

Simmons' *The Terror* Is Guaranteed to Send Chills up Your Spine

By Danielle Conklin

Simmons, Dan. *The Terror*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2007. 769 p.

Starvation. Scurvy. Mutiny. Cannibalism. A nefarious, man-eating ice monster. What else could go wrong with a polar expedition?

To 19th century explorers, the Northwest Passage was as elusive—and as highly coveted—as the Holy Grail. The desire to discover and traverse that unknown region of the Arctic Circle drove many men to risk life and limb in seemingly quixotic voyages. In *The Terror*, Dan Simmons presents the lost Sir John Franklin Expedition of 1845, as gleaned from primary and secondary source research, while adding elements of horror and mythical fantasy.

Using real characters and the chronicles of some true events, Simmons paints the picture of the ambitious, but ill-fated expedition. The crews of the two ships, *Terror* and *Erebus*, are in pursuit of the legendary Northwest Passage. While Sir John is the “official” leader of the expedition, he is a figurehead, an aging captain hoping to recover his dignity following a disastrous political assignment. Captain Crozier of the *Terror* and Captain Fitzjames of the *Erebus* are the true commanders, a fact that is silently but universally accepted by the men. Although there are many perspectives offered throughout the course of the story, Captain Francis Crozier, a drunk and clairvoyant, is the principle consciousness of the tale.

As the two ships become locked in ice, an experience not unfamiliar to experienced Arctic explorers, dark and ominous occurrences plague the men with relentless regularity. Some of the seamen fear that the spirits of the dead are escaping from the Dead Room aboard the ship, but Captain Crozier, with his preternatural intuition, knows that the noises are coming from the “thing on the ice,” as it struggles to breach the ship. Soon enough, the men cast aside their fear of ghosts and discover that their reality is far more terrifying. To confirm his fears, Crozier investigates the hull only to discover “huge claw marks in the splintered oak—claw marks streaked with frozen smears of impossibly bright blood.”

The creature that stalks them easily dwarfs the Northern white bear. Standing over twelve feet tall while on its hind legs, the creature rises out of the ice in a blur of claws and teeth. Its ancient black eyes are an abyss within its triangular head. It seems to kill for sport, rather than for food, and exhibits a stealthy cleverness that exceeds any animal species. It shreds, decapitates, and eviscerates men, returning pieces of their corpses in a cruel prank. The thing from the ice is calculating and unstoppable. Neither bullets nor blades

have any effect. Worse, the monster seems to know what the men will do before they do it.

Crozier's clairvoyance, dubbed his "second sight," presents itself during the withdrawal-induced fever dreams resulting from his depleted alcohol supply. He sees and experiences things that he couldn't possibly know, including numerous rescue attempts—all failures—and, ultimately, the salvaging of goods that are currently on the two ships. He is also able to make an unexpected connection with Lady Silence, one of the God-Walking People, when he taps into her dreams. In a portentous interlude, Crozier has a recurring dream wherein he extends his tongue to receive Holy Communion, but the priest is a huge, menacing creature looming above him. This is oddly reminiscent of a scene between Lady Silence and the ice monster.

In a bizarre and chilling twist, Young Lieutenant Irving witnesses an encounter between the tongue-less Lady Silence (his Esquimaux charge) and the towering bear-like monster. Deep within an ice den, he sees "the thing's jaws [open] wide and [seem] to snap shut on Lady Silence's lower face, devouring half her head." He is certain that the small, young woman has become the latest victim. Yet, when the oddly stirring music begins, Irving realizes that the monster is "playing her vocal cords as if her throat were a reed instrument." She survives unscathed and the beast presents her with what appears to be fresh meat. The sight, as well as the seductive sound of the music, leaves Irving with a throbbing erection and an unbelievable story to report to his captain.

Overall, Simmons narrates what Dr. Goodsir calls a "cursed expedition," that is, after the initial optimism and sense of adventure have faded. There are few animals to hunt, leaving the men malnourished and susceptible to scurvy. The horrors of scurvy plague the men, causing them to become weak, bloody, and bruised. They bleed from their gums, their hair weeps blood, and they lose their teeth. In an attempt to curb this disease, the men begin consuming more canned goods from their stores aboard the two ships. The canned goods, however, harbor a more insidious killer. The only solution is fresh meat, yet the only source of fresh meat comes from the seamen themselves. Some men in this expedition, such as the mutinous "sea lawyer" Hickey, are more willing—and anxious—than others to tap into this potential food supply.

Readers needn't be intimidated by the size of this book. Although it is more than seven hundred pages long, Simmons maintains an admirable pace, expertly weaving backstories, clairvoyant dreams, and Arctic lore into the drama surrounding the two ships and their crews. The men slowly realize that they are doomed. Whether they submit to death by starvation, freezing, illness, murder, or at the metaphorical hands of the mythical ice creature, they will die. It is the fear that comes from hopelessness and imminent death that is the greatest terror.

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