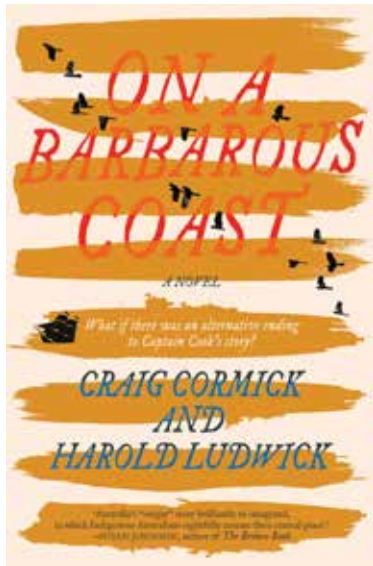


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On a Barbarous Coast

By **Craig Cormick and Harold Ludwick**

Allen & Unwin

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What if Captain Cook's ship had been decimated on the coast of far-north Australia? What if the man himself was incapacitated and the survivors of the wreck had to survive in an unfamiliar land?

These are two questions that lie at the heart of Cormick and Ludwick's reimagining of Cook's landing. Told from the perspectives of both a white seaman and an Indigenous

boy, the story presents the ship's crew as a splintered group. With Cook unconscious, a schism appears between the seamen and the soldiers who have differing opinions on the way to ensure their survival in an unknown land.

On a Barbarous Coast is structured in alternating chapters from two different perspectives. The first is of Magra, an American seaman loosely based on the real Magra who travelled with Cook. In these chapters, the readers are presented with the white perspective of the devastating shipwreck and the journey to the southern land. We learn that life on the ship was not all roses and that scuffles were common; a rift between classes was present along the whole journey. This discussion gives more weight to the decisions made by those who survived the wreck—one group wanting to stay close to where they landed and the other making their way to higher ground.

Their story is one of a fracturing relationship that is only exacerbated by the lack of food, attacks by unknown (and known) wildlife, and the declining health of their captain. Magra's observations of the indigenous people of the land begins as cautious curiosity, compared to the experiences of the crew in Polynesia. His nervousness is present throughout his chapters, both for his own health and survival and for the unknown dangers of the land they found themselves on. He becomes a linchpin to the group, able to talk to the gentlemen, the soldiers and sailors alike. Using his perspective is interesting, as he is written as someone who has some of the

prejudices of the white explorer crew but a curiosity for the way that the indigenous groups live.

In every second (or so) chapter the readers have the same period of time told from the viewpoint of Garrgiil, a Guugu Yimidhirr boy who lives in the area that the crew find themselves relying on. His chapters are disappointingly shorter; they present an insight into not only the way the Guugu Yimidhirr live, but also their language, stories of the Dreamtime and other customs. Garrgiil's narrative is engaging and emotive, following his desire to discover what these ghost-like people are doing on his land.

It is these chapters that would engage students. The use of language and inclusion of traditional practices is compelling and would be easily understood by younger students. The richness of information could provide an interesting starting point for discussion in either a History or English classroom and a springboard for further research.

Overall, *On a Barbarous Coast* is an interesting read considering the current political and social environment where there is a demand for Indigenous stories to be brought to the front of readers' minds. It has been based on meticulous research, with the language of both the sailors and Indigenous characters true to the time the events occurred. However, it is still a story that is weighted to the white perspective, which is disappointing considering the richness of Garrgiil's personality and the possibilities that his story presents.