

Survival

Survival is what life is all about. The cockroach, the whooping crane, the coyote, and every other living thing are engaged in the struggle to survive the dangers in their environment. For human beings, however, survival is more than a matter of merely staying alive and perpetuating the species. Our attempts to control the natural environment and the structure of human society have resulted in new situations and radically altered environments that pose threats not only to life itself, but also to our way of life, our cultural heritage, and our racial, religious, sexual or personal identity. Survivors of the Holocaust and veterans of the Vietnam War, for example, often found that physical survival meant little if human dignity and integrity did not survive. A recurrent theme of Ida Fink's *A Scrap of Time* is the guilt felt by survivors of the Holocaust and their need for atonement.

In imagining survival, you may immediately think of Robinson Crusoe marooned on a desert island or hikers stranded in a mountain snowstorm. Alone in nature, we are immediately confronted with the problem of physical survival. We must find food and shelter from the elements, and we must learn to defend ourselves against predators or those who threaten our food supply or sheltering place, like Garcia Marquez's shipwrecked sailor.

Our achievements in controlling our environment have also created new threats to the survival of other species and to the natural environment itself. Contemporary "survivalists" seek to go "back to nature," but frequently take the trappings of civilization with them, as do the characters in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. Contemporary environmentalists want to restore nature, but often can do so only by interfering with it. We are formed and defined by the material and social environments we have created, and even alone with nature our personal identity is involved in the struggle for survival.

In the environments we have created for ourselves, we often define our identity and self-esteem by our work. We may be wheat farmers, steelworkers, or coal miners; but the rapid pace of social and economic change can threaten our jobs and, therefore, our identity, self-worth, and worth in the eyes of a society that values only the useful.

The social environment requires conformity as well as usefulness and can threaten those of us who define ourselves in terms of a cultural, racial, sexual or religious identity different from those in power, as during the Holocaust. The mental patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are "committed" to the process of conforming because their sense of personal identity doesn't conform to society's demands.

We also define our personal identity by our intimate personal relationships. When other bases of our identity – the natural environment, our work, or society itself – are threatened, our personal relationships can help us survive and reconceive our lives. This is the lesson that must be learned by the heroine of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But because friendships rest on openness born of trust, they develop slowly and are fragile. They require the stability that comes from people living in close proximity over a long period of time. This condition, once provided by the family and the neighborhood, is threatened by our rapidly changing world. As neighborhoods disintegrate, we may find it impossible to build a network of personal relationships which otherwise might have provided an anchor for our identities amid the flux of our lives in society. Without such a community, we may find it difficult to survive.

The complex question of survival is incapable of being reduced to a few neat categories. The five literary works you will read and discuss in this series raise the question of survival in terms of one or more of the issues we have discussed here, but none of the readings offer a simple solution to the question of survival.

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor
by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

In 1955, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was working as a journalist in his native Colombia. In February of that year, several crew members of a Colombian destroyer were washed overboard and disappeared in the Gulf of Mexico. Ten days later one of them was found half-dead on a deserted beach in northern Colombia. Garcia Marquez interviewed the survivor and first told his incredible ordeal of physical struggle on the open sea in a series of newspaper articles. Now collected in our edition, this account of Luis Alejandro Velasco's true story joins a select group of works in world literature that recount the incredible efforts of individuals to stay alive amid seemingly unbearable conditions in nature. The fresh and direct quality of Garcia Marquez's prose reminds us that he has won the Nobel Prize for Literature and, thus, ranks with the great writers of our time.

Velasco grounds his identity in the social fabric of life with his shipmates and the women he loves. These relationships prove irrelevant, though, when his dangerously overloaded ship plunges through rough seas and pitches him overboard. After swimming to a life raft, he watches his less fortunate friends drown and then becomes immersed in his own struggle for life and sanity amid hostile elements. He learns to adjust to the rhythm of the coming and going of the sharks every afternoon at five as well as to compete with them for food. When he fails to capture the attention of rescue planes and his days at sea multiply, he becomes consumed by purely biological needs: his wounded knee, his

thirst and hunger, his sunblistered skin. The hallucinations and loneliness that he endures reduce him to something quite different from his identity as a Colombian sailor. When he does finally reach land, Velasco reflects that he did so “by force of will, hope, and an indefatigable desire to live.”

