

MOBY-DICK

HERMAN MELVILLE was born on August 1, 1819, in New York City, the son of a merchant. His father died when he was only twelve, and Herman worked as a bank clerk and later an elementary school teacher before shipping off on a whaling ship bound for the Pacific. Upon his return, he published a number of books based on his experiences at sea, which won him immediate success. By 1850, he was married and had acquired a farm near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he wrote *Moby-Dick*. His later works, including *Moby-Dick*, became increasingly complex and alienated many of his readers. In 1863, during the Civil War, he moved back to New York City, where he died in 1891.

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HERMAN MELVILLE

**Moby-Dick
OR, THE WHALE**

A Penguin Enriched eBook Classic

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FOREWORD

Even though I hadn't read a word of it, I grew up hating *Moby-Dick*. My father was an English professor at the University of Pittsburgh with a specialty in American maritime literature, and that big, battle-scarred book came to represent everything I resented about his job: all the hours he spent in his attic study, relentlessly reading and writing, more often than not with *Moby-Dick* spread out before him.

Sometimes at dinner he even dared talk about the novel, inevitably in an excited, reverential tone that only exasperated me all the more. And yet, despite my best efforts to look as bored as possible, I found myself hanging on every word. For you see, when my brother and I were very young, my father had told us a bed-time story.

The story was about a whale, a real whale that had rammed and sunk a ship in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The men had taken to their little whaleboats, and instead of sailing for the nearby islands, they headed for South America, thousands of miles away. When a rescue ship found them three months later, only a few of the men were left alive, and in their hands were the bones of their dead shipmates. (That my brother and I grew up without permanent psychological damage is a testament to our mother's remarkable parenting skills.) I was a little hazy on the details, but I understood that *Moby-Dick* had something to do with that ship-ramming whale. But, of course, there was no way I was going to crack open the novel and find out for myself.

I resisted until my senior year in high school when my English teacher made it clear that I had no choice but to read *Moby-Dick* if I was going to graduate in the spring. By that point I had developed an insatiable love of sailing—not your normal recreational activity for a teenager from the Steel City. For reasons too improbable and complex to go into here, I had dedicated myself to racing a Sunfish sail-boat, practicing every weekend on a little manmade lake about an hour outside the city. The previous year I'd qualified for the Sunfish World Championship in Martinique. I finished near the bottom of the fleet, but I was hooked. The exotic tang of saltwater had intoxicated me; I found myself dreaming about the tide-heave of the sea. For me, a shy kid in a big urban high school, sailing seemed my only hope of escape. Then, in February of 1974, I discovered Herman Melville.

The voice of Ishmael, the novel's narrator, caught me completely by surprise. I had expected to be bored to death, but Ishmael sounded like the best friend I had always hoped to find. In the first paragraph he admits to a state of almost clinical depression—"a damp, drizzly November in my soul"—to which any adolescent can relate. But not to worry, Ishmael reassures us, he has found a solution to this condition. Instead of doing damage to himself or to others, he seeks solace in the sea. What's more, he insists, he is not alone: "If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me." As proof, he describes the city of New York on a Sunday afternoon, its cooped-up inhabitants lingering on the waterfront, looking out longingly toward the sea in search of "the ungraspable phantom of life."

Needless to say, this was a scene that spoke to me with a direct, almost overwhelming power. "I am tormented," Ishmael confesses, "with an everlasting itch for things remote." I found myself nodding in agreement. Then, six hundred pages later, came the final pay off when the white whale smashes into the *Pequod*. Here was the event that had been a part of my consciousness for as long as

could remember. And as Melville makes clear early on in *Moby-Dick*, a whale did, in fact, ram into a whaleship from Nantucket back in 1820. So this was the story my father had told us in our bedroom a those years ago. As Ishmael says in the very first chapter, “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open.” It was more than I could comfortably comprehend. But as I’ve since discovered, that is a common reaction to *Moby-Dick*.

Twelve years later, in 1986, I moved with my wife and our two young children to Nantucket Island. Melissa had always dreamed of practicing law in a small town like the one she had grown up in on Cape Cod, and when she saw an ad for a position on Nantucket, she immediately sent in her resume. At the time, I was a freelance sailing journalist and could live just about anywhere. And besides, even though we didn’t know a soul on the island, I figured I was already pretty familiar with the place. I’d read about it in Chapter 14 of *Moby-Dick*.

