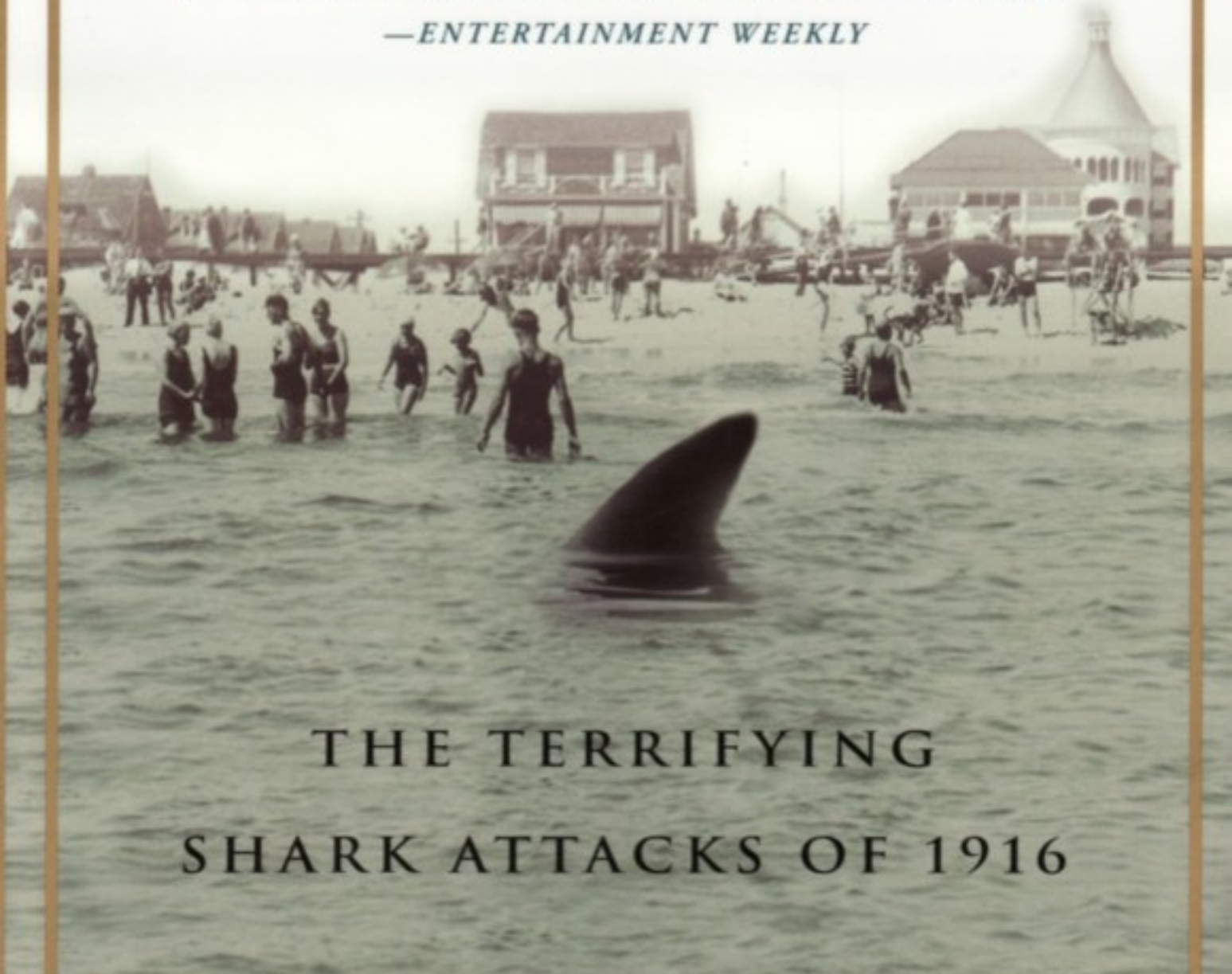


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# CLOSE TO SHORE

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THE TERRIFYING  
SHARK ATTACKS OF 1916

