



Ahab's Wife, or The Star-Gazer

Sena Jeter Naslund

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A magnificent, vast, and enthralling saga, Sena Jeter Naslund's *Ahab's Wife* is a remarkable epic spanning a rich, eventful, and dramatic life. Inspired by a brief passage in *Moby Dick*, it is the story of Una, exiled as a child to live in a lighthouse, removed from the physical and emotional abuse of a religion-mad father. It is the romantic adventure of a young woman setting sail in a cabin boy's disguise to encounter darkness, wonder, and catastrophe; the story of a devoted wife who witnesses her husband's destruction by obsession and madness. Ultimately it is the powerful and moving story of a woman's triumph over tragedy and loss through her courage, creativity, and intelligence.

Ahab's Wife, or The Star-Gazer Details

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From Reader Review Ahab's Wife, or The Star-Gazer for online ebook

Triffany says

When I started reading this book, I was thinking, "How could anyone give this any fewer than 4 to 5 stars?!?!" The writing was so beautiful and the world through the main character's eyes, although difficult, was beautiful and new and she was chameleon-esque changing and adapting to every day that she faced.

I was fascinated through most of it, wondering at how a person (even a fictional one) could continue to live life so far removed from her 'self'; her ego. She truly discovered the land, the landmarks and the people around her in a way that is usually reserved for the eyes and minds of small children.

And then the last...oh.... quarter of the book, I was reminded that this was not a real person and certainly the book (really the author) was not immune to the over descriptive, Steinbeck-y, drivel.

Overall, it is still an enjoyable tale with some opportunity for ideological discovery and self reflection, but if I ever read it again I will stop reading it after Cpt. Ahab dies. (I trust that does not ruin any plot points as this is the same Cpt. Ahab in Moby Dick - therefore, his demise should be of little or no surprise to most.)

Lightreads says

"Captain Ahab was not my first husband nor my last."

Oh come on. Of course I had to quote the first line.

This book is derived from a single, glancing reference in Moby-Dick to the beautiful young woman Captain Ahab has married. This is Una Spencer's story, in her own words. The book is massive, complex, written as a companion, a tribute, an argument, a twentieth-century female response to a nineteenth-century male book. It's couched in the Moby-Dick style, from the choppy chapters to the capital R Romantic school of writing and its dedication to individual power in the face of society, to natural ideals, to characters who are both individuals and avatars.

As derivative fiction, this is brilliant. From that first sentence, this book plants its feet solidly bestride the old classic and takes a broader view from a new height. Una's story encompasses Ahab's and surpasses it; it must to draw a complete portrait of the unusual woman who would capture driven Ahab's love. Obviously, I find fanfiction on this scale absolutely delightful.

I admire the hell out of this book: the scope, the layered, image-saturated prose, the philosophy and the art of it. And Una is a powerful narrator and person – agnostic, abolitionist, thinker, mother, sailor, seamstress, lover. She dresses as a boy and goes to sea, and finds herself in the path of a number of famous people like Margaret Fuller and Maria Mitchell and, glancingly, Henry James. It's a broad and faithful portrait of the times and of the style, but laying some of it out here, perhaps you see the problem. I feel as if this is sometimes a book before it is a story, if that makes sense. Una is extraordinary in ways that, yes, some women of the 1840's probably were, but this book is as much about holding up the prism of Una against the nineteenth century as it is about holding her up for her own sake. But I can't really put the teeth into this to

make it criticism, because even it is faithful to the style, and Naslund is absolutely deliberate and controlled in what she is doing:

"In the quest of writing, the heart can speed up with anticipation as, indeed, during the very chase of whales. I can swear it, having done both, and I will tell you though other writers may not. My heart is beating fast. I am in pursuit, I want my victory that you should see and hear and, above all, feel the reality behind these words. For they are but a mask. The mask that conceals, not a mask that I would have you strike through as mere appearance or worse, deceitful appearance. Words need not be that kind of mask, but a mask such as the ancient Greek actors wore. A mask that expresses rather than conceals the inner drama. But do you know me? Una? You have shipped long with me in the boat that is this book."

