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So You are Thinking about Reading Moby-Dick...

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Editor's Note: In May 2017, fourteen Dordt College (now University) professors, co-led by Dr. Josh Matthews and Dr. Walker Cosgrove, gathered for three hours a day to talk about *Moby-Dick*. These professors came from the disciplines of theology, literature, law, chemistry, biology, history, and psychology. This was the second of the annual "Great Texts" seminar that we hold during the summers, which are week-long discussions of important and influential books. This post introduces a series on *Moby-Dick* that developed from that seminar.

So You are Thinking about Reading *Moby-Dick* ...



by Joshua Matthews

On June 4, 2017, Nobel Literature Prize winner Bob Dylan released his spoken-word-lecture, which Nobel Prize winners traditionally give. In that lecture, Dylan spends one-quarter of his words on *Moby-Dick*, 980 of about 4000 words on a 156-year-old book.

Why did he do that, given everything else he could have said?

Although Dylan tells us why in the lecture—he wants to tell us about the books that highly influenced him—I think that he also wants us, in a digital age, to really read *Moby-Dick*. Spend your time with it, he says, because it's still hypnotic and powerful.

"Okay, Bob Dylan," you say, "but it's a 500-page book that doesn't have much of plot, and

everything in it is about whaling. That sounds boring." So that stops you.

"But then," you think, "if I read it, then I can tell everyone that I did. I can brag!" And thus you motivate yourself.

And then you reconsider, "But it's 500 pages with no plot! Is there an abridged version somewhere? Is the movie any good?"

Here are a few lessons that I've learned about these kinds of motivations for reading. You shouldn't read *Moby-Dick* because everyone else wants to but doesn't. You shouldn't read it because you want to say that you've read it. You shouldn't read it because it's on some "Great Books" list that you found. If you try to read it for any of those reasons, the book will probably be terrible and you will quit halfway through.

Let's start with a few reasons why the book has some interest for you. It's a book about whaling, about throwing harpoons at the largest animals in the history of the world in an attempt to kill them. *Moby-Dick* will tell you how and why we have been hunting whales since humans first built boats and sailed them.

It will then tell you about whaling as a global commercial endeavor. If you think globalization is a new phenomenon, *Moby-Dick* will say no, it's been happening for quite a while. In the nineteenth century, whaling ships went all over the world. They contained crews of men from all over the world. And they supplied valuable resources to the entire world. It was, and still is, a bloody, brutal business. At the time, given the benefits of blubber and oil, whaling was a kind of organized slaughter that allowed high-class

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people to live comfortably. Civilization, *Moby-Dick* says, depends on the filthy, brutal business of killing scarce animals and of making human laborers nearly kill themselves. It asks: is that just the way that nature is? It also asks: should that be the way things are?

Then it will tell you about our fundamental desires and obsessions. Why do we do deadly things like try to kill whales? Maybe for the same reason that we want to climb the highest mountains, tame wild animals, and travel on suicide missions to colonize Mars. Why do we want to do that? Maybe because we need a challenge as a form of therapy. Or because we are so obsessed with one thing that we can focus on nothing else. Or because we want to show off to gain status. *Moby-Dick* examines our motivations for doing things, especially risk-taking ventures.

Moby-Dick is a great read because it will give you a way into a topic or an idea of great personal interest to you. If you are interested in Calvinism or Christianity in general, it's there. If you are interested in why the United States is such a great but messed-up place, it's there. If you want to know whether you should keep quiet at work or disobey your arrogant boss, it's there.

Moby-Dick is a novel that says that everything on Earth matters. Everything, even every speck of dust, has a meaning, in fact has many meanings, if only you would look and think long enough about any particular thing. This is why the novel focuses on seemingly every detail of a whale and of whaling ships. *Moby-Dick* will talk at length about harpoons, ropes, quadrants, whale skin, paintings of whales, blubber, maritime law, and on and on. It seems excessive, which is why people quit reading in its vast middle.

But the novel is making a point: every detail in the universe matters. In fact, every detail has multiple meanings and multiple aspects. A harpoon rope is not just a rope. It has a political dimension, a social dimension, an aesthetic dimension, and so on. All truths are connected. Every thing signifies complex truths.

Moby-Dick also says that everything is con-

nected, somehow. It offers great metaphors, which forge unexpected but insightful connections between things that don't at first seem similar. Whales' heads are like the American prairie, which is like the ocean, which has something to do with the mutability of everything, which is therapy for depressed sailors, who are the Daniel Boones of the sea, who are savage and civilized at the same time, and so on.

These two points—everything matters, and everything is connected—are strikingly important for all Christians.

Moby-Dick, for better or worse, is part of the fabric of America. It is a kind of American Bible, a novel that riffs on the books of Job and Jonah and the Gospels, a book about imperial ambition and world domination, a discourse on faith and doubt and Christianity and science.

Once you're in it, *Moby-Dick* will try to get you to read better. It is obsessed with looking at something—words, paintings, buildings, people, objects—and trying to discern meanings. It teases meaning out of everything. Its central tenet on reading is announced by the narrator Ishmael in Chapter 99: "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher."

Moby-Dick knows that everything that we do requires two things: perspective and interpretation. Everyone has a perspective. And everyone interprets all the time. The novel is an exercise in exploring perspectives and exercising one's interpretative skill. Interpretation is inescapable; we do it all day long. It's only a matter of how poorly or how well we do it.

It is not an easy book. But neither is the book of Job, or the Bible itself.

Moby-Dick is worth trying because Bob Dylan wants you to. Try it because the coffee corporation Starbucks took its name from it. Try it because whales, majestic creatures that they are, exist. Try it because you are pursuing your own white whale, just as everyone else is.

Any odd reason is a good reason to read *Moby-Dick*.