Physical survival, however, does not bring an end to the sailor’s ordeal, for the bewildering hero’s welcome he receives continues the assault on his identity. In the conclusion, Garcia Marquez’s descriptions of the sailor’s final act of courage indicates the complexity of reconceiving the self necessary to human survival: Velasco disappears leaving behind “the serene aura of a hero who had the courage to dynamite his own statue.”

Surfacing

by Margaret Atwood

The external landscape of peril in *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* becomes an internal landscape with a continuous undercurrent of menace and mystery in Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing*. The increasingly desperate heroine is retreating from a complex society that she thinks has distorted nature and become diseased, a society where identity is founded on one’s work and the artificial world that influences life style options. She associates this ecologically imbalanced world with Americans; in this way Atwood a Canadian, develops what she regards as the fundamental Canadian story of survival against the influence of the powerful neighbor to Canada’s south. In this world, the narrator has gone through the harrowing experience of an abortion, and she feels devastated and diminished.

In *Surfacing*, the heroine journeys to an island wilderness with her lover, Joe, and another couple, all seeking to escape the artificial environment of the city. In this island setting, she discovers that she also needs to flee from her companions. She finds she can no longer endure the sexual tension in her relationships with men, and her understanding of herself as a woman and an artist is shattered. She finds herself compelled to explore her past, for the island and cabin belonged to her parents. In her self-examination, she realizes that she has been a victim of reason, ordered spaces, males, and efficient and utilitarian practices. Eventually, she retreats from Joe and the other couple to journey back to her primal roots in nature and her dreams.

Alone in a primitive world, she becomes absorbed in the nurturing cycle of fulfilling her organic needs for food and shelter. As she satisfies these fundamental needs, she begins to sense “everything waiting to become alive.” When she returns to the deserted cabin of her parents, she burns the keepsakes from her past. Perhaps this immolation means

that she is ready to reconceive herself and re-enter her time and place in history, now unwilling to accept a minimally human role as victim. By the end of the novel, she finds herself poised at the moment of re-entry into the world, wondering if she can now be strong enough to trust herself and face the exigencies of interacting with Joe and discovering who she is. The hypnotic quality of the first person narration has the irresistible power of influencing readers to see into themselves and examine their own lives.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
by Ken Kesey

If the deeply moving and ominous journey of Atwood's narrator is charged with sexual energy from a feminine perspective, Ken Kesey's first-person male narrator in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* provides the opposite perspective. The psychiatric ward that Kesey's Chief Bromden describes can represent the terror that Atwood's heroine was trying to escape in order to survive. Big Nurse's hospital ward is a microcosm of a larger world that has exploited the natural environment and individuals and replaced them with an artificial world inhabited by mental patients. Kesey uses mechanistic images to portray a modern technological world that regulates and controls society and the life styles of its members. The men in the hospital are there because "of proven inability to adjust to society"; their deviation from conformity has led them to mental illness, to the sense that they have lost identity and have become victims who cannot survive. Kesey very clearly notes, however, that these men have themselves capitulated and chosen to escape from the freedom out of which interaction with others and identity can emerge; in a sense, the demonic forces within us – externally represented by Big Nurse – have taken over.

To this psychiatric ward or "Combine" comes the redheaded McMurphy, the explosive figure whose laughter and radical assertion of individuality threaten the rigid predictability of Big Nurse's control. Against the overwhelming odds of manipulated consent of ward democracy, threatened exposure in group therapy sessions, and electroshock treatments, McMurphy brings an almost miraculous degree of positive energy that disrupts the established order. The communal togetherness that McMurphy generates among the men through his actions leads potentially to their transformation from victims to survivors.

By the end of the novel, McMurphy seems to have made a choice about the value of life and his role in championing that value. His choice commits him to an irrevocable decision about his own physical survival. The liberating effect of McMurphy's decision leads Bromden to respond convincingly with a paradoxical embrace of violent love.

