



Black Wave: A Family's Adventure at Sea and the Disaster That Saved Them

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When John and Jean Silverwood, both experienced sailors, decided to give their four children a taste of life on the high seas, they hoped the trip would offer important learning experiences, not only about the natural world but about the beauty of human life stripped down to its essence, far from civilization. But the adventure that awaited them would surpass anything they could have imagined.

Aboard their fifty-five-foot catamaran, the Silverwood family found its bonds tested as never before as they struggled with family and marriage dynamics in compressed quarters alongside the terrifying forces of nature. In the crucible of the sea, a stronger, tighter unit was forged. Then, just when it seemed that they had mastered every challenge, their world was shattered in a split second of sheer horror. Now the real test began, forcing them to fight for their very lives.

Black Wave: A Family's Adventure at Sea and the Disaster That Saved Them Details

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Tom says

This book has cemented in my mind that sailing is for crazy people. The story was interesting and entertaining, but I found them to be a bit preachy when it came to explaining the whole "the world is a schoolroom". They tried to sound noble saying the trip was for their kids education, but this was totally about them, not the family. I love the ending when John explains how he watched a young family at the zoo enjoying the "extraordinary beauty of the planet" then mentions how lucky his family was to have the resources to make the trip they did. He finishes with the thought that that beauty of the planet is all around and we can find it anywhere. It sounded to me like he was wishing they had just gone to the zoo!

thewestchesterian says

Black Wave reminded me of the Albert Brooks' film Lost in America; both are about dreamers and their ill-fated, ill-advised escapes from modern suburban California life by packing up and heading out into the open – except Brooks' movie is fictional, funny and no one was harmed in the making. Not so in the Silverwood's partially-around-the-world sea-capade in a catamaran called Emerald Jane. The Silverwoods include a mother, Jean, with family still in Pleasantville, NY, an alcoholic father, John, and several children - at least two of whom were seemingly way to young to have been brought aboard a small boat to face the dangers of the open ocean. And face them they did: pirates, zombies, hurricanes, drug addicts, 30 foot waves, boredom, seasickness, night watches, family off the wagon, creepy natives, equipment failures and ultimately the running aground of the boat on razor sharp coral which cost John a leg and nearly drowned the whole group. Seemingly from the Complete List of Things That Can Go Wrong at sea, the family only missed scurvy during the whole, miserable, misadventure.

So why put the offspring at such risk? My biggest complaint about the book is the lack of a satisfying answer to that question. The authors' contention that the hardships bonded a dysfunctional family together comes off as being imposed in the retrospective retelling. During the account of the journey you see little progression in family dynamics. While they ultimately work together to narrowly save dad from drowning and/or bleeding to death, it was as much a confluence of prodigious good luck as teamwork.

The book is divided into 2 sections and the first part written by Jean largely details the journey up until they hit the reef. The second is written by John and details a sinking in the late 1800s on the same reef of the Julie-Ann. Why you would spend pages discussing someone else's shipwreck rather than the story of how you, and your family, narrowly survived your own reads like little more than trying not to answer questions about what went wrong or why you undertook this misadventure in the first place. John does ruminate a bit about his rescue, whining about his wife in the process, but doesn't say much about the trip itself.

Jed says

Black Wave is a good book. Not great, but good.

Like many of its relatives, the story kicks off almost immediately with disaster. Also, like many of its cousins, details of the story are interspersed with pre-disaster snapshots. None of it was bad; it moved along at an even pace, not too technical but enough detail to keep me interested, a bit of pirate-y danger, and beautiful destinations.

The bulk of the first 2/3rds are written, or narrated, by Jean Silverwood. It has a decidedly nurturing tone about it. Less about the exciting deliciousness of adventure and going to sea and more about how everyone was feeling; how others reacted to the experiences unfolding around and to them. More about expectations and worry about keeping everyone safe and happy. From John's battle with alcohol to the kids missing their friends and "normal" life back in La Jolla, California. The endless costly repairs, the children somewhat reluctant, and eventually coming into their own.

The second part was written by John Silverwood. He follows up the rescue from his perspective and neatly parallel's an almost exact wrecking 150 years earlier. He has a story tellers gift for giving the reader the Silverwood's story threaded with history and nautical lore. His voice is very different and I found myself feeling somewhat cheated that the entire book hadn't been from John's perspective.

It would be easy to nitpick all the faults in this book: like the title, Black Wave. Where the hell did that come from?! I expected a middle of the night rogue wave or... something resembling an evil wave of destruction. Nope. Just an attention grabbing title that never appears in between the pages (if it did appear in the story, I missed it). The kids are all brilliant in their own right. Of course they are, so is my kid. But none of that was enough to derail my vicarious adventure with the Silverwoods.

All in all it was time well spent. A good book that will probably be passed on to another adventure lover instead of finding a permanent home on my bookshelves.

