

ARTS AND CULTURE

Moby-Dick newbie learns it's a marathon, not a sprint

One writer's diary of the 25-hour event begins with his "I haven't read the book" confession and ends with "I feel the pride of where I live."

By **Jonathan Comey**
January 5, 2026



Record crowds jammed the New Bedford Whaling Museum for the annual Moby-Dick Marathon. Credit: Jonathan Bedford Light



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Saturday, Jan. 3, 2026, 7:57 a.m.

W

ith only four hours until the first few words of Moby-Dick are spoken aloud at the New Bedford Whaling Museum's 30th annual marathon, it's probably time to admit that my plan to finish the namesake novel will fail.

Call me disappointing.

I'd love to say that I made progress, but the fact is I just couldn't get past the first few pages. Actually, I couldn't even get past the cover. To be even more truthful, I didn't even procure a copy.

I imagine myself explaining to Herman Melville that I was very busy around the holidays and that classic literature isn't my thing really. But even in this thought exercise I feel guilty that all his hard work wasn't enough to hook me in.

After all, the event is just that, reading the book. And considering that thousands of collective human hours today and tomorrow will be going directly toward the reading of said novel here ... well, I think Melville would be OK knowing that I didn't quite get to it.

Especially since the book itself was a flop in his lifetime and out of print when he died. Melville was successful enough that he knew he wouldn't be forgotten, but it's unlikely that he would have expected this.

As to me, your humble narrator, the idea of 25 hours worth of live reading amongst a large crowd of strangers in what promises to be the museum's most well-attended event in its 30-year history ... well let's just say I'm feeling fatigued just thinking about it.

But, (Foreshadowing!) I have a feeling that my appreciation for perhaps the most iconic and important American novel is all about to change.

10:38 a.m.



EN

Walking down the snow-covered cobblestones on William Street in the city's historic district, it's easy to imagine the past — even as the beeps and clangs of a museum expansion remind you that it's not 1841 anymore.

A little more than an hour before the marathon begins, the museum is ready for its closeup. Volunteers and staff are working in an obvious harmony that only meticulous planning and impeccable vibes can produce. Despite what will be a record number of visitors coming through, there isn't even a whisper of discontent.

The guests are dressed casually but whimsically, many in whaling-forward gear. Most are holding a copy of Moby-Dick, which comes in a seemingly endless variety of different cover designs, shapes and thicknesses.

It is truly an all-ages activity; over the course of the 25+ hours I will spy toddlers and octogenarians in equal amounts, and while “cultural event” connotes “old,” the No. 1 demographic was quite possibly 18-29 year olds. This was unexpected, and surely a welcome sight for those worried whether the analog delights of history are going to survive in the hands of the young generation.

A boy of about 10 is the most visibly excited, walking past me down the circular staircase below the whale skeleton that dangles majestically from the roof. “Dad!” he says to the man in the college-style ISHMAEL sweatshirt a couple steps behind, “Come on!”



Father and son Lenny and Henry Grant of Syracuse, New York, made the best of their unorthodox “boys trip” to New Bedford. Credit: Jonathan Comey / The New Bedford Light

There are people everywhere, already staking their claim to their own small pieces of turf in the sprawling three-floor complex. The floor is host for many people sitting and reading, and the Lagoda room where the reading will begin under the shadow of the half-scale whaling vessel replica is filling rapidly.

A woman comes to the entrance, looks up and down the vast hall, and says “Whoa ... I guess I’m late to the party.”

In the main lobby, the line of spectators (who all pre-registered) extends out the front door into the outside chill, and there’s a laid-back excitement that is very unique.

This is a special place to be right now.

11:59 a.m.



“It’s January, it’s cold, it’s New Bedford — who’s ready?!” museum CEO Amanda McMullen says to a warm welcome. She stands at a lectern facing the Lagoda. Below, underneath the bow, a woman sits in front of a small bell. “Watchman,” McMullen intones. “Eight bells please.”



Massachusetts Poet Laureate Regie Gibson kicks off the 30th live marathon reading of Moby-Dick. Credit: Jonathan Comey / The New Bedford Light

The tones echo through the hall over a reverential hush, and as the eighth note settles, Massachusetts First Poet Laureate Regie Gibson takes his place at the podium.

