“Going Aboard?”

The New Bedford Whaling Museum’s Moby-Dick marathon by evander price

At the New Bedford Whaling Museum’s annual Moby-Dick Marathon, all 136 chapters of the great American epic—from “Etymology” to “Epilogue”—are read nonstop, out loud, in a gallery overlooking the harbor. In years past, the reading took place under the sweating bones of Kobo, the rearticulated skeleton of a juvenile blue whale suspended from the ceiling of the Jacobs Family Gallery like a cetacean Sword of Damocles. Kobo (short for “King Of the Blue Ocean”) is one of five whale skeletons the museum has on display, but he is unique. Because his bones weren’t properly prepared, they have, for the past 16 years, wept whale oil, drop by drop, filling the gallery with an anachronistic musk that was ubiquitous in New Bedford 150 years ago.

To smell whale oil today is an uncanny novelty, a means of olfactory time travel possible only in rare places like this museum. It smells of strenuous work and wealth, of a maritime economy responsible for keeping the world lit at night, of a century of environmental hubris; it is the smell of Melville, and it must be experienced in person. By the mid nineteenth century, New Bedford was the whaling capital of the world, responsible for nearly half the global industry. The museum, founded in 1903, is uniquely prepared to inspire the maritime muse, and to illustrate and grapple with its complex history.
ALL IN A DAY: Take to the Hills

The Blue Hills Reservation spans more than 7,000 acres, forming a scenic chain of largely unspoiled nature, just south of Boston. It’s the largest state-owned green space that caters to year-round recreation—and, even rarer, it’s accessible by public transportation.

In the winter, the golf course is transformed into a cross-country skiing haven, and other sections of the park are earmarked for downhill runs, mountain biking, rock climbing, and horseback riding. Urban-dwelling hikers especially flock to the reservation’s 125 miles of trails, notes Catherine MacCurtain, a leader of the Appalachian Mountain Club’s Southeastern Massachusetts chapter: “Otherwise we have to drive all the way to New Hampshire.” The park’s 22 hills offer a surprising array of treks, she assures, from beginner paths to the challenging Skyline Trail, which stretches across the range, offering perfect views of Boston’s skyline and the harbor islands.

The chapter organizes free hiking trips throughout the year. MacCurtain herself prefers winter jaunts—“No bugs and it’s cool”—and swears she’s not alone. Consequently, she and fellow leader Paul Brookes have organized a weekly hiking series from December 27 to March 14 that roughly coincides with the winter solstice and spring equinox. The group will meet at different locations each Tuesday morning for four-hour expeditions. But anyone can take on the larger goal: hiking the length of every single trail in the park during the wintertime—although not necessarily within one season. (To traverse all 125 miles in three months, “you would be out there at least three or four times a week, in addition to the Tuesday hike,” MacCurtain concedes.) About 20 hardy hikers joined the series last winter and averaged six miles each week. (For those seeking a mellower outing of the “Tuesday hike,” MacCurtain concedes.)

The group stops along the way for snacks and lunch, but the pace is brisk; non-Appalachian Mountain Club members and fledgling hikers are welcome, but they should be in reasonably good physical condition. And, at least after the first snowfall, proper attire, hiking boots, and tread spikes or chains that increase traction are required.

Even without the winds and ice, winter hiking is more arduous than summery climbs. “Last year we didn’t have much snow,” MacCurtain recalls, “but we had many cold and rainy Tuesdays, which can be worse, because no matter what gear you wear, you get wet. We’d do five or six miles; then everyone would want to go home. But at least you’re all in it together, so it’s always more fun that way.”

The point, really, is getting people together to enjoy winter, instead of leaving them to sit around the house. “We’ve found,” MacCurtain adds, “that once they get the right clothing and get out there, they’re not cold at all, and they enjoy it.” The group stops to deliver their allotted portion of the story; the group joins in on the story; the group listens to any portion of the marathon; the truly tenacious Ishmaels try to sit and stay awake for the whole voyage.

What is it about this book that entangles so many readers? How has this American epic maintained its steadily growing Rocky Horror-esque cult following of those who insist on a yearly migration to the New Bedford Whaling Museum to ship out, as Ishmael and Melville did nearly two centuries ago, in the dead of winter?

It could be the tight sense of community at the museum. The marathon draws a diverse crew of scholars, students, conservationists, art historians, teachers, scientists, sailors, politicians, musicians, museum professionals, and local residents, all of whom revel in the collective identity that binds them to a book in the lines, sheets, and monkey ropes; each reader demonstrating his or her claim to the title of “aficionado.” One never quite knows who may show up. Even Melville’s great-great-grandchildren and Melville’s great-great-grandchildren, come to read.