I do think that this book can stand alone, both from *Moby-Dick* and from literary and social history, though maybe not as much as the author wishes. But knowledge of both adds and explains a whole lot – I rather suspect that the casual reader, who did not know that *Moby-Dick* was dedicated to Melville's good friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, would find Una's encounter with a strange veiled man on her walk to see her friend Margaret Fuller nearly inexplicable. This book puts the literary back in literary fiction, and I think it would be helped a great deal by a proper introduction and overview of the relevant historical and literary movements. And even with a solid grounding in the period, like I have, it's still hard to fathom why in the world Naslund made a few particular stylistic choices (when you don't really know until page six hundred why the absolute first person narration was briefly broken by a small chapter in script format at page three hundred, maybe there's some rethinking that should happen).

Still, this is damn impressive for its vision, its thought, its very existence. It's about the woman standing at home on the widow's walk, about how she is not passive, about how as time passes she stops looking out to sea and starts looking up at the stars. It's fanfiction to a particular work, to a place and a time, to the female experience, to history itself. And yes, if you couldn't tell, it raised more intellectual admiration in me than emotional resonance, but to be fair, this really isn't my favorite genre. This is exactly the sort of thing you will like, if you like that sort of thing, which I leave each of you to judge for yourself.

Judy says

How do I begin to say everything I want to say about this book both good and not-so-good?

First of all, I would recommend that before you read it, consider that it is over 600 pages long and there is cannibalism. If you still are eager to read it, there are plenty of things to recommend about this book.

To start with; the writing is gorgeous. Naslund heads up a writing program at a college in Kentucky and I can see why. She writes

Ahab's Wife, or The Star-Gazer with a style that contains a Melville-flavor. For those that have read *Moby-Dick* the language of *Ahab's Wife, or The Star-Gazer* will bring back pleasant memories of MD, but yet the style is Naslund's.

The brilliance of the book is that Naslund was able to weave in the story of *Moby-Dick* but from Ahab's point of view as told to his wife, Una. I read this as a part of a buddy read, and one of the other ladies said that the author also includes *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser in this book also. (One irony is that

Una's maiden name in the book is "Spenser".)

Even though I never got immersed in the storyline and Naslund's romanticizing of Captain Ahab was mildly irritating, I couldn't put the book down for admiration of her skill as a writer. This is a high compliment since the book is so long!

In addition, I *loved* how Naslund included the slavery issue, women's rights and other hot button issues of the period. She blends in characters with moral, physical and mental defects with compassion, but yet without toning down their flaws. In spite of this, I don't think characterization is Naslund's forte. She introduces colorful, interesting characters but I didn't find them always consistent or well-polished. Some of them were herky-jerky IMO.

Okay, now for what irritated me about the book. Being a *huge* fan of Moby-Dick the softening of the MD characters annoyed me. I cannot for the life of me imagine Captain Ahab having a tender side like he is given in this book. Nor can I imagine Ishmael being the personage portrayed in the last pages. Another peeve is that I felt the ending was rushed and Ishmael crammed in, not gently introduced and woven in nicely like most other characters in the book. Another "cramming" complaint is the introduction of Frederick Douglass, who lent period authenticity but gave me a feeling of "name-dropping" for his short appearance but yet frequent use of his name to their abolition cause. I would have liked to have seen more of Frederick spread out throughout the book.

In conclusion, I leave Ahab's Wife, or The Star-Gazer with mixed feelings. Aspects of the book I can discuss in glowing terms, other aspects annoyed me or grossed me out (I hate cannibalism in books!!). For this reason, a middle-of-the-road 3 stars from me. I may pick up another Naslund book in the future (if it is much shorter!), for comparison's sake.

3 stars

Melki says

*A Ship is a Breath of Romance
That Carries Us Miles Away.
And a Book is a Ship of Fancy
That Could Sail on Any Day*

There you have it. This is why books are better than ships. Well, maybe not this book...

Almost nine months ago, my book club picked this one as the February read, so I had plenty of time to read it. And I had the best intentions. I ordered a used copy last October, a nice first-edition hardback, heavy as any doorstep. I glanced at it and put it in my stack. Plenty of time to read it, no hurry. Other books got piled on top, and well, you know how it is... I thought about starting it a few times. Somehow, it's like I knew it was going to be a "Meh!" read for me. Finally, a scant nine days before the club meeting, I started reading.

There's a WHAM! BANG! beginning, with a riveting birth scene attended by a runaway slave. Then we hop back in time til when young Una , after being threatened physically by her maniacally religious father, is sent to live in a lighthouse with her aunt, uncle and lovable young cousin. One day, two potential love interests arrive to install a newfangled Fresnel lens. Hmm....will she choose the chatty one who seems smitten with her, or the dark, brooding mysterious one?