“Call me ...” he says, then after a dramatic pause, “Ishmael.” The crowd erupts in delight, and it is a goosebumps moment.

It’s on! Three words down ... and, depending on the version – only 209,000 words to go.

3:17 p.m.



There are roughly two types of attendees at the marathon: readers and wanderers.

I'm a wanderer, going from floor to floor and room to room.



The crowd follows along in the Cook Auditorium. Credit: Jonathan Comey / The New Bedford Light

I recognize some of the same faces repeatedly over the course of the 25 hours. The question “how many of you have been here the whole time” is asked a lot, and more hands seem to be raised than not.

I pass a man who looks enough to be actor Gary Oldman that I do a double take — it’s not him, but it’s feasible that it could be.

By now, I’ve been to every section of the building; the museum, if you haven’t been, is thoughtful in its collection and layout. Whaling is obviously the focus, but it’s supplemented nicely with New Bedford and American history. There’s a room full of scrimshaw, a modern art exhibit on a whaling theme, room with coloring stations.



But it's the Lagoda room that really makes it special, two stories high to accommodate the tall sails of the vessel, surrounded by exhibits — and on this day, hundreds of people.

While the wanderers wander, the readers read. Despite many seating possibilities, and screens everywhere with the live simulcast, people line the floors like at an airport with weather delays — crosslegged, heads down, following along with their own copies.



New Bedford City Councilor Shane Burgo, left, waits his turn during an early portion of the reading. Credit: Jonathan Comey / The New Bedford Light

Two young women are tucked into the tiny crawlspace under a desk that's belted into the wall on the main second-floor walkway. I am jealous of their dexterity, youth and ability to fit into small places.

The novel's action is still in New Bedford, where the action begins, and where Melville sailed on the whaleship Acushnet 185 years ago to the day. When the city is mentioned for the first time a round of applause rises up as if a favorite band had just struck the first notes of its biggest hit.



As the main event builds steam, they prep in the Cook Auditorium for a reading of an abridged Portuguese language version; on the movie screen behind the lectern is a Zoom call showing concurrent readings all across Portugal and the islands. The main reading will also have an international flair, with the occasional speaker reading in Spanish, French, German, etc. before repeating in English.

You hear the audio of the main reading throughout the building; one of the few places where it's absent is the third-floor observation deck facing the waterfront, which would be worth the price of admission on its own. A young man in a pea coat looks down at the snow-covered historic buildings leading to the sea and says to his friend "I think this is the best view I've ever seen."

It's quiet except for street sounds, seagulls and quiet conversation, and everyone looks up with a start when a loud thud echoes off the walls — someone's copy of Moby dick falling from arm's height, the heft of the noise reminding you how enormous this book is.

After the first two hours, the reading is moved to a hall on the third floor. Two men stand in a crowded hall outside wearing the small white tag around their neck with their reader numbers; 107 and 108. I ask, are they reading soon? Nope, one says with a grin. Not until 11 p.m.

Oh boy. I take the hint — this is a marathon, after all, not a sprint. Time for a break.

6:18 p.m.

Greetings from my couch in Fairhaven, home of the Moby-Dick marathon ... on my phone.

The trials of 2020 did have one silver lining — the solidification of the simulcast as a home substitution for the real thing. The digital marathon coverage is as professional as the in-person; on the screen, readers stand at two podiums, one active, one waiting their turn to make the transition smooth.

Without the distractions, it is a bit easier to follow the readings — in fact everything about this is easier, home being sweet and all.

I tune in at an important time; Ishmael is introducing his shipmates, whose character names I recognize despite my lack of familiarity with the book. I've been so caught up in the atmosphere that the real purpose — reading Moby-Dick — has been a sidebar. Starbuck, the first mate, has a great quote: "I will have no man in my boat who has no fear of whales."



I am one of 161 live viewers at the moment; the number will ebb and flow over the span of the reading but always seems to be between 100 and 300. There will be about 5,000 in the end.

The readings go in and out of my attention. Some readers are better than others, and it matters considering the sometimes difficult and lengthy tone. There are some long digressions into the scientific and cultural hierarchies of whales, and the language of the 1850s does not flow easily into the ear.

