Reviews of the *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* by Nathaniel Philbrick

Domarivip

I'm not here to necessarily review the book - as several people have already expressed what a great story this is - but rather I'm here to say thank you to Nathaniel Philbrick and all other non-fiction writers who have taken the time to research amazing real life events and place that information into a gripping, factual account that somehow still reads like a novel. I'm a high school history teacher who loves all kinds of history, but was never really interested in the whaling culture found on Nantucket Island, per se. But after having read an article about the book in my Smithsonian Magazine, I was instantly gripped. I had no idea that Moby Dick was based on a real event. When I was in high school, my dad challenged me to read Moby Dick. I think he actually said he would give me $100 to finish it - and even with the cash reward - I couldn't do it. I was so bored. But, at 17
years old, I had not yet found my favorite genre: historical non-fiction. Now as an adult, and obviously because I teach the subject, I have become a voracious reader of non-fiction books, and having just consumed this one, I can tell you it was well-written and paced beautifully. In between the story of the Essex were lots of little tidbit type facts about the whaling industry in general as well as other very famous and not-so-famous stove ships and evidences of survival induced cannibalism. Very interesting book. I’ll be looking for another Philbrick book to read right after I post this review.

Mikale

Almost from the very beginning, the author spins together letters, partially-written accounts and log book entries-- along with his own research-- into a tale that is difficult to put down. Descriptions of shipwrecked sailors’ dehydration and starvation are not for the faint of heart; furthermore, it was difficult not to squirm when attention turned to the grisly matter of 'harvesting' human flesh and doling it out amongst survivors. But a single detail refrains: in almost all accounts listed, sailors and shipmen appeared surprised and indignant when their quarry began to fight back. More than a few were bitter about these retaliations, ruminating upon them as they drifted helplessly in stranded whale-boats. But given the violent and extremely bloody methods used to dispatch a whale during that time period (first harpooning them, then rowing alongside to slash at tender tendons near the tail if they failed to succumb right away), the reason should be obvious: whales are extremely intelligent mammals with complex relationships and the same right to protect their pods and youngsters as any other creature. This tale is filled with horrific suffering, endured by both whales and shipmen alike.

Wizer

I knew the outlines of the story of the Essex from reading Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America. What was most interesting to me was the story of how the crew dealt with the event, their tenacity, ability to endure enormous suffering, and willingness to follow leaders, even leaders with very different skill sets. Lots of revealing detail about the community of Nantucket, the construction of the ships, how the crews were assembled of novice and veteran whalers, the sheer enormity of the task of finding, killing, rendering whales and sailing these relatively small, relatively fragile ships thousands of miles into unknown waters. These were courageous, if not desperate, men.

fire dancer

Most readers now probably know that the destruction of the whaling ship Essex by a very large whale was a source for Herman Melville’s great novel "Moby Dick". Without invidious comparison, it might be said that Mr. Philbrick picks up where Melville left off. He offers a fascinating and very real account -- and aftermath-- of the dramatic and dumbfounding event that actually happens at the end of Moby Dick as a masterwork of American literature. Philbrick draws from the accounts of Essex survivors and the realities of the whaling industry and its wooden ship world. It's a tough world, and Philbrick brings its details and people alive, which they once were, in a straightforward work of reportage as to what happened not only to a ship but to its people suddenly stranded in the middle of an ocean.

If you’ve read Melville-- either recently or some time ago, as I-- you owe it to yourself to know something more of his source and to find out "how it all ends". If you read Philbrick first you may learn all you want and forego jumping into Melville’s turbulent sea, with its undercurrents of Biblical doubt, human and animal vengeance and much else. But you’re more likely to sign onto Melville’s fateful voyage better prepared for what might be in store for you along with Ishmael and Quee Queg in Cap’n Ahab’s crew. "Heart of the Sea" is fast-moving and thorough, its narrative of real events as strange and dramatic as anything a novelist could imagine -- or make use of.

Golkis

I myself am a merchant seaman, and chose this book out of a list of potentials for my time at sea. I’m
extremely glad I did. This book is very true to life, and will give readers with no knowledge of the maritime professions, as well as readers who have spent a life at sea nearly equal depth into every aspect that this book builds its self upon. The book starts by immersing you in the era of whale fishing, and the lifestyle of those living in, and sailing out of Nantucket on a personal level. Then it builds up characters individually, making you feel like you've actually met them. Next it builds up very graphic depictions of sailing, the hunt, and processing a whale. When tragedy strikes, the descriptions manage to get even more in depth. As a reader, although I did not feel that I would have made the same decisions as the various characters, I felt I could sympathize with them, and understand why they chose the way they did.

I'm not an avid reader, but this book was well worth the read. It really allows the imagination to take over to make the reader feel as though they are right there in the same boat, and part of the same crew.

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