And then, after *something bad* happens, she cuts her hair and signs aboard a whaling ship as a cabin boy. (I swear, I could almost hear Streisand singing "Papa, Can You Hear Me?")

What follows are pages and pages of blood, guts, blubber, tragedy, disaster and death.

Una and one of her beaus end up on the Pequod, where there is more blood and blubber, and now some madness thrown into the mix, as well.

Rather disturbingly, I thought, Una, still in her teens, ends up married to Ahab, a man in his fifties. More *bad stuff* happens, with a brief time out for tea parties, and some china and linen shopping.

Then the book kind of descends into a Forrest Gumpian fantasy where if anyone important was alive at the time and hanging about Nantucket, Una manages to meet them. (I'm surprised to find she didn't somehow serve as the model for the Statue of Liberty.)

I didn't HATE this book, and it is NOT terrible. Much of it was well written, and I really enjoyed a few of the MANY storylines. The women in my book club loved it enough to pick it a SECOND time, even though most of them had already read and discussed it in 2001.

I just couldn't help wishing that Una had said, "Screw you, Ahab, you old fart!" and taken off with the runaway slave instead. Oh, and she should have definitely had a roll in the hay with the dwarf bounty hunter.

Marvin says

A stunning, magnificent book!--Certainly in my top 10 ever!--great story, great characters, big ideas, & colorful writing that, like Jane Smiley's book about Bleeding Kansas, evokes the language of its period while also speaking in a distinctive voice to our own time. The narrator is the wife of Ahab, captain of the Pequod of Moby Dick fame. It's about several things, but principally about, I think, a woman "choosing life"--choosing her own path in the world and affirming life in the midst of stark suffering. It's also about redemption, forgiveness, and acceptance in the face of shocking revelations, or tolerance of more mundane difference. But it's a sophisticated notion of tolerance & acceptance. In one beautiful scene, Una--Ahab's wife--a "liberal" or "progressive" in religious matters, learns that her dear friend, the runaway slave Susan, believes that the Lord has led her to freedom. At first Una worries that Susan will want to impose her faith, but she wakes the next morning to her accustomed acceptance, which embraces a dwarf slave bounty hunter and a gay neighbor as well. The book embraces the ideas of antebellum America & includes cameos by several famous people, such as Margaret Fuller & Frederick Douglass. I've not been so captivated by the tone, substance, & main character of a book since *The Fall of the Sparrow*.

Lynn says

The author takes a minor character out of the classic *Moby Dick* and writes a complete story about her. Una's 2nd husband in the early 19th century is Captain Ahab. This is an historically accurate, if farfetched, story of a free thinking young woman. Learn about the era, the difficulties, the religions and superstitions, the sea and its impact on the New Englanders' lives, etc. A good read.

Andrea says

This book became my addition for quite some time. Even though I read it some 2 years ago, it took residence in my being and here I am still thinking of it fondly enough to write my review!

I am fascinated by Naslund's ability to select a seemingly insignificant reference in the classic, Moby Dick, and give it breath. The sensory experience of the printed word was at times emotionally wrenching and at times dread dull, as you might expect when sitting down to listen to the life story of a legend. Her account was as brutally honest as a personal diary and I suspect any reader would identify not so much with the actions but with the deeply private inner experience recorded here.

The rich, sensory narrative bound the gap between "historical" and "fiction" in such a way that I could feel the spray from the ocean, smell the crisp cool air, feel the fear, anger, and joy, and ache with loss.

Approach this book with an open mind and allow it to speak to you, "wherever" you are, oft forgotten life lessons are offered for private reflection here.

Colleen says

I'm an English major who never read Moby Dick, but I did recognize the iconic characters on the periphery of Una's (Ahab's wife) epic. And what a story it is! Written in the vernacular of Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, I learned much about 19th century Nantucket, whaling, and typical hardships of that time. Historic characters believably showed up in this novel, but Una was always central. I made a friend in her.

Ashlee says

I COULD NOT STAND this book - it was torture for me to get through. There was SO MUCH unnecessary in it - it made me not care about ANY of it. She touched on just about every issue you can imagine: cannibalism, incest, homosexuality, death, insanity, women's rights, slavery, religion - you name it, it was in here. I was SOOO annoyed with this woman!!!! I am convinced she read Moby Dick one night, went to sleep and had one of those crazy meandering dreams where things she saw on the news and famous people from the past drifted in and out and she woke up the next morning and wrote EVERY SILLY DETAIL down and somehow either an editor never actually read it or if one did it was their first book and they were afraid to get the red pen out! MAYBE if the 700 pages would have been cut in half this actually would have been a good story. So, my favorite read so far this year (Abundance) and my least favorite - this erratic self-serving novel are both by the same author!

