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It's Not About Whales: *Moby-Dick* and Disinformation

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SONYA LARSON'S 2017 short story "The Kindest" is not about whales. It is about a kidney donation, although whether it's about a specific person's real life kidney donation is a matter of debate and disinformation. In a 5 October 2021 story for the *New York Times Magazine* titled "Who Is the Bad Art Friend?," Robert Kolker detailed the ongoing feud between Larson and another writer, Dawn Dorland, who claimed that Larson lifted details from her life and plagiarized portions of a letter, published on a private Facebook group, about Dorland's experience as an anonymous kidney donor. In "The Kindest," a Dorland-like character named Rose Rothario (originally Dawn Rothario) sends a letter to the story's narrator, a Chinese American woman named Chuntao, who was the anonymous recipient of one of her kidneys. Larson, who is Asian American, depicts Rose Rothario as a cringe white saviour figure, who wants to meet Chuntao in order to extract emotional labour from her in the form of gratitude. Exactly how much of Larson's story is lifted from Dorland's experience as an altruistic kidney donor, including the letter she posted on Facebook, has become a matter of both legal and popular debate (indeed, literary Twitter debated little else in the days after Kolker's story went online).

For her part, Larson has tried to distance herself from Dorland's story and claims that "The Kindest" isn't really about a kidney donation at all.

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Rather, in Larson's view, the story is primarily about the racially charged power dynamic between Rose Rothario and Chuntao. In "Who Is the Bad Art Friend?" Kolker writes, "When Larson discusses 'The Kindest' now, the idea that it's about a kidney donation at all seems almost irrelevant. If that hadn't formed the story's pretext, she believes, it would have been something else. 'It's like saying that "Moby-Dick" is a book about whales,' she said." I think most readers know what Larson means: while on a literal level *Moby-Dick* is about a whaling voyage, on a *literary* level it's about a host of Big Literary Themes like good versus evil, humanity versus nature, Ahab's monomania versus Starbuck's level-headed pragmatism, and so on. Along the same lines, Larson implies that "The Kindest" could have featured similar characters and themes while using a completely different "pretext" for bringing the characters together. Focusing on the kidney donation is "irrelevant" because, Larson suggests, that's not what the story is actually about. What interests me about Larson's comparison of her story with *Moby-Dick* is how it affirms that Melville's novel has become, in the popular imagination, the example par excellence of a literary text whose ostensible subject matter must be set aside in order to discern what it is "really about."

Larson is hardly alone in her disavowal of whales in *Moby-Dick*. Allow me to cite another recent example from the Netflix show *GLOW*. In the penultimate episode of season 3, "The Libertines," Ruth—an aspiring actress and the main heel of the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling show—auditions for a Hollywood movie. The character she is reading for is a straight-shooting high school English teacher who delivers an impassioned speech to a student, Julie, who says that her problem isn't that she doesn't care about her grade. It's just that she doesn't care about whales: "*Moby-Dick* is not about whales, Julie. It's about passion. Obsession. Finding the one thing that cuts through all the crap, that keeps on driving you, no matter what. And if you can find the thing you care about as much as Herman Melville cares about whale semen, then maybe you won't totally fuck up your life." Despite the writers of *GLOW* confusing spermaceti, the waxy liquid extracted from the heads of sperm whales, with whale semen, Ruth's monologue does highlight the fact that, setting aside whatever else he might have been interested in, Herman Melville was really, really into whales. When he was twenty-one, Melville set sail on the whaler *Acushnet*, eventually jumping ship with a fellow sailor at Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, an experience he adapted for his first book, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846). Melville spent much of the next two years working on other whaling ships, before returning to Boston in October of 1844.

When he decided to write about his whaling experiences for his seventh book, *Moby-Dick* (1851), he read everything he could on the subject, peppering the “Extracts” that preface his novel with dozens of quotations about whales from an impressive array of theological, literary, and scientific sources.

