Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and The Endurance

Organizational Patterns:
This book is broken into twenty chapters of very manageable size (usually 6-9 pages). These chapter divisions appear to have been chosen based upon significant events that happen to the crew. The book also includes an index. Additionally, Armstrong has included diagrams, maps, and photos throughout the book. In the front of the book there are pictures identifying the crew members, blueprints of The Endurance, and general maps of Antarctica and the path The Endurance took. Page 110 also contains a helpful map for following the end of Shackleton’s journey.

The book begins with an “attention grabber” section entitled “Just Imagine” which gives a one sentence summary of the book that reveals that the crew survives. The book is then read to see how they survived more than if they survived.

Armstrong does an excellent job of incorporating background information about the Antarctic and navigation. This is usually included in the first few paragraphs of the chapters, but it is also scattered throughout. She narrates the book from an objective point of view.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature:
Themes:
Survival- This is the most obvious theme of the novel as the members of the crew continually must decide what to keep and what to take with them on their journeys through the Antarctic. They suffer significantly. There are also many instances when the crew is forced to do things they would not do normally for survival. The examples of this theme are too numerous to mention.

Leadership- Shackleton is the epitome of leadership. He is constantly concerned for his crew and deals with problems of mutiny, etc. He has the respect, however, of his crew. He never seems to slacken, give up, or show any signs of sickness like many of the others do. He is so concerned about the crew that he yells out in the night in nightmares about them (107). One of the best quotes to use in teaching this theme is on page 116: “The thought of those fellows on Elephant Island kept us going all the time. It might have been different if we’d had only ourselves to think about. You can get so tired in the snow, particularly if you’re hungry, that sleep seems just the best thing life has to give. . .But if you’re a leader, a fellow that other fellows look to, you’ve got to keep going. That was the thought which sailed us through the hurricane and tugged us up and down those mountains. . .and when we got to the whaling station, it was the thought of those comrades which made us so mad with joy that the reaction beats all effort to describe it. We didn’t so much feel that we were safe as that they were saved.” There are also great quotes on pages 46-47, 64, 100, and 123, among others.

Loyalty/Teamwork- The team really has to work together in order to succeed. Shackleton, of course, shows unwavering devotion to the crew. The members of the crew are also all willing to help as needed, even when they arrive on Elephant Island.
The chapter “Mutiny” explains some of the importance of sticking together, as well as their continual efforts to stay together as the ice breaks up beneath them (75,79).

Setting:

The setting is nearly a character in this work. It is the impetus and inciting incident of the plot. All of the events in the novel are closely tied to their setting in the Antarctic. The book starts out in London. The crew travels to Buenos Aires, South Georgia Island, and then in the Antarctic. They do eventually land on Elephant Island and Shackleton and some of the men make it to South Georgia Island. However, the majority of the book takes place as the crew floats with the ocean on icebergs on in their boats.

The fact that the setting is on a boat and in the Antarctic is responsible for the majority of the new vocabulary in the novel. Students will need to become familiar with the terms used to describe the setting (such as the parts of the boat, what a floe is, and how icebergs function) to better understand the novel. Armstrong does give some limited instruction on these concepts, but the classroom should definitely supplement this knowledge. Maps and photographs in the book as well as from other sources will prove extremely useful in teaching the setting of this work.

Students should also know the historical context of this voyage as it takes place at the beginning of World War I. This is briefly mentioned in the text.

Character:

Because the crew lives so closely together, it is inevitable that the members of the crew become very familiar to the readers. Surprisingly, however, very few of the characters seem to blatantly undergo changes in their personality traits during the novel. Even Shackleton, the protagonist, remains rather static. Armstrong does an excellent job of developing the men in the story, however, with anecdotes to illustrate different aspects of their personalities. It would be good to have students pay attention to how Armstrong reveals information about the characters as part of her narration. Character maps would definitely be an aid to this novel because of the large number of characters involved. Predicting exercises regarding character could be done with the photograph of the crew and the beginning of the book.

Nonfiction:

This is a great book to teach students what constitutes nonfiction. Even though much of the book reads as a story, students should notice a difference between this genre and fiction. Teachers could discuss what primary documents and secondary documents are (utilizing the examples in the book) and what purposes nonfiction fulfills that fiction does not.

Tone:

The tone of this book may be one students are rather unfamiliar with. Armstrong tries to be objective in her telling of this story. Because it is a work of nonfiction, the way this novel reads may be different from many of the literary texts students have read. Armstrong really takes on two different tones. When she gives background information relating to the setting or other information that the students will need to
better understand the novel, the tone is very formal, and reads a little like an encyclopedia. However, in speaking about the members of the crew, her tone is more relaxed and personable, showing a great deal of respect and admiration for what the crew did. It reads as if a live storyteller were reading it. This book is a great introduction into nonfiction because her tone still keeps the attention of the students as she writes.

