mother and sisters contribute to the relationship he had with his father? Explain your answers with evidence from the text.
2. Compare and contrast Jay’s personality with that of his father, Mitt Gardiner.
3. How would you characterize the father/son relationship? Explain your answers with evidence from the text.
4. When Jay’s father explains the beauty and ferocity of the ocean, he tells Jay, ““Someday, in some way you can’t imagine, one of these so-called stupid facts is going to save your stupid life.”” In what way does this come to fruition? Support your answer from the text.
5. How is Jay’s family impacted by his absence from home and by his lack of care for his father?
6. Why is Mitt Gardiner a gruff and distant father? How does he deal with Jay’s emotional responses to life experiences? Is Mitt justified in his approach to teaching Jay life lessons? Is Jay justified in his emotional and physical distance from his father?
7. How do Jay’s father, mother, and sisters, and Hewey, save Jay’s life as he struggles to survive his own whale fall?

8. In the abyss of the ocean with death looming, Kraus sets the stage for a reconciliation through trial by fire for Jay. How does this journey into the depths help Jay better understand his father and his own life? How does it help him come to know himself better?
9. In what way is the whale a symbol in the story?
10. What does Jay learn about his own family—especially his father—through recalled memories? How does this information impact him?
11. Throughout the story, Jay doesn't understand his father and his deep connection with the ocean. He is resentful of the love Mitt has for the depths below, angry to not receive his attention. He describes Mitt as “godless,” but as Jay encounters and experiences the universe below, he comes to appreciate the beauty and terror of what lies beneath—“A ship of gods from primordial tar . . . a comma in a sentence so large only gods can read it.” How does Jay's experience bring acceptance and understanding of his father's belief that ““heaven's out there””?
12. Mitt carries a copy of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* like “his source of workaday psalms” by story's end. How does Mitt's connection with the book lead Jay toward forgiveness and love?
13. As Jay navigates through the whale, the reference to a “storm” as a metaphor for pain and survival is a powerful form of imagery for the reader. “Two currents crashing . . . Suffer our own storms . . . Do the storms have to kill us?” How is a storm a fitting metaphor for Jay's life and his relationship with his father?
14. Jay's self-loathing and the idealization of his father by the locals in the beginning of the story affects the reader's perception of both characters. What specific words and events account for Jay's feelings, and how do they change as the story progresses? How does our perception change as Jay's feelings evolve?
15. What do you think Jay learns about being a son over the course of the novel?
16. What roles do the heavens (space) and earth play in the novel?
17. Throughout the novel, there is a need for Jay to tell and retell the past. How does the novel deal with the thematic ideas of remembering and forgetting? Do you think there is a right choice between dwelling on the past and/or leaving it behind?
18. The natural world plays a significant role in the novel. How does the area of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Monastery Beach correlate to Jay's relationship with his father?
19. In the novel, Jay's quest is beyond the dive; he also goes through a journey of self-discovery. While traversing physical space, he also occupies mental space. How is his whale fall a reflection on the similarities between physical and mental space?
20. How does Kraus weave the theme of man versus nature throughout the novel? How does religion play into this theme?
21. How does the novel's time line reflect the human experience of reflecting on the past and projecting the fate of the future? What character shifts were captured in those time sequences?
22. What can we discern about the survival artifacts that Jay discovers in moments of most need? How does this mirror his father's belief that “the closer to naked you are, the better, the safer, the realer”?
23. Trusting someone can lead to both life and death. What if the only person you can trust is yourself? What kind of trust does Jay put in his oceanographic knowledge and remembered life lessons in order to survive?
24. The death of Mitt Gardiner, Jay's father, acts as a catalyst in the novel. How do Jay's feelings of shame, guilt,

disappointment, and anger affect his experience both physically and mentally?

25. From the onset, Jay wrestles with living in the shadow of the “revered Mitt Gardiner, local legend.” How does Jay’s journey help him to move past self-condemnation to establish self-worth and put himself in the forefront of his own life?

26. What influence does Jay’s father have on his life choices? How does the novel explore the architecture of the family and how emotional and physical trauma can lead to the disintegration of the family unit?

27. The novel starts and ends with “3000 PSI” and the dreaded “Sleepers, arise!” How does the meaning evolve from start to finish?