Perhaps it is the challenge of trying to swallow an epic in one big gulp. The book is a notoriously slippery fish, a hodgepodge of literary genres that has, since its publication in 1851, defied categorization and been invoked in an endless myriad of analogies. The casual reader generally sips Moby-Dick more times than they can remember. Anyone is welcome to come and listen to any portion of the marathon; the truly tenacious Ishmaels try to sit and stay awake for the whole voyage.
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uses, and should curiosity strike, visitors happy to elaborate on those functions and uses. The whaling museum is hilariously describing the whale penis—a digression without realizing that Melville titled chapter 95, “The Cassock.” Many an author’s smorgasbord of obscure art historical references, marathon-goers can meander through the galleries to see some examples of the works themselves—like Pêche du Cachalot, one of several aquatints by Ambroise Louis Garneray, or Baleinier Français en Pêche, a lithograph by Jean-Baptiste Henri Durand-Brager—which Ishmael believed depicted “by far the finest, though in some details not the most correct, presentations of whales and whaling scenes to be anywhere found.”

Participants can also peruse the museum’s collection of every edition of Moby-Dick ever published, and its shelves of scrimshaw: what Melville defines as “lively sketches of whales and whaling-scenes, graven by the fishermen themselves on Sperm Whale-teeth.” Under the aegis of senior curator emeritus Stuart Frank, no fewer than three dictionaries have been published about scrimshaw; a fourth is dedicated solely to the museum’s collection.

Marathoners come as close to the truth of whaling as Melville himself believed was possible without going to sea. The celebratory reading bridges the chasm between a

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**CURiosities: Steampunk’s Sole**

In *Shumachine*, a shoe-shinee’s regal seat fronts what looks like a kooky scientist’s air-propelled time machine housed within the skeletal frame of a covered wagon. This prime example of Steampunk’s aesthetic playfully melds imaginary and historic constructs—and highlights the Fuller Craft Museum’s exhibit “New Sole of the Old Machine: Steampunk Brockton—Reimagining the City of Shoes.” *Shumachine* creator and guest curator Bruce Rosenbaum incorporated vintage machinery and equipment: the stand (salvaged from a Cape Cod hotel), curvaceous cast-iron legs from a McKay sole-sewing machine, and an early model of the “Krippendorf Calculateur” (used to optimize the amount of leather required to fabricate shoes). Steampunk, he explains, is “a fashion and a visual art, but also a maker’s art, and a way of thinking and problem-solving”; ingenuity, he adds, is spawned by “fusing opposites: past and present, form and function, arts and science, man and machine.”

Science-fiction writer K.W. Jeter coined the term in the late 1980s, and the movement identifies with the fiction of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. The style typically embodies technology-driven sci-fi motifs, Victorian-era “Great Explorer” adventurousness, and the Industrial Revolution’s practical, polished precision.

At the Fuller, regional artists made “Steampunk” works reflecting Brockton’s foundation in footwear. By the turn of the twentieth century, Brockton’s more than 90 factories employed thousands and shod citizens nationwide. For the whimsical *Shoe Carousel*, found-objects sculptor Michael Ulman repurposed elegant metal and wooden shoe forms. John Belli’s toy-like *Ladyslipper: Land Speed Racer* (named for a shoe-industry magnate’s car), incorporates a wooden pulley and drive-belt from a local manufacturer and a cockpit that mimics “a heavy boot upper.” Artist Jim Bremer’s mother worked in a shoe factory, inspiring him to honor the quality craftsmanship and “creativity, hard work, and team work” that built New England’s manufacturing hives. (For *The Sky’s the Limit*, Bremer and his wife, Ruth Buffington, hand-sewed hundreds of beads, buttons, watch gears, and pins onto the image of an airship.) In their *One Giant Step for Brockton*, a statuesque mannequin sports gold leggings, platform shoes, and an antenna-topped aviator cap as she strides through a riveted doorframe: a benign *Metropolis* warrior princess, of the sort who might someday recharge a city, like Brockton. —N.P.B.
solo, silent reading of *Moby-Dick* at home, safe and comfortable in one’s own bed, and the multimedia sensorium of the museum. That extends even to the tasting of food. In an often under-examined passage in chapter 15, Melville describes a bowl of New England clam chowder:

Oh, sweet friends! hearken to me. It was made of small juicy clams, scarcely bigger than hazel nuts, mixed with pounded ship biscuit, and salted pork cut up into little flakes; the whole enriched with butter, and plentifully seasoned with pepper and salt.

The passage comes paired with a steaming bowl of hot chowder: metaphor is made material; reading is made reality.

Midnight at the museum is a quieter affair, much like the scene evoked in Chapter 51, “The Spirit-Spout”: through the “serene and moonlight night,” the pages “roll by like scrolls of silver,” under the watch of the skeleton crew of marathoners who keep the ship steady while others sleep.

Fast-forward to the early morning. The sun has risen and those stoic palinuruses who have endured for a whole night approach the finale. The monomania of Ahab and Melville has become their own.

A marathon described cannot compare to a marathon read. For this year, the twenty-first anniversary of the *Moby-Dick* Marathon (which, coincidentally, is the very age Melville was when he set out on the whaler *Acushnet* in 1841), the titular question posed in chapter 21 abides:

*Going Aboard?*

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