

Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle Study Guide

Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle by Robert Olen Butler

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Introduction

"*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle*" was published in Robert Olen Butler's 1996 short story collection *Tabloid Dreams*. As the title of the book indicates, the basic premise of the stories in this collection is the lurid exaggerations found in the headlines of newspapers such as the *National Enquirer* and the *Weekly World News*. Rather than simply sticking with the humor implied by the outlandish titles of the stories, however, Butler develops the humanity implied within each piece, exploring what the situations mean to the characters who find themselves in such bizarre circumstances.

This story consists of a monologue by a survivor of the *Titanic* disaster. She has no memory of the time that has passed from the sinking of the ship in 1912 to the time that a rescue helicopter arrived to save the lifeboat she floated in, sometime in the mid-1990s. In her time (the first decade of the twentieth century), she was active in the feminist movement, wary of men and acutely conscious of the inequalities that marked the American society she knew firsthand. Excited about the signs of social progress in the modern world that she sees on the television in her hotel room, she is also worried about what this means for her future: with the cause settled to which she once devoted her life, she cannot imagine that there is any joy left for her, a stranger in a strange land.

Though the title "*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle*" implies a farcical comedy, Butler is dead serious about this woman's plight, examining her situation with the same measured care that readers expect of thoughtful works of literature.

Author Biography

Robert Olen Butler was born in Granite City, Illinois, on January 20, 1945. His father was a college professor and his mother was an executive secretary. He graduated from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in 1967, with a degree in oral interpretation. The following year he married Carol Supplee, a marriage that was to last only four years. He attended the University of Iowa for postgraduate work, receiving a master of arts in playwriting in 1969. From 1969 to 1972, he served in Vietnam as an Army Intelligence officer and later as a translator for the U.S. advisor to the mayor of Saigon. His fiction, especially in his early novels, reflects his experience during the height of the Vietnam war.

After returning to the United States in 1972, Butler served as a reporter and editor for the *New York Times* and then returned to teach at the high school in his home town for a short while. He married again in 1972, to the poet Marilyn Geller; they divorced in 1987. From 1975 to 1985, he was an editor-in-chief for the *Energy User's News* in New York City. Butler took a position as associate professor at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, moving into a full professorship in fiction writing in 1993. As of 2005, Butler was teaching at Florida State University; in the same year, he won the National Magazine Award for Fiction.

Butler's first novel, *The Alleys of Eden*, was published in 1981, after having been rejected by twenty-one publishers. When it was finally brought out, it was praised by critics and became a Pulitzer Prize contender. The next year, his second novel, *Sun Dogs*, was published. In all, he published six novels between 1981 and 1992. Butler's 1987 marriage to Maureen Dolan ended in 1995, when he married Elizabeth Dewberry. His short story collection in 1992, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, won the Pulitzer Prize for 1993 and was a nominee for the PEN/Faulkner Award. He published two more novels after that and, in 1996, another collection of stories, *Tabloid Dreams*, which includes "Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle." He also published another collection of stories based on a central concept: the stories in *Had a Good Time* are all based on antique postcards that Butler collected. In 2005, Butler wrote a how-to book: *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*.



Plot Summary

Robert Olen Butler does not establish a setting at the start of "*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle*"; nor does he establish who is talking. Instead, he starts the story with the narrator, whose name will much later be given as Margaret, telling her story, leaving the situation for the reader to piece together. From the title of the story, readers can accurately suppose that she is one of the survivors of the wreck of the *Titanic*, on the night of April 14, 1912. This assumption is supported by her reference, in the first sentence, to the coldness of the North Atlantic, the location where the *Titanic* sank, and references soon after to a lifeboat and the ship's smokestacks. She is recalling that night, and her life leading up to it.

While describing the chaotic scene of the ship going down, Margaret describes having been in London just days earlier, with a group of women who were marching in protest for women's right to vote and whose demonstration was being ignored by men. She feels similarly ignored as the ship is sinking, as her immediate understanding of the situation is ignored by all but one of the men she encounters. She traveled to London to attend a convention on suffrage and is proud of herself for having traveled alone, which was highly irregular for women in 1912.

In the present, Margaret finds her modern hotel room strange, but she has come to understand and accept it. She is conscious of the cold air from the air conditioner and has learned to use the television, examining the world and pleased to see women playing more significant roles now than they did in her time. The running water in the bathtub intrigues her: she has never taken off all of her clothes to bathe and finds uncomfortable the idea of doing so.

Remembering the ship's last hours, she recalls one particular man, an Englishman, whom she met on the promenade deck soon after the ship struck the iceberg. Though she generally looked upon men with disdain, she felt a little more comfortable with this man, which she attributes to his gentle, soft eyes. When he told her that the ship would be all right, repeating the much-advertised point that it was supposed to be unsinkable, she dismissed his words of consolation and told him that she knew that it was sinking. Rather than the patronizing attitude that men ordinarily took with women, he accepted her intelligence, earning her respect. Later, she explains that she climbed into the life boat that was filled with women because he asked her to, while he stayed on the ship and faced his death with those left behind.

She remembers being on the lifeboat a few days after the *Titanic* sank and then hearing a large, loud machine approach from overhead: a helicopter. To the amazement of all of the women on the boat, the captain who speaks to them when they are loaded onto the helicopter is a woman, which is something that would have been unheard of in their time. The advances that women have made give Margaret hope, but they also give her a sense of being unneeded, since so much of her identity was connected to the struggle for gender equality.



The memory of the Englishman haunts her. She knew all onboard the *Titanic* would all die; she smells death nearby as she did in childhood when she and her father visited a town where the coalmine had collapsed on workers. The man, whom she calls "my man" to distinguish him from another man who was treating this disaster as a joke, stopped her when she wanted to go back to her cabin to read. He asked her to get into the lifeboat, and, despite her aversion to domineering men, she listened to him and agreed. For a moment, she considered touching him—reaching out and straightening his necktie, in a gesture of familiarity, as if they were a married couple.

