BOOK REVIEWS

Orca: How We Came to Know and Love the Ocean’s Greatest Predator


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Book reviews are typically performed by an objective reader who is somewhat familiar with the subject matter so that an unbiased assessment can be written. For me, Jason Colby’s book was different in that it felt more like I was reviewing a story about my family history. The staff and animals at Sealand of the Pacific, where I worked as an animal trainer in the late 1980s with Haida II, Nootka IV, and Tilikum, were part of my family. Later, as a naturalist and pilot for Seacoast Expeditions, Victoria, British Columbia’s first whale watching operation, I spent every summer on the water with another part of my family, the southern fish-eating resident and mammal-eating transient killer whales that frequented the Strait of Juan de Fuca and San Juan Islands.

My story unfolded at Sealand where I worked alongside fellow trainers including the daughter of SeaWorld’s veterinarian, socialized with the daughter of the head of the Icelandic whale capture industry, and worked with many of the whale researchers and key figures mentioned in this book. Little did all of us know at the time that many of our stories would eventually be retold and that many in my social circle would become actors in a larger story that would gain worldwide attention. Many of us were just kids in our early 20s and living a carefree lifestyle; we were adored by the throngs of visitors that would flock to Victoria to see captive whales at Sealand or venture out on the water to see wild whales. That is, until the day that tragedy struck and one of our fellow trainers was killed by a captive killer whale. A lot of us ended up splashed across the front pages of local newspapers, subpoenaed as expert witnesses at coroner inquests, and ended up in the media. I felt like a lone voice as I took on the Oak Bay Marine Group’s Corporate President, Bob Wright, the owner of Sealand. During my time as a whale trainer, I was a full-time marine biology undergraduate student at the University of Victoria. Ironically enough, Colby is now a tenured professor at my alma mater and we share a bond and parts of the same story that I never knew existed, having never heard of the Colbys until reading this book.

The Introduction includes a section where the author talks about his dad, a former killer whale capturer, who changed his tune about killer whales in captivity after seeing the documentary Blackfish. Little did I know that when I was contacted by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, the director of Blackfish, in 2011 to ask if she could interview me for a yet-unnamed documentary, that it would go on to change an entire industry, what Colby refers to as “one of the most influential documentaries of all time.” I had no idea that this film would change the minds of so many people, including Colby’s father John, the former hard-nosed whale capturer Don Goldsberry, and those very same peers who had turned their back on me when I went public about the conditions at Sealand two decades earlier.

Chapters 1–6 begin with the story of how Pliny the Elder first described killer whales in 79 CE. The author provides a brief lesson in natural history and the relationship that killer whales had with indigenous First Nations, early explorers, and whalers. We are introduced to the time when the conflicts began between whalers, fishermen, and killer whales. Salmon were overharvested, dams were being built, and killer whales were being slaughtered in the hundreds or thousands each year. Ted Griffin, the grandfather of whale capture and the man who started the Seattle Marine Aquarium, is introduced. He plays a pivotal role in this overall story and Colby relates Griffin’s many early attempts to catch a killer whale without success. Ironically, it was Griffin who held a fascination with the species and refused to believe the widely held belief that this species was a man-eating monster of the sea.

Hound Dog, later renamed Moby Doll, was eventually harpooned at East Point on Saturna Island so that the Vancouver Aquarium’s Murray Newman could use the dead animal to create a realistic sculpture to welcome visitors. But, the whale did not die, due largely to the brave efforts of Joe Bauer, who shielded the whale from further rifle fire. A decision was made to tow Moby Doll to Vancouver, representing only the second time that a killer whale had been taken in to captivity (the first had been captured by Marineland of the Pacific in California but that whale had only lived for 36 h before it died). We