



Fire Down Below

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The narrator, Edmund Talbot, is a young English aristocrat sailing on a decrepit, converted warship as it struggles toward Australia, where he is to take up a position in the colonial administration. FIRE DOWN BELOW, is, first, an exciting adventure story: Danger is constant, and Golding's depictions of the perils of storms and of icebergs, and of the indignities and deprivations of the sailor's life, are so exact and so evocative that readers will probably feel thankful that they are safely anchored on dry land.

The novel is also about character, in particular the continuing growth of young Talbot to maturity, and his changing perceptions of some of the other occupants of the ship. In particular he discovers, as he had done with the Reverend Colley in RITES OF PASSAGE, that those who at first appear ugly or foolish or pitiful may in reality be the true heroes in life. For example, Talbot dismisses one of the passengers, Prettiman, as a feeble-minded, conventional social philosopher, and because Prettiman is ill, bedridden, and apparently dying, Talbot finds him repulsive. As he gets to know the man, however, he finds himself inspired by Prettiman's radical ideas, his wide learning, his vision of humanity as sparks of fire emanating from the divine, and his dream of creating an ideal society in the colony. Prettiman's mystic temperament is in contrast to that of Talbot's closest friend, Lieutenant Summers, who is in turn contrasted with the charming and clever Lieutenant Benet, whose flawed ingenuity costs Summers his life.

There are so many things to admire in this book, including the wonderfully uplifting and subtle conclusion, that it ranks with the very best of contemporary novels.

Sources for Further Study

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