Looking back on the experience from the present in the hotel room, Margaret realizes that she missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for human contact. Having mentioned before how she has never been comfortable with her naked body, even while bathing, she strips out of her clothes and fills the bathtub. She climbs into the tub as it is filling, and, in the end, slides under the water, imagining that drowning now will reunite her with the nameless man she left behind.



Characters

The Drunk Man

Just as the Englishman and Margaret are coming to realize that they view the world in the same way, a drunk man approaches them. He has a drink cooled with ice that was chipped off of the iceberg that has sealed their fate. In describing the drunken man, Margaret is forced to refer to the Englishman as "my man," a familiarity that she notes. Both she and "her" man disapprove of the drunken man's foolishness.

The Englishman

Margaret, the narrator of the story, is generally disdainful of men, finding them to be offensively patronizing and belittling toward women. However, on the night the *Titanic* sinks, she meets one man, an Englishman, whom she comes to trust, respect, and possibly even love.

He is described as being stiff in bearing like an Englishman but having nice, soft eyes, "a woman's eyes." He is tall, wears tweed clothes, and has a moustache. When they first meet, he tries to comfort Margaret with the idea that the ship is unsinkable, but she tells him of her certainty that it is in fact going to sink, and she is impressed that he actually listens to her opinion, instead of thinking that she, as a woman, would not know about mechanical matters. As they are talking, a drunk man approaches, and both Margaret and the Englishman share a feeling of disgust. When he tells Margaret that she should get into the lifeboat that is being filled with women, she walks away, but he finds her, and the care that he has shown in seeking her out reveals to her that he really does understand her. He is the first man for whom she feels anything like love, and she shows her feelings for him by obeying his request to leave in the lifeboat; minutes later, the ship sinks, and he drowns. After her rescue, more than eighty years later, Margaret cannot get this nameless man out of her mind, and, thinking of him, she submerges herself into the cold water of her bathtub, dying just as he has in cold water.

Margaret

The first-person narrator of this story was on the *Titanic* when it sunk on the night of April 14—15, 1912. She was evacuated to a lifeboat, and, after drifting at sea for what seemed like just a few hours, suddenly found herself in modern times, rescued by a helicopter and taken to a room in Washington, D.C., where she is left to think about her past.

Margaret is a thirty-year-old woman. Her father, with whom she was particularly close, was a newspaper editor, and his intellectual curiosity carried on to his daughter. She is well-read, being familiar with authors such as the astronomer Percival Lowell and the economist Karl Marx, whose writings would have been considered inappropriate for



young ladies in her day. When she recalls her father covering a coalmine strike in West Virginia, she thinks of him as standing up against the coal company and its "excesses."

She identifies with a strong feminist sensibility she has held to throughout her life. She is a great admirer of such luminaries of the suffrage movement as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone. Her trip on the *Titanic* is a return passage from Europe. First, she attended a convention of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in London, where she was disappointed to find, when the women took their protest to the street, that the police opposed the protestors. Then she went to Venice, but soon became discontent with travel. Her status as a woman traveling alone was remarkable for a woman of the time.

As soon as the ship crashes, Margaret knows, intuitively, that the *Titanic* is sinking. She is willing to go back to her cabin and finish reading Edith Wharton's *Ethan Fromme* before dying, but a man whom she meets on deck, an Englishman with a gentle disposition, implores her to abandon ship in one of the lifeboats reserved for women. Though Margaret hates exactly this kind of pandering toward women, treating them as if they are children, she agrees. For a moment, as he is escorting her to the lifeboat and saying good-bye, she almost reaches out and embraces him, but she is too self-conscious to do so. Out on the sea in the boat, her mind focuses on the man who had shown her so much concern.

Finding herself suddenly in the 1990s, Margaret adapts fairly well. She accepts modern conveniences such as the television and the computer, understanding them in her own terms. She is glad to see the gains that women have made socially (and assumes incorrectly that they are farther reaching than in fact they are), but these gains also leave her with a sense of loss, since the thing that she fought for her whole life no longer appears to be an issue. At the end of the story, she takes off her clothes and climbs in the bathtub, which is something that she specifically states she would never have done before, and she slides under the water, apparently drowning herself to be reunited with the man with whom she almost shared a tender moment.

Margaret's Father

It is clear that Margaret's father was an important influence on her life. He was her intellectual inspiration. He took her with him to cover the coalmine strikes while he was a newspaper editor in West Virginia, and he gave her, as a teenager, a book about the possibility of life on Mars that he found so intriguing that he reported the author's thesis on the front page of the New York newspaper he was editing at the time. Thinking about the new world of the future to which she has found herself transported, Margaret frames its wonders in terms of headlines that her father might have written for his newspaper.

Her father is the only man to whom Margaret has ever been close. She remembers his death, just a year before the *Titanic* sank, when she was nearly thirty. At his bedside, she took his hand, an act of physical intimacy that, in the story, she finds herself unable to commit with the Englishman to whom she is attracted. His final words to her were,



"I'm proud of you, Margaret," which shows the source of her self-assurance, her energy, and willingness to stand up against social convention. The tears that she wept over him, she says, were "from gratitude, as much as anything else."

Captain O'Brien

When the lifeboat full of women who have escaped the sinking ship is rescued, the women are all brought on board a helicopter. Since no time has passed for them and they think it is still 1912, they are amazed to find that the captain of the rescue ship, Captain O'Brien, is a woman: this instantly shatters all of their notions of gender roles.



Themes

Edwardian Age

The term "Edwardian Age" refers to years during which Edward VII reigned. Though Edward was king from 1900 to 1910, the era named after him is often extended to the start of World War I in 1914. The Edwardian period marked the very different mood that prevailed in England and in America in the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1901, Edward ascended the throne upon the death of his mother, Victoria, who had been queen since 1837. In the early 2000s, many people probably assume that the Victorian period was one of prudishness and repressed sexuality. To whatever extent that description is accurate, Victoria's son, Edward was quite a contrast. He was self-indulgent and licentious. His own behavior matched a developing English taste for permissiveness, intellectual inquiry, and social progressiveness.

