

Working on the Edge: Surviving in the World's Most Dangerous Profession: King Crab Fishing on Alaska's High Seas Study Guide

Working on the Edge: Surviving in the World's Most Dangerous Profession: King Crab Fishing on Alaska's High Seas by Spike Walker

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Contents

[Working on the Edge: Surviving in the World's Most Dangerous Profession: King Crab Fishing on Alaska's High Seas Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....3](#)

[Introduction, Prologue, and Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapters 1-2.....5](#)

[Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapters 3-8....7](#)

[Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 1-4.....9](#)

[Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 5-8...11](#)

[Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 9-12. 13](#)

[Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Summary 1 and Chapters 1-6.....15](#)

[Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Chapters 7-10, Summary 2, and Chapters 11-15.....17](#)

[Part 4, The Deadliest Season: Fishing the Gulf of Alaska Aboard the Elusive and Watching as Tragedy Strikes the Alaskan Fleet: Chapters 1-6.....20](#)

[Part 4, The Deadliest Season: Fishing the Gulf of Alaska Aboard the Elusive and Watching as Tragedy Strikes the Alaskan Fleet: Chapters 5-9 and Epilogue.....22](#)

[Characters.....24](#)

[Objects/Places.....28](#)

[Themes.....30](#)

[Style.....32](#)

[Quotes.....34](#)

[Topics for Discussion.....35](#)



Plot Summary

Working on the Edge by Spike Walker is a non-fiction story of working in the most dangerous profession in the world, fishing in the Alaskan crab fleet. Spike Walker found himself on Kodiak Island searching for work on a crab boat about the time the great king crab boom hit Alaska's Bering Sea. In his own unique style, Spike Walker tells the story of his time on these boats as well as the stories of others who took the chance at fast money and adventure on the high seas and almost did not live to tell about it. Working on the Edge is an exciting tale of adventure in the world's most dangerous profession, but it is also a cautionary tale that warns would-be fishermen that easy money always comes at a high price.

Spike Walker arrived on Kodiak Island with only twenty dollars to his name and the phone number of a crab fishing boat skipper. Spike knew his chances of getting a job were slim when factored in among the hundreds of other fishermen out there looking for a place on one of the famous crab boats, but he felt his experience on the oil fields and lumber camps gave him an edge. Spike was lucky enough to have an old college buddy who ran his own boat and Spike soon found himself with a spot on the Royal Quarry during the tanner fishing season. The work was tough, especially when coupled with the sea sickness that dogged him every minute on deck, but Spike soon fell in love with the excitement of pulling up the crab pot and finding it loaded with crab. The work was tough, leaving Spike wondering how he got stuck on a boat with the only female crab fisherman in the fleet, but Spike left the Royal Quarry with a healthy respect for both the work and for Susy Wagner, the toughest woman he had ever known.

After leaving the Royal Quarry at the end of the season, Spike was lucky enough to be given a space on the Williwaw Wind. Life on the Williwaw Wind during king crab season was just as tough as it was during tanner crab season on the Royal Quarry, but was also made more difficult by a cynical skipper who often left Spike out on limb without instruction or support. Spike's time on the Williwaw Wind came to an abrupt end when Spike called his skipper out for abandoning him in the wheelhouse without radar during a critical fog. During this time Spike learned a great deal about king crab fishing. Spike also heard a great deal about the success of the fleet that season as well as the failures. Spike relates to the reader the story of the Jeffrey Allen that went down for unknown reasons, trapping a man inside. There was also the sinking of the Key West that season in which all men survived. However, the skipper would perish several years later when another boat he skippered would go down in the Bering Sea.

From the Williwaw Wind, Skip would join the crew of the Rondys. The Rondys was owned by a fishing family out of Newport, Oregon. Skip spent the summer making repairs to the Rondys and her crab pots without pay in exchange for a place on the crew during the king crab fishing season. Upon the Rondys' arrival in Alaska that season a strike was called by the crab fishermen. The canneries were refusing to pay what the skippers thought was fair, so they rallied together to fight for the fair market value of their catches. The strike lasted seven days; however, after the fishermen made their way to the Bering Sea, the canneries backed down and lowered the price of the crab



once again. During this season, Spike began to be bothered by the lack of privacy on board the Rondys. Eventually Spike quit, deciding it was time to find new faces with which to share his living space. During his time on the Rondys, several boats went down in the Bering Sea and Spike shares their stories in his book. These include the Gemini, whose sinking nearly cost one crewman his legs.

After the Rondys, Spike found a place on board the Elusive during the peak of the king crab fishing boom. During a turn at the wheel, Spike heard the mayday of a nearby boat. The captain rushed to the scene and they watched as the men were plucked from the sea and rescued by another crab boat, the Cougar. The skipper of the Elusive attempted to tow the sinking City of Seattle to shallow ground, but the boat proved to be too heavy for the Elusive's heavy howser line. Many other crews suffered great losses that year, including the crew of the St. Patrick who lost eight of ten crewmen when they went into the water under the opinion that the boat was about to sink. Unfortunately, the St. Patrick remained afloat throughout the terrible storm that convinced its skipper of its imminent demise.

After the boom years of the late seventies, the king crab suddenly began to disappear. The king crab season was canceled outright several years in a row due to the low number of catchable crab. It was later determined that the crab suffered from an illness that left the females infertile, but for a time the government labored under the opinion that overfishing had caused the decline. Eventually the Alaskan fleet would rebound and fishing would resume. Men would also continue to die. When Spike Walker attended a memorial ceremony in St. Paul Harbor in 1988, the bell that rang for the dead from the previous year rang forty-two times.



Introduction, Prologue, and Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapters 1-2

Introduction, Prologue, and Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Spike Walker once worked the oil fields of Louisiana and the lumber industry in Washington, Oregon, and Iowa. Spike heard about the easy money to be made in the Alaskan crab fishing industry and made his way to Kodiak Island where he learned to work in the world's most dangerous profession.

In the introduction, Spike tells the reader that most of what he has written are events he actually experienced during his time fishing in the Bering Sea during the king crab boom. In the prologue, Spike relates a story told to him upon his arrival on Kodiak Island in Alaska about the survivors of the Master Carl, a crab boat that sank off Prince William Sound's Montague Island. These survivors, Channel and Mogoteaux, swam to shore along with two other crewmen and waited on the beach for their rescue by the Coast Guard. During their wait, Channel and Mogoteaux suffered from hypothermia and were nearly attacked by a bear. Upon their rescue, Channel and Mogoteaux learned that their two crewmates, including their brave skipper, did not survive the rough surf that pounded the island's beaches.

In chapter 1, Spike arrived in Kodiak with twenty dollars to his name and the number of a crab boat skipper. Spike heard a man could make good money in a short time in the Alaskan crab fleet and hoped his acquaintanceship with Mike "Jonesy" Jones would help him secure a job. Spike stayed with Steve Calhoun, a crewman on Jonesy's Royal Quarry, while he waited to find a job. Spike would go to the docks everyday along Cannery Row and talk to boat skippers, but there never seemed to be an opening. In the bars at night, Spike would talk with the fishermen, not only to hear stories of the dangers of crab fishing but also to learn which boats were the best and which might be looking for a man. When the Royal Quarry came back the following week, Jonesy offered to take Spike along on the next trip with the understanding that it would be an unpaid trip just to see if he could handle the work.