It was, and remains to this day, my favorite chapter of the novel: a five-paragraph *tour de force* that creates a mesmerizing sense of bustling enchantment. At this early stage in the book, what will become a dark and disturbing portrayal of Captain Ahab’s mono-maniacal quest for the white whale is more like the literary equivalent of a buddy movie as Ishmael and Queequeg make their uncertain, sometimes hilarious way to the island that was once the whaling capital of the world.

Nantucket is, in Ishmael’s words, an “elbow of sand; all beach without a background.” The island’s greatness has nothing to do with its beauty or its natural resources; it is a mere setting-off point—a place wholly dedicated to an activity that occurs on the other side of the world. In fact, the island is, to Ishmael’s way of thinking, a kind of joke, and the second paragraph of the chapter becomes a running gag about the island’s lack of vegetation. Ishmael claims that weeds have to be planted on the island since they don’t grow there naturally; that wood is so rare that tiny splinters are coveted like pieces of the “true cross in Rome” that Nantucketers are reduced to planting toadstools in an attempt to create some shade; and that the sand is so deep that the islanders clamber around in their own sand-adapted version of snow-shoes.

Once he’s gotten the jokes out of his system, Ishmael plunges into an account of the Native American origins of the island. He tells of the myth of the giant bird that swooped down over a native village on Cape Cod and carried an Indian boy out across the water. The child’s parents set off in frantic pursuit in a canoe. Many miles later they discover an island that would become known as Nantucket, and beneath a tree they find their son’s whitened skeleton. Ishmael then recounts the amazing achievements of an island nation whose dominion is nothing less than all the oceans of the world: “Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires.”

If I had stopped to think about, instead of becoming totally captivated by Ishmael’s miraculous prose, I would have realized that he is not describing a real-life place as much as he is evoking a phenomenon, what he calls elsewhere “a fine, boisterous something.” The Nantucket of *Moby-Dick* is an idea, not a town, and yet I had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. I thought that nothing could be better than to live on this wondrous “ant-hill in the sea.”

Not long after relocating to Nantucket I discovered that Melville had never set foot on the place prior to writing *Moby-Dick*. I had been hoodwinked, seduced by an author’s enticing but purely imaginary construct. But the more I learned about the island’s history, the more I realized that this was not really the case. Even if Melville had never visited the island prior to writing his masterpiece, he was exceedingly familiar with its inhabitants, having spent several years of his youth as a whaleman in the South Pacific. At the core of the dazzling rhetorical display of *Moby-Dick*’s

Nantucket is an imperishable historical truth. What I didn't realize then was how long it was going to take to discover just what that truth meant to me.

I would write two books of Nantucket history before I turned my undivided attention to the story I had first heard as a child. By that point I'd begun to appreciate the ballast of reality hidden in the *Pequod* hold. For us, distanced by more than a century from the time when whale oil was the petroleum of its day, it is difficult to believe that a process as ghastly and strange as whaling was an integral part of the American economy and culture. Having grown up in Pittsburgh at a time when the city was dominated by smog-belching steel mills, I had been unexpectedly prepared to appreciate the dirty, often brutal conditions aboard a whaleship: floating factories dedicated to ripping blubber from the whale's corpse, chopping the blubber up, then boiling it into oil amid a stinking pall of sooty smoke. *Moby-Dick* may be, on occasion, mythic and metaphysical, but it is also an extraordinarily detailed and accurate account of American whaling in the nineteenth century. As Ishmael insists, again and again, he is not making this up.

But the novel is much more than a historical document. As I've already indicated, it can be quite funny; in its flights of language *Moby-Dick* can be more than a little intimidating, as if Shakespeare and the translators of the King James Bible teamed up to write a very weird book about whaling. Once the tale of Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick clicks into high gear, the novel becomes an adventure story. Then there are the fascinating sidebars that begin to take up more and more of the novel as Ishmael openly discusses his attempts to write a book as ungovernable as the white whale itself.

But it wasn't until the writing of *In the Heart of the Sea* that I came to understand that Melville had gotten much more than a dramatic conclusion from the story of the *Essex*. He had gotten a point of view. If nothing else, *Moby-Dick* is the tale of a survivor. And just as I'd analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the men who'd survived the *Essex*, I found myself trying to figure out who was this Ishmael and why fate, or at least Melville, had chosen him alone to tell the *Pequod*'s story.

At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael informs us that all this happened "[s]ome years ago—never mind how long precisely." We subsequently learn that he has been living with the story for a very long time, shipping out on a string of whaling voyages in the years since the sinking of the *Pequod*. All the time he has been preparing the book we are now holding in our hands. Taking a writer's fact-gathering to an unheard-of extreme, he has even had the dimensions of a gigantic sperm whale skeleton tattooed to his arm.