MICHAEL CAPUZZO

# The Last Man in the Water



*The smell of the sea pulled him east. The Atlantic spread before him like a pool of diamonds, liquefied, tossing gently in gleaming tips and shards of changeable, fading bronze light. The sun climbed down toward dusk behind mountains of clouds swollen with moisture. The young man couldn't wait to get in the water.*

*The sandy beach stretched for miles. Behind him were sea-grass-covered dunes, bleached fragments of shipwrecks, the shadows of Victorian turrets facing the sea. The warm wind carried the bark of a retriever, the faint perfume, so close, of the young*



women watching from the sands in their hourglass Gibson Girl dresses, their hair swept up high like the clouds captured in silk bow-tie ribbons. He was a handsome young man with slicked-back dark hair, a strong profile, a man who drew notice. He moved with the slight elbows-out jauntiness of a rebel, for ocean swimming was a new and godless pursuit, a worship of the cult of the body. The startling vision of a young man at the edge of the sea, Thomas Mann had recently written, "conjured up mythologies, was like a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the Gods."

As the young man paused to survey the beach, the dog came beside him and lapped his hand. The man put his toes in the water, then strode quickly into the shallows, the sandy muck sucking at his feet, for there could be no hesitation, no sign of timidity. Timidity was something he was determined to leave far behind, once and forever. The temperature of the water was sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, but he walked out thigh-deep, giving the impression it was a stroll in the afternoon air. As the water reached for his torso, he jackknifed his body and dove in. The lifesavers' rowboat, an old shore-whalers model, lay up on dry sand, beyond the seaweed line.

There were a few other swimmers, splashing and floundering near shore. Quickly, he was beyond them. He was strong and practiced, with a lean, muscular body, and he moved swiftly into deeper water. In the far distance, merchant steamers crawled northward on the warm, onrushing torrents of the Gulf Stream. He could hear splashing behind him, the dog playfully following. All eyes, he knew, were on him now.

He had tried out for the swim team at the university and failed to make it, but he was in his early twenties, at the cusp of manhood, and his endurance did not wane. Soon he had the water to himself, it was his ocean, he was without doubt the strongest swimmer of the hour, and he stopped, exhaled, and floated on his



*back, a signal to shore that he had done what he had set out to do. He couldn't have known precisely how deep the water was beneath him, but, considering his distance from shore, he was certainly in far over his head.*

*It is impossible to know what the young man was thinking as he floated, and the moments passed lazily into twilight. Perhaps he was thinking that he had come to a place of greatest ease, safety, and comfort. The whole summer stretched before him on the beach, with family and friends, not a care in the world but the European war "across the pond," which touched him not. His father had removed him from the mysterious and deadly plagues afflicting the lower classes in Philadelphia. He was engaged to be married in the fall. Perhaps he was pining over his absent love, his first and forever love, as a young man does under a summer sky with all of life ahead. The wedding was arranged. His whole future had been wonderfully arranged.*

*After a time, he realized he no longer heard the splashing of the dog. He turned over on his stomach and looked toward land: the beach was a distant, shimmering strip exhaling the day's radiant heat; the shadows had deepened in front of the turrets; ladies' parasols on the boardwalk bobbed like puffs of yellow cream against the darkening sky. He was the last man in the water. He heard the dog barking from somewhere, across the wind and waves, and was amused. He heard voices, as if from far away. He kicked vigorously, and began his crawl toward shore. He felt an exhilarating jolt of adrenaline lifting him onward and over the waves. Perhaps he mistook it for the thrill of being noticed, or a simple joy in his youth and strength—"He is a Mercury, a brown Mercury, his heels are winged, and in them is the swiftness of the sea," Jack London, one of his favorite authors, had written.*

*His form was perfect, arms arcing through the sea.*



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