At one point my 18-year-old son entered the room and looked with puzzled brow at the stream being cast on the TV screen. He looked at me, looked back at the screen, then departed the room without a word.

Let's consider him unconverted to the delights of classic literature.

8:18 p.m.

It was very (very!) tempting to stay and watch from the couch, but in the spirit of adventure, I am back in New Bedford for the in-person experience.

The acting troupe Culture*Park just performed Chapter 40, which is written as a stage play, and the reading is moving into the first-floor auditorium. The line is long, and the seats are already more or less occupied, as has been the case all day.

I see many of the same faces and outfits from the morning, including Gary Oldman (still not him!) and the two women wedged under a table.

I spot the father and enthusiastic young son that caught my eye in the morning and introduce myself. They are Lenny Grant and son Henry, here from Syracuse, New York, on a "boys trip," and the dad explains that Moby-Dick and literature as a whole is part of the fabric of their lives. They have a spot picked out in the Turner Gallery under the whale skeleton to get some sleep, but they are planning to stay for the whole thing.

The crowd is definitely younger now, with sleeping bags and flannel loungewear in large numbers. With the rush over and people setting in for the evening, you can see pride and relief on the faces of volunteers — the event is a hit, plus we get to go home!

Back in the auditorium, reader 71 is really bringing the heat. Although there are many public officials and people of note doing the readings, everyone remains anonymous, identified only by their reader number. Each is greeted by a round of applause that generally varies in volume based on the quality of



There are fewer and fewer wanderers, so I have the museum mostly to myself as it nears midnight. How fun to be able to just exist in this space, straddling the present and past, surrounded by people but still solitary. (Ooh, that's a good line — take that, Melville!)

Despite all of this energizing ambience, the actual reading is in one of its many tangential sections and I'm really no closer to following what's going on. So I head back home and set my alarm for 5 a.m., by which time the crew of the Pequod will surely be more miserable than they are already, but I will be refreshed and ready to chase that dastardly whale.

Sunday, Jan. 4, 2026, at 5:56 a.m.

Five snooze bars later I'm up!

The livestream is at 83 dedicated souls, and we're on Chapter 92. It's titled "Ambergris," all about the value of a substance sometimes found in whale intestines, and its value in the human world. In other words, more Melville meandering.

I don't know what happened in the hours where I was sleeping, so I turned to Chat GPT, asking it to sum up what happened from Chapters 50-90.

Its report: *"From the Pequod's departure through mid-voyage, Melville blends whaling lore, shipboard routine, and philosophy. Ahab's monomania sharpens; the crew hunts whales, processes bodies, and debates fate. Ishmael digresses on cetology, labor, race, and perception, while omens, rituals, and obsession steadily darken the journey toward the White Whale's looming reckoning ahead."*

That seems like a nice way to say "not much."

But soon, the action heats up. Pip, one of the most beloved characters, has been broken by the sea and the chase of the white whale. He is rescued from drowning, but in a state of catatonia. One of the most striking passages followed as Pip, who is Black, is told by Stubb the mate that a whale is worth 30 times what he would fetch at a slave auction in Alabama — a painful reminder of the times.

But just when the story seems to be gaining momentum, it's back to whale facts, with two chapters about squeezing whale spermaceti and stripping blubber.

I've warmed to the charms of the book by now, but as a writer I don't really understand the va
countless reams of tangent when the main tale is such a page-turner. But considering the fact that it's almost



200 years later and I'm up before the sunrise watching thousands of people gather to celebrate it ...

"I feel the pride of where I live, the humility of learning so much from so many, the joy of having completed something that is worth so much more than the labor involved."

7:20 a.m.

I drive back over the bridge, down Union Street, over to William, and into a prime parking spot two blocks away from the museum. A light snow falls as if on cue just before the sunrise — the latest sunrise of the season, I overhear someone say — and the sky is overcast and romantic.

Walking back into the museum it feels like home, and I know this will be a place I return to more often going forward.

The floors are littered with sleepers, the auditorium seats are about two-thirds full, and people's eyelids look pretty heavy. In the cafe area, caterers are serving coffee and prepping free malassadas.

My pals Lenny and Henry Grant are still here.

