

Hooked: Illustrator Rockwell Kent's pen-and-ink drawings for a 1930 edition of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* helped inspire a revival of the book's popularity.



In the Belly of the Whale

Why did I create my online shrine to *Moby-Dick*?

My moment of clarity came too late.

Sunk into an armchair near the library stacks last June, my defensible space scattered with dictionaries, encyclopedias, and concordances of 19th-century terms, I glanced out the window and saw the 21st century passing me by. Bicyclists tootled along brick pathways; couples lounged under trees; the very young and the very old took their halting steps. And there I was, teeth chattering in the over-conditioned air, embellishing the embellishments on a contraption nobody wanted: my future online annotation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

BY MARGARET GUROFF

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This month's cultural highlights



Suddenly, the whole project seemed like a horrible idea. There were already multiple annotations of Melville's 1851 whaling-adventure-cum-encyclopedia. Sure, none of them were online, and none went into the level of detail I'd needed in order to understand the book last spring, after a friend convinced me to read it for the first time and I got poleaxed by the deadpan brilliance of the first chapter.

But was the lack of a Web annotation—and my own weird affection for the book—really enough reason to spend three months (and counting) annotating the thing? We're talking 566 pages of freaky metaphysical fiction, jammed with archaic words, new coinages, whaling terms, and namechecks of a choir loft full of scientists and philosophers, each of whom I would gloss with a clear, economical sidenote. My project, I suddenly realized, was ridiculously vast, too big for a person with a full-time job. Like the book's narrator, Ishmael, I doubted I was up to the task: "What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this Leviathan!"

I might have quit, if I hadn't already been 95 percent done. Except for the holes I had gone to the library to plug, the notes had come into being almost automatically, the byproduct of my Googling every other word during a long, obsessive slog through Melville's mighty tome.

Obsessive: There it is. You don't have to have read *Moby-Dick* to know how meta my situation was. Captain Ahab—fixated on killing the white whale that had sheared off his leg—long ago escaped the book's bindings and entered our culture as the quintessential Man Obsessed. Any quarry pursued past reason we call by the whale's name.

So I was already fast (i.e., attached via harpoon and rope) to my own *Moby Dick*, *Moby-Dick*. I finished my research and, in a monthlong dash, posted the whole mess at www.powermobydick.com. Scrolling through the site's color-coded sidenotes, I felt a little proud, a little relieved, and very, very sheepish. This book was not the first cultural icon I'd gotten hooked on—ask David Cassidy—but it was the first one for which I had created a shrine: a shrine to the icon's amazingness, and to my own obsession with it.

When we talk about obsession, it's usually like it's a *bad* thing. People take medicine for it. Tragic heroes can't snap out of it. "What cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me," Captain Ahab asks. And yet, as University of Illinois professor Lennard J. Davis points out in his new book, *Obsession: A History* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), modern life would be unrecognizable without obsession. "We live in a culture that wants its love affairs obsessive, its artists obsessed, its genius fixated, its music driven,

its athletes devoted," he writes. "To be obsessive is to be American."

To Davis' mind, some of the pain suffered by those with obsessive-compulsive disorder may be due to the sense that their thoughts and behaviors are weird and pathological, rather than just exaggerated manifestations of the common mindset. In a time when we're encouraged to sanitize gym equipment, drink eight cups of (filtered) water daily, and perform various other acceptable ablutions, he asks, "are we fooling ourselves pretending that it is we who are normal and that those who are pathological are the ones who do some or all of these practices at home in secret?"

The notion of obsession as a mental (as opposed to spiritual) problem didn't even arise until the 19th century, Davis writes. With the Industrial Revolution came a division of labor, and the ideal of the "Renaissance man" of many talents gave way to the ideal of the specialist. Universities and professional guilds reorganized to help people develop a sole expertise. This shift helped bring about rapid developments in science, medicine, and technology, but these gains were thought to come at a cost. In 1810, a French psychiatrist identified a new pathology called "monomania," a harmful obsessiveness brought on by intense focus on one train of thought. It was a disease that caused itself, and within twenty years, it was one of the most commonly made psychiatric diagnoses.