Margaret fights Victorian assumptions. She tries to liberalize nineteenth-century standards for women, remnants of the old oppressive social order. Having grown up in a household that encouraged her to challenge conventional beliefs, she is prepared for the fight, but she leaves England disappointed in Englishmen who are resistant to female suffrage. In the end, though, the man who does listen to her and respect her individuality is an Englishman.

Women's Rights

Margaret's obsession is female suffrage, a goal shared by many women and men at the start of the twentieth century. She is so involved in the National American Women Suffrage Association that she attends an international convention supporting the cause held in England.

Her concern for social justice shapes her world view: she is suspicious of men, expecting the worst of them. When she meets the Englishman on the deck of the *Titanic*, she thinks that he "seemed stupid at first, in a typical way": she expects him to dismiss her intuition about their present situation and is instead surprised to find that he takes her seriously. His acceptance, coming after years of struggling with men's patronizing attitudes, is such a surprise that it frightens and angers her, forcing her to walk away. At the end of their brief encounter, she finds that, even though she feels the right to, she cannot bring herself to reach out and touch him. At the last minute, faced with almost certain death, she is still bound by the traditional gender roles that she has spent her adult life struggling against.

Flesh versus Spirit

Though Margaret, the protagonist of this story, is strong spirited, she is unable to translate that strength into a sense of truly feeling at one with her own flesh. When she



talks about going to Venice to be alone after facing crowds of hostile men at the rally in London, she describes her self-conscious inability to bathe or even to look at her own body naked. As she puts it, "For all my ideas I was not comfortable in this woman's body."

Margaret describes being told of her father's death and realizing that he "had left his body." She wonders, when faced with death at the sinking of the *Titanic*, whether her father found his body as useless as she found hers.

In the end, though, she comes to an understanding that unites her body and her spirit. In the future, far removed from the events of April 1912, she thinks about the Englishman with whom she shared a spiritual bond on that night. At the time, she was too self-conscious to touch him, as she wanted: looking back now at what has been important in her life, she is able to free herself of her clothes, as she was not able to before. Sliding naked into the cold water in the bathtub makes her acutely aware of her body, and she imagines that she and this man, with whom she connected in life can be together again, spiritually, this time in death.

Love

This is a story about a woman who has worked so diligently to avoid being victimized by traditional gender roles that she suppresses the impulse to love when it occurs. The affection that Margaret shows for her father is deep, as is seen clearly in the scene where she sits by his bedside the night of his death and weeps while she holds his hand. Her love for the Englishman whom she meets on shipboard, however, is much less certain.

Throughout their brief encounter, Margaret holds this man at length. She never even learns his name. She expects a condescending attitude from him, and she is surprised to see his genuine interest in her, that he takes her seriously. Her suspicion is so strong that it keeps her from putting a hand up to his face as they are about to separate: the love impulse within her tells her to reach out to him, but Margaret has been conditioned to check herself. It is only after she survives the ordeal and is magically transported decades into the future that she takes the time to consider the potential in that relationship. Then she realizes that it was in fact love, and she wants to rejoin him in spirit.

Style

Symbolism

Throughout "*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle*," water is used to symbolize Margaret's fear of being touched. This is made most obvious in the segment of the story describing her trip to Venice. The trip itself is a quick diversion: she leaves London, goes to Venice, and is quickly back in London. It is not important to the plot, but it offers great symbolic significance. In Venice, as Margaret describes it, she found herself unable to bathe naked in a tub of water, overcome with shame at her own body. This aversion to water becomes even more poignant when she recoils in terror at finding that, due to high tide and/or a storm at sea, the Piazza San Marco is covered with overflow from the canals. She flees to America immediately thereafter, only to find herself faced with the prospect of drowning in the North Atlantic.

In the end, Butler uses the fear of water to show that Margaret has discovered a willingness to be free and open with her body. Having earlier mentioned a fear of the bathtub in her hotel room, she finally fills the tub and slips into the water. This willingness to submerge herself corresponds with her willingness to accept the idea that she actually does want to open herself up to the man she met on the ship that night.

First Person Point of View

Readers may find this story difficult to follow because the first-person point of view restricts the narrative and takes them from one time frame to another without explaining what is going on. The story takes place within Margaret's head and is placed so deeply within her consciousness that it does not identify places where one thought leads to another. Because the background is not established for specific scenes, readers have to interpret the clues around them in order to figure out what is going on. The basic premise of the piece, that it is the story of a person who was on the *Titanic* and has been transported to modern times through the magic of the Bermuda Triangle, is suggested in the title, but the order within the story is only dictated by Margaret private review of events.



Historical Context

The Sinking of the Titanic

The *Titanic* was advertised heavily throughout 1911 and 1912 as illustrating the future of ocean travel, a ship too huge and too well-designed to ever sink. It sank on its first voyage.

The theory behind the ship's presumed stability was its double-lined hull, which was divided into sixteen watertight compartments. Four of these compartments could flood, and the ship would stay afloat. Worldwide attention was drawn to its maiden voyage between England and New York. On the night of April 14, 1912, two days out of Southampton, the ship collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic, and five of the watertight compartments were ruptured, which was enough to make the *Titanic* lose its buoyancy. The initial impact was just before midnight, and by 2:30 a.m., the ship that had been called the greatest luxury liner ever was underwater. Of the 2,200 passengers, including many from the wealthiest families in the world, 1,513 drowned. Many of these could have been saved. But in their haste, people in lifeboats hurried away from the ship without being full, and the ship nearest, the *California*, did not hear the *Titanic's* distress call: the signal operator had turned off his radio and gone to sleep.

The Bermuda Triangle

The Bermuda Triangle is an area in the southern Atlantic ocean where weird phenomena have been said to have occurred for hundreds of years. It is the area bordered by Miami, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico. More than a hundred ships and airplanes are rumored to have disappeared in this relatively small area, fueling rumors of alien abduction, government conspiracies, and paranormal activity. Hurricanes and waterspouts have been known to spontaneously flair up in this area, and strange lights have been reported in the skies.