"Made it through OK I see!" I say, and Henry still has the enthusiasm that struck me on the first day. He'll remember this experience for the rest of his life, and that's a heck of a thing.

The floors are littered with people like the day after a rock festival, without the empty beer cans. I'm excited to see (not) Gary Oldman again, along with many other strangers and volunteers. I feel a real sense of kinship with them.

It's the home stretch, and a constant stream of arrivals brings renewed buzz. Marathon runners reach a euphoric stage where the struggle is replaced with the knowledge that they're going to make it to the finish, and the all-nighters are feeling that energy.

With fewer than four hours left, it's clear that the event has been a smashing success, and it's no surprise to learn after the fact that last year's record of 2,500 attendees was shattered, this year topping 3,

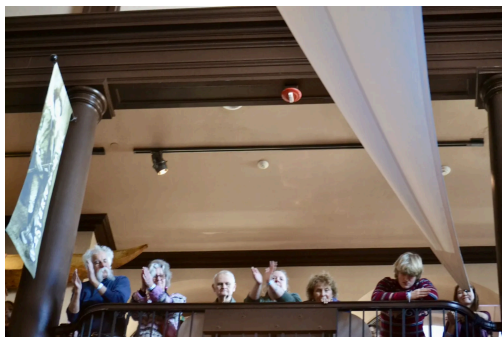
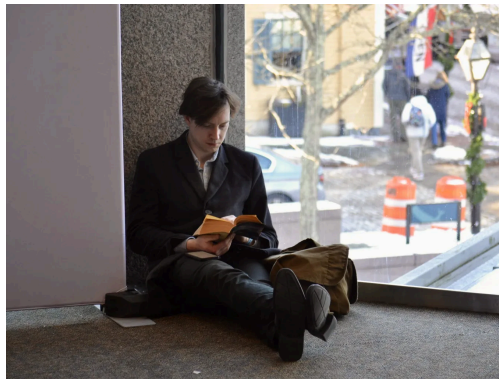


There's no greater sign of this than the scheduled 9:30 seminar with Melville scholars, experts who have traveled from far and wide to be the anchors of the day, along with the museum-affiliated Melville Society Cultural Project. The scholars are the MSCP.

After 18 hours of reading, on a snowy Sunday morning, it was fair to expect a few diehards in attendance at this seminar. Instead, the large room was at absolute capacity, with as many chairs as it was possible to stuff in there all occupied and people standing all along the perimeter. Melville himself would have been overwhelmed by the turnout.

Scenes from the Moby-Dick Marathon

Click photos for captions





10:04 a.m.

I hover on the wall for the scholars' talk but give up my spot to a more engaged reader and head into the hall. I'm a little disappointed, though, because while I've been so impressed with the passion of Moby-Dick's fans, I'm still not quite *getting it*.

Why would a book so long, so meandering, so difficult to read, so unsuccessful in its time, be so beloved all these years later?

As if by fate. I see Lenny and Henry again. I explain my frustration at missing the scholars' insight, and Lenny smiles – he's a professor of writing, aka my own personal scholar.

He explains that the book uses Ishmael's deep diversions into the mundane and scholarly to get you deeper and deeper into the narrator's mind, to sharpen the impact of the furious action as it builds to a crescendo. Melville was frustrated by the success of lesser authors and used every writerly device imaginable to flex his talent and tell the story in a unique way.



As the final chapters build to a conclusion, capped by a truly spectacular reading of Chapter 135 by actor Steven Weber, I'm starting to get it for the first time. Standing on the back wall, I see Lenny and Henry in the front row. They break into thunderous applause with the rest of the crowd as Weber brings the ill fate of the Pequod to a close, Captain Ahab's madness having consumed them all.

"Wow," said CEO McMullen, taking the stage, then reading the brief final epilogue before closing her copy with a giant smile that matched everyone around her. She brought up the key members of the staff that made it such a hit, and they shyly revived their flowers. Well deserved, to say the least.

Walking back to the car and back to life in 2026, I start the process of translating what I learned from this wonderful event. I feel the pride of where I live, the humility of learning so much from so many, the joy of having completed something that is worth so much more than the labor involved.

But if I had one takeaway, I think it was summed up nicely by my new pal the professor, who I hope very much to see again next year:

"You just have to read it!"

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