In chapter 2, Spike left the dock with the Royal Quarry. Also on board were Jonesy, the skipper, Steve Calhoun, and Susy Wagner. Calhoun was an ex-high school football player and Jonesy was a college classmate of Spike's at Oregon State University. Spike was a little shocked and disappointed to be on board the only crab boat in Alaska with a female deckhand, but as he got to know her, he began to respect her. Susy had come to Alaska to make easy money like everyone else. Susy began working in the canneries,



quickly moving up as she proved she could do anything a man could do. However, the supervisor was dead set against a woman working the crane until the day the crane operator broke his ankle and Susy stepped up, off loading the crab boats as fast as a man. From there, Susy moved onto the crab boats, proving to Jonesy and her fellow crewmates that she could hold up her end of the work.

In these early chapters, as well as the introduction, the reader gets an idea of what the life of a crab fisherman entails. The reader is warned in the introduction that the stories are true, as best as Spike Walker could verify them, and that working in the Bering Sea is one of the most dangerous professions on earth. The writer then begins to illustrate his statements in the introduction by telling the reader a story of a boat wreck in the prologue. This story was told to Spike when he first arrived in Alaska by a fisherman in a bar. This story allows the reader to see how dangerous the Bering Sea can be and how inhospitable the surrounding islands can also be. In this first story, two men died. Spike Walker hopes to show his reader that death is a real possibility in Alaska's crab fleet and this first story clearly illustrates that.

The first two chapters of the first part of the book describe Spike's arrival in Alaska. The tone is filled with excitement as Spike, a young man who has experienced both the oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico and the lumber industry in the northwestern United States, gets to Alaska. Spike is constantly warned away by the locals and faces the shortage of jobs but is determined to find a job. Spike is luckier than the others who came to Alaska at about the same time, however, because he has a college buddy who runs his own boat. Spike finds a space on that boat, unpaid, and gets to know the crew and the work. Spike takes a special amount of time to point out the achievements of his deck boss, Susy Wagner. Susy is special because she is the only woman working on a crab boat in the Alaskan crab fleet at the time. Susy has overcome great obstacles to secure her job on the Royal Quarry and Spike is clearly impressed by this achievement.



Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapters 3-8

Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapters 3-8 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 3, Spike suffers terrible sea sickness in the first days on the Royal Quarry. Once they reached the fishing grounds, Spike began to learn the process as Susy, Calhoun, and the other crewmember began to bait and drop the crab pots into the Bering Sea. The fishing was poor at first but quickly began to pick up. However, after only a few days a storm hit and the Royal Quarry took refuge in the narrow entrance to Lazy Bay along with almost twenty other crab fishing boats.

In chapter 4, the Royal Quarry stayed in Lazy Bay for two days before Jonesy decided it was time to go. The storm lifted shortly after they left the shelter of the bay. The crew worked almost non-stop dragging the crab pots off the ocean floor, happy to find them filled with crab. The work was hard, but Spike was quickly learning. Spike was also quickly finding it hard not to like Susy.

In chapter 5, the Royal Quarry returned to port to off load their crab. That night Jonesy took Spike to dinner and told him to hang around because there might be an opening on the boat soon. Spike was offered a fill-in job on another boat, but he turned it down in the hopes that Jonesy might come through with a job. Spike was lucky enough to get a job when one of the crewmen on the Royal Quarry quit. Spike and Calhoun went to the famous Beachcomber bar to celebrate that night, where the talk was filled of the legendary fishermen and boats to fish the Bering Sea. Spike saw Susy flirting with a young man, pretending she knew nothing about crab fishing and Calhoun entertaining a local woman who helped him out when he first came to Kodiak.

In chapter 6, the Royal Quarry sailed back to the fishing grounds. The first night was rough with high winds. The following day, the crew heard over the radio that a couple of men had been washed overboard on the fishing vessel Epic. A crewman, Mike Doyle, was inside a crab pot hanging the bait jar when a wave slammed the door closed and washed the pot overboard. Doyle had only a matter of seconds to get out of the pot and find his way back up to the surface before hypothermia would begin to set in in the water's frigid temperatures. Somehow Doyle surfaced and saw the other crewmen trying to get him out of the water with a pipe pole. Another crewman had also been pulled overboard when the crab pot's line tangled around him. The other man was pulled aboard the boat, but Doyle began to drift away. Fortunately, the skipper was able to maneuver the boat so his crewmen could pull Doyle aboard as well. Back aboard the



Royal Quarry work returned to normal with long hours on deck. Spike took his turn in the wheelhouse during the night so Jonesy could sleep. Spike thought one night he could maneuver the boat through a narrow channel rather than wake the skipper but decided to wake Jonesy anyway. Jonesy accidentally drove the boat aground, an act that could have caused irreparable damage to the boat, but luckily it was not damaged.

In chapter 7, the Royal Quarry continued to fish through March and April. Spike continued to take his turn at the wheel. One night Spike was at the wheel but was overcome with sea sickness but was reluctant to ask anyone to relieve him even as the boat moved into a blinding fog. Spike knew there was a boat nearby, but he could not see anything and the boat was no longer showing up on the radar. Spike thought he could handle the situation, but then a processing ship appeared off the boat's bow. Spike was able to maneuver the Royal Quarry quickly enough to avoid a collision, but he felt as though he had failed the boat and its crew.

In chapter 8, the tanner crab season ended and Spike was informed that there would not be a place for him on the Royal Quarry during the summer or into the king crab season. Spike said his goodbyes. At the end of the chapter, Spike tells the reader that Jonesy would go on to build another boat and make Susy the skipper while Calhoun would become the skipper and part owner of the Royal Quarry.

These chapters follow Spike as he works on board the Royal Quarry during the tanner crab season around Kodiak Island. Spike would learn how hard crab fishing can be even before he enters the Bering Sea for the first time in the following parts. Spike would also suffer from sea sickness, an added burden to the hard work on a crab boat. Spike would also have his first experience with the inherent dangers of working on the water when he hears about the two crewmen who went overboard on the Epic. The dangers of the freezing waters around Alaska only increase the already-dangerous work on board a crab boat where a man can be smashed by a flying crab pot or break a bone working the hydraulic cranes that maneuver the more than seven-hundred pound pots.



Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 1-4

Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 1, Spike met the skipper of his next boat by accident in a bar and was offered a job a few weeks later when the skipper found himself short a man in the weeks before the king crab season was set to begin. Spike flew down to Seattle to join the crew, which included his Norweigen skipper, Lars, the deck boss, Bobby, and two crewmen, Fritz and Sig. As the Williwaw Wind left port in Seattle a man called down to Spike and expressed a desire to be going with him before wishing them luck.

In chapter 2, the Williwaw Wind made its way to the Bering Sea through a risky shortcut through Shelikof Strait. When they reached a risky area just past Unimak Island the boat ahead of them ran aground. The Williwaw Wind made it safely, however. The Williwaw made it into the Bering Sea and began gearing up for a record setting season of catching the unique, gigantic king crabs that could weigh as much as twenty-five pounds and have a leg span of over six feet.