The most popular explanation for the anomalies that occur in the Bermuda Triangle is that the area, for some reason, has a strange electromagnetic field that confuses navigational instruments. The uniqueness of the magnetism in this area is clear from the fact that it is one of only two places on Earth where true north and electromagnetic north actually align. Many theorists take the strange magnetic fields to be proof of the work of outside forces. The second most common scientific explanation for the apparent difficulty in navigating this area is the unevenness of the ocean floor: it varies widely within the Bermuda Triangle, from 5000 feet in the Florida Straits to 12,000 feet a few miles away to 30,000 feet near Puerto Rico. The floor of the ocean affects currents in ways that sailors who are used to more gradual changes cannot anticipate. In addition, the tropical weather is violent and unpredictable. There are plenty of logical explanations for the large number of ships lost in the Bermuda Triangle, just as there are plenty of supernatural explanations.



The Suffrage Movement

The struggle for women's rights in America was present at the country's founding, as is seen in a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams, while he was attending the Continental Congress in 1776, asking him to "remember the ladies." He responded jokingly by using a line that was to be cited frequently over the next hundred and fifty years: the Declaration of Independence says that all *men* are created equal.

The first Women's Rights convention, held in Seneca, New York, in 1848, galvanized the struggle for equality, identifying the inability to vote as a primary stumbling block to it. After the Civil War, those in the suffrage movement worked equally for the rights of women and blacks to vote; when the Fifteenth Amendment granted the vote to black citizens, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the group that, in 1890, became the National American Woman Suffrage Association, mentioned in the story. Stanton resigned from the group in 1892, falling out of favor with many members, who found her ideas too radical. In 1911, the year before *Titanic* sank, the National Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage was formed as a conglomeration of shadowy financial interests, backed by society women. Nonetheless, the right to vote—suffrage—was granted to women with the Nineteenth Amendment, in 1920. Much of the organizing apparatus of the National American Woman Suffrage Association was used to form the League of Women Voters, which continued to be active into the early 2000s.

Tabloids

Almost every grocery store and convenience store in the United States has a rack near the checkout counter stocked with newspapers whose headlines pronounce lurid claims, usually combining the names of currently popular celebrities with pulse-quickening adjectives such as "bizarre," "twisted," "horrifying," "shocking," and so forth. These papers are referred to as "supermarket tabloids." The word "tabloid" refers to the papers' layouts: they are printed on half sheets that are folded in half, not in quarters, so that they can be thumbed through like books without the trouble of having to separate sections and unfold them. Traditionally, papers laid out this way have catered to the lower classes: people who might read their newspapers on a subway train or carry it in a back pocket to read during a break, as opposed to those who might have the luxury of spreading their newspaper over a breakfast table or desk. Editors of tabloids generally catered to uneducated readers with bold, gripping headlines about sensationalistic stories.

Tabloids were increasingly available throughout the nineteenth century in the United States, but they became even more common with the 1890s competition between William Randolph Hearst (1863—1951) and Joseph Pulitzer (1847—1911). By the 1970s, tabloids were part of the newspaper mainstream. By that decade, the *National Enquirer* had been distributed at grocery stores for twenty years. Other newspapers, such as the *Sun* and the *Weekly World News* followed in its wake, offering stories that

were attributed to ambiguous sources (such as "a close friend" of the celebrity being maligned) or simply running articles so preposterous that no one could take them seriously. As of the early 2000s, all U.S. supermarket tabloids are owned by the same publishing conglomerate, American Media.

Critical Overview

Critics have generally been favorable to Robert Olen Butler's works throughout his career. When *Tabloid Dreams* was published, many critical responses focused on the book's general premise, which was to present twelve stories based on lurid-sounding titles that might have been actual headlines in some of the more sensationalistic supermarket tabloids. Bonnie Smothers, writing a review in *Booklist*, found that Butler "fairly giggles throughout this collection over the fun he's having." Smothers found the stories to be "fabulously grotesque" and praised Butler for "inventiveness bordering on excess." In *America*, Barbara C. Ewell noted her appreciation of Butler's narrative device and also found the stories to be meaningful on their own: "But what makes these tales more than hilarious devices is how much truth Butler makes the incredible captions reveal about being human, and how well they expose the strangeness of our own daily life." She ends her review by telling readers that "if his fiction makes us probe a little more deeply into the absurd dreams we all inhabit, then he's only doing his job—very well."

There are, however, critics who understand what Butler was trying to accomplish with the form he chose for these stories and yet still find that his skills fall short. An example of this criticism came from Theo Tait, who reviewed the book for the *Times Literary Supplement*. After acknowledging the book's success in mirroring the collective consciousness of these superficial times, Tait explained, "Unfortunately, these episodes frequently degenerate into a familiar brand of occult whimsy, failing to grapple with their intriguing subject-matter." He found the subject matter of the stories to be too focused on the theme of isolation, with one story after another striking the same note. While many critics have been delighted with what Butler achieved, there are a good number, like Tait, who wished he had accomplished more.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois. In this essay, Kelly looks at whether Butler tries too hard to avoid the sort of sensationalism that his story's title suggests.

Robert Olen Butler's 1996 short story collection *Tabloid Dreams* has a gimmick: each of the stories that it contains is based on a title that resembles the types of titles one finds in tabloid newspapers, the kind that shoppers thumb through while waiting in line at the supermarket. "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover," "Boy Born with Tattoo of Elvis," and "Woman Struck by Car Turns into Nymphomaniac" are some of Butler's titles that could easily have been taken from the same weeklies that promise information about Bat Boy, aliens, and unlikely medical phenomena, all peppered with superlatives such as "amazing," "shocking," "mysterious," and "miracle."

Butler's use of these titles could be considered gimmicky because they reach out to a wider audience than literary fiction usually reaches. Cynical readers and critics could assume that Butler has actively courted a wide readership of people who would find his book easy to talk about with each other, given a handy description: an ordinary collection of short stories can be referred to by its title and author, but friends can take a shorthand approach to a book with a gimmick, telling each other, "Oh, it's the one where . . ." For this reason, popular response to a book with an obvious gimmick is inclined to be favorable. Critics, though, knowing that the gimmick might gain a book more popular attention than it otherwise deserves, tend to stare at such works with more skepticism than usual. They even distrust themselves, fearing that they might be kinder to a book that promises fun than they would be to just another work of literature.

