

More than a whale tale

Book's author is a whale enthusiast and professor in Seattle

Judging by its title and front cover illustration, you might think "Touching This Leviathan" is a book about whales.

Its author, Peter Wayne Moe, is an assistant professor of English at Seattle Pacific University. As you can imagine, an American English professor is going to know "Moby Dick" — so rest assured that you'll get a dose of Ishmael, Ahab and the rest. But that isn't all.

Moe became enthralled with whales when, as a kid growing up in eastern Washington, he and his family visited a traveling exhibit. Whales, represented by life-sized plastic replicas, were hung from the ceiling of a darkened warehouse, while audio of whale songs played, heightening the effect.

For college, Moe migrated across the mountains, working toward a bachelor's degree at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. He began a quest to witness whales in their environment. Curiosity eventually grew into a full-blown obsession.

Today, as a committed whale-watcher, Moe keeps a chart of all the whales he has seen over his years of dedicated gazing toward the ocean. He has seen orcas, gray whales, humpbacks and minkes.

This week's book

'Touching This Leviathan' by Peter Wayne Moe
OSU Press — 152 pages — \$19.95

He is not alone. A growing cadre of folks share their sightings on the Orca Network. As Moe shares in this book, reports from one day alone can include dozens of entries, ranging from Oregon's coast and throughout the expanse of the Salish Sea, from the southern reaches of Puget Sound all the way up into British Columbia's Gulf Islands.

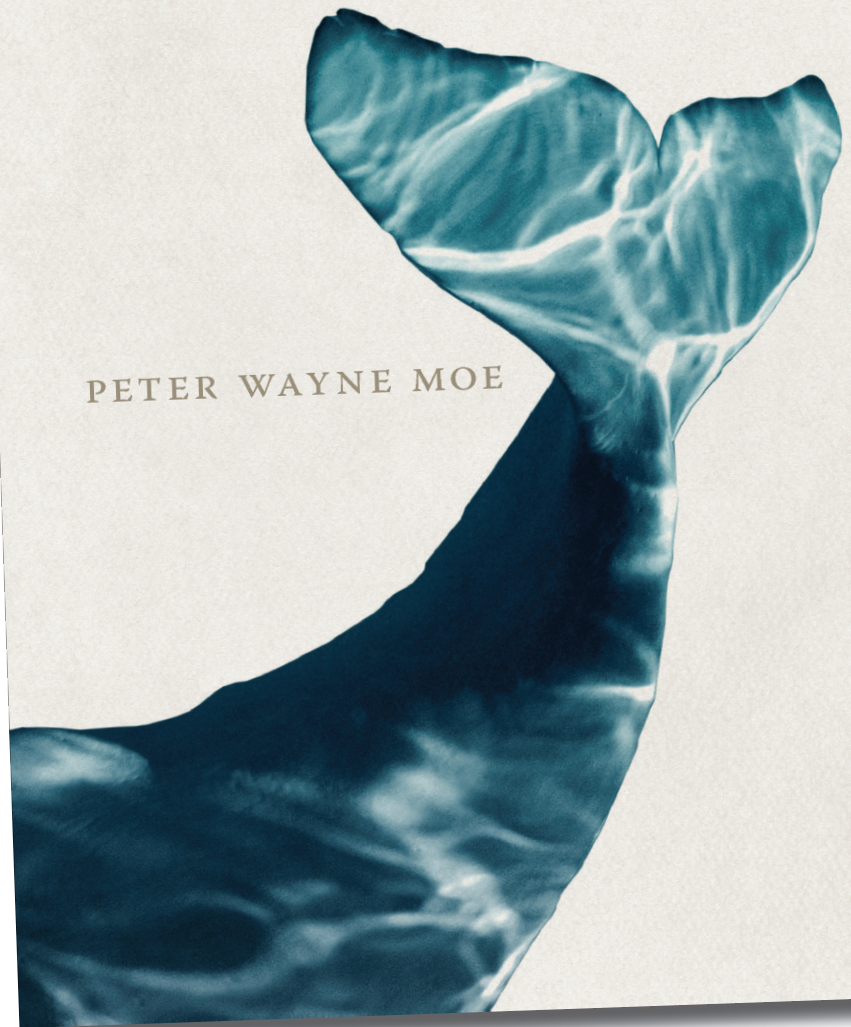
Yet for all of the observations — it is a bit like the fable of the blind men describing an elephant — how much do we know about whales?

Moe approaches this question from different directions. Through theology, he grapples with the Book of Jonah and related Psalms. From etymology, he gleans insights into human interactions with whales. He plumbs the depths of literature, from Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" to works of modern writers.

A couple of years ago, with the guidance of marine biologists, he found himself intimately acquainted with the corpse of a juvenile gray whale that washed upon a Kitsap Peninsula beach. After flensing the carcass, he eventually worked with Seattle Pacific University students to reassemble the bones he retrieved. The 29-foot long skeleton hangs

Touching This Leviathan

PETER WAYNE MOE



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aloft in the lobby of the university's science building.

"Touching This Leviathan" reflects Moe's voracious intellectual quest into myth, medicine, memory, faith, biology and pedagogy. The author also loosely weaves in the story of he and his wife getting fertility treatments to start their family.

In his book, Moe quotes Melville: "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method."

Moe understands that his ambitious

multi-disciplinary approach — he presents an ocean's-worth of ideas compressed into a relatively slender volume — may be overwhelming for some readers. It was so for this reader.

The best bet might be to consume these pages with deliberation. The book shares worthwhile insights — only some of which pertain to whales.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com