In chapter 3, the crew of the Williwaw Wind began to bait and set all two hundred and forty of the pots they had on their deck. When those were set, the boat went to Dutch Harbor to pick up a second load of pots, which they spent the next three days setting as well. Spike then took over the job of throwing the hook to snag the lines attached to the buoys that marked the location of each pot. Spike would pull the lines in and hook them to the winch that would pull the pot on board the ship for the other crew members to sort the crab while the skipper moved the boat to the next pot. As the crew worked, often seventeen hour days, the skipper would use the loud speaker system to criticize their work. This would cause a great deal of anger among the crewmembers, but it also drew them together in their frustration.

In chapter 4, the Williwaw Wind crew filled their tanks and began to make their way to the processing ship, All Alaskan, to off load their crab. The wait at the processing ship was exceedingly long as the boats were off loaded according to when they arrived. As the Williwaw Wind waited, they risked the loss of their crab as they sat in the tanks. The skipper, Lars, was angry when it was finally their turn and they discovered a quarter of their crabs had died. Lars swore to never return to the All Alaskan, a prospect that only made the overworked crew on the processing ship too happy. When the Williwaw Wind returned to the fishing grounds, a fog settled over the entire area. In the fog, another boat, the Rondys, rammed into the side of the smaller boat Paul Lin, causing a great rip



in its hull. Luckily no one was injured on the Paul Lin and it was able to return to Port Moller for repairs.

In these chapters, Spike joins a Bearing Sea boat and is able to fish the fabled king crab. These crabs are much larger than the tanner crab Spike was fishing on the smaller Royal Quarry. This job is much bigger and tougher, with the crew working seventeen hour days while also taking their turns in the wheelhouse. This leaves the crew less than three or four hours a night to sleep and less time to eat a decent meal. Added to this the annoying criticism of the skipper, tempers are often raw on the Williwaw Wind. However, this is typical of the working conditions on most crab fishing boats, conditions that make the large income of these crewmen barely worth the effort.

On the Williwaw Wind, Spike experiences the off load at a processing ship for the first time and learns how waiting in long lines can cut into a fishing boat's profits when the crab begin to die in the tanks on the large boats. Spike also learns about the many different types of accidents that can happen on the water when he hears the story of how the Rondys ran into a smaller fishing vessel and caused a huge tear in its hull. Every moment Spike works on board one of these boats he learns another unpleasant aspect of the job, reminding him that the easy money he heard about in the Alaskan fishing fleet is not as easy as it was rumored to be.



Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 5-8

Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 5-8 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 5, the crew of the Williwaw Wind discovered on their second trip that someone had emptied their pots. It was not unusual to experience theft but most fishermen lived a code of integrity and would not steal from someone else's pots. Despite this theft, the second trip experiences phenomenal fishing. Spike was nearly pulled off the boat during this trip as well, saved only by the quick thinking of the deck boss.

In chapter 6, the skipper of the Williwaw Wind decided to take his crab to Kodiak Island when the boat was ready to be off loaded after the second trip because the canneries in the Bering Sea were overloaded with crab, but the canneries on Kodiak Island were practically empty. As the Williwaw Wind approached St. Paul Harbor the canneries began a bidding war for their crab. The Williwaw Wind ended up getting almost twice the price they would have gotten in the Bering Sea.

In chapter 7, the Williwaw Wind began making slow progress back to the Bering Sea. As they passed Puale Bay, Sig told Spike about the Jeffrey Allen. The boat rolled over and the skipper, Rusty Slayton, was washed out of the wheelhouse. Slayton swam around the hull of the boat and found his crew trapped behind a portal. Slayton helped break out the window, releasing the air bubble that was keeping the boat afloat. Slayton was able to pull a crewman and his son free, but his brother-in-law could not escape. When the Coast Guard dove on the boat later, they discovered that had the man gone to the wheelhouse, he might have survived due to an air bubble trapped there. Slayton left the fishing business after that accident.

In chapter 8, the Williwaw Wind returned to work on the Bering Sea. Someone cut the wire that connected the loud speaker to the speakers on the deck. The crew was able to work in peace for a few hours until Lars figured out what had happened. It was suspected that Spike was the one who cut the wire. The men had fallen into a natural work rhythm. One day Sig got in Spike's way as he was throwing crab from the bin and suffered some cuts on his face. Sig admitted it was his fault, however, and nothing came of it. Later, Spike's knuckles began to swell from the repetitive work. Lars told him to urinate on his hands, but Spike thought it was a joke. Desperate a few days later, Spike did urinate on his hands and miraculously the swelling went down.



In these chapters, Spike relates some of the downside of crab fishing. One of these is the stealing of crab from crab pots that are unguarded on the Bering Sea. It was common for boats to go into port to off load their crab while allowing their pots to soak, baited and fishing. The fishermen relied on the code of honor among fisherman, but occasionally an unscrupulous fisherman would betray this trust and steal crab. If that man had been caught, however, he would have found himself very unpopular.

The Williwaw Wind also found itself in a bidding war over its crab when it took the crab to Kodiak Island, showing the reader how important crab was to the fishing industry at the time even though the ports in the Bering Sea were overwhelmed with crab. This foreshadows the crab boom that would occur in the following years. Spike found a natural rhythm with the work and began to find some enjoyment in it even though it was hard work. However, dealing with an unpleasant skipper began to be a problem, and this, too, foreshadows trouble for Spike in the near future on board the Williwaw Wind.



Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 9-12

Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapters 9-12 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 9, Spike relates the story of how Gerald Bourgeois was found on an island by the fishing vessel Moonsong after his own boat, the Marion A, sank after hitting a reef in Geese Channel. The Marion A did not have time to get out a distress signal; therefore, no one knew they had sunk. Bourgeois watched Coast Guard patrols going by overhead, but they never seemed to see him. During this time, Spike continued to work hard on the Williwaw Wind. During a turn in the wheelhouse one night, Spike was told to turn the boat when he hit a certain point to avoid running aground. However, it was a dark, icy night and the radar went out. Spike had no way of knowing where he was. Spike asked another crewmember to get the skipper, but Lars ignored his request. Spike managed to turn the boat just in time, but when Lars came into the wheelhouse, Spike lost his temper and complained about being left alone without any assistance. The fight escalated, ending when Lars informed Spike he would no longer be welcome on the Williwaw Wind at the end of the season.

In chapter 10, a violent storm hit the Bering Sea during Spike's final trip on the Williwaw Wind. Many crab boats sought out refuge near land. The waves were very large and shook the boat, breaking plates and leaving the men exhausted. In chapter 11, another boat was also suffering in the storm. The Key West had several crab pots that became loose on the deck and one of them apparently sheared off the exhaust pipe to the lazarette room, allowing large amounts of water into the boat. The boat began to sink. The crew began to put on their survival suits and prepare to abandon ship. Pete Knudsen dropped into the ocean and managed to make his way to the life raft where other crewmembers waited. The crew was rescued by another crab boat, the American Eagle.

In chapter 12, the Williwaw Wind survived the storm and returned to Kodiak to off load their crab. Spike left the ship for a final time, grateful the season was over. However, for one boat the season ended in tragedy. The crab boat Epic rolled over on the south end of Kodiak Island. The skipper was able to get out a distress call and a search began immediately. Unfortunately, only one crew member was able to get to relative safety by clinging to the overturned hull. That man, Richard Majdic was rescued by the crab boat Jeanoah. The other crewmembers were never found.



