

Read Moby Dick

- by David Sedaris

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. --Herman Melville, Moby-Dick

DAY ONE. On the off chance you may have heard otherwise, Moby-Dick is hard work. It's what my brother, Paul, would call "all symbolical and shit," meaning that no one ever approached the author to say, "I could tell you probably had a lot of fun writing it." By the end of the first paragraph, I realize that in order to get through all 521 pages, I'll have to come up with an incentive, something that might help spur me on. Hugh and I are spending the week in Normandy. There are no shops or theaters nearby, so rather than reward myself with magazines and movies, I've decided I won't bathe, shave, or change my clothes until I'm finished with the book. I tell myself that although one may smell like it, nobody ever died from having dirty hair.

DAY TWO. I don't want to ruin anyone's surprise, but a hundred pages pass before the whaling ship even pulls away from the dock. This follows twenty-two separately titled chapters, one of which is exclusively devoted to the subject of chowder.

DAY THREE. The crew of the Pequod finally killed a whale, and, to mark the occasion, I joined our neighbor as she slaughtered a chicken, hanging the animal by its feet before driving a knife clown its beak. It felt good to get out. While flapping around in her death throes, the hen flung blood onto my face, pants, and shirt. Two hundred and fifty pages to go and I look like Sissy Spacek in Carrie.

DAY FOUR. My trip to the henhouse has left me with mites. I'm now pimped with tiny welts that bleed when scratched. This afternoon, Hugh and I were supposed to attend a wedding reception held at a neighboring farmhouse. Seeing as I'm still not allowed to change, I layered a second outfit over my first, leaving me so puffy I could barely bend down to tie my shoes. In the end, I wound up staying at home. Great gales of laughter issued from up the road as I sat in my chair, brushing away flies and reading, "As in general shape the noble Sperm Whale's head may be compared to a Roman war-chariot."

DAY FIVE. The whale wins, but not before Captain Ahab asks, "Art thou a silk worm?" Along with "Talk not that lingo to me," this line is a definite keeper. I started drawing my bath at the top of the final page, and by the time I'd peeled off my clothes and settled into the instantly filthy water, I'd decided that Moby-Dick was the greatest book ever written. It leaves the reader with a few good lines and the arrogant self-righteousness that comes only with great suffering. I endured the chapter titled, "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton," and so should everybody else. Strength through mutual agony-that's the dictum of the great literary canon, and if you think otherwise, you're an idiot.

When Moby-Dick is turned into a Disney cartoon, I'll raise my voice against the inevitable wisecracking Brooklyn-born seagull who'll refer to the protagonist as "Ishy" and lead the crew in a chorus of "We'll Have a Whale of a Time." I'll decry the McDonald's tie-in and say "I told you so" when infants start choking on the peg legs of the Captain Ahab Happy Meal figurines. I had similar complaints against The Hunchback of Notre Dame; only this time, when pressed, I can say that I've actually read the book.