

THE BEAST OF CRETACEA

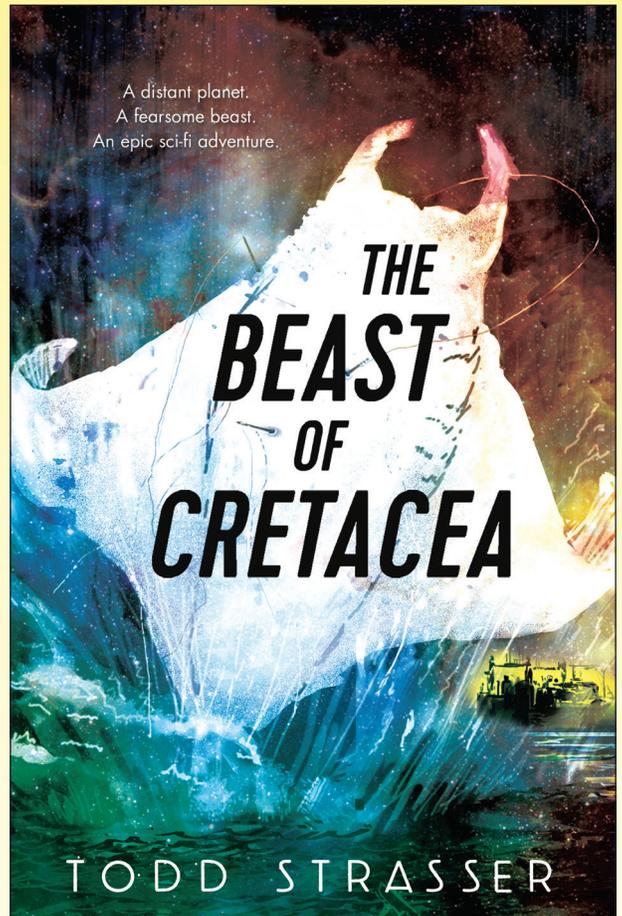
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ABOUT THE BOOK

As Earth grows arid and barren under the pollution-induced Shroud, seventeen-year-old Ishmael travels to Cretacea to earn money for his family. On this planet that sparkles with fresh air and clear water, he's assigned to the crew of the *Pequod*, a hunting ship under the command of the mysterious Captain Ahab. Onboard, Ishmael grows close to his crewmates as they chase down the huge aquatic beasts known as terrafins. His new life, though exciting, puts him in constant danger from treacherous creatures and weather, vicious pirates, and even fellow sailors. But it's Ahab's obsession with capturing the Great Terrafin that may very well kill them all. Echoes of *Moby-Dick* and a compelling portrait of environmental destruction enrich this thought-provoking, fast-paced, suspenseful adventure.