Butler seemed to be aware of the probability of critical distrust, maybe too aware. Though the titles of the stories in *Tabloid Dreams* imply a playful sense and some tongue-in-cheek jibes at popular culture, the stories themselves are usually dry and serious. It is as if Butler has gone out of his way to curtail the charge that the fantasy, hallucinations, and paranoia implied by the titles of his stories are there for cheap thrills, and squeezed all of the thrills out of his fiction entirely. Nowhere is this more evident than in the collection's final tale, "Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle." It is the story of a woman on the way home from a suffrage convention in Britain when the *Titanic* crashes into an iceberg: on the deck, a man she meets convinces her to seek safety in a lifeboat, and soon after she watches the ship sink she finds herself in the modern world. The title touches upon two elements that might capture the attention of fans of actual tabloids: the sinking of the *Titanic* off the coast of Newfoundland in 1912 and the mysterious Bermuda Triangle, where ships and aircraft are said to disappear without explanation. What the story delivers, though, is a woman in a hotel room, looking back on her life with regret.

The main thing to consider when asking whether Butler has let his gimmick affect his story too much is whether the story works on its own, regardless of its title. The story itself perches in several different, but familiar, conceits. First, there is the doomed



shipboard romance. Forgetting for a moment that the narrator, Margaret, says that the ship she was on was the *Titanic*, this is just the story of two people, a man and a woman, who meet in that terrible time between a tragic event and its eventual, inevitable result. About the man, readers are told practically nothing: his story is told in detail in another story in *Tabloid Dreams*, but, considering this story on its own strength, he is just a tall, decent man with a moustache dressed in initially in tweed.

About the woman, much is known. As the narrator of the story, she darts in and out of important moments of her life, giving glimpses of herself at different ages, telling readers about her history, her family, her ambitions, her phobias. We learn that at the time of the boat crash she was thirty, a crusader for women's rights who had recently lost the father whom she adored. She distrusts men, but is uncertain about her own instincts. In some ways a Victorian, she is uncomfortable looking at her own body so she cannot comfortably take off all her clothes to bathe. She traveled to Venice, which was daring for a woman in 1912, but while there she experienced an unidentified dread when water filled the streets, and she raced for home.

Although the most of the story is concerned with Margaret's life in the year 1912 and before, the story actually takes place in modern times. She is in a hotel room in Washington D.C., where she has been for less than an hour. She has seen rescue helicopters and female army officers. She has seen television, on which she has seen "women intimately involved with machines," from which one can assume she means computers, automobiles, and the like.

Herein lies the most unsettling question about Butler's telling of the story: is Margaret's reaction to the situation she finds herself in credible? With so much new, so much unfamiliar life being introduced, is it possible that a person would spend her time dwelling on her past? The slippery thing about this question is that it concerns a possible person, not a likely one. You, yourself, might not spend your first hour in the computer age pondering your theories, or your father's theories, or the great suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton's, but if there *could* be one person who would do so, then Butler is certainly entitled to tell that person's story. He only has to convince readers that Margaret is that person.

It is not inconceivable nor even unlikely. Margaret is thoughtful and painfully self-conscious, and her encounter with the mustachioed man on the ship is the closest thing she has ever had to a romance. She might, after a glance at the modern world, take note of what is unfamiliar to her and then turn back to the matters that already preoccupied her on the lifeboat. Margaret is an unusual case: but then, all stories ought to have protagonists who are unique.

Making Margaret so introspective gives Butler a chance to delve into such rich, diverse fields as history, philosophy, sociology, Freudian psychology, gender issues, and love. In order to stuff all of these issues into a short story, he needs to have Margaret just barely conscious of the circumstances that surround her, such as the fact that she has been transported across decades in the wink of an eye. It is one thing to refuse to dwell on

the sensational, but "*Titanic* Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle" refuses to even acknowledge the proverbial elephant on the living room sofa.

For instance, the story makes no mention of the supernatural. The title mentions that Margaret has been moved from the familiar world to the unfamiliar by the mysterious workings of the Bermuda Triangle, but the story does not use the words "Bermuda Triangle" at all. For all that the story's narrator knows, she was in one place one minute and then somewhere else: the best she can do to understand this transformation, with her 1912 mindset, is to compare the modern world to a 1895 description of life on Mars. Butler avoids the question of just how the Bermuda Triangle works, just as he refuses to offer any realistic explanation for any of the weird events in the other stories in the book. To do so is his right as a fiction writer. What he fills the story with while avoiding an explanation of what has happened are the protagonist's random thoughts and background fears.

The other attention-grabbing element in the story's title is the *Titanic*. To people familiar with the story of the ship's sinking, who would be drawn to a headline like this if it actually appeared in a tabloid newspaper, the fascination with the *Titanic* is not that two lonely people might have met before the disaster. There are particular aspects of the sinking that have been told and retold since 1912: for example, the band played "Nearer My God to Thee" as the boat went down, people cooled their drinks with chunks of the iceberg that had sealed their doom. Butler's dour narrator refers to both, but only disparagingly. The elements that became commonly known and which ordinary people found interesting about the ship's sinking are not relevant to her. This seems to reflect the attitude of the story in general: after catching readers' eyes with an extraordinary title, Butler seems to be warning them that fiction is not supposed to be fun.

Since the story focuses on Margaret's mental state and avoids having her interact with the strange new world in which she finds herself, the options for how it can end are limited. One might imagine an ending with her embracing her new home, perhaps picking up the telephone and summoning the people who put her in the hotel room to tell them—what? To buy her different clothes, take her out to work the press circuit? No, this story would never go there. Such an ending is cut from the same sensationalistic territory that this story goes to such lengths to avoid.

