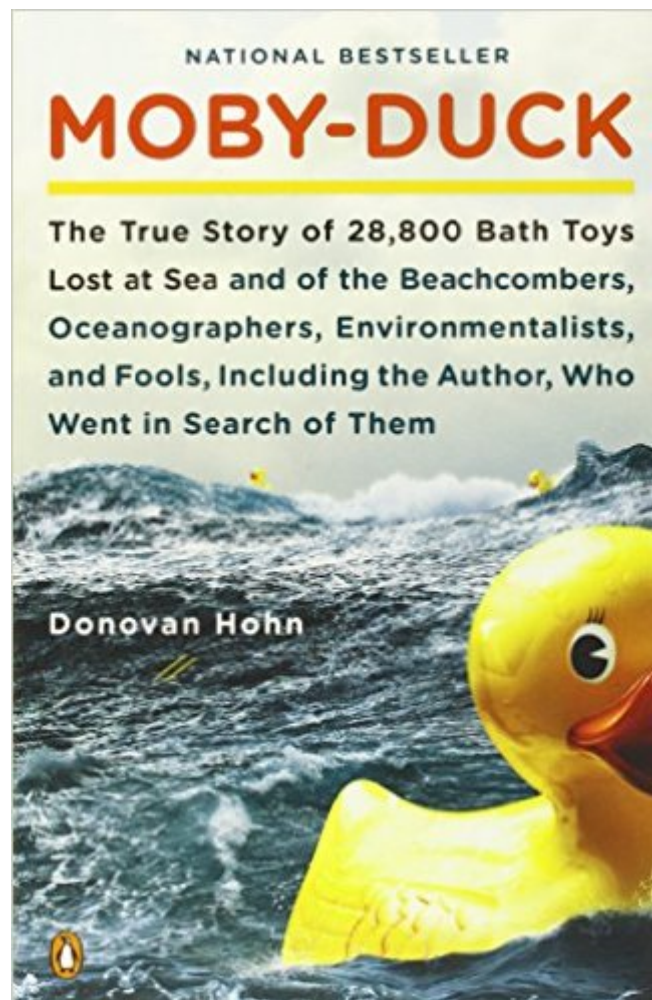


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Moby-Duck: The True Story Of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost At Sea & Of The Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists & Fools Including The Author Who Went In Search Of Them





Synopsis

A compulsively readable narrative of whimsy and curiosity- "adventurous, inquisitive, and brightly illuminating" (Janet Maslin, The New York Times). When the writer Donovan Hohn heard of the mysterious loss of thousands of bath toys at sea, he figured he would interview a few oceanographers, talk to a few beachcombers, and read up on Arctic science and geography. But questions can be like ocean currents: wade in too far, and they carry you away. Hohn's accidental odyssey pulls him into the secretive arena of shipping conglomerates, the daring work of Arctic researchers, the lunatic risks of maverick sailors, and the shadowy world of Chinese toy factories. Moby-Duck is a journey into the heart of the sea and an adventure through science, myth, the global economy, and some of the worst weather imaginable.

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Customer Reviews

In fiction, particularly in film, a MacGuffin is a plot element which seems to drive the plot forward (a rare diamond, perhaps, because the main characters are chasing after it); but in reality, the MacGuffin used to get the reader into the story loses its importance as the story goes on, because the story is really about deeper, more meaningful concepts: love, glory, sacrifice, truth, and so on. Alfred Hitchcock is credited with making the concept of this mechanical plot device popular. In fiction. With Moby-Duck, we enter the world of nonfiction. Here, a reader's expectations (at least my expectations) are different. If the author is writing about the Abominable Snowman, for example, he

or she had better stay focused on and provide a lot of information on and insight into the topic. Or, he or she should make it clear up front that the book is not really about the Abominable Snowman at all: it's just a collection of thoughts. Some abominable, some not. The subtitle of Moby-Duck, printed large on the front cover, is: "The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea and of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists, and Fools, Including the Author, Who Went in Search of Them." Well, that is simply not what the book delivers. First of all, none of the beachcombers, oceanographers, or environmentalists mentioned in this book went in search of the bath toys. No. They were all doing something else, and the author bummed along on the trip so that he could search for the bath toys. Second of all, this is NOT the story of the bath toys lost at sea. That's what it promises to be, but it isn't. Instead, it is 400-plus pages of the thoughts and observations of the author, Donovan Hohn. While I like many of his observations, particularly the ones he relates to American literature such as Moby Dick, the fact is that I as a reader am not there for these observations. I'm there for the ducks, of which we get precious little. To bend over backward and be ultra-fair to the author, I will say that even if I had never expected this book to be about the rubber duckies, and had always expected it to be the observations and ramblings of the author, I would still give it three stars. It's just not that interesting. Yes, the oceans and the currents and ecology and the horrible use of the oceans as a dumping grounds for trash, all of these are serious concerns. But the way the author presents them, they seem like ramblings, not like analysis and not like a call to action. I was disappointed.

A couple weeks ago I went to a lecture by the author of Moby Duck, Donovan Hohn. I was interested in this because of a story that I remember reading a few years ago. The story was about a flotilla of 1000 ghost rubber ducks, bleached by the sun, about to invade the coast of the UK. That story turns out to have been false, part of the growing myth surrounding the Friendly Floatees. Much like the white whale, a figment of the collective imagination. This book tells the story, as best can be reconstructed, of these toys. They weren't made of rubber, and the ducks only accounted for 1/4 of the toys (lost in the creating of the myths were the turtles, frogs, and beavers). The story is incredible. In an attempt to find the full lifecycle of these toys Hohn goes up and down the Alaskan coast looking for the toys cast upon the rugged north Pacific beaches. He goes to sea, many times, including joining scientific expeditions looking at the plastic content of the Pacific, meso scale currents in the North Atlantic, and crossing the North West Passage (now possible due to a rise of 5 degrees C at the poles) all exploring the possible tracks these toys could have taken. He even goes to China to find the birth place of these toys, and crosses the Pacific on a container ship not unlike

the one the Floatees fell off of. His style is very much like that of Bill Bryson, though his mind drifts and wanders in a really interesting way that gives you a sense of the drifting and wandering of these toys at sea. It's an incredible lens to look at our Oceans, a largely unexplored part of our earth, the impact we are having on them, as well as the dangers that still lie out to sea. Highly recommended.

This was a fascinating summer read, providing details on shipping, on Alaska beachcombers, on the Woods Hole MA oceanography work, even on toy making in China and some fascinating Sesame Street trivia. In the end, however, I can't bring myself quite to go above three stars in the rating. The author's quest to track a wayward shipment of plastic bath toys was an interesting one but, when he reaches the point where it appears the East Coast sightings that started his journey were false, he doesn't quite know how to wrap things up. The last pages were not necessarily dull; they just don't really fit in this story. Better that he might have taken this portion of the account and spun it off as a long Atlantic or similar magazine piece. I was a little surprised to see that there are high school teachers who are assigning this book. While it was an enjoyable read overall, it does seem like something to dip into a little bit, skimming here and there and getting more involved in other sections. Somehow, the thought of having to somehow read and report on this as a specific assignment would make the book more difficult to take too. For those of us who enjoy reading a broad span of nonfiction, this is a good but not outstanding choice. Maybe make it a beach book, with the plan to skim through areas of less interest than others.

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