

It was approaching blue hour on the north Atlantic on April 15th, 1912. Captain Arthur Rostron scanned the dark horizon looking for any sign of the RMS *Titanic* as he neared her last reported position. Suddenly, a spark of green light illuminated the lifeboat crewed by Fourth Officer Joseph Boxhall. Mary Devaney set her straw hat on fire and used it as a flare. The sparsely populated lifeboats idling in the darkness would prove to be all that was left of *Titanic*. Captain Rostron cemented his place in the history books as he pulled aside and began rescuing *Titanic's* surviving passengers.

It was around midmorning on April 15, 1912. J. Bruce Ismay broke his near catatonia just long enough to hand Captain Rostron a message to be telegraphed to White Star's New York office... one which would be intercepted by the media and by Senator William Alden Smith of Michigan: "Deeply regret advise you Titanic sank this morning fifteenth after collision iceberg, resulting serious loss life further particulars later"

It was days after surviving the one of the greatest modern maritime disasters yet recorded, and Dorothy Gibson, shivering and reluctant, stepped out on a movie set, wearing the same clothing she'd worn that night, ready to relive her traumatic experience for the cameras.

It was May of 1912, beads of sweat formed upon Senator William Alden Smith's brow as he admonished the White Star Line and the captain and crew of the *Californian* while giving his final statements in the Myrtle Room at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Among the recommendations made by both the American and British inquiries into the disaster would be the need for enough lifeboats to accommodate all passengers.

It was May of 1953 and survivor Anna Turja had just finished watching *Titanic* starring Barbra Stanwyck and Clifton Webb in theaters. She turned to her son with tears in her eyes and asked "If they were so close to take those pictures, why didn't someone help us?"

It was around 1:00 am on September 1, 1985 aboard the RV *Knorr* and the night watch team in search of the wreckage of *Titanic*, headed by Jean-Louis Michel were rapt with attention, staring at the video footage being transmitted by the unmanned submersibles, *Jason* and *Argo*. Unable to look away from what appeared to be a debris field, they sent the ship's cook to retrieve the sleeping Robert Ballard from his bed. Within the hour they'd be toasting with Portuguese sparkling wine and raising the Harland & Wolff flag – they'd made perhaps the most significant marine archeological discovery to date and found the lost *Titanic*.

It was 1993, and a headstone was unveiled, dedicated to the memory of *Titanic's* lookout Frederick Fleet, who'd died by suicide nearly three decades earlier and had been laid to rest in a pauper's grave. It reads: "Frederick Fleet – 1887 - 1965 – Lookout – R.M.S. Titanic – Erected To His Memory – By The – Titanic Historical Society, Inc. – Indian Orchard, Mass. U.S.A"

It was Spring of 1998, and James Cameron's feature film had just spent 15 weeks on the top of the box office. It would go on to spend nearly a year in theaters.

It was 2012, and 2022, and 2026, and hundreds of thousands, millions of people around the world tuned in for annual “real time sinking” animations and posts on YouTube accounts like Titanic Honor & Glory and social media accounts like White Stars, Black Sea.

After more than a century, *Titanic* still occupies a, well, titanic place in the culture. Why? My name is Amanda Hootman and my personal opinion has always been that its mythic status was cemented not as she sailed, not as she sank, but in the time “after *Titanic*”.

I haven’t really discussed *Titanic* in the context of early 20th century history that much on this podcast. It was one of the deadliest maritime disasters in history at the time of its sinking and remains one of the worst peacetime disasters. This spurred the public’s initial interest in the disaster, but this first wave of *Titanic* fever was speedily quelled with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The violence and tragedy of *Titanic* was no match for the horrors of modern warfare. Several of *Titanic*’s surviving firemen and third class passengers nonetheless died at sea only a few short years after surviving the disaster, the victims of wartime torpedoes. Some of them were on *Titanic*’s little sister, *Britannic*. The destruction of the Great War was only to be outdone by the atrocities of the Second World War; Charles Lightoller evacuated nearly 130 British servicemen trapped at Dunkirk on his private yacht. New terrors emerged: the holocaust and nuclear warfare. A traumatized and frightened world tumbled painfully into the Atomic Age. The Edwardian Era seemed a quaint and distant memory.

It wasn’t until the publication of Walter Lord’s 1955 history, *A Night To Remember*, that interest in *Titanic* was reignited. Lord’s narrative style is incredibly readable and novelistic, placing special interest on the human story at *Titanic*’s center – the lives of those who lived and died that night. It’s also a short book at only around 200 pages. So, a lot of readers were taken in by the story for the first time. Lord contextualized the disaster as symbolic of the “end of an era”, a “loss of innocence” experienced by the world en masse. The death of the great White Star Liner was framed as emblematic of the death of a simpler time to which we can never return. The slow and bloodless deaths of *Titanic*’s victims felt a stark contrast to the bombs and guns of the previous decades. The gentility of the “women and children first” rule that was observed during the evacuation (and very notably not other contemporaneous shipwrecks, I might add) played very well with the social and political mores of 1950s audiences yearning for a bygone time with stricter gender roles. One of the other histories Lord would go on to write was actually a history of America from the year 1900 up until the outbreak of World War I titled *The Good Years*. So, yeah, he was very invested in the mythology of this brief period of post-Industrialist pre-War Europe and America as a period of great hope and optimism crushed by the gears of war. Nevermind that this was the same period Upton Sinclair was writing about Lithuanian immigrants being ground up into sausage meat or whatever. Nevermind that this was peak Jim Crow. But I guess for some people the first decade of the 20th century might have been pretty good.

