

# Moby Wolfe [Digest urth.v022.n038]

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 05 Feb 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1360>

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John Bishop — 05 Feb 1999, 09:07

Cute, but no cigar:

o "Call me Ishmael" is a reference to the son of Abram and his concubine Hagar (search for "Ishmael" in [http://www.tagnet.org/freebies/KJBible/01\\_GEN.HTM](http://www.tagnet.org/freebies/KJBible/01_GEN.HTM)). His family splits off before the Jews become Jews.

So "Ishmael" is not the narrator's name, but his method of:

- 1) denying the reader his real name,
- 2) claiming that real names are not the point,
- 3) saying he is a "wanderer" and cast out from his people and
- 4) telling the reader that what follows is going to be portentous and symbolic (biblical) rather than realistic and direct.

Dan McCall, author and English professor, told me this some years ago; as the professor pointed out, any reader of the time would have instantly caught the reference.

Of course, "Severian" is meant to make us think of "severe" but it's also his name.

o Queequeg is probably not Andean; many of the whalers were Native Americans from New England (e.g. the "Gay Head Indians" who were in the news a few years ago when they had a run-in with Jackie Kennedy over land on Martha's Vineyard), others came from all over; but the makers of shrunken heads are the Jivaro [<http://users1.ee.net/pmason/shrunk2.html>], who are from Brazilian or Ecuadorian low-land forests. On the other hand, he may just have picked up the technique as a way of making money from other people's prejudices.

Personally, given his tatoos, I suspect he's a Pacific Islander--Hawaiian, Tahitian, Samoan or Maori: the whalers were active in the Pacific and recruited anywhere they could get cheap, tough workers.

o And who would be Ahab?

-John Bishop

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Peter Stephenson — 05 Feb 1999, 14:13 · follows John Bishop

John Bishop wrote:

Cute, but no cigar:

I just wanted to suggest the scenes were parallel. I'm certainly not implying the books are parallel, and the subject line was just a throwaway, there's certainly no overt connection between Ishmael/Severian. Queequeg's poncho ('doormat') is referred to in some detail by Ishmael, which puts him, or his associations, entirely in the right part of the world for me, anywhere in Ecuador would do as far as I'm concerned. I'd have thought that was enough for one little cigar. I'm not asking for a Havana, and I'll go and smoke it outside if you like.

corncrake

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Mark Millman — 05 Feb 1999, 10:51 · follows Peter Stephenson

On Friday 5 February 1999 at 2:08 pm GMT,

John Bishop wrote:

Queequeg is probably not Andean; many of the whalers were Native Americans from New England (e.g. the "Gay Head Indians" who were in the news a few years ago when they had a run-in with Jackie Kennedy over land on Martha's Vineyard), others came from all over; but the makers of shrunken heads are the Jivaro [<http://users1.ee.net/pmason/shrunk2.html>], who are from Brazilian or Ecuadorian low-land forests. On the other hand, he may just have picked up the technique as a way of making money from other people's prejudices.

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As it happens, the Maori also preserved trophy heads (part of the object was to preserve the victim's tatoos), although I don't believe that they shrunken them. It certainly is the Jivaro who are best known for the practice and who made the stereotypical shrunken heads. I don't know whether the Samoans, who were notoriously belligerent, had a similar tradition.

Like Rostrum, I noticed that Severian was sharing a bed with a stranger whom he at first finds threatening but later grew to trust (and also like Rostrum, I didn't get any further correspondences at the time). Of course, unlike Ishmael, Severian eventually finds

himself fighting his former companion.

Though it is, interestingly, a water-borne assault that results in a fight with dreamlike elements. Perhaps Baldanders--who disappears into Lake Diuturna and eventually comes to inhabit the ocean--actually takes on the whale's role in Severian's life for a time.

- o And who would be Ahab?

Maybe Severian is Ahab as well as Ishmael--but Severian, unlike Ahab, achieves redemption.

Mark Millman