

Moby Dick Book Review

1 Plot Summary

The novel begins with a famous line: “Call me Ishmael.” Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*, seeks “freedom” from his life in New York City, and decides to head north to New Bedford, Massachusetts, to find a job on a whaling ship. In New Bedford, at the Spouter Inn, Ishmael meets Queequeg, a “native” man from Kokovoko, in the Pacific isles, who is trained as a harpooner on whale-ships—a man who actually hunts and catches whales. Although Ishmael is initially scared of Queequeg, the two quickly become friends, and vow to accompany each other on a ship of Ishmael’s choosing, in Nantucket.

There, Ishmael comes across a ship called the *Pequod*, and when he speaks to two of the boats owners, Peleg and Bildad, he realizes that the captain of the *Pequod*, called Ahab, is a “strange” man, possibly mad, who does not tend to associate with others. Ishmael later finds out that Ahab lost his leg to a particularly nasty whale, who bit it off; this whale is called *Moby Dick*, and is famous for its whiteness, its ferocity, and its inability to be caught.

Ishmael introduces Starbuck, the practical and cautious first mate, Stubb, the wild and talented whale-fisher and second mate, and Flask, the “mediocre” third mate. Ahab finally makes an appearance on the deck of the *Pequod*, and announces to the crew that, although they are a normal whaling ship, they also have a special mission—to find and kill *Moby Dick*. Ahab vows to give a one-ounce gold doubloon to the first man to spot the “white whale.”

Ahab asks the ship’s blacksmith, Perth, to make him a new harpoon, which Ahab then “baptizes” with the blood of Tashtego, Daggoo, and Queequeg, the ship’s three “heathen” harpooners. It is also revealed, in this middle section, that Ahab has snuck five men, one named Fedallah, and all from an unnamed country in Asia, aboard the *Pequod*, to help him find and kill *Moby Dick*. Stubb and Flask are convinced that Fedallah is the “devil incarnate,” and that Ahab has sold his soul to the devil to catch the white whale.

Starbuck warns Ahab to quit the mission, but Ahab again approaches *Moby Dick* and throws his harpoon—but this time, Ahab is caught in the line, and he is hanged and drowned with his own rope. *Moby Dick* then turns and smashes into the *Pequod*, causing that ship to sink, and killing everyone aboard except Ishmael, who escapes “to tell the tale” by floating on Queequeg’s coffin. Ishmael is picked up by the *Rachel*, a ship with which the *Pequod* previously had a gam. The novel ends.

2 Review

Moby Dick is as mammoth, mysterious and elusive as the enormous white whale that gives the book its name. The opening line (“Call me Ishmael”) is one of the most famous in all literature. And even people who’ve never read it are familiar with the peg-legged, vengeance-seeking Captain Ahab, the archetype for any maniacally obsessed leader. What makes the novel so fascinating is how modern it feels. It’s hugely digressive, contains dialogue that at times sounds Shakespearean, and there’s not really much action until the end. But somehow it’s still very entertaining. Melville (who, of course, knew all about whaling) is such a clever, genial writer, that you’ll be smiling and chuckling throughout and gasping at his powers of description and observation. What I feel about the book is awe and respect. Like the ocean itself, it is vast and has unknowable depths, and I can see myself in another couple of years venturing back out for another rewarding trip.