In addition to the prefatory “Extracts” and “Etymology,” no fewer than forty (by my count) of *Moby-Dick*’s 135 chapters are almost exclusively about whales, whaling, or whaling lore, with little or no emphasis on the novel’s “real” plot. Bearing this in mind, the oft-repeated claim that *Moby-Dick* “isn’t about whales” seems to be a kind of disinformation, albeit one with the reader’s best interests purportedly in mind. Abridged editions of *Moby-Dick* are common, and the novel’s cetological chapters are almost always among the cuts. Writing in *The New Yorker* about Orion Books’s 2007 abridged edition of Melville’s novel (*Moby-Dick: In Half the Time*), Adam Gopnik reports that “Melville’s story is intact and immediate; it’s just that the long bits about the technical details of whaling are gone, as are most of the mock-Shakespearean interludes, the philosophical meanderings, and the metaphysical huffing and puffing” (“The Corrections”). Golgotha Press’s 2016 *The Condensed Moby Dick* makes even more drastic cuts, reducing Melville’s novel down to a mere twenty thousand words. As far as I know, the only abridged edition of *Moby-Dick* that highlights Melville’s cetological speculations is Damion Searls’s 2009 text ; or *The Whale*, a direct response to the 2007 Orion Books’s edition, which includes everything, down to the last stray punctuation mark, that was cut from *Moby-Dick: In Half the Time*.¹ *Moby-Dick: In Half the Time* and ; or *The Whale* are two sides of the same coin—or, more accurately, two halves of the same book—which makes the question “which is the real *Moby-Dick*?” impossible to answer. Melville’s novel, of course, specializes in such interpretive dilemmas. In chapter 99 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Doubloon,” the Pequod’s second mate, Stubb, delivers an enigmatic monologue (cut from *Moby-Dick: In Half the Time*, included in ; or *The Whale*) to the gold coin Ahab has nailed to the mast as a prize for the first sailor to spot Moby Dick. Confounded by the zodiac signs on Ahab’s Ecuadorian doubloon, Stubb consults his “Massachusetts calendar” to interpret the

1 The only abridged edition of *Moby-Dick* that condenses the text indiscriminately seems to be Parasitic Ventures Press’s 2006 book *Four Percent of Moby-Dick*, which reduces Melville’s novel to “4% of its original length using Microsoft Word’s AutoSummarize feature,” although even this radical abridgement makes “exception [...] for particularly important passages” (“Four Percent of Moby-Dick”).

imagery on the reverse of the coin, although his assessment of the “almanack” is skeptical at best. “Book! you lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You’ll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts” (402).

When we “supply the thoughts” and interpret a text, or decide what it is “really” about, we necessarily pick and choose from the “bare words and facts” set down on the page. Every interpretation is also a misinterpretation, every reading a misreading, every insight a blindness. To put the matter somewhat differently: interpretation is disinformation. And yet, it is also obviously the necessary first gesture toward understanding a text, connecting with an author’s ideas, and communicating those ideas to our students and peers. As a kind of disinformation, interpretation is only dangerous when it becomes static, unchallengeable, and unchangeable. Texts like *Moby-Dick*, a staple of higher education curricula for the past century, are particularly susceptible to this transformation of disinformation into dogma.

Melville himself was no stranger to disinformation: he was accused of exaggerating his own experiences in *Typee*, his books were pirated and passed off under other titles, and much of his best fiction (*The Confidence-Man*, “Benito Cereno,” “Bartleby the Scrivener”) is structured around withheld information, if not outright deception. And, to be fair, some of what you might learn about whales in *Moby-Dick* is not exactly true (Ishmael maintains that the whale is a fish). When it was first published in England, *Moby-Dick* was also characterized as a kind of disinformation, because Melville’s British publisher omitted the novel’s epilogue in which Ishmael explains that he alone survived the wreck of the *Pequod* and, thus, also explains why he is able to narrate the novel. Likewise, nineteenth and early twentieth century editions of *Moby-Dick* often moved the “Etymology” and “Extracts” sections, which highlighted Melville’s extensive whale research, to the end of the novel, where they were sure to be skipped over. And, of course, Captain Ahab is a great master of disinformation, lying to the *Pequod*’s owners, Peleg and Bildad, about his true intentions for his voyage, offering a gold doubloon to the first crew member to spot the white whale and then claiming it for himself, keeping the harpooner Fedallah and the rest of his “dusky phantoms” (213) concealed from the rest of the crew, all of which have earned Ahab unflattering comparisons with twentieth and twenty-first century political leaders.