Suzanna says

This was not my first read from Naslund, nor will it be my last.

I loved this book! I'll address some of the other readers complaints to start.

The style of prose is, in my opinion, in keeping with the time period represented. There is significant, expressive detail, tons of imagery, so if you find that annoying, this book is not for you. You probably will also not like Steinbeck, Dickens, Wharton, Bronte....

As far as too much "stuff" included in the storyline, I would remind those folks that this is the story of many years in someone's life. I felt the various situations and events in the story - the religious exploration, homosexuality, etc. - seemed reasonable within the book's context. Those who felt Una's mindset for adventure was inappropriate for the time period might like to explore Transcendentalism more, and perhaps read some accounts of women in the Civil War, fighting alongside their husbands, posing as their brothers. It might also help to remember that in this time period, artists' colonies were thriving.

And to those who said the book should have ended after Ahab's death, I feel Naslund is merely keeping with the theme she set at the first sentence. She says that Ahab wasn't Una's first husband, nor her last. She then tells us about the character's life, and includes the mentioned husbands.

I will also say that everything in this novel was thought through. If you like digging and picking things apart, you will love this book. I don't do spoilers, but I will tell you that EVERY event in this book, every nuance of it - people's names, the colors, the letters in many of the words - Naslund has thought it all through. If there is a character, or an animal, or anything with any substance mentioned, there is a reason for it. If digging around in a book excites you, this is a great choice. If that stuff usually flies over your head and you sit wondering why this and why that (thinking to yourself, "Please just tell me the story! Get to the point!") you aren't going to like this book.

So summing up, I'd say this is a book for those who like wordy, detailed novels with a lot of imagery, and/or those who love a layer cake novel. Right up my alley!

Hannah says

Take my advice: read the first 100 pages of this (can't give you a really accurate count, unfortunately), and then stop, STOP, FOR THE LOVE OF GOODNESS, STOP, before the main character gets on the ship, or at least midway through, and you will be so much happier that you did, although you will forever wonder what happened and then end up disregarding my advice. That's way before Ahab even enters the story, but c'est la vie, poppet.

Written with lovely prose, and a with extensively wandering storyline for the protagonist, who ends up all over the place in her adventures. (To miss the spoilers, stop now.) Despite all predictions to the contrary, this story ends up happily(?), if you can say that after all of the tragic things that happen. Kip? YIKES. If you are still reading now and are really wise, you'll stop shortly after Ahab dies, conveniently missing (please, really,

let me sum it up for you and save you the anguish) her random encounter with and subsequent marriage to Ishmael (sure, three husbands is a little unconventional for that time period, but who the heck cares, right?) and the almost unbearable preachiness about universalism that goes into the broadest sort of universalist/animist thinking (we're talking worse harping on spirits-in-the-rocks than in Disney's Pocahontas, and THAT'S almost too revolting to contemplate).

To Jeter's credit, I seriously considered reading another novel by her because the prose was really well written and her characters were compelling (with the last quarter/end as a *dismaying* exception), but have since convinced myself not to.

Laura says

This book is traveling from Canada to Brazil, following to Sweden and then back to Canada. There are not enough words to describe such wonderful book, one of the best books I read recently. The author has a lyrical way of writing and we are strongly immersed into the story.

Mary says

Whoa-finally finished this baby. Reading this is quite an investment in time; at least 1000 words could easily be sliced out to create a more coherent epic.

Word of warning; whenever you have a novel, based on an american classic (and an infamously difficult one at that) written by an english professor, you can expect literary symbolism to abound. In this case, I think the author gets caught up in her own cleverness; she throws everything but the kitchen sink at us.

Freedom or "Liberty" seem to be the main theme (three women give birth to babies they name Liberty-two die in infancy and the last is born into slavery-ironic coincidence?...I think not). This theme is explored through the historical issues of the time; slavery, religion, womens rights, sex and sexuality, marriage, madness and obsession, isolation and boredom.