In these chapters, Spike continues to relate stories of shipwrecks, again reminding the reader of the constant danger of death that working on a crab boat represents. A boat can sink in a matter of seconds in the Bering Sea. Not only do the survivors face the risk of drowning, but they also have to deal with the frigid temperatures of the water. Without a survival suit, the chance a survivor will live until rescue which is often hours away, are next to nothing. It is an important lesson that tempers the excited, happy tone with which this novel began.

Spike continued to work hard on the Williwaw Wind as hard as any of the others. Spike and his crewmembers fell into a good rhythm and enjoyed one another. However, tensions with the skipper cause Spike to lose his temper and his job. This leaves Spike without a job on the Bering Sea, segueing into the next part of the book.



Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Summary 1 and Chapters 1-6

Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Summary 1 and Chapters 1-6 Summary and Analysis

In summary 1, Spike explains to the reader how 1978 saw an amazing increase of crab boats and pounds of crab caught. In chapter 1, Spike was offered a place aboard the Rondys, a crab boat owned and skippered by Vern Hall. Spike agreed and found himself in Norfolk, Oregon for the summer, helping to paint and repair the Rondys as well as her pots. In mid-August, the Rondys began the long trip to Dutch Harbor with Spike on board.

In chapter 2, Spike introduces his crewmates on board the Rondys. Terry Sampson was a high school football player who, as the father of a new baby boy, flew to Alaska to find a job to provide for his family. Sampson lived on the generosity of the people of Dutch Harbor while he searched for a job. Weeks passed and Sampson was beginning to despair when he was finally able to secure a job on the Rondys. Dave Capri was a quiet man who worked at a pace that many men would never be able to keep. They were both incredible crewmen who Spike would come to believe were the best of the fleet.

In chapter 3, the Rondys anchored at Dutch Harbor when news reached them that a strike had been called. The fishermen were upset at the low prices set by the canneries and were in negotiations to raise the prices. Most of the boats in the Alaskan crab fleet either anchored at Dutch Harbor or one of the other ports in the Bering Sea to wait the end of the strike rather than begin fishing when the season began in a show of support.

In chapter 4, the striking fishermen were left with too much time on their hands. The nights centered around the many bars in the port villages. Spike heard many stories of the legendary fishing vessels and their crew during that time. One night, Spike ran into an old acquaintance from his days as a logger. The man was looking for a berth on a crab boat.

In chapter 5, State Trooper Lt. Bob Lockman spent the strike looking for crab boats that were breaking the law. Lockman would patrol the Bering Sea, keeping an eye out for baited pots that were fishing before the season officially opened. The punishment for this crime was often a large fine that would leave the boat's owner without a skipper.



Lockman arrested several skippers during the strike, including one who attempted to run by returning to his home port in Seattle.

In chapter 6, the strike finally ended with an offer of a dollar and penny per pound of crab. The fishermen were eager to get to the fishing grounds and there was gridlock as the boats quickly left the harbor. As the boats left, news reached the fleet that one of the canneries in Dutch Harbor would not be honoring the price set through negotiations.

These chapters find Spike on a new boat, the Rondys, with a skipper whose family is legendary in the Alaskan fishing fleet. Showing another side of the fishing industry, Spike tells his reader how he spent a whole summer working for free on the Rondys in exchange for the promise of a job at the start of the king crab season. This is not something that most workers would do, but a fisherman can sometimes have such a hard time finding a space on a boat because of the overwhelming number of men who want what they think is an easy way to make money, that they might be willing to make compromises.

A strike begins on the Bering Sea just before the opening of the king crab fishing season. Most people associate strikes with car workers or garbage men, but many readers probably never thought of crab fishing as an industry where striking might take place. However, this did happen and Spike relates one he went through himself, a strike that delayed when the fishing could begin, therefore restricting how much money the fishermen could make during the short season. It was a difficult time that left many men with too much time on their hands, beginning to illustrate as well the problems associated with so many men making such large amounts of money in a quick amount of time. This foreshadows a chapter later in the book in which Spike will address other concerns about this situation.



Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Chapters 7-10, Summary 2, and Chapters 11-15

Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Chapters 7-10, Summary 2, and Chapters 11-15 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 7, the Rondys crew worked quickly to make up for the week they lost during the strike. Spike liked that Vern Hall left them to their own devices, rarely making any comment about how they were working. Vern Hall had been fishing on the Bering Sea since he was in high school and his father bought the crab boat King-n-Wing, so he was veteran who trusted his crew. Once again the work was hard and the crew had to work long hours and fight heavy seas. Spike suffered from sea sickness once again and was often annoyed by the glee his crewmate, Capri, took in his suffering.

In chapter 8, Spike began to suffer from a lack of sleep. Spike also began to suffer from a lack of privacy, unable to deal with the annoying habits of his crewmates. Due to his own frustrations, Spike was not surprised when he heard stories about other crewmen who often went insane on fishing vessels, including one man who committed suicide.

In chapter 9, the Rondys off loaded their crab at the processing ship the All Alaskan, a ship that was owned by Vern, his father, and dozen other fishermen. Despite his claim to the processing ship, the Rondys was still forced to wait its turn, giving up valuable fishing time. Spike and his fellow crewmembers, however, welcomed the break because of the speed at which they were forced to work.

In chapter 10, the physical and mental toll of living on a fishing vessel for months at a time and working at a pace that led to body aches and health concerns began to take their toll on Spike. The dangers of the sea was also a constant concern, especially when Spike heard stories such as the one about a man who was rescued from the water through the luck of a toss of a coin. It did not surprise Spike that many fishermen gave up the easy money and settled in the lower forty-eight.

In summary 2, Spike tells the reader that the Rondys off loaded more than eight-hundred thousand pounds of crab, netting a paycheck of more than forty-thousand dollars per crewman that year as part of the biggest king crab season Dutch Harbor had ever seen. In chapter 11, Spike ended the king crab season and took a brief vacation to



Oregon before the tanner crab season. Spike found life in the lower forty-eight mundane and boring compared to the life on a crab boat.

In chapter 12, the Rondys began fishing for tanner crab in the waters around Kodiak Island but had to return to the Bering Sea in order to rescue crab pots they had left in a spot acknowledged as a storage area. As they moved through Shelikof Strait, they passed the place where the famous tragedy of the John and Olaf took place. The John and Olaf, caught in an ice storm, issued a mayday and the Coast Guard asked the crab boat Shelikof Strait to go look for the shrimp boat. The Shelikof Strait attempted to find the John and Olaf, but the winds made it impossible for them to make it anywhere near the shrimp boat's last radio contact. A few days later when the Coast Guard finally located the ship, the John and Olaf was encased in ice and her life rafts were gone. The crew is never be found. During that same trip, the Rondys was inexplicably hit by thousands of birds who became disoriented by the boat's lights and crashed into the deck. When the Rondys finally reached the storage area where their pots had been left, they discovered the ice pack had taken off with them. They were ultimately only able to find less than half.

In chapter 13, the Rondys began to build ice and the crew spent the morning knocking it away to prevent the boat from becoming top heavy. The deck would become dangerous as the ice began to fall from the boom cables overhead. Later Spike would take his turn in the wheelhouse and be surprised by the swirling steam coming from the building ice. In chapter 14, the crew on the Rondys sat and listened as the Coast Guard searched for survivors on the crab boat Gemini. The Gemini iced over and began to roll. Crewman Wayne Schueffley was in the wheelhouse with the skipper when the Gemini settled on its side. Schueffley abandoned ship without a survivor suit and was able to get into a life raft with two other crewmen. After having been in the freezing water and sitting in a puddle of freezing water in the raft, Schueffley's legs began to freeze. For days Schueffley and his companions waited for rescue as their raft was beaten by the high seas. Finally the men were rescued and Schueffley was able to keep his legs after months of surgeries and therapy. In chapter 15, unhappy with the lack of privacy on board the ship, Spike quit the Rondys.

