

YA Book Review

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# MOBY-DICK MEETS THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW: ECO-DISASTER AND SALVATION IN CRAIG RUSSELL'S *FRAGMENT*

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Craig Russell's 2016 eco-thriller *Fragment* is a cautionary tale with nautical overtones.

Like Herman Melville's classic 19<sup>th</sup>-century American allegory *Moby-Dick*, the 214-page novel is encyclopedic in its presentation of scientific knowledge; unlike *Moby-Dick*, it is Wikipedic in its exposition of the potential effects of the ignorance of this knowledge. Though alarmist in its message, and matter-of-factly Naturalistic in its depiction of the deaths of tens of thousands of creatures both human and other, the book is ultimately Romantic as it presents Nature in simple language composed to improve society.

Set in contemporary times, its human heroes are polar climatologist Kate Sexsmith, astronomer Eric Lawson, and marine biologist Graham Palmer who survive an Antarctic catastrophe: glaciers create an iceberg the size of Texas that promptly erases New Zealander and American research stations from our planet's face. Disaffectionately dubbed the Fragment by the trio, it barges its way into the sea thus initiating a chain of events that ultimately involve: the *Lincoln*, a US Navy ballistic nuclear missile submarine; a pod of blue whales; a cruise ship line that guarantees adventure; a chartered sailboat; television news crews; the Pentagon; the White House; the Caribbean; and, orcas. Ring, an unconventional blue whale, is the novel's cetacean hero.

While *Fragment's* overall conflict is character versus environment, there are also fundamental clashes that reveal character versus society and characters versus other characters (the fight to the death between blue whale Ring and killer whale Bull is quite exciting!).

After Graham Palmer cracks the whale-song code, the conflicts lead to an overall theme: if humans can learn to listen, then whales (symbolizing Nature) can save humanity.

The novel would appeal strongly to adolescents who enjoy reading the science of how humankind is on the brink of destroying our planet.

*Fragment* would easily slip into a unit of study that involves Earth Science, geography, history (especially that of Antarctic exploration), marine biology and meteorology. I envision a class project that edits images and data (here students could quote from the book) in a PowerPoint exposition designed to persuade an audience to follow the direction of a particular decision. I could also see students role-playing one of the news team announcers or one of the scientists in visual presentations.

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I imagine that those who challenge the book are those who deny global warming. For their children, *Moby-Dick* could serve as an alternative selection. Other choices might include Richard Henry Dana, Jr's *Two Years before the Mast*, any of C. S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower books or Jules Verne's classic *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*.

Of particular interest to me is the affection that the submariners hold for the blue whale Ring. Akin in their mammalian underwater existence, the depth of understanding and respect these creatures have for one another is simply beautiful. In this relationship, Nature, technology and humanity intersect in ways wonderful to read.

### Author Biography

John Franklin (BA Rice, MA Miami of Ohio, PhD Florida; certified to teach English and economics) began his career at Jones High School in Houston. During that time, he combined his love for literature with a love of travel, spending 12-week summers biking or backpacking to visit the settings of the drama, fiction and poetry he loved to teach: Scotland for *Macbeth*; London for Dickens; Canterbury for Chaucer; and the Lake District for Wordsworth. One Fourth of July he ventured further abroad, discovering himself atop the Acropolis in Athens, thinking, "Here I am at the birthplace of democracy on the birthday of the greatest democracy that has ever existed." He has spent his life since then appreciating and sharing his good fortune. John Franklin is a Professor of English and Director of English Education at Pittsburg State University in Southeast Kansas where he teaches Literature for Middle and Secondary Schools.