Along the way our main character, disguised as a boy, sails on a whaling ship, is shipwrecked at sea, survives through cannibalism to later become the model of female domesticity as Ahab's wife while interacting with a host of real historical american figures, mostly from the world of literature and transcendentalism. Like I said, alot going on and I left quite a bit out.

For whatever reason, the main character Una,named after Spenser's character in the Fairie Queen (the virginal Una representing truth, or the true religion;only an english professor could come up with that one!) held my interest till all but the very end when I just really got tired of all the comings and goings and nonsensical ramblings. Like I said, a strong hand with the editing pen would have made this a better read. But if you keep that in mind and skim ruthlessly through some of the sillier stuff, it is an engaging adventure tale-sort of a female Huck Finn.

Lynne King says

I had seen Melki's review on this book and it was so interesting, even though her rating was not that high, and so I purchased it. Melki just has a way with reviews...

"Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last. Yet, looking up – into the clouds – I conjure him there: his gray-white hair; his gathered brow; and the zaggy mark..."

This was the beginning of the book and the words were more or less meaningless to me then but I continued; well they were just words and so I started skim-reading, came across "pregnancy" and read:

"I did not consult Ahab about my decision to spend my pregnancy in a rough Kentucky cabin, with my mother, instead of staying in the gracious home of a captain's wife on Nantucket. But I wrote him, of course, and sent the letter after him on the ship called the Dove, so he could imagine me alright."

More skim-reading and nothing of interest, and really I should have followed Melki's advice in the last two paragraphs of her review:

"I didn't HATE this book, and it is NOT terrible. Much of it was well written, and I really enjoyed a few of the MANY storylines. The women in my book club loved it enough to pick it a SECOND time, even though most of them had already read and discussed it in 2001.

I just couldn't help wishing that Una had said, "Screw you, Ahab, you old fart!" and taken off with the runaway slave instead. Oh, and she should have definitely had a roll in the hay with the dwarf bounty hunter."

Then I abandoned the book and sent it to its final resting place up in the Cloud of my Kindle.

The lesson I've learned is that I must be more prudent in my choice of books, even though I do want to extend my range. One also cannot go by the number of reviews on a global scale either.

And I'm not blaming Melki either...

Sheila says

There...I have finished it. It was like reading someone's diary. Too long, too detailed, and monotonous in tone. No suspense, unless you don't know the end of Moby Dick, no ebb or flow. It just reads, slowly and laboriously for 666 pages in first person of a woman that doesn't exist. If this were about a real person, I would consider this valid. If it were a reflection of the hardships of being a captain's wife or a seamstress in the 1800's, I would also give it merit. But instead we have an extraordinary, direct-minded, publicly correct unrealistic character who just manages to encounter by accident many famous real and fictional characters. And we are suppose to adore her. The author did not take any chances with our affections making sure that she was a woman who accepted obscurities, defied religious beliefs, encouraged women's rights, befriended a slave and a dwarf as equals, could argue with the champions of transcendentalist even though she grew up

on a tiny island with two adults and a four year old. I kept hoping she would do something mean spirited like tell the dwarf to go find a woman or cease talking to her neighbor because he was a too into china cups. It was very easy to lose interest in her character because she moved in a predictable direction. Things just happened to her. The only two decisions she made were to jump on a whaling ship disguised as a cabin boy and to marry Captain Ahab, both of which made me want to stop reading because I felt my interest wain. But finish it I did. And now I know never to name my first child Liberty or else it be doomed. Sorry, just can't recommend this and my apologies to the book club for choosing it.

Marin says

The first portion of this book was fascinating and well-written. Naslund's imagining of the details of the ill-fated travels of Captain Ahab and his wife are picturesque, with just the right gothic touches thrown in to lend horror where horror should be.

I liked the main character and was rooting for her... until the return to the States after the grotesque voyage that sent Ahab over the edge.

For some reason, Naslund chose to focus on the literati and cognoscenti of the era instead of simply continuing to present the story of this remarkable woman.

The entire last... half? third? of the book is a contrived, name-dropping tour of the transcendentalists, statesmen and scientists of the time. Ahab's wife is constantly running into them on the road, in the woods, at the gym, in the grocery store... OK, I'm getting a little snarky, but that's the way it felt: too coincidental and too contrived.

I kept getting the feeling Naslund had no destination for her character, so she just wandered off through the political and intellectual landscape at the time and hoped readers would be so impressed with the array of local legends they wouldn't notice the complete lack of story and character.

