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### Abstract

Literature offers an engaging opportunity for the transfer of place-based knowledge and history. The imaginative dimensions of a novel are an ideal tool for sharing and communicating ideas: the text is designed to hold the reader's attention, it is memorable and realistically complex. Literature is not restricted by presumptions of accuracy and such can explore lifestyle and ethnographic information in a way that is inappropriate to scientific writing. In the context of the north and my own research parameters of marine resource management and participant behavior in Alaska, I consider the following novels: Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* and William McCloskey's *Highliners*. As a control text I will refer to the classic literature standards of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a personally influential novel with reference to many accurate dimensions of the historic international sperm whale fishery. As part of this study, I also researched John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and Frederica De Laguna's *Fog on the Mountain*.

### Argument

The art and craft of literary novels are a source of knowledge for the features contained in the story. Knowledge within a work of fiction is boundless because it comes from two sources: 1) the author's creative skill transforms the subject into linked expressions that can be visualized and therefore experienced by diverse readers across typical restrictions of time and space and 2) the reader's own background brings personal memory and imaginative depth to the words on the page.

The truthfulness or realism of discourse in this genre may pose conflict but in the pursuit for information; but if the author has integrated dimensions of researched reality and/or personal experiences, the result can be a fair method for transferring factuality.

In the example novels for this project, external bibliographic information about the fisheries identified was quite accessible and though the tales have invented narrative details they also have components that are quite accurate (for example, compare the photos on this poster to the text quotations of the books). Location-specific seascapes and marine weather are described clearly, many fishery methods and harvest techniques are detailed and character relationships are appropriate to those that might occur in the real settings.

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## Northern Stories: Collecting Knowledge from Fiction

"Fiction seeks out truth. Granted, it seeks a poetic kind of truth, universals are not easily translatable into moral codes. But part of our interest as we read is in learning how the world works; how the conflicts we share with the writer and all other human beings can be resolved, if at all; what values we can affirm and, in general, what the moral risks are. The writer who can't distinguish truth from a peanut-butter sandwich can never write good fiction." —John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*.



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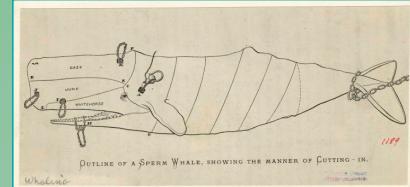


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- ### Research Curiosities (Work in Progress)
- 1) Are fiction and scientific study antithetical? Can they operate in congruity with each other?  
a) Contrasting research methodology: is fiction appropriate in scientific research?
  - 3) What can fictional literature offer to social science research?  
"At heart all fiction treats, directly or indirectly, the same thing: our love of people and the world, our aspirations and fears." John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*
    - a) Stories: basic plots are often based on reality or a writer's "real" experience
    - b) Imagery and description: landscape, community identity, character behavior, relationships
    - c) Alternatives: assistance in the process of imagination
  - 4) How can fiction be explored as a dimension of cognitive anthropology?  
    - a) Organization of knowledge (role of the writer)
    - b) Portrayal of knowledge (role of the writer)
    - c) Distribution of knowledge (communication in the form of publication or presentation)
    - d) Interpretation of the final document (role of reader)
  - 4) What are the relationships between different dimensions of creative writing?  
    - a) Writing as structured craft (character, plot, setting, point of view, storyline)
    - b) Writing as art (imagination, quality of writing, clarity and precision of imagery, quotations and conversation, complexity and continuity of story-line)
    - c) Writing as cognition (interpretation of reality, relationship between story, author and reader, energy of possible knowledge/ desire to know more about the general subject)
  - 5) What role might other arts and humanities contribute to studies of climate change and northern community impacts?



