

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

August 13 or 15, 2024

*The Wager* by David Grann

Conversation with the author abridged from:

<https://newrepublic.com/article/172193/david-granns-guide-misinformation-mutiny-wager-book-interview>

**Daniel Strauss:** There are a lot of themes that apply to the modern day in this book: mutiny, governments telling stories, the truth, race relations. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the reader should take away from the book? Because so much of it is familiar to events today.

**David Grann:** There are so many surprising echoes of the present in this story. I first came across the story when I saw this eighteenth-century account written by John Byron who had been the 16-year-old midshipman on *The Wager* when it set sail, and it instantly struck me as this unbelievably gripping yarn and saga of survival. The crew and the officers had basically undergone everything from scurvy, the shipwreck, to this real-life *Lord of the Flies* on the island.

But what did compel me to do this as a book were these surprising resonances with what's happening in our country. I would go to the archives and pull out these old journals and log books that were dusty and disintegrating, and you would read these competing accounts and this war over the truth and this disinformation. I was just so shocked that I came across allegations of fake journalism and then I would come back home and read the newspaper and turn on the news and people would be talking about alternative facts and fake news. Then I would go back to the archives, and I would be reading about how in the nineteenth century there was this great fight over who would tell the history of the story—who had the right to tell who tells our history?

And then there were these efforts by those in power to cover up the insurrection, the kind of scandalous truth that this mutiny had revealed and what it said about the British Empire and the folly of imperialism. And then I would come back home and be reading about what books can be taught in schools, books being banned because people didn't want to reckon with the past, and efforts to manipulate and shape history. So it really, for me, was a story that informed the present in so many ways. I mean it was this little parable for our times. The echoes just kept coming.

**D.S.:** I came into the book thinking this was an adventure book, but in reading it, it didn't feel that way. It felt very *Lord of the Flies*.

**D.G.:** Sometimes you see a story that just kind of seems what it is [initially], so this fits on one level with sea yarns and sea adventures, but for me the real interest is actually in the genre, peeling it back and showing that part of the genre that isn't often told or is romanticized. So yes, this is as much about what happens when a kind of civilization—in this case a floating civilization on a ship that is very regimented, hierarchical—ends up disintegrating and these people are kind of thrown onto this island.