

NEW NOVEL BY HERMAN MELVILLE — ALL MOBY  
CONTEMPORARY WRITER RECLAIMS EVERY SCRAP OF *MOBY DICK*

*Moby-Dick in Half the Time*, an abridgment by Orion Books which Adam Gopnik notoriously described in *The New Yorker* as “all Dick and no Moby,” has now called forth a spirited rebuttal. In an act of arguably Ahabian obsessiveness, writer Damion Searls has pulled together every chapter, word, and punctuation mark that Orion’s abridger cut from Melville’s original *Moby Dick*; or *The Whale*. The result—inevitably called ; or *The Whale*—has been published as a book-length special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, making it the first contemporary fiction by Herman Melville to appear in almost 150 years.

“I have nothing against abridgments, I make them myself,” says Searls, who holds a Ph.D. in early American literature. His one-volume abridgment of Henry David Thoreau’s 7,000-page *Journal*, produced with traditional methods, will be published by NYRB Classics later in 2009. “After all, the original is still there for anyone who wants it. I just think we should ask what we value, what we want to abridge *for*. Orion went for a straight-ahead story with a clear plot arc, but what makes Melville Melville is digression, texture, and weirdness. If you only have time to read half the book, which half the time is more worth spending?”

In a cover story for *The Believer* magazine (“Carving the Whale,” September 2009), Searls describes Melville’s new novel as a good read, filled with humor and unexpected poetry. Chapter 62 consists of a single word, “hapless”—the only word Orion’s abridger cut from the chapter, trimming a 105-word sentence to 104; the book’s first sentence is “methodically”; the final hunt for the white whale dissolves into pure punctuation. And the emotional arc of the book is the same as in Melville’s original, because Melville’s excess comes at moments of emotional intensity, and that excess, trimmed from *Half the Time*, is what makes up ; or *The Whale*. Searls describes it as like watching a DVD on fast forward, and it may get you closer to what *Moby Dick* is really like than the other abridgment does.

Bringing readers closer to others’ works is the goal of many of Searls’s efforts. He translates from German, Norwegian, French, and Dutch, bringing classic writers like Proust and Rilke and less known writers like Ingeborg Bachmann and Jon Fosse to American readers. His new book of short stories, *What We Were Doing and Where We Were Going*, is a collection of “cover versions”: present-day stories inspired by Nabokov, Hawthorne, and other writers from around the world.

For the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, though, ; or *The Whale* is not just a version of *Moby Dick* but a work of literature in its own right: “Otherwise we wouldn’t be publishing it,” insists editor Martin Riker. The quick cutting and narrative elisions are very 21st Century, irrespective of whether the author wrote 19th Century classics too.

Author Herman Melville could not be reached for comment.

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; or *The Whale* on Facebook: [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=124444974042](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=124444974042)

*Believer* article: [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200909/?read=article\\_searls](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200909/?read=article_searls)

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Searls’s most drastic abridgment—of 2666, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *War and Peace*, and other megabooks—is

“Fifteen Thousand Pages in Three Minutes”: [therumpus.net/2009/02/fifteen-thousand-pages-in-three-minutes](http://therumpus.net/2009/02/fifteen-thousand-pages-in-three-minutes)