

RE 251 – Fall 2015

Amelia Richards

Questions for *Deep Waters*, Prologue and chapters 1 through 3

If I had heard about St. John's school in high school I would have thought it was fascinating but probably wouldn't have had any real desire to go there. Obviously, as a girl, I really would not have had a chance to attend, but with the hypothetical situation that they did accept girls, I still don't think I would go. The higher academics would have been attractive, but the school I attended already provided a good education. Obviously the snowshoeing and canoe trips would pique my interest, but not enough to want to deal with the intensity of the school. I appreciate recreation and a bit of adventure, but I personally don't enjoy throwing myself into such extreme situations. I enjoy a bit of challenge and I recognize that without adversity you do not develop character as well, but St. John's school would have not been good for me. The extreme snowshoe races in which if one team member dropped out the whole team dropped out would have left me ostracized and with broken confidence. I would not have coped well with pushing oneself to harm and exhaustion. The fact that there were very few "good" days on the 800 mile canoe trip would have ensured my ticket back home. I recognize that when things go wrong or are challenging they often force you to think on your feet and overcome them, but to have that majority of the trip... I would not have liked that at all. I think extremely positive moments can be just as impactful on one's growth. They may not "build character" but they certainly develop social bonds, positive outlooks on life and a healthier attitude towards others, oneself and the world around you.

*Deep Waters* only changed my perceptions of risk a little bit. More so on the handling of risk within an institution. I've always been aware of the risks in adventures and like to be prepared anytime I'm involved in such activities. We also live in such a risk cautious world where many schools wouldn't dream of doing a day paddle, let alone an 800 mile canoe trip,

that the recklessness these instructors show is almost foreign to me. Most of the more intense adventure activities I've taken part in were through venture scouts (coed branch of boy scouts) and while similar in nature to St. John's character building mission, "be prepared" was always at the top of the takeaway lessons. We would plan every inch of the route, every calorie we planned to consume, learned every skill recommended and practiced until we became adept before we even thought about hopping in the car to go on an adventure. I like to think that all the planning and practice was actually a part of the character building process as it taught organization, self reliance, leadership and compassion for your crew mates. Before I participated in venture scouts I was able to observe this process of almost extreme risk aversion as I helped out with my brothers scout troop. I suppose learning about St. Johns School gave me a new appreciation for why scouts almost over prepares the participants as opposed to the learn on the fly approach that the St. John's boys suffered through. It helps me realize that most adventure activities are inherently risky, but that risk exponentially increases with lack of preparedness. St. John's would argue that high risk equates more intense challenges to overcome and builds more character, but I counter that the risk of bodily harm or death is not worth the supposed mental toughness one would develop. Character can be built through challenging yet fairly safe scenarios. Risk is good when low costs are at stake. Failure on an adventure activity should mean a bruised knee or ego, not extreme hypothermia or death.

I have gotten the impression that Raffan can be a little harsh and overly judgmental of the people and this school. While I agree that most of these instructors (and even students) were adrenaline junkies and suffered from god complexes, they also had good intentions and were overall good people. This school wanted to provide a better education for boys who did not fit in with the "normal" Canadian school system. They wanted to build self resiliency, innovation, compassion and ambition in these boys to improve their lives in the long run.

They wanted to honor the spirit of the explorers, the heroes of times long ago. The instructors at St. John's truly cared for the students wellbeing even if they showed it in a tough love sort of way. The parents only wanted what was best for their boys as well. They committed to helping with the school and didn't use it as just a place to send their troubled child to get him out of their hair. When Raffan describes Markus Jannasch's death in the snowshoe race, it mentions how Markus made his own decisions and his death was ultimately caused by an unavoidable and unusual medical anomaly which cleared the school from blame. This is all written in an almost resentful tone however, implying that the school neither took enough responsibility for the extreme stress it was placing on its students, nor mourned Markus's death nearly enough. Raffan mentions that many of the instructors were graduates of the eastern schools, but fails to highlight that these instructors were still young, most in their early twenties and others fresh from the military having never taught children before. This is not an excuse for their lack of planning or preparedness, but I think plays a large part. Certainly enough to warrant a paragraph of that perspective. Along with the lengthy descriptions of suffering though; positive comments from those involved are sprinkled throughout as well. Despite the slightly hypercritical tone this book suggests, I do think that Raffan is fair in presenting all of the facts and uncovering a more realistic picture of these boys daily lives while attending St Johns.