Kathy says

I first heard about this book last year when I got a notice to put in the church bulletin that the authors would be speaking at a local fireside. I reserved it at the library but did not have time to read it the first time it became available. This time I got it on CD and listened while cleaning a bedroom late into the night. The first part is told by the mother: the accident, their family history, and typical days on the high seas. It's not particularly well written but it was like having Jean sit on the bed and tell me the story while I worked. John comes across as mildly religious (though an alcoholic). I could not figure out why they would be invited to an LDS fireside, until I got to John's portion of the book. He compares their crash to that of the Julia Ann, the only ship, of the many that carried 85,000 Mormon immigrants to the US, to be shipwrecked and lose passengers.

David says

A family adventure living on a sailboat is recounted in two main sections. The wife/mother walks you through the travels, family conflicts, ups and downs of the four kids' moods, and her husband's struggles with drinking, all surrounding the central story of their accidentally hitting a reef during a storm. Her husband lost

a leg in this incident, and they were all at grave risk of dying.

The husband/father's part of the book gives some insight into how he dealt with the pain and helplessness until they were rescued but also includes a strangely detailed digression about a similar accident in the same location from about 100 years ago (I think -- I found this part boring and skimmed a lot). Apparently he found researching the earlier accident helpful as he recovered physically and emotionally.

Obviously it's very sad what happened to them, but I found the reading non-suspenseful. You can tell from the cover photo that he loses his leg and they all survive, and beyond that outcome the details about sailing and reefs and navigational equipment were not riveting to me.

I was thinking it would be an interesting analysis of the feelings involved in having gotten your kids into such a dangerous situation in order to gratify your own (especially the Dad's it seemed) wanderlust. While there were a few touching observations (esp. their reactions to seeing their older son perform heroically during the storm), for the most part it just seemed that they were normal cute kids, and the parents thought it was a good experience for them to see the beauty of the natural/nautical world, and too bad about the leg but life is short, and that's that.

Rhonda says

True story of a family who took off in their sailboat for a "trip of a lifetime" to get away from the ratrace of the world. They left Norfolk, VA, headed to Bermuda, the Virgin Islands, Lesser Antilles, Aruba, Panama Canal, to Ecuador, Galapagos, and off to the South Pacific to Tahiti. They hit a coral reef which tore their boat apart, the father gets his leg crushed by the fallen mast, etc. Of course, they eventually get rescued. Not a heartwarming story to a woman whose husband wants to constantly take off on the sailboat to the "unknown". But at least it has a happy ending.

Amy says

I didn't like this book. There were moments where it seemed to get better but much of the book I was just trying to get through. I wouldn't have finished except for it was a discussion book for my book club.

The writing was choppy and non linear. I didn't really find any of the main characters to be very likeable. The wife was rude and kept bring up her husband's alcoholism. She also seemed to alternate between how great and wonderful their family was (Yay God!) and how completely dysfunctional it was. She even mentioned several times what a brat her oldest was (Gee thanks mom). I wanted to hear more about why they

took this trip and all the things they got to do on it. I don't give two figs about the boat and all the sailing terms and crap. Much of the book was bogged down by sailing stuff which might be nice to add for those that sail but for those of us that don't, I was completely lost and bored by those sections.

I would not recommend.

Doug Cornelius says

Black Wave is the story of a family from San Diego sailing around the world in their catamaran. The subtitle lets you in on the upcoming drama: A Family's Adventure at Sea and the Disaster that Saved Them. It only takes five pages into the book before the disaster strikes. The boat slams into a coral reef during the night, destroying the boat and seriously wounding members of the family.

I am generally not a big fan of stories that start with the climactic scene and then flashbacks to tell the story. It just seems to be kind of tired way of bringing people into the story. In this case, I found it worked. Interweaving the family's background with disaster unfolding made you understand and empathize with the characters as they struggled to survive.

I really enjoyed Part I of the book which was this story told by Jean Silverwood. Part II of the book was written by John Silverwood and tells some of the history of the reef. He focuses on a similar disaster, when the Julia Ann crashed into the same reef in 1855. Part II is far less interesting and not as engaging as Part I.

In the interest of full disclosure, the publisher send me a free copy of this book to read, hoping I would review it. I am big fan of human adventure stories. Before the kids I had a few years of mountain climbing and adventure racing. Now, with two kids, I am much more of an armchair adventurer. Maybe it was the family man in me that got so engaged in a family trapped in a desperate situation.

Whatever the reason, I thought the book was a good read. But feel free to stop at the end of Part I.

Gerry Claes says

Sometimes I wonder what parents are thinking. Why would parents take their three children (14, 12 and 4 years old) on a one year sailing trip from New York to Sydney Australia? The risks from weather, pirates, mechanical failure not to mention taking your kids out of school and removing them from almost all social interaction are way to great to even consider such an undertaking. If you want to expose your children to the experience of sailing the oceans, do it over the summer for a month or two. If they enjoy it, they can pursue sailing as an adult.