Babette says

I must thank Louis Bayard for mentioning this book in an interview. I might not yet have read it if it weren't for him - and I am most appreciative. What an amazing book! I do feel inclined to return to Moby Dick once more, and this time to read it through. This book is complete even if Melville's novel never existed. But how cleverly Naslund makes connections to Melville's story, without repeating in any way what Melville told. Una is an outstanding character. I savored this book because of her. I would like to know a person like her, to be friends with a person like her.

Naslund does a superb job of portraying the times - the abolitionist movement and the rumblings of war, the draw of the the frontier, the intellects, scientists and artists of the day, the importance of whaling as an industry, the life of families in a whaling town. Naslund uses Una to reflect upon all these as well as individual spiritual and moral questions that are still being debated today.

One of Una's friends writes to her: "And it is the way of women. We allow each other our individuality. We do not insist that we dominate or control." That may have been more true in the 19th century, but even then there could be found many examples to the contrary.

Nature, especially the sea, is a central motif throughout the novel. A close friend and neighbor of Una's - an artist - asked: "And wherein differ the sea and land?"

He responds to his own rhetoric: "Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life.....Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return."

This may be a book a decide to own (the copy I read is from the library), if just for the picture on the cover - "Reflections upon a Wreck at 'Sconset, Nantucket, Mass" by Baldwin Coolidge.

P.S. I am too impulsive. I just ordered a copy of a book - New England Views: The Photography of Baldwin Coolidge. This received some excellent reviews and is out of print. It is not available from my library, alas. I need to go back to Nantucket, and to Bedford. There is so little time, alas.

And now for the New York Times book review of October 3, 1999 by Stacey D'Erasmus. Based on her review below, she is a writer I want to know more of. So she goes on my reading list.

HOW one feels about this book depends on how seriously one takes the pursuit of happiness -- as opposed to, say, the pursuit of a large white whale. In "Ahab's Wife," Sena Jeter Naslund has taken less than a paragraph's worth of references to the captain's young wife from Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick" and fashioned from this slender rib not only a woman but an entire world. That world is a looking-glass version of Melville's fictional seafaring one, ruled by compassion as the other is by obsession, with a heroine who is as much a believer in social justice as the famous hero is in vengeance.

Naslund, Ahab-like, has taken on an overwhelming quarry in pursuing Melville, but, true to her maternal, liberal philosophy, she does not harpoon the master so much as harness his force to her own. That Naslund is unstintingly reasonable, empathetic and kind should not, however, blind one to the fact that she is, in the most nonaggressive way, rewriting American history, revising American literature and critiquing traditional masculinity. On the froth and foam and rage of "Moby-Dick" Naslund lays a cool hand, as if to say: "There, there. Such a fuss about a fish."

Melville probably would have found Naslund's inversion of his work anathema: not only did he basically exclude women from the decks of his fiction, he could barely tolerate the thought of them reading his books. Of "Moby-Dick" he wrote to a female acquaintance, "Don't you buy it -- don't you read it when it does come out, because it is by no means a sort of book for you." In "The Feminization of American Culture," Ann Douglas called "Moby-Dick" "an implicit critique of liberal Protestantism," its intense masculinity and Calvinist perspective specifically designed to torpedo the popular and sentimental feminine works of the time. The book failed (it wasn't taken seriously until many years after Melville's death). Ironically, "Ahab's Wife," which reworks the great whaling novel from a female, liberal, Protestant point of view, is already positioned to be a best seller. A Book-of-the-Month Club main selection, with a huge first printing, it may well turn out to be Melville's worst nightmare: "Moby-Dick" rewritten by a woman as a conventionally constructed popular novel with an unflaggingly virtuous heroine and a happy ending.

"Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last," begins Naslund's heroine, Una Spenser, as she lies on her back on a Nantucket beach after Ahab's death, watching the clouds go by. One of them, she thinks, looks a bit like Ahab's face, a face that she always recalls as "mild" if somewhat excitable. She waves goodbye. With one dreamy, casual gesture, Una thus waves aside a century's worth of canonization and goes

on to talk about what's really on her mind: her mother. Over the course of the next 667 pages, Una unscrolls her life story, a long and winding tale in which Ahab is one player among many, and not necessarily the most important one.