In these chapters, Spike began to suffer from a lack of privacy on board the Rondys, touching on a theme of the novel. Spike found himself unable to deal with the constant companionship of his fellow crewmembers even though he liked each of them personally. However, when Spike went to Oregon for a visit, he found it difficult to adjust to life in the lower forty-eight. Spike, who had been a greenhorn only a few years before, has now become a fisherman in his heart, but he cannot deal with the conditions of the career, creating a quandary for the man that caused him to quit his berth on the Rondys, opening a spot for another aspiring greenhorn.

Spike also relates the mental toll fishing has on men as well as the physical toll. Men often break under the pressure of the work and the lack of privacy, as well as the fear of death. To underscore this final aspect of life at sea, Spike once again relates several accidents that happened during the seasons that he spent on the Rondys as well as other accidents that took place in the years before his tenure in the Bering Sea. Every

story Spike tells underscores the danger of the fishing industry, changing the tone again from one of caution to something close to a dark, forbidding tone.



Part 4, The Deadliest Season: Fishing the Gulf of Alaska Aboard the Elusive and Watching as Tragedy Strikes the Alaskan Fleet: Chapters 1-6

Part 4, The Deadliest Season: Fishing the Gulf of Alaska Aboard the Elusive and Watching as Tragedy Strikes the Alaskan Fleet: Chapters 1-6 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 1, the record breaking season of 1980, gave each fisherman more money that they had seen before, encouraging many to use that money in irresponsible ways. Many fishermen would drink in the local bars night after night, often buying drinks for everyone in the bar to a tune of hundreds of dollars. Cocaine also became a problem in the crab fleet. Spike can recall walking onto a boat and seeing bowls full of cocaine on the table.

In chapter 2, the fishing fleet in Alaska had increased immeasurably in the three boom years and this caused the building of fishing vessels to explode, as well as loans made to fishermen for these boats. The boats also began to be built with amenities that had never been seen before, including mechanical implements on deck that took some of the work out of fishing. However, the skippers rarely changed. Many were easy to get along with, but others proved too difficult to make the promise of easy money worth the effort. Crewmen would also continue to go nuts, with one man actually attempting to choke a fellow crewman before jumping overboard and purposely drowning himself. Another quit after months of poor fishing only to learn that the boat found perfect fishing in the days after he left.

In chapter 3, Spike returned to the fishing fleet aboard the Elusive. Spike worked under skipper Tom MacDonald who came to fishing when he discovered he could make three times what he had been making as a grocery store manager on a crab boat. The Elusive was at sea during the opening of the opelio crab season when Spike had watch in the wheelhouse. A distress call came in from the City of Seattle, a boat that turned out to be near the Elusive. Spike woke MacDonald and they immediately set out to go to her aid. Another boat made it there first and was able to pull most of the crew from the water. The crew of the Elusive could only sit and watch as the City of Seattle burned. MacDonald got the idea to salvage the City of Seattle by pulling her aground, but the boat proved too heavy for the Elusive's heavy howser line.

In chapter 4, just twenty-four hours after the tragedy of the City of Seattle, the Amber Dawn rolled in rough seas. The ship took on water, but the skipper knew that all she



needed was a stronger pump. The Coast Guard was able to drop one on her deck and the boat was able to return to port for repairs. In chapter 5, the Elusive suffered poor fishing. The weather was bad, so the boat would race for cover in between strings. Fishing was bad throughout the entire fleet that king crab season, bringing in less than a quarter of the crab seen in previous years. However, some boats were able to bring in huge profits because they were one of a few boats with crab so the canneries paid insane prices.

In these chapters, Spike returns to the Bering Sea on board the Elusive. Several boat wrecks foreshadow the disasters that would follow, including the depression of the king crab after three seasons of huge numbers. Spike also talks about the dangers of giving working class men a large amount of money at one time. Spike tells stories of seeing bowls full of cocaine on some fishing vessels as well as the drinking that went on in excess in most of the ports. This discussion was hinted at early in the book and begins to show Spike's growing disillusionment with the fishing industry. It seems Spike began to lose interest about the same time the king crab began to disappear.



Part 4, The Deadliest Season: Fishing the Gulf of Alaska Aboard the Elusive and Watching as Tragedy Strikes the Alaskan Fleet: Chapters 5-9 and Epilogue

Part 4, The Deadliest Season: Fishing the Gulf of Alaska Aboard the Elusive and Watching as Tragedy Strikes the Alaskan Fleet: Chapters 5-9 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In chapter 6, Spike's respect began to grow for his new skipper as he was able to keep them safe and on the crab. However, Spike was once again growing unhappy with the crew and decided to quit the Elusive. In chapter 7, the king crab season continued and became more violent. On board the Vestfjord, the skipper died when a wave exploded through the wheelhouse windows and knocked him to the floor. Several weeks later, aboard the Golden Pisces a crewman was knocked overboard by a shifting crab pot stack. The man died from hypothermia despite a heroic rescue. The Cougar was anchored off Sitkinak Island when a couple of crewmen decided to take a raft and go ashore to hunt. The men were supposed to be back by dark, but when they were not the crew became concerned. One man rowed partially to shore to attempt to speak with the men, but was unable to get close enough. In the morning, the same man went ashore, but could find no sign of the missing men. The two men were never found.

In chapter 8, the St. Patrick began to struggle in high seas. The inexperienced captain ordered his men to abandon ship. The men tied themselves together and jumped overboard. The men, and a female cook, remained tied together in the water for hours, until they spotted land. The men began to swim toward the land, becoming exhausted after swimming for hours in freezing water. Several men with them who had not gotten into survival suits died. One man swam to shore and was crushed against the cliffs. Two others gave in to exhaustion and hypothermia. The female cook died of hypothermia. One man made it to shore and was rescued. At the hospital this man learned another of his crewmates had been rescued, but seven men and the cook died. Not only this, but the St. Patrick never sank and was towed successfully back to harbor.

In chapter 9, Spike tells the reader that the king fishing seasons were canceled in the early eighties because a lack of legal crab. The early consensus was that the crab had been over fished, but it was later discovered that the crab had suffered an illness that left the females infertile. During that time, fuel prices also rose, making it nearly



impossible for crab fishermen to make a profit, so many turned to other kinds of fishing. It was soon said that men looking for jobs should not go to Alaska.

In the epilogue, Spike is hiking in Alaska in the summer of 1984. Spike thinks of his days on the crab boats with nostalgia. The crew members of the boats Spike worked on went on to find success, either in the crab fleet or elsewhere. However, fishermen continue to die in the Bering Sea. Spike went to a memorial ceremony in St. Paul Harbor in 1988. The bell that tolls for the dead rang forty-two times that year.

In these chapters, Spike has clearly become disillusioned with crab fishing even as one of the most deadly seasons in history rages on. Spike tells of other shipwrecks, recounting wrecks whose death toll was unnecessary and preventable. Spike's tale of excitement and adventure had turned into a cautionary tale, expressing the real danger of fishing on the Bering Sea. The tone has become dark, and Spike has revealed his true feelings about this profession, giving the reader a deeper insight to his perspective than earlier promised.



