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San Francisco *Moby-Dick* Marathon, October 2018

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San Francisco *Moby-Dick* Marathon, October 2018



The San Francisco *Moby-Dick* Marathon committee. From left to right: Barrie Grenell, Gina Bardi, and Fran Hegeler. Photo courtesy Colin Dewey.

From Daniel Herman starting with “Loomings” at noon on Saturday, October 13, to the “Epilogue,” read memorably by former San Francisco poet laureate Jack Hirschman, ending the proceedings around 1:30 p.m. on October 14, the 2018 San Francisco *Moby-Dick* Marathon was a great success. Organized by a committee of volunteers led by Gina Bardi, Reference Librarian at the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park Research Center, Barrie Grenell, and Fran Hegeler and attended by over 300 readers, listeners, and supporters, the marathon was sponsored by the National Park Service, the San Francisco Maritime National Park Association, the Melville Society, Word for Word Theater, and Starbucks, which provided a complimentary bottomless coffee service throughout the night.



The San Francisco Maritime Museum. Photo courtesy Colin Dewey.

The 25-hour big event was preceded by a series of four public evening lectures delivered at the NPS Maritime Research Center at Fort Mason. This series was organized by Gina Bardi and Melville Society Executive Secretary Colin Dewey and featured four speakers who each brought a distinct and original perspective to the novel. Daniel Herman was first, with “Zen and the White Whale” on May 31. Later in the summer, on August 7, Jeffrey Hole spoke on “Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.” He was followed on August 28 by James Noel’s “There’s No Place Like Home: *Moby-Dick* and Childhood Trauma.” Ryan Hereford closed the series on September 6 with “. . . But Drowned the Infinite: Reading *Moby-Dick* in the Wake of Climate Change.” By the time the pre-marathon lecture series was finished, the maritime (and) literature community was primed to launch on its own reading.

The location for the marathon was perfect: the third floor of the San Francisco Maritime Museum, which is housed in the historic former Aquatic Park Bathhouse Building. This unique structure was built in 1939 as a joint project of the City of San Francisco and the New Deal Works Progress Administration



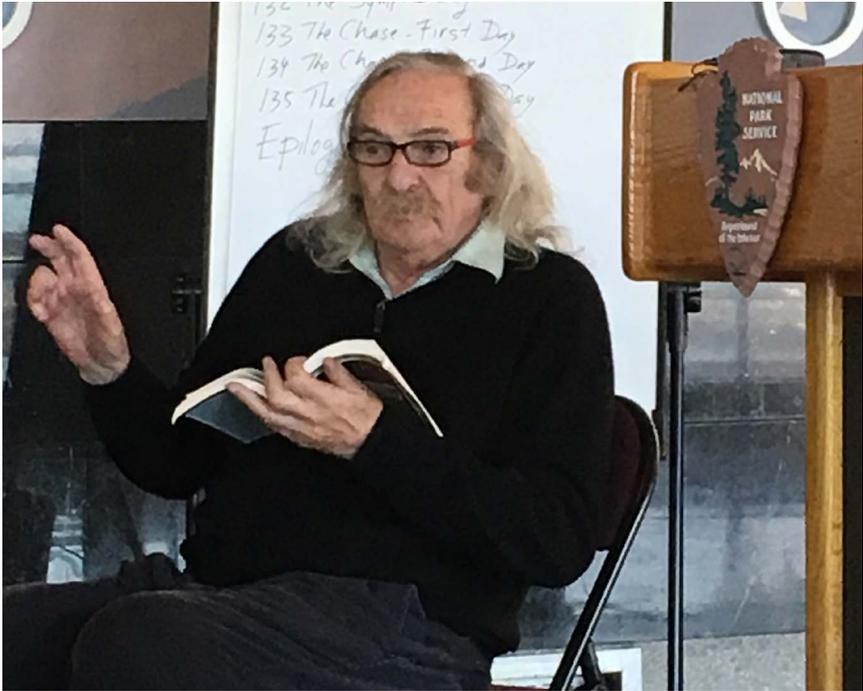
Amy Parsons and Colin Dewey at the San Francisco *Moby-Dick* Marathon. Photo courtesy Ana Rojas.

in the Streamline Moderne style, mimicking the art deco lines of an ocean liner. The breathtaking panoramic views of San Francisco Bay from the third floor are enhanced by the recently restored dreamy and dazzling oceanic murals created during the 1930s by Sargent Johnson and Hilaire Hiler. As the reading of *Moby-Dick* progressed, we had a view of swimmers, yachts, and ships of all kinds passing by Aquatic Park on the northern San Francisco waterfront. The participants had a stunning view as the sun set past Fort Mason, which, Melvilleans should note, is on Black Point, where Jesse Benton Fremont entertained Herman Melville and a salon of local notables in her home on the evening of October 19, 1860, during his visit. The marathon commemorates that visit.

The reading was attended by a diverse and enthusiastic crowd that represented San Francisco well. As the evening drew in and the fog settled on the bay, the number of readers thinned somewhat but their enthusiasm only grew while the average age decreased. As the maritime history and grey-haired bookish set drifted off, a younger crowd took their chairs and brought a whole new spirit to the night. At about 7 pm, Word for Word, a San Francisco experimental theatre group, performed chapters 36–40. Word for Word specializes in both staged readings and full dramatizations of literary works, and their



“Miss Cora Values” (Sean Owens) reads chapter 63, “The Crotch.”
Photo courtesy Gina Bardi.



Former San Francisco poet laureate Jack Hirschman reads the “Epilogue.” Photo courtesy Colin Dewey.

performance of “The Quarter-Deck” through “Midnight, Forecastle” was a memorable highlight of the evening. The old-timers had not disappeared completely, as evidenced by the several stalwarts who remained. After midnight, as if more were needed to make this reading undeniably San Franciscan, Sean Owens, who had already read in character as a Scottish Highlander, returned as his alter-ego, diner waitress “Miss Cora Values” to read chapter 63, “The Crotch.” The following morning, Kim Shuck, San Francisco’s current poet laureate, read chapter 112, “The Blacksmith,” and slowly the crowd returned as the three chapters of “The Chase” approached. Finally, and only an hour and a half over the projected 24-hour running time, the city’s distinguished former poet laureate ended the reading.

The Melville Society and the Marathon Committee thank Crystal Taylor, Sandy Stadtfeld, Daniel Herman, Darlene Plumtree, Kevin Hendricks, Gretchen Stromberg, and Lynn Cullivan for all their help organizing the event. Thanks, too, to more than 300 fantastic readers and listeners whose participation brought the book and the event to life. Inspired by the success of this year’s

marathon and the popularity of the preceding event in 2015, we are excited to do it again next year. Plans are underway for the San Francisco *Moby-Dick* marathon to join the city-wide literary festival, “LitQuake,” and celebrate Herman Melville’s bicentennial with a gala reading next October.

—Colin Dewey

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