In his 2018 book *The Value of Herman Melville*, critic Geoffrey Sanborn explains how he tries to get students to think of *Moby-Dick* not as a daunting literary classic—the kind of book that is not about whales—but as one

book (not even necessarily a novel) among thousands in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, to meet it on its own admittedly weird terms, and to just read it one word at a time. For Sanborn, we should all aspire to read like the sea captain who, in the early 1870s, was handed a copy of *Moby-Dick* by an English woman who told him that “it is the strangest, wildest, and saddest story I have ever read.” He then read the book aloud to his crew every night. “These days,” Sanborn writes, “most readers approach Melville with an overpowering awareness of his cultural status. They view him, accordingly, with a mixture of deference and resentment, as if he were a commodore of great world literature, standing in full dress on the quarter-deck of the canon” (1–2). When Sanborn first wrote about teaching students to read *Moby-Dick* on its own terms, he tells us that a newspaper critic (Bob Hoover of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) called him out for suggesting, in Hoover’s words, that *Moby-Dick* was “overrated.” In his original essay for *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Sanborn wrote that the point of reading *Moby-Dick* was not “to seek out [its] cleverly hidden meanings” but rather that “the secret [...] is that there *is* no secret,” an analysis which clearly flies in the face of the “it’s not about whales” school of thought to which Sanborn’s newspaper critic belongs. For this columnist, “Literary value resided,” Sanborn writes, “in the message, and the message of *Moby-Dick* was rated on the basis of its depth—size, weight, inaccessibility—and ominousness” (3).

What is the “literary value” of Sonya Larson’s “The Kindest”? Reviewing Larson’s story in the wake of the “Bad Art Friend” discourse, Katy Waldman criticized “The Kindest” for “lack[ing] both the texture of realism and the courage and clarity of satire.” And it’s true that reading “The Kindest” with Kolker’s article in mind makes it nearly impossible to ignore how much Larson seems to dislike Dawn Dorland, to the point that the character she based on her reads like a shockingly simple caricature. Reading the story through the lens of Larson’s throwaway comment about *Moby-Dick*, however, does reveal some curious points of kinship between Melville’s novel and Larson’s text. Like Captain Ahab, both Rose Rothario and Chuntao have lost a body part: Chuntao’s kidney through an accident caused by her own drunk driving, and Rose Rothario’s through her non-directed organ donation. But which character is the Ahab surrogate? Although Chuntao’s dark thoughts recall, at times, Ahab’s brooding demeanour, Larson leaves little doubt that Rose Rothario is the one with a “monomaniacal” desire, not for deadly revenge, as in Ahab’s case, but for the sense of moral superiority that she holds over Chuntao. During Rose Rothario’s visit to her house, Chuntao senses her benefactor’s eyes

“[T]he secret
[...] is that there
is no secret.”

upon her or, more accurately, upon her new kidney: “Finally she turned my way, her jaw working the cracker, but she looked right through me, as if to some far-off mountain. Then I realized. She was eyeing my torso. She was thinking about her kidney, buried deep inside of me. “Do take care of it,’ she said quietly” (59). Like Ahab’s leg lost within the white whale, Rose Rothario’s kidney has been (willingly, in her case) taken from her and placed in a foreign body that she eyes with mistrust and suspicion. Of course, Ahab’s obsession leads to pure destruction—his own, his ship’s, his crew’s—as, harpoon in hand, he screams his final words, “*Thus*, I give up the spear!” (520). Nothing quite so dramatic happens in “The Kindest.” Two people talk, eat crackers, take a selfie, one of them cries. But when Chuntao’s husband, Bao, decided to leave her alone with Rose Rothario, she imagines herself in a position not unlike that of a harpooned whale: “In my head I pleaded to my husband with every inch of my skin. Don’t. Don’t you dare [...] But he snapped up his helmet. Rushed his feet into shoes with the ankles smashed flat. And I felt through my heart the spear that would orphan me” (58). From hell’s heart, Rose Rothario looks at thee. I stand by what I wrote at the start of this paper: “The Kindest” is not about whales. But it just might be about *Moby-Dick*.

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