



AAC Publications

STARVATION SHORE: A NOVEL

BY LAURA WATERMAN

STARVATION SHORE: A NOVEL. Laura Waterman. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019. Hardcover, 416 pages, \$27.95.

In *Starvation Shore*, Laura Waterman (no relation to reviewer) has turned her scholarly pen to a forgotten Arctic tragedy. In 1881, 25 men led by Adolphus Greely of the U.S. Army were dropped off on Canada's Ellesmere Island to establish a scientific research fort. Greeley's men methodically logged weather observations, traversed Ellesmere Island, and attained "Furthest North" toward the North Pole, a grail for explorers until the present day.

But over the next two years, resupply teams failed to reach Greely's Fort Conger. Unwisely abandoning their post and heading south on meager rations, they eventually encamped on Cape Sabine. This grim yet fascinating story of inept leadership includes a shipwreck, drowning, hypothermia, mutiny, suicide, execution, scurvy, and starvation. By the time a rescue ship finally arrived, only seven of the 25 men had survived. Over more than a century, beginning with Greely's *Three Years of Arctic Service* in 1886, several authors have tried to resurrect the saga.

In previous books, let alone the extant explorer diaries, an essential detail has been left out: how and why the men resorted to cannibalism. Waterman realized she had to find a new framework for presenting their story, so that she (and ultimately her readers) could understand what really drove Greely and company. She began reading and transcribing Sgt. David Brainard's diary (available online at the Dartmouth Library), limiting herself to two entries a day in her quest to figure out what these men were made of. The research and writing of her book would take a full decade.

So, seven men survived by eating the flesh of their dead companions—like the Donner Party in California. Yet none of the Arctic survivors would ever cop to this cannibalism. Back in the day, the feds tried to suppress the news. However, even though the bodies were brought home in sealed caskets, eventually a reporter got a look inside—at least ten had been cut into for food, and the media blew this up to sensational proportions.

Waterman, after writing a dozen drafts, discovered that to make these men real and "slide my sleeping bag in next to theirs," she had to reimagine parts of their story and fictionalize what may have driven them to such desperate ends. As a winter mountaineer, she drew on her knowledge of cold, of wind-driven ice and snow, and of the breathtaking, often frightening beauty to be found in remote landscapes in order to fully flesh out their story.

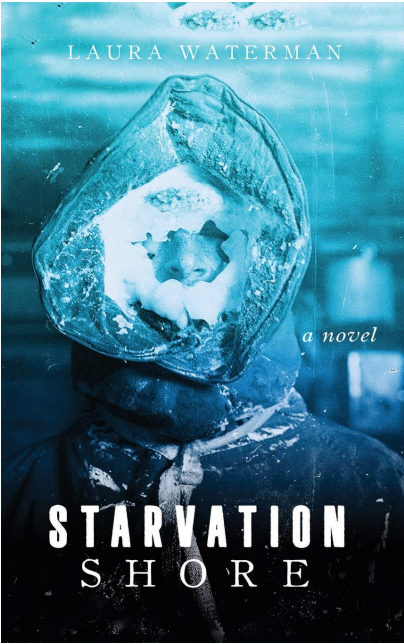
She prompts us to consider what's it like to starve to death, as these explorers' bodies began to feed on themselves for sustenance. This would have been followed by starvation, edema, diarrhea, and extreme dehydration. Yet along the way, particularly in the last days, as, "the extreme craving for food" stops, death often comes peacefully as victims drift into euphoria.

In *Starvation Shore*, Waterman fills in the blanks between the lines of the surviving diaries and letters, and shows us what likely transpired in the minds of these desperate men. The author continually asked herself, What would I have done in these circumstances?

Waterman delivers her climax with compassion and empathy, and brings the reader into the thoughts of these frantic men as no book has done before. In her hands, this tale of explorers pushed to their limits stands as a parable for the character of the human soul.

– JONATHAN WATERMAN

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