

HARKNESS FOR ALL:

EXETER FACULTY STUDY 'MOBY DICK' AT MYSTIC

Last June, 15 Exeter faculty members left behind their Harkness classrooms and entered a new one—not on the Exeter campus, but at the Mystic Seaport Museum in Mystic, CT. What brought them together was the chance to study one of the great American novels, *Moby Dick*, with one of Exeter's great Harkness instructors, Harvard Knowles—"a legendary combination," in the words of mathematics instructor Philip Mallinson.

Organized by then-Dean of Faculty Barbara Eggers, the seminar was an intensive, four-day version of English 499, the highly regarded *Moby Dick* course that Knowles, the Thomas S. and Elinor B. Lamont Professor in English, has taught for many years. Here, a few members of that special Harkness class reflect on what they learned.

Townley Chisholm, instructor in science

I first read *Moby Dick* after college, for pleasure. Some people are put off by the long whaling passages, but I loved them because I have always been interested in whale biology. I also loved Melville's depiction of Ahab's struggle with his obsession.

We had two discussion periods per day, each lasting two hours. They were true Harkness discussions, and we got to experience firsthand the joys of shared insights that resulted from many different perspectives, as well as the frustrations of the occasional digression that led to a dead end.

Thanks to a talk we heard from a Melville specialist, I gained a much better understanding of the novel's historical background and of Melville's connections with other writers. And Heather Pettis, a part-time biology teacher at Exeter and right whale researcher, gave us a fantastic overview of the modern understanding of whale behavior and of the obliteration of whale populations by industrial whaling.

Mystic is home to the last surviving wooden whaling ship, the *Charles W. Morgan*, and we were able to spend a lot of time on it. Mystic Seaport has recreated a whaling port complete with all the necessary supporting industries, from the ropewalk to the blacksmith's shop; we felt very fortunate to be able to walk those streets and imagine the lives of the people who lived then.

But the best part of the experience was discussing the book, section by section, with Harv and my fellow students. Bruce Pruitt and Amy Schwartz gave us historical insights; Betsey Farnham helped us understand biblical references (of which there are many); Sarah Ream and Nita Pettigrew made literary connections and did wonderfully close readings; Sydnee Goddard shared her animal behavior expertise; and all of us responded differently to different parts of this very powerful novel. Some of the most exciting moments happened when we were trying to puzzle out together the meaning of a particular passage or the psychology of a character like Ahab or Starbuck.

I loved being a student and being reminded so powerfully of



TANYA WATERMAN (ALL)

All of Mystic Seaport—including the whaling ship the Charles W. Morgan—became a classroom for Exeter faculty members who took part in an intensive, four-day seminar on Moby Dick: (from left) Rob Richards, Sydnee Goddard, Phil Mallinson, Tanya Waterman, Bruce Pruitt, Catherine Holden, Townley Chisholm, Barbara Desmond, Nita Pettigrew, Sarah Ream, Betsey Farnham, Evelyn Christoph, Amy Schwartz (aloft), instructor Harv Knowles. Not shown: Heather Pettis.

how much work these discussions are, how rich they can be, and how much self-discipline is required to help move a discussion in the direction you're itching to take it without dominating the conversation and losing the depth of so many voices. And Harv was wonderful: in his love for and mastery of the text, his patience in waiting to see what we would create in our discussions, and his love of teasing us with the occasional question about a passage whose location he knew perfectly well.

Philip Mallinson, instructor in mathematics

When I worked with Outward Bound each instructor was responsible for a patrol of 12 or so students. As instructors we would often imagine a "patrol from hell" that would consist of 12 instructors, all leaders with very definite ideas, none willing to compromise or listen to the designated leader.

There were many times during the *Moby Dick* seminar when this image arose. Here we were, 15 Exeter teachers from a vari-

ety of disciplines, united by a common book and a common respect for the teacher who knew the book better than any of us could have hoped. It was fascinating to see the Harkness dynamics emerging: The warriors vying to start each session with the idea that they had been carefully nurturing during the break (but all so terribly politely); the wallflowers deferring to the warriors and nodding sagely.