The end that Butler chooses is so constricted that it can only work by turning symbolic. Margaret, longing for the romance that she did not have time or impulse to enjoy, decides to conquer the fear of water and nakedness that overcame her in Venice and to overcome the disdain for men that has defined her adult life. She explains that sliding into a tub of cold water will reunite her with the Englishman she did too little to get to know. If such a reunion is to happen, it could only be symbolic. (Unknown to her but known to readers of "*Titanic* Victim Speaks Through Waterbed," which is also in *Tabloid Dreams*, his fate has been a transformation into water). It is a spectacularly quiet ending to an amazingly uneventful story.

"*Titanic* Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle" is more static than it needs to be, pushed deep inside the main character's psyche by the need to avoid seeming a slave to its

exotic origins. All of the stories in *Tabloid Dreams* stem from populist roots, but they struggle against the very idea of whimsy that gave them their original purpose for being. Butler is a terrific writer, and the idea of working with tabloid sensibilities is a compelling one, but it seems as if, in working through his ideas, his basic gimmick may have scared him.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "*Titanic* Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



Critical Essay #2

Becker has an M.M. in musicology from the University of Texas at Austin. As of 2005, he is completing his Ph.D. in musicology from the same school. In the following essay, Becker discusses the use of form, especially the conclusion, in the short story "Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle."

In a time-based creative endeavor (meaning anything with a beginning, a middle, and an end which unfold over a certain time period), devising a satisfying ending can perhaps present the most difficult questions for the creator. How a composer resolves the sonic tension created during a piece, what decisions a director makes about how a film's momentum slows, or how an author wraps up the situations he has presented through out his story all have a major impact on how the audience receives the work as a whole. An exemplary finish can make up for an otherwise perfunctory work; in fact, some writers and authors make entire careers out of unique endings (for example, writer/director M. Night Shyamalan of *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* fame). At the same time, a poorly executed ending can spoil an entire work for the audience, even if the rest of it is top-notch.

For example, a common tactic in poor conclusions is the use of fairy-tale endings in which the hero implausibly wins the heart of the love interest, defeats the evil-doers, and, to boot, learns some important life lesson along the way. In short, everything ends neatly tied up and totally positive. While this may work in children's stories and Walt Disney movies, it generally does not for adult literature. After spending time witnessing the drama's unfurling, such an ending short-changes the audience. It leaves them feeling cheated or snubbed, as though they wasted their time.

To circumvent blatant fairy-tale endings, authors have endings which are just as "cheap" as that described above but are not as obviously childish. One of these is the ending in which the central character is placed in a difficult situation (or usually a series of them) only to find out in the end that it all has been a dream. In the 1980s the writers of the hit television show *Dallas* tried to use this tactic at the end of the 1985—1986 season; in the season finale, the main character wakes up one morning to find her husband alive (he was killed off at the end of the previous season) and that the events in this entire year's episodes were all figments of her imagination. Fans of the show were disappointed because they watched the show every week for months only to find out that none of it mattered—they wasted their time. A variant of the dream ending involves the character either dying suddenly or realizing he has been dead all along (for example the films *Sixth Sense* or 1990s *Jacob's Ladder* with Tim Robbins). This method is just as frustrating for an audience because killing off a character makes it easy for the author not to have to resolve the complicated situations he or she has created for that character. It all magically disappears. In other words, this type of ending feels like a cop out.

Given this discussion of types of endings, the conclusion of Robert Olen Butler's short story, "'Titanic' Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle," from his *Tabloid Dreams* merits a



close examination. On the surface it would appear to be one of these difficult-to-digest endings. The character, Margaret, agonizes over her unfulfilled life and lost chance at love only to suddenly choose to drown herself in the bathtub on the very last page. However, Butler does not allow this to play out like an awkward, sophomoric gimmick. His choice to have her commit suicide is more than just a convenient, if a tad morbid, way to bring the story to a finish. Instead, his choice of ending works for this story and this character, even though death endings are often weak. This begs the question, "How does the author manage to kill off the only character in the story, yet manage to make it seem genuine rather than an unskilled stunt?"

To begin with, Butler's choice of ending is sensible in that death appears as a topic throughout the story. While Margaret's decision to die is sudden, at least the end is not the first time the reader has encountered death in the story. Perhaps the clearest example of this foreshadowing comes when Margaret first meets "her man," as she calls him, telling him she can sense death in the air; the feeling reminds her of the time when as a little girl she saw the mine disaster in West Virginia. Thus, Butler immediately establishes the theme of dying in the initial connection between them. In fact, this discussion serves as the turning point for her, the moment in which he wins her heart by both listening intently and apologizing for doubting her. This discussion of death in essence becomes the cornerstone of her attraction to him and an inseparable part of her memory of him. Given the early references to death, readers may not be surprised that death reappears as a topic when Margaret yearns for him decades later.

Soon after this flashback about West Virginia, Butler again brings up death when Margaret claims she was not afraid of dying while on board the sinking ship. Though she is not explicit about why, the reader can infer from the next paragraph that it is because a year before she had experienced the death of her father. After remembering his death, Margaret thinks again about the *Titanic*. Butler comes back to the subject of mortality by having her decide to return to her cabin to finish the book she was reading. In this book, Edith Wharton's novel *Ethan Frome* (1911), two lovers decide to kill themselves rather than face the shame of an illicit affair. Thus, in a matter of a mere four pages, Butler makes the reader aware of death through a variety of references. These indirect omens for her suicide at the end serve to make her final act more understandable. To put it another way, by repeatedly broaching the topic of death in such a short space, Butler paves the way for Margaret to commit suicide without completely blindsiding the reader.

In addition to the way death recurs in the story, Butler's potentially self-indulgent ending is successful because it is a realistic one for his main character. To begin with, Margaret openly admits near the beginning of the story that she is alone. Further, she describes her life in the decades since the sinking as that of a deep dreamless sleep. In fact, the only time she seems to have not felt alone and catatonic was during the brief time she spent on the deck of the sinking ship with "[her] man"; this short-lived encounter was her only brush with any sort of romance. Because of this lack of exuberance in her lifetime, she paces around the hotel room, "frantic with regret," over her inability to savor the little time she had with the Englishman. At this point in her life, she desperately wants to reconnect with this fleeting moment, the only time she has felt a close personal



connection and intimacy with a potential sexual partner. Now, still thirty but suddenly in the late twentieth century, Margaret realizes she has outlived her peers; thus a reunion with the Englishman in death is attractive.