Photo by Emilie Springer



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### Example Novels

#### **Model: Moby Dick, Herman Melville. Original publication: 1851.**

**Description:** This book is considered by most maritime literary scholars to be the ultimate sea-faring novel. It rarely goes unmentioned either in the introductions of other maritime literature or in the text of the books themselves. It is the story of whale ship cruising international waters in search of sperm whale to harvest, but, like *The Sea Wolf*, the vessel is charged by a deranged and obsessive captain: Ahab. The voice of the narrator is Ishmael, a novice deckhand who survives the wreckage that occurs in the final chapters of the story and lives to tell the tale. This is a classic novel and the artistic standards of the book and the depth of the writing are better defined than the following examples.

#### **Quote: A description of the sperm whale.**

"In the ordinary swimming position of the sperm whale, the front of the head presents an almost wholly vertical plane to the water; you observe that the lower part of that front slopes considerably backwards, so as to furnish more retreat for the long socket which receives the boom-like lower jaw; you observe that the mouth is entirely under the head as though your own mouth were entirely under your chin. The front of the sperm whale's head is a dead blind wall without a single organ or tender prominence of any sort whatsoever."

#### **Factual information available:**

Whaling vessel structure and necessary gear, vessel social status and relationships, details of whaling procedures, details of sperm oil reduction techniques, animal behavior and physical characteristics, land-based community descriptions.

#### **The Sea Wolf, Jack London. Original publication: 1904.**

**Description:** Humphrey van Weydon (Hump) is pulled from the ocean near San Francisco after experiencing a vessel accident in the typically foggy weather. He is taken aboard the *Ghost*, a North Pacific seal-hunting vessel, captained by crazed skipper, Wolf Larsen. There, he is forced to work as crew—a lesson Larsen felt his smooth hands could benefit from. Hump, an intelligent fellow, eventually learns the skills he needs to manage and operate the vessel. He develops a relationship with Larsen via many heated and long discussions and is involved in the many treacherous incidents that the boat is involved in.

#### **Quote: The scene of a seal harvest.**

"We ran on to the north and west till we raised the coast of Japan and picked up with the great seal herd. Coming from no man knew where in the immeasurable Pacific, it was traveling north on its annual migration to the rookeries of Bering Sea. And north we traveled with it, ravaging and destroying, flinging the naked carcasses to the shark and salting down the skins so that they might later adorn the fair shoulders of the women of the cities. It was wanton slaughter. After a good day's killing I have seen our decks covered with fat and blood, the scuppers running red, masts, ropes and rails splattered with the sanguineous color."

#### **Factual information available:**

Details of seal hunting, description of sea conditions, vessel social settings, location description of far western Aleutian seal rocks.

#### **Highliners, William McCloskey. 1979.**

**Description:** On a summer break from college on the east coast, Hank travels to Kodiak with the intention to work in a remote cannery elsewhere on the island. As soon as he arrives, he knows he'd rather be working on any one of the boats and spends all free-time wandering the harbors, looking for work as a deckhand. First, he's taken up by Jones Henry after someone else is injured and spends the rest of his summer seining. By the end of the summer, he is hooked on the industry and the independence of being on the water. He doesn't want to do anything else and spends several more years pursuing opportunity on the water. The timeline for the novel is 1963-1974.

#### **Quote: A seine set (in 1963).**

"A pelican hook connected to the winch the line called the painter that held the skiff's bow snubbed against the boat's stem. When the hook was opened with a mallet blow, it released the skiff and snapped the heavy hook across the deck. "So always stand clear," said Steve. "Now, as soon as the skiff goes, it starts paying out that few feet of net board that Ivan's always working over. You call that the lead; it's a shallow net so the skiff can maneuver closer to shore without catching snags. The lead's attached to the seine, so as soon as it's out, the skiff's pulling the seine over the fantail, and all kinds of lines are running on deck. Watch your feet, never catch them in a bight, or you'll get pulled overboard. Right?"

#### **Factual Information available:**

Accurate descriptions of various fishing techniques (seining, trawling, long-lining and pot fishing), location descriptions of Alaska communities (Kodiak, Dutch Harbor), location descriptions of marine landmarks and water ways in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, descriptions of social features of commercial fishing, descriptions of interactions with international vessels (Russian and Japanese).



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