By the time Melville identified monomania as Ahab's major malfunction, the disorder was giving way to such complaints as neurosis, hysteria, and, later, OCD. But the bifurcated notion that obsession is a problem—and a precondition of success—has endured. Our CEOs, athletes, artists, and politicians are admired for their extraordinarily dogged pursuit of a particular goal. Our weirdos, fanatics, conspiracy theorists, and tongue-depressor collectors, not so much. That guy who recently announced that he'd read the 59-million-word *Oxford English Dictionary* cover to cover? Your call. Does it make a difference that he just published a book about this effort?

One distinctly modern form of obsessive weirdoism is fandom: becoming so devoted to a work of art that you want to augment or even inhabit it. Out of this impulse was born the Klingon Language Institute (www.kli.org), the phenomenon of "fan fiction" (unauthorized stories by civilians advancing new plotlines of beloved films and TV series), and also, one might argue, my ever-growing *Moby-Dick* website, which now includes not only a full annotation but also links to artwork, poems, movies, and even cartoons based on the book.

It's one thing to fixate on your own masterpiece, as Melville did. (While he was



photo by Wil Kir, courtesy of the Peabody

Rockin' the sackbut: The Peabody Renaissance Ensemble in action

MUSIC

Old School

Peabody Renaissance Ensemble Holiday Concert, Dec 11 and 12

For those tired of umpteen choruses of Handel's *Messiah*, the Peabody Renaissance Ensemble offers a more novel take on the holiday concert. Under the energetic direction of Peabody faculty and Baltimore Consort member, Mark Cudek, the twenty-one-year-old ensemble made up of Peabody students, Hopkins staff, and alumni will present *Puer Natus in Bethlehem: A German Christmas* at Peabody's Griswold Hall. Honoring the 400th anniversary of the first German communities in the New World, the concert features the music of German composer Michael Praetorius (1571–1621) and some of his contemporaries, performed by a chorale of eighteen singers, a lute band, and a recorder consort, among others.

Eight members of the ensemble are early music majors, and, along with experiencing the pure vocals of soloists such as Elizabeth Hungerford (who played Dido in Peabody's production of *Dido and Aeneas* last year), one of the thrills of this concert is seeing and hearing unfamiliar period-reproduction instruments such as the theorbo (described by Cudek as "a lute on steroids") and the memorably named proto-trombone called the sackbut. The program includes several suites of dances from Praetorius's *Terpsichore*, and Cudek also promises recognizable Christmas carols such as "Es ist ein Ros entsprungen" ("Lo, how a Rose E'er Blooming") and "Joseph, lieber Joseph mein" ("Joseph dearest, Joseph mine"). *Frohe Weihnachten!*

—Mary K. Zajac

For tickets, call 410-659-8100 ext. 2 or e-mail boxoffice@jhmi.edu.

holed up writing *Moby-Dick*, a neighbor worried that his “morbid excitement [would] soon injure his health.”) Many would say it’s something far less worthy to fixate on another person’s masterpiece. But here, too, the distinctions break down, because everything is based on something. Melville himself was a fan, of his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. After bonding with the author of *The Scarlet Letter*, he tore up the lighthearted whaling yarn he’d been working on and set to work crafting something deeper. He also borrowed liberally from earlier whaling texts and real-life stories. The result may not have been as daft as a new *X-Files* episode written by a fan, but it is on the far side of the same emotional continuum—both are powered by the drive to exalt and augment what has come before. And, in so doing, to create something new.

Not to give away the ending, but things don’t turn out so well for Ahab. You’ve got to wonder what the book’s impact would have been if Melville had made the captain into less of an oddball and more of a world-beater. We may get a glimpse of such an alternate reality in a few years, when Universal releases its new film version, said to boast an action-packed “graphic-novel sensibility” and an Ahab who has been described as “more a charismatic leader than a brooding obsessive.” (Collective response of Melville snobs: Yikes.)

