

Douglas Carlton Abrams
Eye of the Whale -- Q&A

What is this story about?

It's an eco-thriller about a marine biologist named Elizabeth who must risk everything to decipher the mysterious song of a trapped whale and its implications for human survival.

What inspired you to write the novel?

I was sitting by the fire reading my twin daughters a children's story about a trapped whale, just after another whale had swum up the Thames. A scientist friend was visiting and started telling me some astonishing facts about new environmental dangers to our children's and other animals' health. I asked myself: what if these events were connected? What if whales and humans were threatened by the same dangers? I knew that the answer to this question would result in a thrilling and important story. I had no idea when I started quite *how* thrilling and important the story I discovered would be.

What did you discover?

I discovered that there is an environmental threat as grave as global warming, and it is doing to our bodies what global warming is doing to our climate. It is called endocrine disruption—toxic chemicals are shifting our fundamental physiological processes in the body. It has been linked to a rise in infertility, childhood cancers, breast and prostate cancer, birth defects, even autism and the decrease in the number of boys that are being born. We know what's happening at the macro but I had no idea what was happening at the micro level.

But you chose to write a novel? Why?

I start out every novel with a question, not an answer. I didn't write this story just to tell people about endocrine disruption. The day I was sitting by the fire reading to my daughters, I asked myself a question that was both deeply personal and universal. It is a question that many of us are increasingly asking ourselves: Can we survive, and what might be stronger than our greed, our fear, and our denial? I needed an answer to this question, and there is no better place to ask questions about human nature than in the fictional world. I did get an answer to my question. There is indeed something that is stronger than greed, fear, and denial, but I better not say more, or I may give away too much of the story.

You write fact-based fiction. What does that term mean?

I am interested in stories that explore the fault lines of human life, the questions that reveal our human nature and the world we live in. A fact-based novel is constrained and liberated by the way the world really is. People learn a great deal about history, about

science, about life through fact-based fiction, but in a way that is quite different than a non-fiction book. They learn about a world by breathing it, and tasting it, and living it.

How do you balance fact and fiction?

Well, the first goal is to write a story that will entertain, and in the mythic sense, to enchant, to allow readers to forget about the world by going more deeply into another. The best compliment a writer can receive is when someone says, “I couldn’t stop reading your book.” So the story must always come first, but the facts must also be true. I had the book vetted by numerous scientists. Among other things, they told me that my villains were completely realistic. As a novelist, I was glad to hear it, but as a father, I was hoping they would tell me that I had exaggerated the villainy of what is happening.

The book is an eco-thriller. What is that?

Eco-thriller just stands for ecological thriller, or a dramatic, thrilling story about the environment. It is a story where nature is either threatened or threatening or both. In some ways, humanity’s relationship to nature is one of the oldest stories in existence. The difference is that in the past, man was at the mercy of nature, and increasingly we see that nature is at the mercy of man.

This is also a scientific detective story. Tell us about the detective and the clues.

My main character, Elizabeth McKay, is a marine biologist who has spent her career trying to crack humpback whale communication, and in particular their song, the most complex in the animal world. When the song changes dramatically and suddenly, she must figure out why and what the meaning of the new sounds might be. She has to crack the code to save the whale and ultimately she discovers much more.

As you were writing the book, certain discoveries were made that confirmed what you were imagining in the story. What were they?

This was quite incredible. One of the marine biologists that I was working with and I were imagining that there was a sound mother humpbacks and their calves might use to communicate—what’s called a contact call. When they actually discovered this sound, it was the exact same sound that we had hypothesized. Social sounds, the sounds whales use to communicate with each other in every day life—were also discovered in their song just as the story suggests. Most researchers assumed that the songs were only instrumental pieces, like a jazz saxophone, but this created the possibility that their songs might also have lyrics.

You did a great deal of research for the novel. Tell us about it.

I worked with some of the world’s leading scientists—marine biologists, ecotoxicologists, veterinarians, physicians, and others. I also believe in experiencing what my characters experience, so I went swimming with the whales in Tonga, cage diving

with the great white sharks off the Farallon Islands, and even met modern day whalers in the Caribbean.

Swimming with whales? Tell me more.

It was amazing. A half hour after getting off a tiny airplane, I was in the water watching the first chapter of my novel unfold in front of my eyes: a mother humpback, her newborn calf draped across her back, and a male escort whale swimming beneath. The adults can weigh up to 70,000 pounds, and the babies merely a cuddly 2,000 pounds. I'll never forget when the male escort came over to check me out. I looked into his eye, and then watched as he gracefully lifted his several-thousand-pound pectoral fin over my head to avoid hitting me. He could have killed me with that fin, but he carefully avoided hurting me.

And great white sharks?

Well, you have to go where the story goes, and one of my major characters is a shark researcher. I was very fortunate to go with an incredible shark expert, and we were "fortunate" to see two kills. It's a mixed feeling of course, because they are feeding on seals, and yet you realize that this is their natural diet. The wild is fascinating, but it does not conform to our sense of good and bad, just and unjust. Even so, there is a deep sense of order and balance that all species must respect or go extinct.

Your portrayal of the sharks is quite different than Jaws or other stories of sharks as bloodthirsty killers. How do you portray the sharks and why?

The sharks are not the villains in the book. They are awe-inspiring and certainly terrifying, but they are to be revered, not reviled. They are an extraordinary animal that is vital to the well being of the oceans, and they have survived for hundreds of millions of years. I wanted to portray them as magnificent, not as monsters.

Are the whalers the villains?

I don't think that many people even realize—well perhaps now thanks to *Whale Wars*—that some countries are still killing whales. There are many different whalers in the novel: Japanese, Norwegian, and a Caribbean whaler who lives in Bequia, a beautiful island, where some men still hunt whales. The challenge of fiction is always to make every character compelling and human, not to make anyone all good or all evil, no matter what your own views as a novelist might be.

Who are the villains?

There are three villains in my novel. I'm a big fan of villains and having a lot of them, because a hero is only as strong as the forces of opposition that she faces. Elizabeth faces a lot of opposition, but that is the way life is. There *are* villains, and our nemeses make

us stronger in the end. I'm afraid I can't say more about the actual villains without spoiling the story.

Is there hope for us as a species? Can we overcome the villains?

Absolutely, but we must not deny their existence. In the end this is a very hopeful book, because what we discover is that so much human disease and suffering is actually man-made. If it's man-made, it's not inevitable. We can turn around a great deal of this suffering. People alive today face perhaps the greatest challenges to our survival that any generation has ever faced—climate change and chemical pollution being perhaps the two most severe. If we meet these threats, these forces of opposition, we will be the most heroic generations of humans to have ever lived.