

Book Review: Why Read Moby Dick, by Nathaniel Philbrick

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on November 22, 2011

Nathaniel Philbrick says he's read Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick" "at least a dozen times." I've managed it twice, once in high school and once in college (three times, if you count the Classics Illustrated comic book version I read in grade school), and I've never been tempted to have another go at it. Philbrick wants to change that. In his latest book, "Why Read Moby-Dick?", which is part reader's guide, part love letter to Melville and his masterpiece and part exhortation to the reading public, he offers a brief but pithy tour through the novel and its milieu, urging his readers to set aside their angst-ridden preconceptions and plunge right in. There's a lot of depth to explore beneath the surface.

Philbrick is a freelance author, historian and sailing enthusiast who began his literary career writing for Sailing World magazine. He's lived on Nantucket since 1986 and, after writing a history of the island and its people, was invited in 1995 to found the Egan Maritime Institute, "the island's only non-profit organization devoted exclusively to celebrating Nantucket's seafaring heritage." His other books, which cover a broad swath of American history, have won or been nominated for several prestigious prizes, but his most notable accomplishment to date is winning the 2000 National Book Award for "In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex," which recounts the true story of a ship that was rammed and sunk by an enraged sperm whale (though not a white one) in the South Pacific. That incident, of course, was at least in part Melville's inspiration for "Moby-Dick."

So you can see why Philbrick would be a passionate reader and re-reader of "Moby-Dick," but what about the rest of us? Even if you didn't read the book at some time during your formal education, the odds are good that you've seen one of the movie or TV versions or at least leafed through the Cliff's Notes. Nearly everyone knows the

story. Do you really need to navigate your way through the shoals and eddies of 479 pages (Barnes & Noble Classics edition) of 19th century American lit? Philbrick's answer is unequivocal: "Aye!"

No substitute for the actual book will do. "Moby-Dick," Philbrick says, contains "the genetic code of America." It is "the one book that deserves to be called our American bible." The consummate poetry of Melville's prose is testament to all the Shakespeare, Milton and Virgil he'd immersed himself in not long before starting to write his greatest novel. But there's much more to it than beautiful words (or beautiful handling of ordinary words). In a series of compact, thoroughly accessible chapters, Philbrick treats his readers to a smorgasbord of ideas, observations, quotations, historical and biographical tidbits, philosophical ruminations and meditative insights served up in a well-mixed concoction as heady and delectable as the New England clam chowder Ishmael savors at the Try Pots Inn.

We learn that the first draft of "Moby-Dick" had "no whiff of Ahab," and that the monomaniacal captain of the Pequod took shape in Melville's mind only after he'd met Nathaniel Hawthorne, when that first draft was nearly finished, and found himself utterly taken by the darkness at the center of Hawthorne's soul. The complex relationship between Hawthorne and Melville (a firm staple of graduate-level American lit classes) is a thread that runs throughout Philbrick's narrative, deepening and enriching our understanding of Melville and his book.

Yet another theme that Philbrick touches on repeatedly is the way in which American culture—and particularly its struggle over the evil paradox of slavery in a free nation—permeates all of "Moby-Dick." The great white whale has been construed as a stand-in for many things (refer, once again, to the aforementioned graduate level American lit classes), among them God, the relentless hostility of nature, the horrifying emptiness of existence and something like the Dark Side of the Force, but it also stands as a metaphor for the institution of slavery, and its attack on the Pequod parallels the

impact of slavery on American history. Philbrick further illuminates the book's timelessness by pointing out that Ahab (the novel's other horrifying force of nature) has been seen "as Hitler during World War II or as a profit-crazed deep-drilling oil company in 2010 or as a power-crazed Middle Eastern dictator in 2011."

More than the simple raising of a rhetorical question for hesitant readers, "Why Read Moby-Dick?" is an engaging and entertaining guide to the meaty substance of its subject, and it's certain to enhance the experience of anyone who decides to take on (once again or for the first time) Melville's masterpiece. Any takers? I'm actually getting a slight itch to try it myself (call me an itchy male). Your library has multiple copies available.