



## Close Quarters

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CLOSE QUARTERS presupposes knowledge of its predecessor, RITES OF PASSAGE, published in 1980. That novel is cast in the form of a journal kept by an aristocratic young man, Edmund Fitzhenry Talbot, at the behest of his godfather and patron. The ambitious Talbot has a post awaiting him in Australia's colonial government--a stepping-stone, he hopes, to a career in Parliament and, ultimately, a cabinet seat. Like many fictional protagonists, he is a mixture of charm and unconscious arrogance, a fundamentally decent man who has much to learn on this voyage of initiation. RITES OF PASSAGE concludes with a horrific testimony to humankind's propensity to evil: Golding's recurring preoccupation, all too convincingly dramatized.

The second book in the trilogy takes up where the first left off. The premise of a journal is maintained (although this time, with his first volume sewn in sailcloth for safekeeping, Talbot is writing for himself rather than for his godfather), and once again Golding re-creates the idiom of the era with great elan. Again, too, he brilliantly evokes the microcosm of the ship, which for the duration of the voyage is a world unto itself; an aged ship of the line converted to carry passengers and cargo, it is literally falling apart.

Yet there are also differences between the first and second books of the trilogy. CLOSE QUARTERS is much lighter in tone than its predecessor, and less obviously allegorical. At the center of it is a story of love-at-first-sight, with Talbot smitten by a young woman on her way to India whose ship meets his own, bringing the good news of Napoleon's abdication and exile to Elba. The outcome of their encounter remains very much in doubt at the book's end--as does the fate of the wallowing old ship.

In short, CLOSE QUARTERS is very much a middle book; unlike RITES OF PASSAGE, which was not initially perceived as the first installment of a trilogy, it is not a self-contained novel. With that caveat in mind, the reader can look forward to an absorbing tale.

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