28. Reluctantly and begrudgingly, Jay starts to see commonalities with his father. How does *Whalefall* use time sequence to slowly unravel the process of Jay’s isolation to freedom and self-discovery?

29. How does the character of Hewey play a part in the father/son dynamic? How does his role as a bridge between the two offer Jay a different perspective on his father?

30. *Whalefall* explores the role of relationships using time and space (setting/environment) to illustrate physical and emotional boundaries. How do these connections tie the reader to Jay and his journey?

Extensions for Writing: Literary focus—tone, flashback/time sequence, protagonist, symbols, themes, and metaphor

1. As a story of death, loss, fear, and destruction, *Whalefall* has at its heart a number of tragic events both physical and emotional. However, one of the most pervasive elements of the novel is its sarcasm embedded in thought and dialogue. Why do you think the author incorporates this tone? Is it effective?

2. The bulk of this novel is told by Jay Gardiner—in his voice and through his eyes—however, the narrative structure moves from past to present using flashbacks and time sequences of racing the clock as his PSI diminishes. Discuss the effect of and possible reasons for the narrative structure of this novel and how it builds suspense around the protagonist and for the reader.

3. Throughout the novel Kraus implements diametrically opposing symbols and themes, such as:

Light vs. Darkness

Life vs. Death

Loneliness vs. Happiness

Love vs. Hate

Forgiveness vs. Reconciliation

Perception vs. Reality

How do the opposing forces within the text represent plot progression and character development? Use specific examples from the text.

4. How is the whale fall a metaphor for life?

Extensions for Reading: Text-to-text reading extensions help readers determine the relationship and commonalities between what they have read in the past to what they are currently reading as a form of literary

analysis.

Cannery Row and *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway

Dante's Inferno by Dante Alighieri

Moby Dick by Herman Melville

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

The parable of "Jonah and the Whale"

Extensions for Viewing: Viewing opportunities for students help teachers illustrate complex ideas and give students the opportunity of exposure to the world outside the classroom.

ACTIVITY TIP: Write a film review.

Objective: Students will build active viewing and writing skills. Students will watch with purpose, apply note-taking skills, and ask questions to develop and draft their film review.

Related Topics for Viewing:

Real Science "The Insane Biology of: The Sperm Whale" - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hve8_iSDD-o

"Sperm Whales: Titans of the Deep" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhcFCONHZvA>

National Geographic "Experience the Underwater World Through the Eyes of a Free Diver" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4qM1IEhtNQ>

PBS NewsHour Introduction to "The Deepest Breath" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3mvMMHy-5U>

"The Deepest Breath" on Netflix

Extensions for Research: Research opportunities help students build knowledge, skills, and understanding by connecting sources of information with significant topics of interest to improve reflective reading, critical thinking, and dynamic engagement beyond the text.

ACTIVITY TIP: Write your senator or participate in action research

TOPIC: Ocean pollution

Objective: Students will understand audience and purpose, develop evidence-based arguments, create critical responses to cultural and/or historical issues, reflect on the relationship between research and practice.

Research Writing Prompt: Discuss how the author, Daniel Kraus, weaves the theme of cultural exploitation and capitalism throughout the book and the impact it has on man and nature.

Related Topics for Discovery:

Allain, Rhett. "The Physics of Scuba Diving." *WIRED*, November 26, 2022. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-physics-of-scuba-diving/>

Birnbaum, Michael. "There Are 21,000 Pieces of Plastic in the Ocean for Each Person on Earth." *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/03/08/ocean-plastics-pollution-study/>

Marine Mammal Center, The. "Sperm Whale." <https://www.marinemammalcenter.org/animal-care/learn-about-marine-mammals/cetaceans/sperm-whale>

NASA. "Ocean Worlds." <https://www.nasa.gov/specials/ocean-worlds/>

NOAA. "What is a whale fall?" National Ocean Service website.

<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/whale-fall.html>

"Support Research to Stop Ocean Pollution." *Ocean Conservancy*, April 3, 2017. <https://oceanconservancy.org/blog/2017/04/03/support-research-to-stop-ocean-pollution/>

Younger, Ben. "The Holy Shiver." *FLYING Magazine*, June 21, 2021. <https://www.flyingmag.com/leading-edge-holy-shiver/>

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