There was a huge variety of literary experiences, and of experience at teaching a book round the table. Our combined depth of experience showed when we were discussing more than just the literary dimension of the book. Not only was Melville an uncommonly well-read man, but he had a genius for sprinkling the text with subtle cues for us to seize on. Not that he realized 15 teachers were going to dissect his story as elegantly and thoroughly as the whalers dissected their whales.

When our brains were full, we ate like kings and mooched round Mystic playing tourist, but tourists with our interest sharpened by what we had just read. These rusty objects now made sense, the harpoon sockets that Ahab used to drink to the success of the venture, the try pots for rendering the whale into oil, the scrimshaw that the whalers produced during the countless hours of interminable boredom—everything at Mystic added meaning to the text. If we had stayed at Exeter we would have missed one of the most important features of the seminar; being away from Exeter and in one of the few places in the country that could add significance to the text.

I learnt that I am not an English teacher. I learnt a great deal about the text, which will help me when I read it again, more slowly, more thoughtfully. I learnt a great deal about my colleagues, almost invariably positive. I can identify the warriors and the wallflowers. I learnt from Harv that you can run a memorable class by saying virtually nothing, but knowing everything. If discussion stalled, he might break the silence with, “How about page 154?” And it would turn out that page 154 was exactly the right place to get us going again.

Melville would have been proud. He might have been amazed that we had teased so much out of his gargantuan work. But then we had an uncommon teacher and ideal surroundings.

Tanya Waterman, instructor in science

I had read *Moby Dick* as a teenager for an AP class, and then in college, under the tutelage of a professor idolized by the students. Both times I was told what to take out of the book; I read it again on my own, when I turned 30; since then it is kept on my list to reread. While rediscovering the book (with the eyes of middle age) was heady exhilaration, and I enjoyed the discussions immensely, what I took away from this group and from Harv’s teaching was to me an unexpected windfall: a lesson in Harkness, which I could not have possibly learned by observing colleagues, or by leading my own class. What my students feel around the table in class could not have been internalized by me in any other way—nor could I have gained this special vantage point for empathy and respect for them.



“Everything at Mystic added meaning to the text,” says Phil Mallinson, including the chance to row a whale boat with a Mystic instructor. “We were very glad we didn’t have to tow a dead whale back to our ship,” adds Townley Chisholm.

Another aspect I appreciated was the mix of ages and tenure lengths in the group. I cannot speak for all the junior faculty of the group, but I speak as junior faculty myself: it was an invaluable experience to see Harkness discussion in action with a legend leading us, and other “heavyweights” carrying us along.

Bruce Pruitt, Steyer Distinguished Professor, instructor in history

The greatest thing about last summer’s class was discovering that the novel just gets better with each reading. Tanya said that each time she comes back to the book she sees it differently, because she’s not the same as the person she was when she last read it. I’ve always loved the philosophical aspects of the novel, and I think I understood them better this time around. What was new and wonderful for me was the power and beauty of Melville’s language. As he and his colleagues do here at school, Harv had us read aloud, and our class invariably chose some of the best passages. It’s not going too far to say that these were thrilling moments for me.

The class reminded me of how much I like to learn and how much fun it is to be a student. It reinforced my appreciation for discussion-based teaching, and got me to think more about the differences between Harv’s teaching style and my own. It gave me a better sense of what our students experience around the table, not to mention a clearer recognition that I am, alas, a would-be Harkness warrior. All of this I’ll take back to the history classroom, and I trust that much of it will help me become a better teacher. The seminar also helped me get to know some of my colleagues better—experiences such as these contribute to a greater sense of comity among the faculty.

So, all in all, it was a terrifically worthwhile experience. My only question is ... what *does* the white whale stand for?