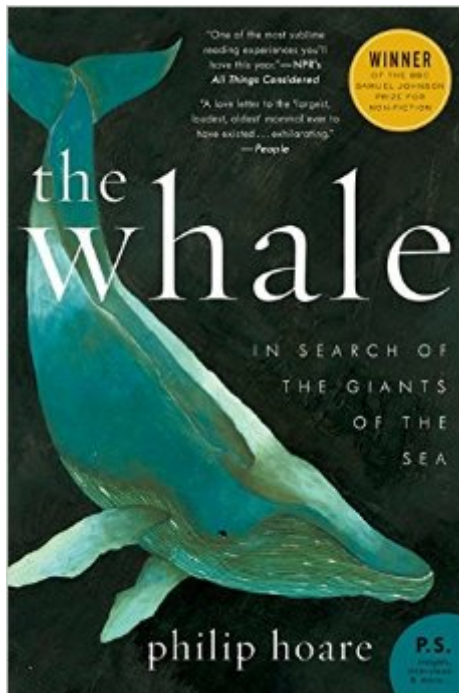


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# The Whale: In Search Of The Giants Of The Sea



## Synopsis

Unpredictable and amusing and informative and original, cavorting between biology, history, travel writing, and memoir. Mark Kurlansky's *The Whale* by Philip Hoare is a enthralling and eye-opening literary leviathan swimming in similar bestselling waters as *Cod* and *The Secret Life of Lobsters*. Winner of the BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Nonfiction, *The Whale* is a lively travelogue through the history, literature, and lore of the king of the sea—the remarkable mammals that we human beings have long been fascinated with, from *Moby Dick* to *Free Willy*. Bestselling author and naturalist Bernd Heinrich calls it, “a moving and extraordinary book,” and Hoare’s sparkling account of swimming with these incredible behemoths will delight whale and wildlife aficionados, lovers of the sea and sea stories, as well as the socially and environmentally conscious reader.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Like most people, I have loved whales since I was a kid (though I have always been more fascinated by sharks...). This book's title, however, was a bit misleading... there were a lot of fascinating facts about whales, but it was honestly more about whaling than the whales themselves. Which made it a pretty depressing (albeit very interesting) read, all in all. And throughout, the book constantly references *Moby-Dick*: or, *The Whale* (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition), and the life of Herman Melville. So, if you are very familiar with that piece of classic literature, I think you will enjoy this more than someone who only has limited knowledge of the book. My only real complaint was that I would have liked even more information about the whales themselves, their lives and their

habits, and a little less about the cruelty and utter destruction brought upon them by mankind. Although, this book managed to give a balanced look into whaling, and did not come off as the Sea Shepard's, or another eco-terrorist group's, manual. There certainly were a lot of facts that any eco-group could use, however. In handling this sensitive topic of history, this author certainly did a wonderfully detailed job. Well-written (despite a few rather abrupt transitions), and well-researched, the photos and drawings added a lot to this good, but on the whole, rather depressing look into the history of humanity's relationship with the whale.