Anyway, the Silverwoods decided that this was a good idea. They faced all kinds of trials during the sail and eventually found themselves grounded on a reef in the south Pacific with a large hole in their Catamaran. Fortunately after two days stranded on the reef they were rescued but not before the father, John Silverwood, lost his leg when the mast fell on him. All the other members of the family did come through the experience unscathed.

The first half of the story is told through the eyes of the mother Jean. She has to be a saint in order to put up

with her husbands antics. He is an alcoholic who falls off the wagon halfway through the trip, is somewhat reckless and would go through some dark mood swings. The second half of the book is told by John Silverwood and tells the story of a passenger vessel that 150 years earlier hit the same reef with somewhat similar experiences.

The story is well written and is very interesting. I just keep shaking my head and asking the question: "what were you people thinking?"

Jen says

I started this book thinking it would be a 5 star read and it was for a couple of chapters. Unfortunately I got more angry with the parents as time went on. I know parents are only human but seriously expecting your teens to step up and take charge while you fall to pieces is just not on. Kids don't have long enough to be kids now anyway which may have something to do with all the adults abdicating responsibility (they have already had to be adults for too long). Letting your daughter stand in open water while you pour blood out of a raft, really? On what planet is that ok? Anyway I got so angry with the parents, especially the mother, that it spoilt the read. Perhaps I should respect them for being honest but at this stage I can't.

I also got frustrated with some of the information (science) printed as fact which was complete rubbish and the talk of diving which implied that they knew what they were doing but clearly didn't.

If you like your teens cared for and your facts correct this is not the book for you. Much respect to the teens though who really did step up in awful circumstances.

Fishface says

A pretty good read. Book I was written by the mom and Book II by the dad. This is the true story of a blue-water-sailing disaster that almost killed the dad and forced the mom and their 4 kids to pull together in a way that they had never needed to before, even in all their previous months of travelling around the world by sailboat. I disagree that this disaster "saved" them -- they were a pretty strong family before, not in need of saving, and this is the kind of trauma nobody truly needs. But by the end of the story I had overcome my disdain for their privileged blonde selves and admitted that they all have sand.

Keith says

As someone with sailing experience, I found the Silverwood family's true life adventure captivating. I was particularly taken with the candid revelations that Jean Silverwood, the wife and mother of the family acknowledged. Admitting her doubts and fears about participating in what was essentially her husband's obsessive dream trip showed devotion and courage beyond the pale. Taking one's young children on a world sailing cruise, regardless of its experiential potential, shows an unshakable faith in destiny, as well as an enduring self-confidence. I'm not sure if those without sailing experience will be as moved as I was by this book but in addition to the nearly tragic and exciting outcome, they may appreciate that the story becomes a virtual primer on sailing terms and techniques as well as a basic handbook, on what to do and what not to do, for the ultimate sailing experience.

Philski says

The mother telling the story comes off as a total bitch, the editor whoever it was should be shot, in both parts of the book the flashbacks are inconsistent and so closely intertwined that you lose track of where you are in time - traditionally you'd flash back with a font change, different indentation or some horizontal space but in several stretches we'd flip a paragraph at a time. The second part written by the husband was more interesting paralleling his shipwreck with prior shipwrecks on the same reef but suffers the same issue - there at least we have differently named actors in each phase of history.

Also the nautical verbiage was mixed throughout the book (left and right for port and starboard, references to 'geona jib' which is redundant and other stuff a deckhand could have fixed easily, much less a competent nautical editor.

TL;DR lots of rookie mistakes, bitchy storyteller, poorly edited. And plenty of evidence as to why one should sail a fully keeled sailboat instead of a catamaran :)

Kirsti says

"If I'm sleeping, then nothing hurts me." --John Silverwood, trying to explain to his two youngest children that he is likely to die in the next few minutes

Interesting but really, really, really padded account of a family's shipwreck. The family was a married couple and their four children, ages 16, 14, 9, and 5. They spent more than a year sailing the Atlantic and Pacific before their catamaran ran aground on a coral reef and broke apart. I'd thought that children as young as 9 and 5 might not be able to take in what was happening during such a horrific event. But as soon as the chaos started, they hung onto each other and began screaming "We don't want to die! We don't want to die!"

I admired the mom's intelligence and bravery. I did get a bit irked at her for repeatedly comparing her husband and boat and income to others' husbands and boats and incomes and then insisting that it wasn't right to compare them. Either do it or don't, but be honest about it.

Stephanie says

I quite liked this adventure book: a family of 6 leaves their comfy California life to live on their catamaran and sail around the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal and on to Australia. We find out almost immediately that they do not reach Australia, but that instead, they shipwreck and the husband becomes seriously injured. The first 80% is told from Jean, the wife's, narrative. She kept a journal on the voyage and she details not only their travels and port visits, but how she watches her family grow and change during the voyage. The narrative goes back and forth between the night of the wreck, and the entire trip leading up to it. It's well-done, not award-winning, just interesting. I didn't care as much for John's narrative, which completes the book. I didn't like his voice. I most enjoyed hearing about raising the kids on the boat! 3.5-4 stars.

