

## Book Review

WHALE. Joe Roman. Reaktion Books, 2006. ISBN 1-86189-246-2, 240 pp.

*Whale* is a small paperback that undertakes the large task of being a concise primer on the evolving relationship between man and leviathan. It fares well in that the material is digestible, well-written, fascinating, and at times in depth, leaving the reader with a hunger for more. Thus, this reviewer's complaint is, in the main, one of looking for more.

The book forms one of Reaktion's *Animal* series, whose topics range from dogs, to ants, to oysters. There is no overt statement as to the series', or book's purpose, albeit on page 108 the author describes the book as "a history of great whales." It is actually a history of our relationship with them.

He starts with a right whale exhaling its first breath after a dive, and then each chapter surfaces as another breath or era of his subject, pushing through matters of ancient spiritual focus such as St. Brendan and Sinbad, early exploitation, the whale oil booms, modern food whaling, the dawn of conservation biology, and ending with the ongoing conflict between the value of whales as one-time consumable commodities versus durable goods for generations of voyeurs to come. The text closes with a poetic brief showing of a fluke. He then shows a timeline summarizing each era, which is illustrated with a sampling of the sketches and drawings that also grace many pages of the book.

One of the biggest frustrations was to continually come up against the wall of how much detail the references pointed towards. About half of the facts cited in the book are referenced with a source. Such citations are usually of a secondary nature: Perrin et al. (2002) being a clear favorite. A minority of citations are to the primary literature. Some of the secondary sources could have been equally concisely cited to their primary sources; however, inevitably in a book like this, there is an editorial constraint on the density of reference material.

Perhaps the largest absence in this rich repast is that Roman leaves us with the idea that the fate of current and future generations of large whales rests in the balance between whale harvesting and conservation interests. He completely ignores current, globally reaching, indirect large whale mortality—especially the impact of industrial fisheries entangling large and other whales in rope and nets, and of ships that continue to grow in size,

speed, and whale lethality by both blunt and sharp trauma. To have included a summary of these current conservation and welfare issues would have perhaps served, if only symbolically, to have dislodged our widespread, multinational governmental complacency about such issues. A tale that is all too familiar to his theme, it should in fact be the unfinished chapter of the book that he wrote. Indeed his "reluctant star," the North Atlantic right whale, is front and center in these the latest forms of whale killing that man has invented.

There are other lesser omissions. He carefully describes the dawn of the Yankee whaling era in Nantucket, and its shift to New Bedford, but missed the chance to briefly mention that the driving factor thereof was that the soundings in the former shallow harbor could no longer float the vessels as they grew in laden tonnage. There are few overt errors. He fails to include blue whales in the list of species that show their flukes on diving (p. 109).

Perhaps for a review of such a book in a scientific journal it is important to point out what the book is not. It never attempts to be a history of the science of large whales. Where scientific findings impinge on his theme of human/whale relationship, such as Payne's humpback whale song record, or Whitehead's cultural elevation of the sperm whale, he delves in some detail, while he dismisses in two lines on page 146 the entire Discovery Investigations centered on South Georgia in the early 20th century. These were in fact conceived (Anonymous, 1920) with a far more conservation-based agenda than he gives credit for, and established the basis for modern large whale feeding ecology.

So, in summary, this reader was much satisfied by this tasty book. It should find space on any self-respecting whale biologist's shelf as a handy chronology of large whale eras. It certainly belongs in museum bookshops from New Bedford, through Sandefjord, to Grytviken. It could also be a more substantive alternative to the cetological trinkets and tee shirts purveyed to modern day whale-watchers as they disembark from their brief encounters with his subjects. If such punters then read it, they might gain a respect and understanding for the variety of attitudes that different nationalities and generations have had towards large whales since they and we first interacted. Perhaps it will have a much broader market appeal.

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**Literature Cited**

- Anonymous. (1920). *Report of the inter-departmental committee on research and development in the dependencies of the Falkland Islands with appendices, maps etc.* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Perrin, W., Würsig, B., & Thewissen, J. (2002). *Encyclopedia of marine mammals*. San Diego: Academic Press.