

At the Moby-Dick Reading Marathon, the greatest American novel still draws a crowd

By **Chris Vognar** Globe Staff, Updated January 23, 2026, 6:00 a.m.



The crowd at the annual Moby-Dick Reading Marathon. DREW FURTADO/NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Before hitting the high seas on a quest for the most renowned whale in literature, before introducing the monomaniacal Captain Ahab, [Herman Melville's](#) “Moby-Dick” begins on the streets of New Bedford.

“In New Bedford,” our narrator Ishmael tells us, “fathers, they say, give whales for dowers to their daughters, and portion off their nieces with a few porpoises a-piece. You must go to New Bedford to see a brilliant wedding; for, they say, they have reservoirs of oil in every house, and every night recklessly burn their lengths in spermaceti candles.”

For the past 30 years you must also go to New Bedford, the South Coast burg that remains a thriving commercial fishing port, if you wish to attend the Moby-Dick Reading Marathon. A communal celebration of Melville’s leviathanic 1851 novel, the 25-hour Marathon, which began in 1997, brings together legions of Moby mavens — this year’s event, held Jan. 2-4 at the [New Bedford Whaling Museum](#), drew more than 3,000 people, from 35 states and five countries — to plumb the depths of the greatest American novel.

The public portion of the Marathon set sail at high noon on Saturday, Jan. 3, at the stern of a half-scale model of the whaling ship Lagoda. Visitors of all ages crammed into the museum’s Bourne Building, sitting on stairwells, leaning on walls, most cradling copies of the novel.



Regie Gibson at the Moby-Dick Reading Marathon. DREW FURTADO/NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Most of the readers were chosen by lottery, but there were also special guests. [Regie Gibson](#), the inaugural poet laureate for Massachusetts, took the podium to read the first chapter, “Loomings.” He brought a dramatic gravity to the famous opening line — “Call me Ishmael” — pausing briefly before saying the narrator’s name and drawing a raucous cheer from the primed assembly. The Marathon had begun like a rock concert.

“One rarely gets such enthusiasm for a single sentence,” Gibson said in an interview the week after the Marathon. “In that moment I knew that these are some diehards, and these are some folks who are open and ready to receive. It’s one of those moments where you’re like, ‘OK, I’m with my people.’”

Moby Dick Marathon 2026: Chapter 40 to Chapter 86



New Bedford isn't just where Ishmael and his new bestie Queequeg meet and set forth to Nantucket for their rendezvous with Captain Ahab and the Pequod. Melville himself arrived in the city in 1840 to embark on his own whaling adventures, which is one reason why he could describe it so well in the novel. That, of course, was a long time ago. Where Ishmael laid his head at the fictional Spouter Inn, with its "wide, low, straggling entry with old-fashioned wainscots, reminding one of the bulwarks of some condemned old craft," I and many other marathoners stayed at a modern and fairly anonymous hotel that was blasting The Smiths when I entered the lobby. But you can still feel the history in the town's cobblestone streets, and you can eat some fine sea bass at the Black Whale, overlooking the harbor. (There is also, inevitably, a Moby Dick Brewing Company.)

Most of the Marathon took place at the Whaling Museum, but there were a couple of fun excursions built into the schedule as well. The best of these took place right across the street at the Seamen's Bethel, known to "Moby-Dick" readers as the Whaleman's Chapel. In the novel, this is where Father Mapple gives his sermon that stirringly evokes the Book of Jonah (in which, you might recall, Jonah is swallowed by a "great fish"). As described

in the novel, the Bethel features a pulpit shaped like a ship prow, and cenotaphs honoring mariners lost at sea.

We sat spellbound as Rev. David A. Lima of New Seasons Worship Center took the pulpit and performed Father Mapple's sermon ("In this world, shipmates, sin that pays its way can travel freely, and without a passport; whereas Virtue, if a pauper, is stopped at all frontiers"). But this was a rare star turn at the Marathon. Part of the weekend's fun was seeing and hearing a procession of regular people stand up and hack through a few pages of Melville's often-ornate prose (though the actor Steven Weber made an appearance, as did US Senator Ed Markey, via video recording). As readers flubbed the occasional word ("whitsuntide," "precipitancy"), it was easy to feel like just one of the crowd.



Actor Steven Weber at the Moby-Dick Reading Marathon. DREW FURTADO/NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

You get the feeling that Melville would approve, for "Moby-Dick," among its many virtues, is a paean to the American experiment, with the men (and they are all men) of the Pequod forming a sort of microcosm of democracy, though under one malignant

ruler. Through Ishmael, Melville writes of “that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; himself! The great God absolute! The center and circumference of all democracy ... thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind!” Writing during what would become the last gasp of slavery, Melville, like many of his [American Renaissance](#) peers, was imagining what the country might still become under a Spirit of Equality.

After the sermon, I caught up with Grady and Fiona, who came to the Marathon from Boston. Grady, a nursing student, fell in love with the novel when he read it a year ago, and his passion convinced Fiona, an urban planner, to come along for the festivities.

“The book gets at these big existential questions that people had when it was published and they still have now,” Grady said. “There’s so much that is contained within the book, so many different perspectives and philosophies and angles on human life. There’s something that anybody could relate to somewhere in these pages.”

Fiona, though a “Moby-Dick” newbie, was taken with the diversity of the devotees.

“I like the range of ages, and seeing all the families,” she said. “I feel like I’m seeing people from all walks of life.”

At its heart, “Moby-Dick” is also a story of obsession. The kind of obsession that leads a vengeful sea captain to seek revenge, come hell or high water, against the whale that took his leg. The kind of obsession that leads a verbose narrator to pontificate on seemingly all subjects beneath the sun.

The kind of obsession that leads one to devour a dense, weighty tome — my Penguin Classics edition checks in at 654 pages — and spend a weekend listening to people read it aloud, cover to cover. They went through early Saturday afternoon, the crowd thinning but a core of diehards remaining. (I went back to my hotel room to get some sleep after Chapter 42. Call me Landlubber.)

As of this writing, I'm on page 324, Chapter 65. Many adventures await.

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