Characters

Spike Walker

Spike Walker is the author of this book. Spike went to Alaska in the late seventies to find work in the fishing industry. Spike had been lured by reports of high pay for a few months of work. Spike arrived on Kodiak Island with no money and no promise of work. Spike stayed with a crewman from the Royal Quarry, a boat owned and run by a college friend, Mike Jones. Spike spent his first week on Kodiak visiting the local bars and looking for a place on a boat. The following week, Mike Jones invited him on his boat for a run, but without the promise of work. Spike found crab fishing tough, but exciting.

Spike worked on the Royal Quarry for most of one season and found that despite the sea sickness that plagued him the entire trip that crab fishing was one of the hardest and most exciting jobs he had ever experienced before. Spike continued to work crab boats, moving from the Royal Quarry to the Williwaw Wind where he worked nearly a whole season before a falling out with the skipper left him looking for another berth. Spike was offered a place on the Rondys after a summer of repairs and painting. Spike worked the hook on the Rondys and found the work enjoyable until the lack of privacy and constant seasickness began to get to him. After that, Spike worked on the Elusive during one of the most tragic crab fishing seasons on record. Spike would continue to work crab boats for almost a decade, but after those first few years, the industry changed and Spike lost interest.

Susy Wagner

Susy Wagner was the deck boss on the Royal Quarry. It was unusual for a woman to work a crab boat, but Susy was an unusual woman. Susy liked to push herself, to prove that she could do anything to which she set her mind. After working as a waitress in the lower forty-two, Susy moved to Alaska and began working in the crab processing plants. Susy watched the crane operators move the crab off the crab boats and decided she wanted to do that. The supervisor would not allow a woman to work the crane, however, so she had to learn in secret during breaks. One day the crane operator broke his ankle and the supervisor was not available. Susy stepped in and took over, off loading a crab boat in record time. After that, no one told Susy she could not work the cranes. However, Susy's attention then turned to the crab boats themselves. Susy once again set out to prove herself, eventually proving to skipper Mike Jones that she could hold her own on his boat. Jonesy took a great deal of ribbing for hiring a woman on his boat, but Susy proved herself as good as any man. Susy would go on to become a skipper of her own boat before leaving the fishing industry and finding challenges elsewhere.



Mike

Mike "Jonesy" Jones was a classmate of Spike's in college. Jonesy bought his first crab boat after graduation and became known as a skipper who could find the crab under any conditions. Jonesy gave Spike his first job on a crab boat during tanner crab season. Jonesy was a well-respected skipper who built his fishing empire from one boat to many boats.

Donny Channel and Joe Magoteaux

Donny Channel and John Magoteaux were crewmen on board the Master Carl when the boat sank off Montague Island in April of 1976. Channel and Magoteaux managed to make it aboard a life raft and found themselves afloat on the Bering Sea for hours with their two other crewmen when the raft began to rush toward shore. The surf was so heavy that the men decided it would be better to risk going to shore in the water rather than remaining in the raft. The two other men were separated from the raft, but Channel and Magoteaux managed to hang on to the raft's rope. Channel and Magoteaux were washed onto the beach. The first night, the men slept inside the raft, beginning to suffer from hypothermia. A bear woke them from their much needed sleep. The following day the men tried to walk to a lighthouse on the island. After a short time, however, they began to grow confused from hypothermia. They stopped to light a fire. The Coast Guard arrived a short time later and rescued them from the beach. Unfortunately, their two crewmates did not make it. The story of the Master Carl was the first story Spike heard when he arrived on Kodiak.

Rusty Slayton

The owner and skipper of the Jeffrey Allen, Rusty Slayton woke in the middle of the night to realize his ship was rolling over. Slayton was not able to get to the radio to call in a Mayday because a wall of seawater had exploded through the wheelhouse window and washed him out. Slayton swam around the boat and realized that the lights were still on, suggesting the auxiliary engines were still running even though the boat was now completely turned over. Slayton swam to the other side of the boat where the portholes were just above the waterline. Slayton saw his son, his brother-in-law, and another crewman trapped behind a porthole. Slayton could see that the pressure of the air inside the boat was keeping the crewmen from opening the window. Slayton broke the seal with a bin board. Slayton pulled his son and the crewman out of the window, but breaking the seal caused the air bubble keeping the boat afloat to rush out, allowing the boat to sink. Slayton's brother-in-law went down with the boat. Later, the Coast Guard would discover that there was still air in the wheelhouse and had the brother-in-law gone inside he might have survived. Slayton left the fishing industry after that accident.



Pete Knudsen

Pete Knudsen was a crewman on the Key West. During a particularly violent storm, several crab pots on the deck of the Key West came loose and began sliding around. It was later believed that one of the pots sheared off an exhaust pipe that led onto the deck from the lazarette room. The lazarette room quickly flooded with water, causing the boat to become too heavy in the stern. The crew began making Mayday calls and dressed in their survival suits for protection against the freezing waters in the event they had to abandon the boat. The crew launched the life raft and finally decided it was time to abandon ship. Three men were able to board the raft in the high waves before the raft was washed away from the boat. Pete Knudsen remained on the boat, carefully dropping into the ocean from the now nearly perpendicular bow. The skipper of the boat remained in the wheelhouse until it was clear there was no possible way to save the boat, arguing with the Coast Guard over whether or not the boat was really sinking. The crew of the Key West was picked out of the water by fellow crab boat, American Eagle.

Richard Majdic

Richard Majdic was a crewman on the Epic. The crew of the Epic was stacking crab pots on the deck when the boat rolled over. Richard Majdic and his crewmates were washed into the Bering Sea without survival suits. The skipper was able to get out a Mayday and the Coast Guard was quickly on their way to pick the men from the water. However, the freezing water quickly took its toll, causing some of the crewmen to become confused and to act opposite to their best interest. Majdic was able to climb onto the hull of the Epic as the waves lowered it into the water before rising high above the water line. Majdic was pulled off the hull by the crab boat, Jeanoah, and would be the only survivor.

State Trooper Lt. Bob Lockman

State Trooper Lt. Bob Lockman was once a skipper of his own king crab boat but became a state trooper who is in charge of enforcing the laws in the Bering Sea. Lt. Lockman travels the waters of the Bering Sea watching for fishermen who begin fishing before the official opening of the crabbing season. Lockman would come across crab pots already baited and fishing and would empty them of crab before cutting off their doors to make them useless. Lockman would then track down the offending boat and arrest the skipper. Often these fishermen would be forced to pay a huge fine for their offense. The worse part of being caught fishing early for many of these men was not the possibility of arrest or fines, however, but the backlash of other fishermen. Fishermen live by a code of conduct and when someone breaks the code, there is often a price to be paid.