The woman who was of so little interest to Melville and his creation that they could barely spare her 10 sentences reveals, in her turn, that Ahab constituted a fraction of her own adventures. Moreover, the captain was, as she knew him, a pretty decent older guy -- forward-thinking, a proto-feminist and good in bed -- until his violent encounter with the mysterious underwater mammal induced in him a condition that today could probably be solved with a prescription for Viagra. Unfortunately, he took another route, and the rest is history.

Her history was different. In quite beautiful, unobtrusively 19th-century-style prose, divided into many little Melvillean chapters, Una tells of how her good mother sent her away from her zealously religious, violent father to be reared by liberal lighthouse keepers; how, at 16, she left them to run off to sea disguised as a boy (named Ulysses); how she was shipwrecked and ate human flesh to survive; how she loved two men, married one of them, but later lost them both; how she married Ahab, had a child with him, but lost both of them as well; how she loved again, had another child, whom she named Justice, and became part of a community of freethinkers on Nantucket, where she discovered her truest happiness.

Along the way, Naslund thoroughly feminizes the masculine sense of epic, right down to its tropes: the mind is "a glistening, pink cave"; the head of a whale surfaces in the water "the way the tip of a needle broke through fabric." The first time Una sees Ahab, through a spyglass, she says that she "inscribed" him, in an antique usage of that verb that reverberates with the act of writing itself: she writes him, or rewrites him. The old sailor, in her reasonable gaze, is just another man in a boat. The killing of whales, Naslund makes clear, was a misbegotten enterprise that drove men mad by setting them to dominate a vast Otherness that could not be dominated; it was a kind of barbarous war.

Ishmael, after he washes up on shore and meets Una at a party, speculates that men who kill whales, the sea's "great, oil-saturated" babies, show that they "hate the oceanic mother." It's not nice to fool with Mother Nature -- whale-killers, in this novel, come to bad ends. Una, by contrast, says of the "heartless immensities" that "we are a part of them, and they are a part of us," and lives happily ever after: progressive virtue is rewarded.

Naslund, the author of four previous books of fiction, is most successful here sentence to sentence, where her gift for pleasure shines. Her Una is a deep and wayward creature, undaunted by convention, whose descriptions are dense with a languid and sensual interest in the world. Unlike Ahab, Una can wait. She is not driven; for her, the world is enough. Somewhat more problematic is the extent to which that world is strewn with benevolence toward her. Ahab thinks of her as his daughter; at a bookstall she bumps into Margaret Fuller, who promptly invites her to her salon; a kindly Nantucket townswoman offers to share with Una her collection of porcelain dildos when Ahab is away. There are quite a number of Unitarians, and a family of fondue-eating pacifists. After the departure of the first, cruel father, the book positively abounds in good father figures, including, in a way, Melville himself: from his few meager crumbs of concern for what Ahab left behind on land, Naslund has baked an enormous, many-layered cake, and fed it all to her protagonist.

IN this respect, "Ahab's Wife" is sometimes reminiscent of a Marge Piercy or Marilyn French novel, circa 1976, minus any anger. Una is an innate feminist, but she is inscribed into a landscape that rarely opposes or disappoints her for long. Instead, she wins again and again, the narrative kindly correcting every social inequity in her favor, as well as that of other like-minded characters. In this America, liberals rule. On the

roiling, dark terrain of Melville's wildness and disintegration, Naslund has erected a glistening pink utopia, every word of which argues by harmonious example, "Now, isn't this better?"

And, of course, it is, though when one gets to the scene of a more or less uncloseted gay male character teaching newly freed slaves to make pots by the seaside, one might well feel that wish fulfillment has trumped artistic good sense. It is certainly no accident that when Una has a daughter, she names the child Felicity. The book insists on happiness, sometimes to the exclusion of even the most generous reading of history. But why not? Men have got rich from their big harpoons and mythic beasts and improbable heroics. Don't women deserve their own fantastic voyages?

Emily says

Ick. I hated this book. I felt that the author was basically living out her own fantasy of being adored by these historical and fictional men. I mean, she even finds a way to work in Hawthorne and Emerson having a crush on her. It's the kind of book where the heroine stands on the deck of ships (or ports, or lighthouses) with her hair blowing in the wind a lot. All men want her. She survives great hardship with her noble spirit intact. And she has an intelligent, sensitive soul that is eventually recognized by the greatest minds of her generation. Historical fiction or historical masturbation?

Jamie says

I went from really loving this book, to hating it, to thinking it was just okay.