But if Ishmael has thrown his lot with the sea, he has done so with more than a little regret. As he knows better than anyone, the sea is a most unforgiving task-master. "No mercy, no power but its own controls it," he says in the chapter titled "Brit," then launches into a simile that ends as an anguished warning: "For as the appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle; thou canst never return!"

To my mind, the novel's masterpiece is the chapter "The Grand Armada," in which Ishmael discovers the vision of domestic bliss that he has denied himself but which is nonetheless crucial to our humanity. After being dragged through the chaotic fringes of a vast school of whales, he and his whaleboat crew come upon a lake-like still center, where whales gently copulate and mother whales suckle their young. Even if this "enchanted calm" is all too quickly destroyed by a whale entangled in the line of a cutting spade, it remains an enduring example of everything the demonic Ahab is not:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely reveled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.

The imagery of this passage anticipates the novel's final scene, in which the whale-rammed *Pequod* and all the chaotic plenitude of the book are sucked down into the swirling vortex of the void. The sole exception is Ishmael. Clinging to a life-buoy fashioned from Queequeg's unused coffin, he seems to have drifted into the welcoming stillness at the maelstrom's center, where he remains miraculously immune to the sea's hazards. "The unharmed sharks," he recounts, "they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks." Two days later Ishmael is rescued, and as is the blessing and curse of all survivors, he must begin to live the rest of his life.

The publication of *Moby-Dick* marked the beginning of a difficult time for its author. What is generally considered the greatest American novel ever written proved to be a critical and popular disappointment in the fall of 1851. Even Melville's friend and literary confidante Evert Duyckinck panned it in what must have been a humiliating review for Melville. The novel's poor sales put him under increasing pressure to support his large and growing family. Then, the following summer, Melville visited Nantucket for the first time.

Like the author of *Moby-Dick*, the island had fallen on hard times. In just a few years, Nantucket had lost more than a quarter of its voting population to the gold fields in California. Where he had once imagined Ishmael walking the streets with his cannibal cohort Queequeg, Melville found a ghost town.

He made a point of meeting George Pollard, the captain of the ill-fated *Essex*. Pollard had given up the sea and become the town's nightwatchman. "To the islanders he was a nobody," Melville would later record, "to me, the most impressive man, tho' wholly unassuming even humble—that I ever encountered."

In the years to come, Melville's professional life as a novelist would go the way of Pollard's whaling career. Having lost a readership for his books, he would be forced to take a job as a customs inspector on the wharves of New York City. As if mocked by Ishmael's vision of domestic bliss in "The Grand Armada," Melville's family life proved difficult. There are indications that he drank too much, that he may have physically abused his wife; one of his sons would die of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Finally, in 1885, a small inheritance allowed Melville to retire from the customs office at the age of sixty-six. After years of composing arid, intellectually complex poetry, he wrote what many regard today as one of the greatest novellas ever written, *Billy Budd*, about an incident; aboard a British man-of-war. Pasted to the side of his wooden writing desk was a simple slogan: "Keep true to the dreams of thy youth."

What these words meant to Melville can only be guessed. But what unites his two masterworks, *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*, is the watery wilderness in which Melville came of age: the sea. It is one of the ironies of history that 150 years after *Moby-Dick*'s publication, the frontier that most Americans associate with our national identity, the West, has long since been civilized beyond recognition. The sea, on the other hand, has never been tamed, and it is the sea that, with Melville's help, we are beginning to rediscover. He is, in the end, one of our greatest literary survivors.

INTRODUCTION

Not many years ago, at an elite northeastern university, a prominent English literary critic was asked which was the greatest English novel. The room was paneled and lit by a chandelier, the windows heavily draped, the bookshelves lined with leatherbound classics—furnishings all carefully assembled to replicate an Old World atmosphere. There was not a whiff of sea air in that room. With the combination of eagerness and resentment that sometimes greets the proclamation of a standard, the students leaned forward to hear from their eminent guest. “*Middlemarch* would be my candidate,” he said tentatively, “unless by English novel you mean novel *in English*, in which case it would, of course, be *Moby-Dick*.”

That *Moby-Dick*, this sea monster of a book, could be declared self-evidently the greatest work of fiction in the language by an arbiter of literary taste would have amazed Herman Melville—not because he did not believe it to be true, but because he doubted the palatability of his truth. Melville was an artist of the highest ambition, but he thought of himself as a writer whose insolence and candor would never become the currency of genteel common rooms. “A whaleship was my Yale College and my Harvard,” he wrote in *Moby-Dick*, which is a book full of wild and untamable characters—“mongrel renegades, and castaways,” Melville called them—and written in frank contempt for the genteel life:

The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship’s direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality;...With all her might she crowds all sail off shore. seeks all the lashed sea’s landlessness again; for refuge’s sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!