Margaret chooses a highly symbolic manner of dying. How she does it is important since she believes that "the mind's energy surely crackled on beyond the body." How she dies would have an impact on the way her energy will "crackle" after her departure. Perhaps it would affect her reunion with the Englishman in the afterlife, especially considering she hopes that "his spirit has found its way to me and is gazing on this vessel of my body." If he is watching, she needs to him to approve of her actions. Since the Englishman died in icy water, her death by the same method appeals to her. In short, Butler's choice is a nearly perfect solution to Margaret's situation. She will get to reconnect with the Englishman (albeit in the afterlife) which will ease her suffering from both solitude and regret over her lost chance at love; plus the method she chooses will resonate with how he died.

But does the ending relate to the rest of the story? Any part of the narrative, be it a twist ending or a perfunctory beginning, should be more than just plausible in terms of the plot. It should play into the mood, feel, or theme of the rest of the story; a reader should be able to interpret it as easily as any other part. Gimmick endings (or any section of a story for that matter) stand out in that they have little or nothing to do thematically with the others.

In this case, Margaret's suicide underscores the message of the whole story: the importance of living fully. Margaret's actions are not heroic but they express her single regret: "if I were the woman my mind has always aspired to and even believed I was, I should have taken the initiative there, should have touched him."

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Source: Michael Becker, Critical Essay on "*Titanic* Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



Critical Essay #3

Carter is a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter considers the merits of Butler's story from a surrealistic perspective.

Robert Olen Butler's "*Titanic* Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle," is, on the surface, a personal account of a narrator whose life has been defined by two equally profound, near-death experiences and the impact these experiences have had in shaping the course of her life and ultimate suicide. From this perspective, it is a rather dismal account. Beneath the surface, however, is a tale of supernatural proportions, punctuated with inconsistencies that suggest Butler's narrative is more than a mere survivor's tale, but a beautiful, surrealistic love story powerful enough to transcend the physicality of space and time.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator recounts the *Titanic* disaster, including her own feelings and associations. The narrator talks of her heart as "a place ripped open by ice and letting all this cold air rush in." Her experience and escape from tragedy has left a gash in her heart. The narrator speaks of being "so cold in the boat." She recalls how a "vast jagged wall of ice sought out at once" the ship on which she was a passenger. Similar images dominate the opening pages, as her focus shifts back and forth between the sinking ship and the air-conditioned hotel room; she focuses on the view of the sea and the sky, lights blazing and smoke smoldering.

Butler sets the stage for the story of a woman who, deeply traumatized, walks the world in a dreamlike state. Central to the action is the narrator, who acknowledges the emotional toll that has been taken on her spiritually. Rhetorically, the narrator asks, perhaps even pleading for a belief in the present, "Why am I still slow in believing in the reality of this hotel room in a year decades removed from the night when I fled a ship and then fell into a deep sleep?" The setting is also driven early on by other pertinent or important historical clues. Butler's protagonist expresses her displeasure for the captain of a ship, whom she calls an "arrogant man," positioning herself as "a scorned woman." Along with everyone else on the ship, she is jeopardized by his incredible shortsightedness. But for Margaret he also represents as the gender collective, "men who would not let us speak, much less gain the vote."

Buried almost casually within Margaret's recollections is yet another near miss with death. The reader discovers that she has escaped not one, but two terrible accidents at sea. She describes her mortal predicament this way: "I understand that I am alone in some surpassing way, plucked out of a place in the sea apparently notorious for mysteries, a place far from the fatal ice field." Thus readers learn that she has both survived the *Titanic* disaster and the Bermuda Triangle; she has outlived her contemporaries, yet she remains "just turned thirty." The narration moves between the past and the present in a dreamlike fashion as Margaret remembers what matters most to her. Events seem to be separated more by their emotive power than by distinct moments in time.



The story moves between the *Titanic's* fateful voyage and the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle, from which, as the title suggests, the narrator has emerged. This claim tests credibility. Margaret is fortunate enough to survive the *Titanic* and then is safely plucked from a location in the ocean where many disappear. But the *Titanic* and the Bermuda Triangle incidents represent more than two mysterious tragedies. One is a romantic memory from the narrator's past; the other, a circumstance from which the narrator has reemerged, as if from a long sleep. Essentially the story moves between two periods in history, from the turn of the twentieth century to the late twentieth century. On an emotional level, these time periods are diametrically opposed; therefore, the movement is troubling for the narrator. She sees herself as a step out of time, out of agreement with modern society. She approaches the twentieth century as one without hope or promise, but with arguments against industrialization.

Her misery is compounded by two things: first, separation from the object of her fantasy, the Englishman, a love story lost opportunity. The narrator states, "I find myself now walking around and around this room at the end of the twentieth century and I am frantic with regret, for on that night I could find no other language with which to speak." She regrets touching him only to straighten his tie: "I wanted to take him in my arms, but I did not, I could not, I was being a lady. God forgive me," she exclaims. She is haunted by this lost opportunity and what she perceives to be a separation from the other. This is in fact the context with which she frames her reaction to escaping the *Titanic*. She is, by her own admission, not afraid to die; she welcomes the idea. Her reaction to survival is not one of elation; rather, she regrets not going down with the ship if doing so could have offered her a chance to experience equality and intimacy with a tender man who took her seriously.

The second rift is a matter of living versus existing. She is disturbed by being detached from contemporary society. From the outset, the narrator claims that she is "in a place and time as foreign to me as Planet Mars." In describing the hotel room she chooses to recall her romantic encounter as it unfolded in the moments before impending tragedy. It seems that she has kept her cloths from the *Titanic*, favoring them over those that are laid out in her room, which are to her immodestly revealing. She claims that she no longer knows what to do with her body, now that her mind has been rendered obsolete with modern advances. She remarks, "When I was a child—dear God, more than a century ago now." For her only a brief time has lapsed since the ship when down, but she now realizes decades have gone by and she is thrust into a new world.