Wayne Schueffley

Wayne Schueffley was a crewmember on board the crab boat, Gemini. During a storm, the Gemini built so much ice on its deck and wheelhouse that it began to become top heavy. The boat began struggling to manage the huge waves constantly beating against the boat. The skipper was reluctant to call the Coast Guard despite urging from Schueffley, unwilling to admit he was in trouble. However, the boat was so heavy that it began to roll over in the heavy waves. The skipper called out a Mayday and then ordered his men to abandon ship. Schueffley had trouble getting his survival suit on and it was washed away before he could get it on. Schueffley's crewmates all began leaving the boat through the windows in the wheelhouse. As Schueffley began to escape, he heard the cries of another man behind him. Schueffley helped the man out of the boat and they both found themselves in the Bering Sea. Schueffley managed to make it to one of the life boats that had been launched and climbed inside with two other crewmen. Schueffley did not have a survival suit on, therefore his legs began to freeze. The three crewmen would float in their life raft for several days before being rescued by the Coast Guard. Schueffley's legs were thawed and after months of surgeries and therapy, he was able to keep his legs.

Wallace Thomas

Wallace Thomas was a crewman on the St. Patrick. The St. Patrick was caught in a bad storm and the windows of the wheelhouse broke, allowing large amounts of water to flood the boat. The boat continued to be pummeled by large waves, prompting the skipper to order all crewmen to abandon ship. Thomas did not have a survival suit and was afraid to leave the boat without one. The skipper told him where he could find one in his stateroom. Thomas retrieved the survival suit and abandoned ship with eight of his fellow crewmen. They all tied themselves together with rope because the life boats had been lost and they did not want to be separated. In the water, those who did not have survival suits quickly began to succumb to the freezing water. Those who did were soon exhausted from fighting the waves. The crewmen swam for hours, and finally found that they were a few miles from land. The crewmen swam toward land, but as they came closer they realized the land was covered in dangerous rocks. One crewman swam in to shore in hopes of starting a fire, but his body was crushed against the cliff. Another man died from the cold water. Two others succumbed to exhaustion. Soon Thomas found himself alone with Vanessa Sandin, the boat's cook. Vanessa's suit was old and allowed water inside. Soon Vanessa died of hypothermia. Thomas managed to make his way to land and was rescued. Thomas was one of two men to survive. In the hospital, Thomas learned the St. Patrick never sank.



Objects/Places

Crab Pots

Crab pots are steel frames covered in mesh that are baited and dropped from five to seven hundred feet under the Bering Sea to fish for crab. The pots come in several sizes, ranging from six feet to eight feet.

Launchers

Crab boats have platforms on their decks that allow the crewmen to launch the crab pots into the water.

Buoys

Two air-filled buoys and a Styrofoam buoy are attached to the ropes that are attached to the crab pots to allow the fishermen to keep track of their pots and to lift them out of the water.

Radar

Many fishing vessels use radar to keep track of the sea's depth, their crab pots, and other fishing vessels.

Survival Suits

Survival suits are heavy, insulated suits that are designed to protect a person in frigid waters. These suits can help a shipwreck survivor survive longer than the twenty minutes it would take for a normally clad person to begin suffering hypothermia.

King Crab

King crab are large crabs, often ten to twelve pounds each, that live in the Bering Sea. King crab are caught during a season that stretches from September to November in the Bering Sea.

Tanner Crab

Tanner crab are small, brown crab that live in the Bering Sea and are caught during the winter and spring months. These crabs are often referred to as snow crab.



Opelio Crab

Opelio crab are small, brown crabs that are related to tanner crab. These crab are also caught in the Bering Sea during the winter and early spring months.

Dutch Harbor

Dutch Harbor is a sea harbor in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. During the crab boom of the late seventies Dutch Harbor was the most successful and richest fishing port in the world.

Kodiak Island

Kodiak Island is a large island off the coast of Alaska at the southern edge of the Bering Sea. Kodiak Island's eastern coast has the port of St. Paul Harbor where Skip and his fishing crews would often off load crab.

Bering Sea

The Bering Sea is a large body of water surrounded by Alaska on the eastern shore and Russia on the northern shore. The Bering Sea is the home of many kinds of crab, including tanner crab, king crab, and opelio crab.

Seattle, Washington

Seattle, Washington is on the west coast of the United States. Seattle is the home port of many crab fishing boats.



Themes

Dangerous Jobs

Spike Walker spent his early adulthood working exciting and dangerous jobs. Spike's early jobs including the oil industry in which he worked the oil fields during the boom in Morgan City, Louisiana and the fields bordering the Gulf of Mexico. During that time Spike became an apprentice to a certified deep-sea diver and learned how to inspect ship hulls, barge hulls, and propellers. Another job Spike took on his early adulthood was as a logger. Spike was a part of the lumber booms in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska, learning how to work heavy equipment, work with straining lines, and basic serious labor. Spike thought these experiences made him more than qualified to be a crab fisherman.

When Spike got his first job on a crab boat, he thought he was prepared. However, Spike had not taken into account sea sickness and the horribly long hours that would be required for him to be on deck. Spike worked hard, however, and discovered the excitement associated with the job of a crab fisherman. Over the decade Spike worked on the crab boats he was lucky to never suffer a terrible injury. However, Spike heard of other stories in which men suffered broken limbs from loose crab pots, hypothermia from being pulled overboard by becoming entangled in crab pot lines, and death from ship wrecks.

Spike came to believe that crab fishing is the most dangerous job in the world as his experience on board ships continued to expose him to stories of shipwrecks. Spike relates in his book many shipwrecks including one in which ice buildup caused a boat to overturn and a bad storm sank another. Spike tells the reader at the end of his book that the last time he attended a memorial ceremony in St. Paul Harbor, the bell rang for forty-two fisherman who had died in the previous year.

Fishing Industry

The fishing industry in Alaska experienced a boom in the late seventies. There were so many king crab caught in those years that orders for new crab boats exploded. The fleet expanded by more than half in those years, bringing in more crab than the canneries could handle. In fact, a strike took place during these years because of a reduction in prices paid by the canneries. So many people came to Alaska to fish for crab that there was often not enough jobs to go around. There was also an explosion of cheating during these years, including fishermen who began to fish before the season was officially open and fishermen taking crab from other boat's pots.

After the boom of the late seventies, the king crab suddenly began to disappear. At first, the officials believed the reduction in catchable crab was due to overfishing during the boom years. However, it would later be established that the king crab had suffered



some kind of illness that left many of the female infertile. The king crab fishing season was canceled two years in a row due to this shortage. In the following years, restrictions were enforced with more zeal than in previous years, keeping the number of crab the fleet could catch to a minimum. The king crab industry recovered, however, and the Alaskan fleet continues to fish them to this day.

Lack of Privacy

Despite the promise of large amounts of money for just a few months of work, crab fishing was hard and many people could not handle the work. Spike would meet people during his years in the industry who could not handle a full trip on a boat. Many men would find the long hours on the deck of a boat too difficult while others disliked the repetitive work. The one thing that bothered some men, Spike included, more than the work and long hours was the lack of privacy on board a crab ship. Spike discovered that having to share sleeping space, bathroom space, and eating space with other men twenty-four hours a day every day was too difficult.

Spike soon came to the point while on board the Rondys when he could no longer stand the way a fellow crewmate chewed his food. Spike did not like having to be around these men twenty-four hours a day, both working and relaxing with them. The men on board a crab boat during the fishing season often were only able to leave the boat for one night three or four times a month, leaving them living on top of one another constantly for months at a time. Spike eventually left the Rondys for this reason, making lack of privacy a theme of the book.