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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Ishmael's character when the novel begins and the ways in which he changes while he's on Cretacea. Identify scenes in which he shows courage and leadership. What mistakes does he make? Discuss what kind of friend he is, based on his words and actions.
2. Queequeg surprises his new friends by referring to science and history that they are ignorant of. How has he learned those things? Why is it forbidden to be a Lector? Describe other aspects of Queequeg's character, his background, and what kind of friend he is.
3. At first, Gwen is angry and belligerent. Describe her attitude when she first arrives. Explain how and why she changes, referring to specific scenes. Give examples of instances when she displays courage and generosity, and others when she reveals a darker side.
4. Billy's life is transformed during the book. Discuss what he's like at the beginning, including his background and self-image. In what ways does he change? What causes the changes? Discuss whether or not he's better off in his new life, and why.
5. Ishmael and his friends realize that Pip is from a much wealthier, more powerful class than they are. How can they tell? How does Pip explain why he's on the ship? What is his background, and what role does he play at the end of the book? Discuss whether you think Pip grows as a character, citing evidence from the text.
6. Early on, Ishmael makes enemies of Bunta and Daggoo. Describe how it happens. What does the incident tell you about Ishmael's character? Discuss specific consequences of having those two crew members as enemies.
7. Some chapters offer glimpses of Ishmael's childhood and the years before he went to Cretacea. Describe what Earth was like where he lived, including the Shroud, and how his family survived. Why do you think the author interspersed chapters about Ishmael's life on Earth throughout the narrative instead of summarizing this period at the book's beginning?
8. Even though Archie appears mainly in the short chapters set in the past, he's important to Ishmael throughout the novel. Describe the boys' relationship before and after they became foster children. What is Archie like? How does he influence Ishmael's choices and actions? What does Ishmael learn near the end of the book about Archie's fate?
9. What clues does Old Ben give Ishmael about what is really happening on Earth? What is Old Ben like? How does Ishmael encounter him on Cretacea, and what occurs during that encounter?
10. Describe Gabriel, Fayaway, and the other islanders, their everyday activities, and their philosophy of life. How is their safety threatened by Ishmael and his friends? What does Ishmael learn from them, and how does he affect their lives?
11. What role does Tarnmoor play during Ishmael's time on the ship? What might the old man mean when he says to Ishmael, "Ask yerself where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoors no more? Where's the foundling's father hidden? Our souls is like those a' orphans. The secrets a' our paternity lies in their grave" (page 97).
12. Tarnmoor later says of Starbuck, "He always did have heart, that one. Damaged heart, true, but heart just the same" (page 376). Describe Starbuck, how he treats Ishmael and others, and the instances when he shows heart. What is Starbuck's relationship with Ahab like? Why does Tarnmoor say Starbuck's heart is damaged?
13. In the end, what happens to Ahab, his crew, and the *Pequod*? Describe the final encounter with the Great Terrafin. Talk about what the huge beast means to Ahab and why he was pursuing it. How did the officers and crew feel about the pursuit?
14. Although the crew is told that the *Pequod* hunts the terrafins for nutrients, Ahab and Starbuck also seek a mysterious green liquid. What does it do, and what is its relationship to the terrafins? Describe the connection between the islanders and the green liquid, how they obtain it and use it, and why it poses a threat to their safety.

15. Analyze the book's ending from Ishmael's perspective. What parts of it are positive? What parts are sad? Discuss what you think his future holds, citing evidence from the text.
16. In many ways, Ishmael's life on Cretacea feels as if it belongs to an earlier time. Identify some of his experiences there that could have taken place in the nineteenth century and then point out others, such as the use of certain technologies, that couldn't.
17. Explain the relationship between Earth and Cretacea, and the role of time in that connection. What clues were there on Cretacea that Ishmael overlooked? Identify some of the things that Ishmael has never seen on Earth that he sees on Cretacea.
18. Queequeg says near the end, "Humans have been the most successful invasive species of all time" (page 405). What does he mean? How does the novel illustrate his belief? In what ways does our environmental situation today support his statement?
19. The novel's epigraph is a quote from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Why did the author choose this quote? If you aren't familiar with the novel, locate a summary of it. Discuss aspects of *Moby-Dick* that are similar to *The Beast of Cretacea* and aspects that are different. Why do you think the author drew so many parallels with a previous book?
20. To build tension and drama, the author uses cliffhangers at the end of some chapters. Find examples of effective cliffhangers and discuss their impact on the reader. Look at the beginning of the chapters immediately following the cliffhangers to see how quickly the suspenseful situation is resolved.



photo by Hollis Ratkin-Sax

ABOUT TODD STRASSER

Todd Strasser is the author of numerous award-winning young adult and middle-grade novels, including *Fallout*, *The Wave*, and *Give a Boy a Gun*. He once worked as a street musician in Europe and later owned a fortune cookie company. He now divides his time between Westchester and Montauk, New York, where he likes to read, play music, spend time with his grown children, play tennis, and surf.



What if the bomb had actually been dropped? What if your family was the only one with a shelter? Todd Strasser's most impressive and personal novel to date ruthlessly yet sensitively explores the terrifying what-ifs of one of the most explosive moments in human history.

★ *Kirkus Reviews* ★ *Publishers Weekly*

Fallout

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Also available as an e-book and in audio

Teachers' guide available

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean. Kathleen was a school librarian for more than fifteen years and now presents all-day workshops on new books for young people. She served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.