**Affective Issues in the Work:**

Because of the severe survival theme of the novel, many of the events will be difficult for students to relate to themselves unless they have been prepared with pre-reading activities that put them in that mindset. The best ways to make text to self connections may be some of the following:

- Draw upon students’ experiences of climate and compare those to the temperatures experienced by Shackleton and his crew.
- Students may relate to being in difficult situations where there seems to be no solution. It would be effective to have them write or discuss these situations.
- Students could connect Shackleton with heroes that they have and compare their characteristics.
- Many of the students may have been in situations where there is a problem they are facing and there seems to be nothing that they can do about it but wait, as the crew must do on the Endurance and the icebergs. Students may have experiences to share.
- Most students will relate to the friendships shown among the crew and also between Shackleton and the crew. The book is full of examples of the team working together and helping each other. Some of the best examples may be when a member of the crew falls into the water, chased by a leopard seal, and as the crew works together to all arrive safely.
- Some students may have leadership experience. They could be asked to think about their feelings about being a leader or babysitter and the responsibility they felt.

**Vocabulary:**

The vocabulary of this book is surprisingly difficult. Though the text reads well, because of the specific nature of their undertaking, there are countless nautical terms as well as terms for geographical features (especially in the Antarctic) with which students may not be familiar. Vocabulary will undoubtedly need to accompany the study of this text. It may be beneficial to teach a few vocabulary words with every chapter, as some of the terms do not arise until later in the novel. Some of the vocabulary words may be familiar to them, but alternate definitions are being used for the words. There are also several quotes from crew members where British terminology is utilized. Struggling readers in 7th grade may need significant assistance. Sample vocabulary words include: impenetrable (18), crystalline (20), fo’c’sle (31), ice pack (31), brandishes (33), perpetuate (33), gramophone (33), ailing (37), jutted (39), floe (39), manning (44), calve (48), stores (53), hummock (57), plotted (57), demoralized (63), flatulence (67), unperturbed (70), occultations (73), awash (95), prismatic (101), confronted (104), fjord (104), pervasive (115), and gangrene (120).

**Major Concepts:**

- The concept of need versus want could bring up some interesting discussions in class and the crew continually sheds their equipment in order to survive. Students could think about what
constitutes and need and what constitutes a want. They could debate if the banjo that Shackleton told Hussey to keep (46-47) was a need or a want. Basic needs can also be discussed and how needs change with climate and circumstance.

- Team work and leadership are also important concepts in this text as the crew works together to survive. Students can examine what these different roles mean and the responsibility that comes with each of them. They can evaluate how they act as a team member and leader. Group work could be appropriate for many assignments relating to this unit.

**Background Knowledge:**

Students and teachers will need to become familiar with the geography of the voyage. The many maps within the novel will prove a very valuable asset to students. Knowing a little bit about sailing ships and the age of exploration could supplement and expand the explanations given in the text. Knowledge of Antarctic climate and fauna (including what icebergs are and how they move) is rather imperative. Students must know that the months of the seasons are opposite in the Southern Hemisphere of what they are here, meaning that during the summer months, it is winter in the Antarctic, and during the winter months, it is summer. Some students could become very confused without this knowledge.

**Implications for Students of Diversity:**

Students of diversity may have problems finding themselves within these texts because the characters are all Caucasian males. Perhaps some background information on discovery and how many cultures had contributed to our knowledge of the world could help students from minority backgrounds feel more comfortable in reading the text.

**Gender Issues:**

This book involves solely Caucasian males. Roles of women and men in the time period could be discussed. The crew does toast “To our wives, and to our sweethearts: may they never meet,” but I don’t believe this would be worth addressing in the classroom.

**Central Question/Enduring Issue:**

1. **What does it mean to be a leader or hero?**
   Shackleton is definitely the hero of this novel. He constantly shows examples of being wise in his decisions and careful with his crew. He loves the crew members he leads and takes his responsibility very seriously. Students can examine how they can be leaders and heroes in their own lives.

2. **What would you do to survive?**
   This examines the survival aspects of the novel. Students could think about whether or not rules of right and wrong change with circumstances. They can also think about the differences between needs and wants and consider things they could or could not give up.

3. **What does it mean to be a member of a team?**
   The crew members are loyal to each other and work towards a common goal. How important is it to do your part as the member of a team? What strengths do you have to contribute?
Research Issues/Project Ideas:
1. Have students research different aspects of life in the Antarctic to better understand the conditions there.
2. Students could be given a mock survival situation in groups and decide what they would do in certain situations. (Possibly the situation utilized by Johannessen in English Journal v 93 Issue 1 (September 2003)).
3. Students could research and write about their personal heroes and how they compare with Shackleton. What makes that person a hero? Are there certain characteristics of all heroes? Discussion could ensue on what constitutes a hero and the different types of heroes that exist.
4. Students could construct a model of The Endurance from the blueprints at the front of the book.
5. Students can write their own survival stories.
6. Write personal essays about leadership and how to be a good leader in at school and in your personal life, based upon the example of Shackleton or personal experience.
7. Students could make character maps describing and analyzing the different strengths of the crew members and how they made the team more effective.
8. Research the navigation techniques that Worsley uses and have students learn how the readings of latitude and longitude were done and possibly take readings of their own (Could incorporate Math in the Curriculum).
9. Many resources about Shackleton exist on the web, including interactive tutorials. Have students explore the web to learn more about Shackleton’s journey.

Informational/Functional Texts:
1. Maps
2. Photos
3. Videos about the Antarctic and Shackleton
4. Navigation papers Worsley uses
5. Blueprints of The Endurance
6. Newspapers from 1916 announcing Shackleton’s miraculous survival