Style

Perspective

Spike Walker is the writer of this book. Spike worked in the Alaskan crab fleet for a decade, beginning in the late seventies just as the king crab boom began. Spike writes in this book about his experiences in Alaska during this boom, including the 1979-80 season which was one of the most dangerous seasons in the history of the crab fishing industry. Included in the book is not only Spike's own experiences on board crab fishing boats but also stories told to Spike by other fishermen who worked the Bering Sea during the same boom years.

The perspective of this book is subjective. Spike Walker shares his personal experiences with the reader, giving the reader a look at the crab fishing industry through the eyes of someone who was on board several of these boats and learned to fish each type of crab available for fishing in the Bering Sea. The book also includes stories of other fishermen who suffered shipwrecks during the seasons about which Spike Walker writes. The perspective continues to be subjective because Spike's own experiences bring him too close to the stories to allow him to be objective regarding the experiences of others. In fact, Spike offers comments at times about these tragedies that range from sympathy to criticism for the poor judgments of others in regards to their own tragedies.

Tone

The tone of the book ranges from excitement for a first time fisherman who finally finds a berth on a crab boat to tragic as the author relates the stories of fishermen whose boats sank out from under them, causing the deaths of fellow crewmembers. The tone changes steadily as the book continues with its stories, beginning from the innocent point of view of Spike, a young college graduate who has just arrived in Kodiak Island to seek employment on a crab boat, a profession he knows little about but feels knowledgeable to take on because of his past experiences with logging and oil field work. The tone then changes as the author, Spike, begins to work on the boats and learns that the job is one of the most difficult in the world not only because of the actual work involved, but also because of the real possibility that the boat could sink out from under him at any time.

The tone of this book is both enthusiastic and something of a warning to all those who might hear about crab fishing and think it would be an easy way to make a fast buck. The tone of the book changes with the stories Spike tells and this works well because the tone fits the story being told. The book should begin with excitement because it is biographical in the beginning, telling Spike's story of being a young man eager to enter into a new adventure. However, the book also becomes something of a warning and the tone appropriately changes to underscore this warning. Spike ends his book by telling the reader of forty-two men who died in one year on the Bering Sea. The tone at this



point is dark, showing the reader how Spike has grown up and how he is attempting to warn his reader that crab fishing is not for the faint at heart.

Structure

The book is divided into four parts, each part focusing on a year and specific boat on which Spike Walker, the author, participated in the crab fishing industry on Alaska's Bering Sea. Each part is divided into its own set of chapters, each ranging in number from eight to fifteen. One of the parts also include several short summaries that help to keep the reader informed of the details of the crab fishing industry at the time Spike was fishing on the Bering Sea. The book also begins with an introduction that explains the background of the fishing industry in Alaska and tells a story of a boat that sank in the years before Spike came to Alaska, a story that was told to him in warning before he boarded his first crab boat.

The book is told in a basically linear story line. The book begins with Spike Walker's arrival at Kodiak Island in hopes of securing a job on his friend Jonesy's fishing boat, the Royal Quarry. The story then follows Spike as he moves from boat to boat over several years of fishing in the Bering Sea. Included in all these stories are other stories of boats that sank or suffered problems during the seasons during which Spike worked on the Bering Sea. Many of these stories include the deaths of fishermen who were simply attempting to do their job, one of the most dangerous jobs in the world.



Quotes

"This book is about the most dangerous occupation on earth: king crab fishing off the coast of Alaska." Introduction, pg. xv

"Once aboard the helicopter, their joy at being rescued was short-lived when, only a short distance up the beach, the copter pilot came upon the bodies of the heroic young skipper Tom Miller and Tom Davidson." Prologue, pg. xxiii

"I'd arrived in Kodiak with twenty dollars to my name, but I held one ace card. I had the address and phone number of crab-boat skipper Mike Jones." Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapter 1, pg. 3

"Then I fell off to sleep, dead away." Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry: Chapter 3, pg. 27

"I'd failed him bitterly, as well as my crewmates, and my self-loathing went beyond shame." Part 1, The Greenhorn Season: Tanner Crab Fishing Aboard the Royal Quarry, Chapter 7, pg. 55

"I met my new skipper by chance during the summer of 1978." Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapter 1, pg. 61

"Now as we moved past the Royal Quarry, I felt much the same involuntary pangs of melancholy and mixed loyalties as happily married man might feel, who, wife on arm, happens to pass a beautiful woman friend and former lover." Part 2, The Bering Sea Season: King Crab Fishing Aboard the Williwaw Wind: Chapter 6, pg. 93

"By the close of the 1978 season, even the most pessimistic of fishing clans could see the mind-boggling profits to be made in the king crab industry." Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Summary 1, pg. 131

"As the trip progressed, sleep became a precious commodity." Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Chapter 8, pg. 165

"Overflowing with nostalgia and unable to put all that I felt into words, I turned and disappeared down the stairwell." Part 3, Working on the Edge: Fishing the Aleutian Islands and Points North Aboard the Rondys: Chapter 15, pg. 209

"In 1988, the bell tolled forty-two times." Epilogue, pg. 279



Topics for Discussion

Who is Spike Walker? What makes Spike Walker qualified to write this book? Discuss perspective. From what perspective does Spike tell his story? Is Spike's view of the events told in this book subjective or objective? What is the difference? Explain. Why does Spike choose to tell his story? Is this book meant as a warning or as an enticement? What led you to this conclusion?

What is the Royal Quarry? What is important about the Royal Quarry? Who is Susy Wagner? What is unusual about Susy? Who is Jonesy? How did Spike Walker know Jonesy? Who is Steve Calhoun? What role did he play in Spike's early experiences on Kodiak Island? Why did Spike not remain with this first crew? What kind of crab did this crew fish?

Where is Dutch Harbor? What is important about Dutch Harbor? Where is Kodiak Island? What is important about Kodiak Island? What is St. Paul Harbor? Why did Spike begin his odyssey in the crab fishing industry in St. Paul Harbor? Why are there so many bars in these harbors? Why does Spike continuously talk about these bars? What do these bars represent to the fishermen on the Bering Sea? Explain.

Why does Spike talk about the use of cocaine in his book? Is Spike attempting to criticize or hurt the fishermen he worked with by talking about the use of cocaine? What does Spike theorize that cocaine represented to many of these fishermen? Why? What does Spike believe caused the increased use of cocaine on the Bering Sea? What warning does Spike offer about the use of cocaine on the Bering Sea?

Discuss the dangers of shipwrecks on the Bering Sea. Why does Spike relate so many stories of ships that wrecked on the Bering Sea? Why did so many of these ships wreck? What was a common factor about many of these wrecks? Could any of these wrecks have been prevented? What was the outcome of many of these wrecks for the fishermen and the boat owners? Does Spike offer the opinion that fishing the Bering Sea is worth the danger of these wrecks? Explain.

Discuss overfishing. What is overfishing? What dangers does overfishing represent? What might happen if all the king crab in the world disappeared? How would it affect the overall environment of the Bering Sea? Why are their regulations on when and how many king crab can be caught? Are these regulations important? Explain. Compare and contrast overfishing with the lumber industry. How do they compare? What are the inherent dangers?

Discuss the changes in the fishing industry in Alaska. Spike mentions the use of mechanics to make fishing easier. Does this make fishing easier? Is making fishing easier a danger to the wild life or to the fisherman? How? Why does Spike suggest that these innovations took the fun out of crab fishing? Did it? Why would Spike harbor such an opinion? How has innovation changed life in other ways? Is this a good or a bad thing?