This wide-ranging paean to the world's largest mammals had its origins in fear. As a boy, British biographer Hoare was terrified of water; his imagination reeling at the depths his eyes could not fathom. Nevertheless, in his mid-20s he determined to learn to swim. "In the chilly East End pool, built between the wars, I discovered that the water could bear up my body. I realized what I had been missing; the buoyancy of myself." He still wasn't ready to obsess about the whale for our benefit; he still found his attention wandering from the density of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* despite repeated attempts. It wasn't until his first visit to New England and his first sight of a finback on a whale watch out of Provincetown that Hoare was hooked by the majesty of Leviathan. He dove into *Moby-Dick* with new eyes and prepared to follow the whale himself, guided by Melville and his own curiosity. "Now, as I came to it again, I saw that *Moby Dick* is a book made mythic by the whale, as much as it made a myth of the whale in turn." Hoare muses on *Moby Dick*'s abject failure to stir the collective imagination during Melville's lifetime and the classic status it has since achieved. "Each time I read it, it is as if I am reading it for the first time.... Every day I am reminded that it is part of our collective imagination; from newspaper leaders that evoke Ahab in the pursuit of the war on terror, to the ubiquitous chain of coffee shops named after the Pequod's first mate, Starbuck..." A biographer at heart, Hoare (Noel Coward, *Wilde's Last Stand*) uses Melville's life as a springboard into 19th century whaling. Coming from a solidly middle class background of revolutionary heroes, Indian fighters and seafarers, Melville ran away to sea at 19. His second sea journey was on a whaler out of New Bedford. Hoare gives us the seaman's life - the cramped, efficient quarters, the pay and food, the work, the clothing. He explores New Bedford. "To look at it now, you would not guess that New Bedford was once the richest city in America." The book seems effortlessly organized as the author shifts among Melville's adventures and friendships and disappointments, the dangers, rewards and myths of the whaling life, the uses of whales and their architecture, biology and evolution, all of it seamlessly intertwined throughout the book. We learn about ambergris and spermaceti, about the tactile sensuousness of shipboard oil pressing. There is

a tremendous wealth of information - facts, myths, literary allusions, history, political scheming, science, culture, biography, and more, and all of it is integrated, fascinating and necessary. Hoare quotes liberally from Moby Dick, sharing vivid stories and accounts of whaling that Melville himself read and used; the tales of sea monsters and whales who fought back, the lives and ships lost, the whales harpooned, killed and harvested. If Melville's classic and the whales themselves anchor the book, its connecting digressions loosely follow the whaling places. Hoare explores the ports of New York, New Bedford and Nantucket, from which the sperm whales were hunted, pointing out the mansions and heading out with the captains who built them. As the whaling trade moved onto Europe Hoare follows it to Hull, Southampton, London, out through the British Empire, digressing into politics, changing economies, and technology. As electricity and petroleum phased out whale oil, new processes expanded its use into lubricants, paint, brake fluid, ice cream, lipstick, insulin, pet food and lots more. Factory fleets took hundreds of the slow-reproducing animals and whale populations decreased around the globe, even as our knowledge of them increased. The gathering technique sperm whales used to protect against killer whales (their only non-human predator) has made them easier for humans to kill en masse. Hoare looks at cetacean brain research and diet and culture, then goes for a big finish - swimming with the whales in "their nursery, their living space, their dining room," off the Azores. Hoare is a fluid writer, planting an echo of Melville himself in his prose. Winner of Britain's prestigious BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, this is a magical sort of book, deeply researched (with an excellent bibliography and index) and lovingly written. It's a travel book and a memoir with a reverence for whales. It's a history and a biography and a naturalist's delight. It's a literary accompaniment to Moby Dick and an introduction to the whaling industry. It's entertaining and endlessly informative and recommended for just about anyone who reads.

After hearing the author on the radio, I was thrilled to find my local library had the book available. Now I'm very glad I didn't buy it, because I found the actual book quite disappointing. There are interesting passages -- the story of the author's own pursuit of an encounter with whales is vivid and moving, and I enjoyed his examination of Melville's life and work (apparently repurposed from a program he created for the BBC). But the bulk of the book, as another reviewer has mentioned, is about whaling, not whales. Not only are there far too many details (many of them repeated several times) about the development of whaling in various oceans and centuries, there are too many descriptions of beached whales (how many do we really need?!), and too many visits to whale museums. If that's where your interests lie, you'll probably enjoy this book. But the information about

the whales themselves is patchy and scattered. Hoare's model for the book is Ahab's pursuit of Moby-Dick, where the whale is seen only through the attempts to capture it, and the animal itself remains mysterious. Unfortunately "The Whale" follows the same pattern, and what is tragedy in Melville is only a missed opportunity in Hoare.

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