Una is sent to live with her aunt on an island where they take care of a lighthouse. Una's mother sent her there because her father had become a religious fanatic and couldn't cope with Una's disbelief. She grows up at the lighthouse with her younger cousin Frannie. This part was sweet and reminded me of some of my own childhood experiences.

She meets Kit and Giles while at the lighthouse (they do some work to change out the lens) and falls for both of them but decides she will pursue Giles. She receives a letter from her mother telling her that her mother is pregnant and her father has killed himself because he couldn't bear failing another child again. Una goes inland to meet her mother but there receives another letter telling her that her mother has miscarried and returned home. Instead of going home she decides to cut her hair, sew some trousers and become a cabin boy on the ship the Sussex.

It just so happens that it is the ship that Kit and Giles went on. She hides her identity from them but Kit discovers her after they have taken in a whale. Kit and Giles are no longer friends (you find out later Giles raped Kit) but Una brings them together. Then a whale rams the Sussex and it sinks. Three whaling boats are saved with Kit, Giles, and Una being on one of them. They get separated from the other boats on their way to Chile, having decided not to go to the closer, cannibalistic, Tahiti. Eventually their provisions run out and they draw lots. The Captain's son draws but the Captain hits his son over the head and kills himself in effort to save his son. Kit, Giles, and Una eat everyone and are the only survivors. They get picked up by a passing merchant ship where Giles throws himself overboard and Kit goes mad. Kit requests that Una marry him but the captain of the boat won't do it.

They end up crossing paths with the Pequod and swap ships and head back for Nantucket (Kits hometown). Captain Ahab marries Una and Kit. Kit continues to go mad off and on. They arrive in Nantucket where they stay with Kits former girlfriend, Charlotte who is now married to Mr. Hussey. Charlotte takes care of them but Kit goes completely mad and pees in the town well for which he is arrested. He escapes jail and goes off to live with the Indians where "mad" men are accepted. Charlotte eventually leaves Mr. Hussey to go and find Kit amongst the Indians.

Ahab and Una keep running into each other. He divorces her from Kit and marries her. He has already but her a huge home completely unfurnished except the master bedroom. He leaves her to furnish it and is off whaling. The Judge lives next door and helps Una. He becomes her good friend.

She leaves Nantucket to go see her mother in Kentucky and have her baby there. While in labor her mother leaves to get the Doctor. Her carriage rolls over and she freezes to death in the cold. A runaway slave named Susan is hiding in Una's bed and helps Una deliver the baby but of course the baby dies. Una helps Susan run away. She then meets David Poland (for a second time) who was one of Susans bounty hunters and he has let Susan go but took the money that Una gave her. He takes Una back to Nantucket.

Ahab returns having had a very profitable trip and stays for a summer. Una is pregnant again and Ahab is off whaling again. Una has a son named Justice. Ahab returns after 3 years without his leg, very bitter, and seeking revenge on Moby Dick. Una cannot convince her husband to stay and so off he goes. Justice misses his father terribly. They move to 'Sconset for a simpler life. They eventually find out the the Pequod sunk and there was only one survivor. Una actually marries the survivor, Ishmael, whom she had seen on the merchant ship when she was rescued with Kit and Giles. They write there books together hers obviously Ahabs Wife and his Moby Dick.

Believe it or not I actually left out probably half of the story, death, and random characters. The author is a good writer and very creative. She had many themes which she related throughout the entire book. I just felt like she was trying to fit way to much in this book and there were to many characters and subplots that were distracting to the story.

Ashley says

I wasn't sure if I was going to enjoy this book when I first started reading it, but I really did. The book is a long one (nearly 700 pages, if memory serves), but it's rather engrossing. For me, it didn't have a section where I had to force myself to continue reading because I was bored (that sometimes happens to me). The characters are appealing, the plot is engaging (a little unbelievable at times, but I think that was intentional), and it's well-written. I particularly enjoyed what I would guess you'd call the book's meta-physics - the way it takes side-tracks to discuss time, loss, maturity, life, etc. - without sounding preachy. These sections were thought-provoking, yet didn't take away from the book's plot or flow.

Ahab's Wife is a novel about the life of the Pequod captain's wife, so there's a lot of Moby Dick in here. But you wouldn't necessarily have had to have read or enjoyed reading Moby Dick to enjoy this book. It's an interesting look at the options available for women at the time through the eyes of a woman who chooses to make her own options and her own life. It's also an interesting look at 19th century life and some famous authors and philosophers from that time period.