These lines about the fatality of coziness and comfort bear Melville’s unmistakable stylistic signature. No one in America had ever written prose of such compressed intensity (“the lashed sea’s landlessness”) and taunting contradictions (“for refuge’s sake forlornly rushing into peril”). As anyone encountering *Moby-Dick* for the first time will discover, it is a book that struggles to maintain its narrative drive against the impulse to digress and meditate and play. One reason for this is that Melville was indefatigably alert to what might be called the stages of a word’s career—as in his use of “pitiful,” a word that vibrates between its old meaning (full of pity) and the more modern meaning it was acquiring in Melville’s time: pathetic, exhausted, impotent. Melville does not employ words in *Moby-Dick*; he savors them.

A noisy book written in a braggart’s voice (“Give me a condor’s quill! Give me Vesuvius’ crate for an inkstand!”), *Moby-Dick* is also a book of exquisite refinement. With all its sprawl and bluster, it can suddenly subside into the mood of “mowers...sleeping among the new-mown hay” and evoke the “snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds...the gentle thoughts of the feminine air.” Even its most dramatic chapters rarely end in crescendo but tend to resolve themselves into a reflective quiet.

that chastens like the sound of strings after brass.

Despite its patent beauties, Melville's novel was, like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a "language experiment" that struck many of its first readers as overwrought and bewildering. "Not worth the money asked for it, either as a literary work or as a mass of printed paper" was the judgment of the *Boston Post*, and although other reviewers appreciated its "easy, rollicking freedom of language and structure," *Moby-Dick* was regarded at best as a curiosity and at worst a botch. In some moods Melville claimed to be unhurt by the public rebuke; he was, he wrote to Hawthorne, "content to have our paper allegories ill comprehended." But in other moods he was devastated that he had failed to touch the nerve of the American public. That Melville was disappointed is hardly surprising, but that he was bitterly shocked is a sign of what was at stake. He wrote *Moby-Dick* in a messianic fervor because he wanted to save his country from itself.

One way to approach Melville's forbidding text is to regard it as part of his lifelong meditation on America. The country into which Melville was born in 1819 was a nation where the vestiges of aristocracy were fading, and where anyone who defended the idea of inherited privilege ran the risk of being charged with treason. National politics, the conduct of which had once been handed back and forth between New England blue bloods and Virginia gentry, was becoming the scene of feisty combat among populist heroes like Andrew Jackson and political professionals like Martin Van Buren. But even as the disfranchised Melville chafed in this vulgar country, he relished its impatience with pretension and the liberation it promised from the burdens of the past. In *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*, the novel he wrote just after *Moby-Dick*, he remarked that

in countries like America, where there is no distinct hereditary caste of gentlemen, whose order is factitiously perpetuated as race-horses and lords are in kingly lands; and especially, in those agricultural districts, where, of a hundred hands that drop a ballot for the Presidency, ninety-nine shall be of the brownest and the brawniest; in such districts, this daintiness of the fingers, when united with a generally manly aspect, assumes a remarkableness unknown in European nations.

Melville's early years were spent in an effort to come to terms with his own "remarkableness." It was a strenuous effort, in which the young man struggled against an insurgent biliousness that he disliked in himself. Both his grandfathers had been heroes of the Revolutionary War, and when his less distinguished father died—a failure in the haberdashery business—the young Melville was compelled to fight his own resentment at being overtaken by men of lesser heritage. Among the novels that preceded *Moby-Dick*, several were records of this struggle: *Redburn* (1849), in which a young man journeys down the Hudson from his once-glorious family seat and endures the embarrassment of being unable to pay his passage; *White Jacket* (1850), in which another gentle youth enters a mariners' world, where the only measure of status is competence in the rigging. These books were retrospective meditations on Melville's years of wandering—first aboard a merchant vessel that took him to Europe, later as a crewman on a United States frigate in the Pacific.

Through these books Melville began to enlarge his private trials into an allegory of the nation's. In Liverpool, trying in vain to navigate the city with the help of his father's outdated guidebook, *Redburn* comes face to face with the dark underside of England's industrial power. When he encounters the shriveled form of a starving woman, chilled to blueness, and hears her whimper a faint cry from the gutter, he suspects a portent for Americans who were still claiming exemption from such horrors even while moving to challenge Britain for world primacy. In *White Jacket* Melville went on

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