ISHMAEL, THE ALL-AMERICAN BOY

Well, it's Summertime, and I've been on the road, and as usual, it seems like more fun to write about something completely different. Recently I saw a production of the opera *Moby Dick*, composed by Jake Heggie, libretto by Gene Scheer, which inspired me to re-read the book. I say re-read, although it's been so long that I barely remember it

About ten years ago I started re-reading books that meant a lot to me as a young person, including *Kidnapped* by Robert Lewis Stevenson, *Men of Iron* by Howard Pyle, *One, Two, Three … Infinity* by George Gamow, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and other books by Albert Camus, and a whole bunch of science fiction, my first serious love, to name a few. I have vivid memories of these books, and was not often disappointed; they held the same intensity that I remembered. I also reread several books every two or three years, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Possession* by A.S. Byatt, and chapters of *Philosophy and Social Hop*e by Richard Rorty,

There is a lot to be said for re-reading. For one thing, I read more carefully when I'm not desperate to find out how it all comes out. For another, as I grow older I see different things in old favorites. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, my earliest readings were focused on the courtship of Elizabeth and Darcy. In later readings, I began to appreciate the way Austen contrasts existing family relationships and those formed throughout the novel. I also began to see the ways other characters saw these relationships, especially the sharp-witted Charlotte. In *Capital In The Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty talks about the basis of Darcy's wealth, which I had not understood. Then my colleague Rayne pointed out that each of the women in the novel negotiates their economic situation differently, and how much Elizabeth risked by turning down Mr.

Collins, something I hadn't noticed on multiple readings over decades. She also posted insightful comments on the book in response to this post.

I'm about 2/3 of the way through *Moby Dick*. I've learned a lot about whales and something about the work of the crew on whalers, and read several fascinating stories about other ships and crews. Two larger themes have emerged for me: religious and civic tolerance.

Religion enters in the first sentence: "Call me Ishmael." Ishmael is identified in the Bible as the son of Abraham by Hagar. Sarah suggested that Abraham sleep with her slave to conceive a child when it becomes clear that Sarah is too old to bear children. When Sarah produces a son in accordance with the promise of the Almighty, Sarah insists that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. in the desert as she weeps in desolation, an angel appears and tells her that Ishmael is a son of Abraham, and therefore the Almighty will make a great nation of him and his children.

Ishmael is claimed by Muslims as an ancestor of the Prophet. It is said that Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca, and that Abraham returned to construct the Kaaba. That Ishmael is included in both Jewish/Christian texts and Islamic texts is a duality that seems relevant to the personality Melville's Ishmael reveals to us.

Ahab too is a Biblically freighted name. Ahab was a king of Israel, and Ishmael knows this:

> And a very vile one. When that wicked King was slain, the dogs, did they no lick his blood?

Compare 2 Kings 21:19 with 2 Kings 22:38.

In the beginning, Ishmael is on his way to Nantucket, planning to ship out on a whaler. He stops in New Bedford at the Spouter Inn for a couple of nights. The bar is made to resemble a whale's head, including the entire jaw bone of a

sperm whale. Standing under this arch is the bartender, called Jonah. The story of Jonah and the Whale is one religious thread.

Ishmael goes to a whaler's church for Sunday services. The church is built on the model of a ship. There are plaques on the walls commemorating men who died at sea. The preacher, an ex-whaler, climbs into the tall pulpit on a ship's ladder, and gives a sermon on Jonah. He paints the story from the perspective of a sailor, with vivid descriptions of the ship's crew and captain, and the storm. He draws two lessons. For the sinner, Jonah is a tale of proper repentance:

> .., Jonah does not weep and wail for direct deliverance. He feels that his dreadful punishment is just. He leaves all his deliverance to God, contenting himself with this, that spite of all his pains and pangs, he will sill look towards His holy Temple. And here, shipmates, is true and faithful repentance: not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment.

Compare this to the words of Abraham Lincoln in the Second Inaugural Address.

> Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether"

Christianity isn't the only religion. Ishmael meets the harpooner Queequeg at the Spouter Inn. He is the son of royalty on the island of

Rokovoko, “an island far away to the west and South”. He’s Black, and a cannibal, and a head hunter; he’s bald, has sharply filed teeth and is a large and imposing man and a highly skilled harpooner. He also practices his religion, seemingly centered on a small ebony figure he calls Yojo. Queequeg explains to Ishmael that Yojo wants Ishmael to select a ship for them. While Ishmael somewhat unwillingly sets out on this errand, Queequeg begins a ritual with Yojo: he sits cross-legged with Yojo perched on his head and stays that way for 24 hours, unmoving. Ishmael calls this a “sort of Lent or Ramadan or day of fasting, humiliation and prayer”, the best explanation he can envision because Queequeg doesn’t explain and Ishmael doesn’t aask.

A strange scene of religious import takes place after the Pequod kills its first whale, flenses it, and beheads it, preparatory to extracting the valuable sperm oil. Ahab leans over rail staring at “…that blood-dripping head hung to the Pequod’s waist like the giant Holofernes’s from the girdle of Judith”, and gives this elegy:

> “Speak, thou vast and venerable head … which, though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world’s foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor’s side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down. Thou saw’st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship;

> heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them. Thou saw’st the murdered mate when tossed by pirates from the midnight deck; for hours he fell into the deeper midnight of the insatiate maw; and his murderers still sailed on unharmed — while swift lightnings shivered the neighboring ship that would have borne a righteous husband to outstretched, longing arms. O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!”

Chapter 70. Later the crew is drawing out buckets of sperm oil from a hole drilled in the whale’s head guided by the harpooner Tashtego. Suddenly the hooks holding the head slip out, and Tashtego is thrown into the hole in the whale’s head. The head breaks away from the tackle holding it to the ship and falls into the sea, carrying Tashtego down into the deeps. Queequeg somehow manages a rescue. The godless parallel to the Jonah story suggests Ishmael’s secular religion.

That brings us to the second point: civic tolerance. Recall that Ishmael met Queequeg at an inn, forced to share a bunk. Ishmael is in bed when Queequeg arrives and scares the daylights out of Ishmael. But shortly, Ishmael reconsiders. Queequeg agrees to the joint sleeping arrangement, and the tomahawk in this passage is both a pipe and an ax:

> “You gettee in,” he added, motioning to me with his tomahawk, and throwing the clothes to one side. He really did this in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way. I stood looking at him a moment. For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself — the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I

> have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.

Chapter 3. It doesn’t take long for the two men to become actual friends as well as co-workers, and the respect each has for the other becomes relevant in several episodes in the book.

Ishmael’s attitude is genuine. He’s interested in people, and observant without judging his crewmates by class or nationality or cannibalism. There are several chapters discussing the members of the crew, and there is not a word of judgment, just statements of fact.

It’s also a parallel to the treatment of religion. He is most familiar with the Christian Bible, but has a basic knowledge of other religions, again without judgment, and without making much of his own views, at least directly.

This kind of tolerance, religious and civic, cheerfully informed by wide experience of various people and an open mind, seems to me to be a perfect demonstration of an important virtue of idealized America. It turns out it’s a sad reminder of what we no longer care about in this country, of what we have abandoned as civic virtue. Maybe I just can’t read anything without recognizing our own times, with our depleted national identity.