

# Old, new accounts tell shipwreck story

**The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale: First-*Person* Accounts.** Edited by Nathaniel Philbrick and Thomas Nickerson. Penguin Classics. 256 pages. \$12.95.

**In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex.** By Nathaniel Philbrick. Viking. 320 pages. \$24.95.

BY ROBERT MCGUIRE  
Special to the *Journal Sentinel*

When we read popular histories, it's easy to forget that the original documents that historians draw on are interesting in their own right.

The simultaneous publication of two books about a once-legendary and now-forgotten shipwreck is an excellent opportunity to make that comparison.

Nathaniel Philbrick has edited a collection of raw historical narratives about the tragedy and written his own account that joins the current commercial craze for suspenseful non-fiction books of disaster and survival.

The two books tell how, in 1820, the whaleship Essex was attacked by a sperm whale and sunk in the most desolate and uncharted part of the Pacific. The 20 men aboard managed to scramble to three flimsy whaling boats.

They were 90 days' sail from the South American coast with about 70 days of food.

A gruesome arithmetic problem followed wherein eight of the sailors dwindled to skin and bones while the rest wound up only as bones.

If that sounds familiar it's because the 19th century was no

less fascinated with tales of disaster and survival than we are. Herman Melville was taken with the wrathful sperm whale part of the story and made it the basis of Moby Dick.

The gross-out part of the story was the beginning of an unsavory media fascination with cannibalism that lingers to this day.

Two of the survivors published their accounts of the disaster, and Philbrick has collected those and other historical documents into "The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale," a seemingly stuffy and academic collection from Penguin Classics. But when it comes to gripping suspense, the historical sources can't be beaten.

The headstrong first mate and the novice teenage cabin boy who eventually put their accounts on paper give presence as well as anyone to their desperate hunger and terrifying solitude.

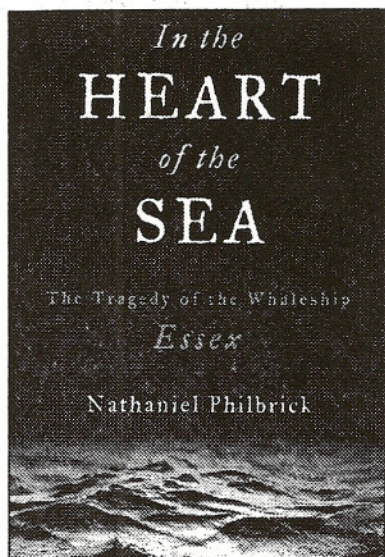
What Philbrick can do in "In the Heart of the Sea," though, is shine the light of modern science and psychology on the story to illuminate the gaps.

Between his paraphrasing of the original accounts are quick lessons on the nature of paranoia, the biology of starvation and the theory and practice of oceanic navigation.

And Philbrick's account also gets closer to the literal truth of the story.

For example, Tahiti was only a few days' sail away from the wreck, but, misguided by tall tales and xenophobia, some of the crew feared being eaten by cannibals there and insisted on steering for South America, several thousands of miles further away.

The more self-serving first



drafts of history don't do as well as Philbrick does to clarify responsibility for such choices.

Most interesting, Philbrick situates the disaster in a larger context.

"In the Heart of the Sea" isn't so much about 20 shipwrecked sailors as it is about the tight-knit whaling community they were struggling to get home to. The frame of the story is the so-called "Nation of Nantucket," the independent-minded island where the peculiar business and industry of hunting sperm whales was perfected.

The decisions made by different characters, what kind of characters they are, the ability of some to survive while others didn't — Philbrick describes all this as a way to describe the character of Nantucket itself.

"In the Heart of the Sea" is a well-crafted, thoroughly researched and sometimes engaging book, and fans of true-life adventure tales should enjoy it.

But with Philbrick's sources made available at the same time, one can't help but notice that we might depend too much on historians for our history.

For pure drama and a sense of what that emotional moment might have been like, "The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale" is a rare treasure.

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