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Narrating the Storm

Author tells how he chronicled fishermen's drowning



Sebastian Junger reads a passage from his bestseller, "The Perfect Storm."

What does a drowning victim think about in his final moments?

No one will ever know for sure, but author [Sebastian Junger](#) tried to get as close as possible to the experience when he wrote his bestseller, "The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea."

"It was sort of like writing a detective story," Junger said Monday at Fisk Hall, where he was invited to address associate professor David Abrahamson's "Literary Journalism" class. "I am interested in the forces that corner people and kill them, or save them. As long as you're honest about not knowing the answer, the quest for the answer justifies itself."



Assistant Dean Jon Ziomek (top) and other guests listen to Junger's reading.

The book tells the story of six swordfishermen on the *Andrea Gail*, out of Gloucester, Mass., who died in a shipwreck during a storm off the coast of Nova Scotia. Junger interviewed a survivor of a

similar wreck as well as Gloucester natives who knew the victims, and he gathered a myriad of scientific data on the biology of oxygen deprivation and the physics of storms, waves and ship structure.

Junger said interviewing the man from the similar wreck, who had survived being upside-down in the darkness of his ship's wheelhouse but somehow made it out, provided invaluable insight into what the men

of the *Andrea Gail* might have been thinking.

But Junger he said studiously avoided directly attributing those thoughts; he read aloud the passage about the final moments before drowning, which contains a flurry of generalized references like: " 'I can't die, I've got tickets to the ballgame next week,' is not an impossible thought for a drowning person to have."



Junger used analogies to describe what a drowning victim thinks about. "Otherwise, you're saying you had access to information that you didn't," he said.

If a journalist directly attributes such thoughts, "You're saying that you had access to information that you didn't," Junger explained. "You can say to the reader, 'Sorry, I'm not God.' "

Junger made a point of interweaving the dramatic aspects of the men and their deaths with the drier scientific information. "You're using two different sets of reading muscles," he said. "If it's all drama . . . you're going to wear the reader out."

But without the drama, Junger said, who would care about the particulars of ship stability? "You're motivated to do the work because you're attached to the characters," he said. "You want to know how waves work because they killed them."

Before writing "The Perfect Storm," Junger said he had been published occasionally in magazines but made his living as a tree surgeon. That experience got him interested in people who work dangerous jobs but get very little press -- loggers, farmers, oil rig workers and the like.



Journalism graduate student

After settling on the shipwreck of the *Andrea Gail* as his subject matter, Junger got a modest book contract "to my

Rachel Brand asks a question. shock" and realized he had no idea how he was going to fill 300 pages. But eventually, he cobbled together enough angles on the story -- from how Gloucester was first settled, to how a big storm gathers, to why these particular men were on that particular boat on that particular day.

One student asked whether Junger considered writing the book as a novel. He did write one chapter of fiction, which he said was "unspeakably bad." If he had grown up in Gloucester or worked as a fisherman, Junger said, that approach might have worked. But as a college graduate from a prosperous Boston suburb, "I can't step into their shoes and pretend I know what it was like," he said, adding: "It also felt disrespectful."

Another student asked Junger about his writing discipline. He said he tries to write 500 words a day but generally not at the same sitting. "As soon as I get bored -- and I know the feeling immediately -- I stop," Junger said. "A lot of coffee is involved."

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