

Melbourne Reads

Rebecca Giggs, *Fathoms: The World in the Whale*

Expert Reading Guide

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The Melbourne Reads Expert Reading Guide is a bite-sized critical reading guide designed to elevate your reading experience by providing essential literary and cultural context for our featured book.

The 'key questions' can be used to facilitate thought-provoking conversation when reading along with your own book club, students, or friends.

Expert Reading Guide:

Introduction

Fathoms plumbs the depths of human relationships with whales in order to re-energise our sense of responsibility to animals with whom we hope to share a future. It prompts us to better understand the extent of environmental change from perspectives other than our own, and to revise and renew our compassion, place and power in the world.

It is a book that provides often uncanny insight into historical and 'deep time' relationships – the many ways in which whales have entered our arts, cultures, economies and imaginaries. Prompted by her own encounter with a stranded humpback whale and the reactions of her local community, Giggs explores how contact with whales and our growing desire for connection with them can enlarge both a sense of awe, hope and wonder, as well as a shameful realisation that 'the rubble of our marketplace' now profoundly affects other *beings*.

Memorably, Giggs challenges us to consider the ways in which human excess and pollution could mean that 'the unseen spirits' we have imagined and enjoyed in wild animals may now be in a kind of decline. *Fathoms* challenges us to consider our obligations to wild animals and what kind of lives in the wild we want to insure...

Essential context for *Fathoms*

Fathoms belongs to an emerging genre of works about the shared past, present and future of human and nonhuman species. It is a book about ecological relationships in the spirit of Rachel Carson, and about animal otherness and the presence of life in death in the spirit of Helen MacDonal.

More specifically, Giggs draws on social, cultural and natural history, science, literature and philosophy to explore our ability to sustain planetary ecologies and a sense of our connected selves and communities. The whale is a bellwether species. In the past we have exploited the whale in order to serve industrial growth and profit; whales are now a haunted presence as a result of being poisoned by our waste and vandalism.

Giggs argues for the value of a 'scientifically literate imagination to allow us to better understand the sensoriums of other species' as fully wild beings. As she relays tales of our human detritus

embedded in the bodies of whales, Giggs makes a compelling argument for urgent ecological change.

How *Fathoms* inspires

Fathoms is inspiring because it is well researched, beautifully written, deeply affecting and honest – and because it explores our shared vulnerability with and moral responsibility to these magnificent creatures. It connects at the level of language, of narrative, thought and imagination.

The writing inspires confidence in Giggs as an author who knows her subject - the further reading list runs to 25 pages – and the detail is often eye-opening. Giggs reports, for example, that ecologists now realise the critical role whales play in mitigating climate change: their manure fertilizes plankton, plankton absorb carbon dioxide and emit twice as much oxygen as all of the rainforests on the planet, with the result that ‘each whale has been calculated to be worth more than a thousand trees in terms of carbon absorption’. At the same time, Giggs does not hit us over the head with her erudition - the style is of shared discovery: open, honest, surprising, sometimes urgent and often moving.

It does not avoid discussion of the terrible and violent history of whale hunting, nor the challenges that the world’s largest mammal faces today, largely as a result of human negligence. Because of this transparency, when Giggs also discusses the concept of ‘hope’, we put trust in her relative optimism.

How *Fathoms* challenges

Fathoms is a book that challenges and will change reader’s perceptions on the status of whales worldwide and the relationship of the mammal to both human society and the planet. While we once perceived that the greatest threat to whale species was the continuation of hunting, Giggs also alerts us to the far greater threat of pollutants released into seas and oceans, rising water temperatures that increase acid levels in oceans and a loss of vital food sources, particularly krill. It also challenges us to consider *why* we want to save the whales, and most importantly it works to augment our moral capacity.

Key questions to ponder as you read

1. What moves you to respond with hope towards the future rather than despair? And what keeps you reading sometimes difficult material? The first chapter of *Fathoms* in particular - and many other sections that detail the slaughter and suffering of whales – could move a reader to despair. And yet Giggs writes specifically about the vitality of hope. What hope do you find in this book, and how does hope manifest for the author?
2. In a memorable section, Giggs discusses the phenomenon of a ‘whalefall’. What struck you about this description and how did it change your understanding of a whale’s death in the context of marine ecosystems?
3. The book has been praised for the ‘poetic’ quality of its language. How do you experience ‘the poetry’ in this book? Do you think that Giggs - a writer who has previously published short and narrative nonfiction - was conscious of producing a specifically ‘poetic’ work? How crucial might this be to the book’s message?
4. Why might you want to ‘save the whale’? Has this book prompted you to consider different responses to the prospect of encountering a stranded whale on a beach?

Further down the rabbit hole: More to explore

Books to read if you enjoyed *Fathoms*:

- Julia Blackburn, *Time Song: Searching for Doggerland*, Jonathan Cape, 2019.
- Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, Oxford University Press, 1951.
- Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, Vintage, 2014.
- Philip Hoare, *Leviathan, or The Whale*, Forth Estate 2014.

Additional Resources:

- Rebecca Giggs, 'The Leech Barometer', *Granta* 2018; essay - <https://granta.com/the-leech-barometer/>
- Rebecca Giggs, 'Why We're Afraid of Bats', *The Atlantic*, November 2020; article - <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/daniel-blumstein-fear/616480/>
- Rebecca Giggs on the World in the Whale, When We Talk About Animals, Yale University, Episode 36, Sept 2020; podcast - <http://www.whenwetalkaboutanimals.org/2020/09/28/ep-36-rebecca-giggs/>

Associate Professor Sara Wills is the Associate Dean Partnerships in the Faculty of Arts, Head of the Executive Master of Arts in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and an Associate Professor in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies. A former Director of the Australian Centre and Deputy Director of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, for much of the last 10 years Sara's time has been devoted to creating greater opportunities for students, researchers and teachers by making connections beyond the University. Believing that we are always 'stronger together', Sara has been keen to work in partnership with individuals and organisations who share a commitment to excellence, access, equity and diversity in education. And Sara loves teaching 'The Power of Ideas: 10 Great Books' to the students in her Master's program!