Perhaps McMurphy does survive in that Bromden now seems to be a person who can respond to a sensorially rich world and experience the coldness of the tile beneath his feet, the smell of fall in the air, the honking of geese flying above. Like Atwood's heroine, however, his transformation is not guaranteed, for both of them are poised on the brink of movement back into the world.

A Scrap of Time
by Ida Fink

In this haunting collection of a play and twenty-two short stories and sketches about Polish village life during the Holocaust, Israeli writer Ida Fink – a survivor of the Holocaust herself – portrays an unimaginably infernal world, a world in which Kesey's metaphorical world of the "Combine" has become the world itself. Against the dark backdrop of attics and secret rooms, cellars, haylofts, and closets, Fink renders the daily life of people in hiding as they resist, submit, betray, deny, hope, regret, remember. Without ever depicting the extermination camps, Fink makes palpable the agony of anticipation, the looming threat to survival that her characters must live with. And yet, her focus is not so much on this sheer threat to staying alive, but rather on the attitude that one chooses to live with.

The agony of the Holocaust also continues to vibrate with intensity for those who live beyond it. To survive wholly, one must "learn to believe in people, in happiness and goodness" again. After the war, one woman returns to a pond that had been the scene of her escape and needs to tell a stranger not only how she escaped, but also why she even attempted it after her sons and husband had been killed. The roots of the life force are too deep within her to be torn out. The survivors also must confront the human tendency to deny or want to forget the shattering truth of the Holocaust, a tendency that still exists among us today.

Their Eyes Were Watching God
by Zora Neale Hurston

The rich evocation of Afro-American folk culture makes Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* an absorbing novel. Hurston depicts the successive stages of self-discovery and survival of a black female, Janie. Traditionally, black women have been portrayed in fiction as falling into one of several stereotypes: the strong matriarch who loyally defends the white family whom she serves, the amoral slut, or the tragic mulatto. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, tries to prepare her to assume the matriarchal role, for Janie is raised in the "white folks' yard," shielded from the roots of her Afro-American culture. An abused ex-slave, Nanny believes that, to survive, a black woman must learn

to be the “mule of the world,” to carry for both the black male and herself the burden that the white world demands. She tells Janie that survival depends upon either money or the protection of good white people.

In spite of these warnings and the external realities of being a southern black, Janie dreams of alternatives to the role of victim. Even during her two loveless marriages, Janie envisions the possibility of loving a man who loves her as an equal. In her second marriage, she finds herself trapped within a chauvinistic view of a woman as a man’s possession, a view that isolates her from membership in her society, from any genuine opportunities to interact with others to discover and reveal who she is. Only with the arrival of the unexpected outsider, the wandering gambler, Tea Cake, is Janie able to begin to interact with someone as a unique human who is urged to be herself.

With Tea Cake, Janie moves down from the pedestal her husband had put her on and finds a home of her own. In the shanties of an itinerant farming community closer to the world of nature, Janie’s identity evolves. The rendering of the struggle to survive through the perspective of the minority experience of being black parallels Kesey’s depiction the minority experience of being Native American. The ambiguity of Janie’s final action with Tea Cake also echoes Chief Bromden’s climactic action toward McMurphy. The importance of laughter and humor in the process of surviving and reconceiving the self are championed in both novels. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, Hurston culminates Janie’s struggle with the affirmative image of a survivor, a woman who has gone beyond “hanging on” to learn how to live and make meaning for herself.

For further reading:

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Streiber, Whitley. *Wolf of Shadows*. Fawcett, 1986.

Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice*. Bantam, 1982.

For viewing (available on videotape):

Hiroshima Mon Amour. Dir. Alain Resnais. n.d.

Seven Beauties. Dir. Lina Wertmuller. n.d.

This reading and discussion series was developed by Dr. Harbour Winn and Dr. Leo G. Werneke, with help from Margaret Struder, original state project director for Let's Talk About It, and Dr. Jennifer Kidney, former state project director.



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