


[Maas on King, 'Ahab's Rolling Sea: A Natural History of Moby-Dick'](#)

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Richard J. King. *Ahab's Rolling Sea: A Natural History of Moby-Dick*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Illustrations. 464 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-226-51496-3](#). 

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Richard J. King's *Ahab's Rolling Sea: A Natural History of Moby-Dick* is simply breathtaking, in that it takes one's breath away and refills the lungs with a gust of salty sea breeze. Situated somewhere between Steve Mentz's *Ocean* (2020), Patricia Yaeger's "Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons" (2010), and BBC One's documentary series *The Blue Planet: Seas of Life* (2001), *Ahab's Rolling Sea* collects accounts from literary criticism, theory, climate activism, and natural history for a deep dive into one of the most popular maritime novels around—Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851).[1] While *Ahab's Rolling Sea* itself falls quite neatly in the emergent and ever-expanding category of the Blue Humanities, its vast reach speaks to the interdisciplinarity of both the novel in question—*Moby Dick*—and King's own approach. Working from interviews of current scientists and fishers, from literary sources and natural history documents, from pedagogical and personal experience, King explores "topics in marine biology, oceanography, and the science of navigation," and much more, "as Ishmael takes them up in *Moby-Dick*" (p. 3). The wide reach of *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, therefore, proves placement in any particular subsection of the Blue Humanities quite difficult—it contains aspects of literary, historical, and environmental works. However, in giving central importance to "sailor knowledge and experience," what *Ahab's Rolling Sea* shares fully with these works is its firm centering of the ocean (p. 250). It is a book that loves, wonders at, fears, and fears for the ocean. As King writes, "*Moby-Dick* is first and foremost a novel about the living, breathing, awe-inspiring global ocean and its inhabitants" (p. 3). So too is *Ahab's Rolling Sea*.

In many ways, King draws on his source material to structure *Ahab's Rolling Sea*. As just one fitting example, King repeats the book's epitaph in his chapter "Whale Skeletons and Fossils": "I fully believe in both, in the poetry and in the dissection" (p. 240). This quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson encapsulates the book as a whole but also each meticulous chapter. *Ahab's Rolling Sea* explores both poetry and dissection. Each chapter is both poetic and dissecting. Following *Moby Dick*'s chronological arc closely, and similarly often pairing chapters, King devotes most of the thirty-one chapters to the study of a single marine animal or natural phenomenon as it appears in the novel. Moving from a close etymological exploration of the ocean's minute brit in "Brit and Baleen" to the mysterious giant squid Archie in the following chapter, "Giant Squid"—which King is "entirely underwhelmed" by—*Ahab's Rolling Sea* shifts seamlessly between varying oceanic, and literary, scales (p. 143). King spans the ocean's "ugly, dirty deep" and its "treasures," moving from a chapter on the smelly—yet lucrative—substance found in the digestive track of whales, "Ambergis," to the

submerged and endangered, wonderful world of coral in “Coral Insects” (p. 218). One chapter on whale behavior and whale hunting, “Sperm Whale Behavior,” covers twenty-five pages, while another chapter on pilot fish, “Small Harmless Fish,” covers a brief two pages. These shifts in scale mirror our own continued paradoxical relationship with the sea in all its immensity and minuteness, its mundanity and wonder, and its immortality and crucial susceptibility.

Consequently, one of the primary questions King wishes to address is how and why *Moby Dick* still captures our oceanic imagination well into the twenty-first century. In one particularly exemplary moment, scientist Marta Guerra Bobo tells King that *Moby Dick* is “obligatory reading if you’re getting a PhD studying sperm whales” (p. 311). Moving from the novel’s interdisciplinary reach, King situates *Moby Dick* in the field of ecocritical scholarship and our current climate crisis, writing: “Reading *Moby-Dick* in the twenty-first century, now well into the Anthropocene, we can read this novel as a proto-Darwinian, proto-environmentalist masterpiece of ocean nature writing that still has much to say, even when applied to our current global crises” (p. 2). King explores the novel’s “blue ecocritical themes” in terms of whale intelligence, its “environmental studies angle” in terms of a “superstitious sympathy for seals ... surprising for the time period,” and nineteenth-century American “eco-guilt” in terms of “human impact on the natural world” and “habitat destruction and overhunting,” to name a few (pp. 211, 293, 257-58). He concludes *Ahab’s Rolling Sea* by considering Ishmael in our contemporary context as proto-environmentalist and climate refugee, with Western society as Ahab, ever hurling harpoons and endangering our future.

Ahab’s Rolling Sea is a productive environmental reading of the pervasive *Moby Dick* and also more broadly, like the novel, “about life at sea—and about sea-life” (p. 5). What distinguishes this book is its focus on oceanic ways of knowing. Unlike Melville, King does not necessarily privilege “the sailor’s perspective over ‘the old naturalists’” but seamlessly splices many forms of oceanic knowledge and know-how into a complex reading of this classic novel returning—always and most refreshingly—to his own time at sea (p. 23). *Ahab’s Rolling Sea* is therefore part of a growing corpus of work by oceanic humanities scholars that draws on personal experience at sea in shaping scholarly discourse. From kayaking along with David Gange in his *The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian’s Journey from Shetland to the Channel* (2019) to swimming through cold waters with Philip Hoare in *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR: In Search of the Soul of the Sea* (2017) and Steve Mentz in “Swimming Lessons,” scholars and students alike are urged to embark onto/into the wide historic and literary waters of the rolling sea. King—who has been sailing tall ships for over twenty years and is a visiting professor at Sea Education Association—often refuses landed metaphors in favor of ocean-specific comparison yet still makes legible his experience to seasoned seafarers and landlocked readers alike. The relatability and readability of *Ahab’s Rolling Sea*, at a time when the sea has much receded from daily life, is a testament to King’s pedagogical, sailorly, and descriptive mastery. King invites us to stand aloft with him and Ishmael, and look out toward the wonderful, ever-rolling sea. Maybe, if we look close enough, we will even get to see a whale.

Notes

[1]. Steve Mentz, *Ocean* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,” *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (May 2010): 523-45; and Alastair Fothergill, dir. and prod., *The Blue Planet: Seas of Life* (London: BBC One, 2001).

[2]. David Gange, *The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* (London: William Collins, 2019); Philip Hoare, *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR: In Search of the Soul of the Sea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); and Steve Mentz, "Swimming Lessons," *Hypocrite Reader* 61 (February 2016).

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