In the meantime, there’s my peculiar little website. I’ve been feeling better about the whole thing since strangers started finding it and e-mailing me. Some write to thank me for the boost; others are looking for specific, obscure bits of Melvilleana, such as which translations of the Bible the author may have owned. (Beats me.) But many just want to talk about their own relationship to this overwhelming, transporting book with someone who’ll understand. Wrote one visitor, “I feel reconnected to my own personal Tahiti.”

As you may know, *Moby-Dick* was a critical and commercial failure in Melville’s lifetime; in fact, it ruined his career. He lived forty more years and died in near obscurity; his *New York Times* obituary even got his first name wrong. It wasn’t until after his death that scholars rediscovered the book and heralded its genius. So you’d think I might be less sensitive to whether my own, far lesser work is read or appreciated. If something’s good, it’s good. Right? And yet the more frequently I hear that my website has helped someone (or, let’s be honest, that it has impressed someone), the less I worry that I’m on the wrong side of the line between obsession and what, in America, we call success. ■

—Margaret Guroff lives in Washington, D.C., where she is health editor of AARP The Magazine. This is her first story for Urbanite.



photo by Paul Kohnik

That '70s show: The Hippodrome revives *A Chorus Line*.

THEATER

Singular Sensations

A Chorus Line at the Hippodrome, Dec 2–14

Trixie and Monkey's Fourth Annual Holiday Spectac-u-thon at Creative Alliance, Dec 20

When *A Chorus Line* opened at the then-edgy (and deeply broke) Public Theater in 1975, it was a phenomenon. The stories of seventeen wannabe Broadway stars, developed in a series of workshops with real-life “gypsies” (as chorus members are called), remains as close to documentary as the American musical has ever come. Eight of the original cast members played versions of themselves: There was the girl whose passion for ballet replaced her father’s love, a boy who had taken his sister’s place at dance class, the girl whose figure—or lack thereof—precluded her from jobs.

The production itself was a hit and quickly moved to the Shubert to become one of the longest-running shows in Broadway history. It closed in 1990 but returned in 2006, and the national tour of the revival will stop at the Hippodrome December 2–14. Baayork Lee, who played Connie Wong (the 4-foot-10 dancer) in the original, restaged the choreography for this production.

Preparing for the play, says current cast member Julie Kotarides, wasn’t so different from the way she envisions the original was developed. “We’d sit around and talk about our experiences so we could relate to the show,” says Kotarides, who grew up in Perry Hall and attended Baltimore School for the Arts and the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She plays one of the dancers cut in the first scene. “I have to be bad,” she says. However, as an

understudy, Kotarides had to prepare for the possibility of playing four other, substantial parts. During the Baltimore run, on December 11, 12, and 13, Kotarides will play Diana—who sings “What I Did for Love” and “Nothing”—for a few days while a cast member is on vacation. *A Chorus Line*, she says, “definitely takes place in the ’70s, but all the same issues, passions, and worries ring true today.”

If you’re nostalgic for old-time burlesque, look no further than Trixie Little, who, along with partner Evil Hate Monkey, will bring the fourth annual *Trixie and Monkey's Fourth Annual Holiday Spectac-u-thon* to the Creative Alliance on December 20. The production will include a naughty variation on *The Nutcracker*, a visit from New-York-based burlesque star Miss Astrid, and Dr. Lukki, who, Trixie reports, “dresses as a Christmas tree. And then strips.” The hirsute Monkey will dance to *Fiddler on the Roof* en pointe and don his Santa suit at intermission to pose for pictures with audience members.

—Martha Thomas

For tickets to *A Chorus Line*, call 410-547-SEAT or go to www.broadwayacrossamerica.com.

For tickets to the *Holiday Spectac-u-thon*, call 410-276-1651 or go to www.creativealliance.org.