Suddenly thrust into the late twentieth century, the narrator who has committed herself to female suffrage realizes, "I am no longer needed, for one thing. I have no proof of it, but I am certain in a world like this that women have the right to vote." Given the changes between 1912 and the 1990s, she would naturally feel uncomfortable, perhaps even frightened, by technologies that have emerged during the lapsed decades. In light of her circumstances, then, an extreme discomfort with her surroundings is no surprise.

Moreover, Margaret does not want to endure life without the connection she felt briefly to the Englishman. The narrator's world is a watery one, her story's emotive power shifting, murky, turbulent as the deep ocean waters from which she has emerged twice.



Despite her good fortune or perhaps because of it, she is haunted by the souls of those not so fortunate that night on the *Titanic*, but by the modern world in which she has found herself desperately out of place, purposeless, and alone. Her suicide is an effort to transcend these circumstances in order to be again with the Englishman. In light of these circumstances, Robert Olen Butler's "*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle*" is a hauntingly beautiful love story about a woman's hope to transcend the physical boundaries of space and time.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle*," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Butler reads from his novel *They Whisper* and is interviewed on a 1994 audiocassette produced by the University of Missouri, recorded for the radio series "*New Letters On the Air*."

Butler's interview for the American Audio Prose Library is available on "Robert Olen Butler: Interview with Kate Bonetti," released by AAPL. It is featured at www.audible.com for downloading.

Butler's interview for "Soundings," the cultural affairs radio program produced by the National Humanities Center, is part of the center's audiocassette collection *New Southern Writers*, released in 1995.

Readers accessing the official Florida State University Robert Olen Butler page at www.fsu.edu/~butler/ can see Butler develop a story, day by day.

Topics for Further Study

Interview a large number of people about what they think the Bermuda Triangle is and what causes its mysterious power. Then research the scientific theories of people who have studied the area. What psychological need do you think accounts for the difference?

The website for the parody newspaper *The Onion* lists made-up newspaper front pages from history. Find one from around the time of the *Titanic* sinking and write a short story based on it.

Watch the 1997 blockbuster movie *Titanic*, and the 1958 film *A Night to Remember*, which is also about the night that the ship went down. Write a comparison of the two films, explaining which story you found most compelling.

Find the specifications of a contemporary luxury liner, and explain to your class why—in theory, at least—it will not sink.

Research Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and write a report about what their personalities were like. Explain in detail what Margaret's interest in them says about her.



Compare and Contrast

1912: Women will not have the constitutional right to vote for another eight years.

Today: Political operatives study and preen candidates' images in order to find the best way to gain the "woman vote."

1912: The fastest way to get from Europe to the United States is by steamship. Under the best conditions, the trip takes approximately six days.

Today: British Airways' Concord airplane could make the trip between New York and London in less than three and a half hours, but it was retired in 2003 due to lack of interest.

1912: The distress call from the *Titanic* is not answered by the nearest ship because the communications operator has turned off his radio.

Today: In a crisis such as the *Titanic* faced, most of the passengers would be able to call anywhere in the world on their cell phones.

1912: Sailors speculate about the mysterious Bermuda Triangle, where ships have been known to mysteriously disappear.

Today: The phrase "Bermuda Triangle" is so well known that one can generally use it to refer to any mysterious disappearance.

1912: Many cities have daily tabloid newspapers that practice "yellow journalism": printing sensationalistic articles as "news," even when they have been made up by the writers specifically to capture public attention.

Today: Daily newspapers are usually held to standards of ethics and verifiability. Lurid, imaginary stories are the province of the low-end supermarket tabloids and bloggers.

What Do I Read Next?

The narrator of this story refers to Edith Wharton's 1911 novel *Ethan Frome*, which she says she was a few pages from completing the night that the *Titanic* sank. In the book, Frome, a poor New England farmer, finds himself attracted to the enchanting, captivating Mattie Silver, who is the cousin of his homely, ill wife, Zeena.

Butler's first short story collection, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Its fifteen stories, centered on the lives of Americans and immigrant Americans affected by the Vietnam War, force Vietnam folk myths up against the difficult realities of modern industrial life.

Readers can get advice from Butler about how to write in his *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* (2005), published by Atlantic Monthly Press.

Unlike the titles in Butler's short stories, the works discussed in Bill Sloan's *I Watched a Wild Hog Eat My Baby: A Colorful History of the Tabloids and Their Cultural Impact* were all actually published in newspapers. Sloan, a former editor for the *National Enquirer*, gives an insider perspective on how decisions are made in the tabloid publishing business.

The Story of the "Titanic" as Told by Its Survivors, edited by Jack Winocour, contains dozens of first-person accounts from the night the ship went down in 1912. Some of the voices echo the voice of Margaret in the story.

Further Study

Bird, S. Elizabeth, *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids*, University of Tennessee Press, 1992.

Bird's analysis is particularly interesting for its emphasis on the historical antecedents of the tabloid reporting that is popular in the early 2000s.

Glynn, Kevin, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*, Duke University Press, 2000.

A scholar from New Zealand, Glynn has an outsider perspective that helps Americans see the growing influence of tabloid newspapers and television shows as reflections of their contemporary life.

Sartisky, Michael, "Robert Olen Butler: A Pulitzer Profile," in *The Future of Southern Writers*, edited by Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 155—69.

This 1994 interview, recorded when Butler was still pigeonholed as a "Vietnam" writer, chronicles the author's jump from obscurity to fame with his Pulitzer Prize win the year before.

Schumock, Jim, "Robert Olen Butler," in *Story Story Story: Conversations with American Authors*, Black Heron Press, 1999, pp. 201—13.

This interview covers Butler's life up to the end of the century and includes a long discussion of the ideas behind *Tabloid Dreams*.

Trucks, Rob, "A Conversation with Robert Olen Butler," in *The Pleasure of Influence: Conversations with American Male Fiction Writers*, NotaBell Books, Purdue University Press, 2002, pp. 65—88.

As the title of Trucks' book implies, gender is a focal point in this interview. He does focus on the genesis of and the critical responses to *Tabloid Dreams*.

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