And for certain people, *Titanic* represented the end of good, or at least an awakening to bad. In his account of surviving the disaster, Jack Thayer wrote: “[n]othing was revealed in the morning the trend of which was not known the night before. It seems to me that the disaster about to

occur was the event that not only made the world rub its eyes and awake but woke it with a start keeping it moving at a rapidly accelerating pace ever since with less and less peace, satisfaction and happiness. To my mind the world of today awoke April 15th, 1912.”

Innocence was not lost on April 15, 1912, we did not emerge from Eden into a harsher world than we’d inhabited before, but maybe we saw the harshness of the world with clearer eyes.

Nonetheless, *Titanic* came to *symbolize* the death of one world and the birth of another. And she is a fine choice for a symbol. The disaster is a Shakespearean melodrama. If it never happened in real life and you wrote the disaster as a screenplay, you’d get script notes asking you to tone it down a bit. It was the greatest, most expensive, and largest ship ever built and carrying many of the world’s wealthiest and most powerful people – a monument to man’s hubris that never even completed her maiden voyage. The mortal blow to the ship was dealt by a floating ice mountain, a symbol of the power and terror of nature and man’s helplessness in face of it. Lord points to this element of fated tragedy in *A Night To Remember*: “What troubled people especially was not just the tragedy—or even its needlessness—but the element of fate in it all. If the *Titanic* had heeded any of the six ice messages on Sunday ... if ice conditions had been normal ... if the night had been rough or moonlit ... if she had seen the berg 15 seconds sooner—or 15 seconds later ... if she had hit the ice any other way ... if her watertight bulkheads had been one deck higher ... if she had carried enough boats ... if the *Californian* had only come. Had any one of these ‘ifs’ turned out right, every life might have been saved. But they all went against her—a classic Greek tragedy.”

The sinking took nearly three hours, allowing for the melodrama to really marinate. Unlike other maritime disasters like the *Lusitania* or *Estonia*, the passengers aboard the foundering *Titanic* had time to realize what was happening to them and to attempt an escape or to decide to meet their deaths. In his book analyzing the cultural impact of the disaster, *The Titanic Complex: A Cultural Manifest*, John Wilson Foster points out that survivors and victims are frequently assigned stock dramatic archetypes: “Rich Man, Socialite, Unsung Hero, Coward, Martyr, Deserter of Post, Stayer at Post, Poor Emigrant, Manifest Hero, etc,” and that the story of her maiden voyage and sinking contains theatrical overtones. We imagine ourselves in these stock characters, envision the choices we’d make – to go down with the ship or to fight for survival.

This sounds a little out of left field, but just go with me here... I have a theory that even the fact that the ship struck on her starboard side (the right side if you’re facing toward the front of the ship) played a tiny role in cementing *Titanic*’s mythic legacy in the Western canon. Westerners typically read from left to right, so in film language objects on the right of the screen often carry more weight. I think to the Western imagination this mental image of the great, dark iceberg lunging out of the darkness and slicing up the right side of the vessel as she tried, futilely, to pull away is more visually striking than if it had happened any other way. Like a giant period on a terrifying sentence. Like, imagine the scene from James Cameron’s film with the iceberg on the left and tell me I’m wrong. Someone use some editing software and flip it, even. Maybe - maybe it’s just me. Film studies majors, feel free to weigh in on this one.

And then, of course, there's the element of class. The ship was very literally, *physically* segregated by social class and then there are these disproportionate rates of survival among the social classes... *Titanic* becomes this very elegant and succinct morality play demonstrating that the continued survival of the nobility and nouveau riche necessarily depends on the exploitation and destruction of the lower classes.

Then there is the story of her rediscovery. After the titanomania inspired by Walter Lord's book died down, the next major wave came following the discovery of the wreck in 1985. Given *Titanic*'s certified mythic status by this point, the discovery of the wreckage was almost akin to stumbling upon the Lost City of Atlantis. The artifacts that lay deep below the surface of the Atlantic told a story that was both fascinating and terrible. And very human. Here was no longer a symbol of man's hubris but the tangible and utterly fragile remains of the hopes, dreams, and lives of more than 1500 people.

The James Cameron film, itself almost certainly the product of that 1985 wave of titanomania, served as the catalyst of another wave, followed by renewed interest in the ship once again, following the hundredth anniversary of the sinking and the sinking of the *Costa Concordia* in 2012. And now, in the wake of the 2023 *Titan* implosion and the upcoming 30th anniversary of the Cameron flick, I feel we are entering a new cycle of interest in the disaster.

I think all of these reasons really add up to why *Titanic* so thoroughly captivates us, more so than other tragedies, and why she has become a part of our cultural mythology. The story seems larger than life, but it is life. It is true. It happened to real people. We return to *Titanic* again and again because like all good tragedies, she is a lens through which we can observe ourselves. She was a little microcosm of society as it was then, through which we analyze society as it is now. And like all good tragedies, she inspires us to hope. That next time there will be enough lifeboats. That next time the rescue will come in time. That next time every life will be worth saving. That as we drift in the wake of the before, we will resolve to improve our world and ourselves in the after.

"After *Titanic*" is a podcast by Bash Back Productions. Written, recorded, and edited by Amanda Hootman. Music by Neilly Farrell. Artwork by Paul Scott Canavan. Full cast list, transcripts, and sources are available on [aftertitanic.com](https://aftertitanic.com). "After *Titanic*" is supported by our generous Indiegogo backers and patrons. Help support the podcast by heading to [Patreon.com/AfterTitanic](https://Patreon.com/AfterTitanic) where you'll get exclusive access to our Discord server, and join an entire community of fellow Titanophiles. I'm Amanda Hootman and it has been an honor to be your host. Thank you always, for listening.