Whaling Scoundrels: In Cold Blood: A WHALE FOR THE KILLING
By GEORGE L. SMALL
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A WHALE FOR THE KILLING
By Farley Mowat
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GOOD BOOKS ABOUT WHALES make fascinating reading. Most of them pit little men against giant whales and reflect the attitude widespread in western society that nature is wild and mindless, a force to be subdued or vanquished. The conventional narrative may generate some respect for the animal, but the aim is to create a formidable adversary, awesome and terrible, and thus magnify the triumph of civilized man.

A Whale for the Killing by Farley Mowat is both unconventional and unforgettable. It challenges, and indeed devastates, the arrogant human assumptions of the man-nature relationship that are at the root of our present ecological crisis. Neither an epic nor a yarn, A Whale for the Killing is Mowat's personal account of a tragedy that once again pits man against whale. The protagonists are a 70-ft, 30-ton, pregnant fin whale accidentally trapped in a tidal pond, and the local "sportsmen" of Burgeo, Newfoundland, who use high-powered rifles, speedboats and even rocks in their determination to "kill the monster." Mowat shakes his readers with brutal evidence that men still kill for pleasure.

In this strange episode, the whale takes no revenge on her tormentors and makes every effort not to damage their boats and fishing gear. Who is civilized and who is savage, whale or man? The author has the courage to raise the question, and he has facts that point to an unpleasant answer. His book is precisely the type of work that conservationists wish the rest of the human race would read more often.

A Whale for the Killing is more than a brilliant plea for a change in human attitudes towards nature; it is a book that contains new and valuable information about the giant fin whales. This material is not presented in scientific jargon but in the style of an articulate layman who is a keen if not a trained observer. His contribution to knowledge about fin whales is based on scenes he witnessed.

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scenes never before witnessed by a human being. For example, it has long been thought that fin whales, like sei and blue whales, eat only shrimp-like crustaceans called "krill." Mowat shows that fin whales are also herring-eaters, and he describes the technique with which a fin whale "rounds up" a school of the fish before swallowing them.

Many incidents described in detail shed new light on fin whale communications, migration and social structure. Few men who have seen a whale swimming are likely to forget its extraordinary grace and rhythm. For these who have not had the privilege, Mowat has produced what is probably the finest verbal description of swimming whales ever written.

A Whale for the Killing has its message and its information, and it also has drama and suspense. For the first time in history, and probably the last, man had a unique opportunity to study a giant fin whale in "natural captivity." The author seems to have been the only person in the village who realized how priceless was the knowledge that could be obtained if the situation were properly handled.

He phones and cabled scientists all over North America; with few exceptions they yawn in disbelief. The whale is hungry and needs food, by the ton. Mowat appeals to the government; promises he gets, but no aid comes. The citizen-sportsmen of Burgeo attack the whale but the Mounties are elsewhere. Mowat comes to the rescue, at no small risk to himself. He is surely the only man in history with a fin whale he must protect from neighbors' bullets, a whale he must feed, study and try to set free in the open ocean. How does he manage? The answers are yet another reason for reading this amazing book.

Despite all the praise that it deserves, A Whale for the Killing does have a few flaws. The absence of photos of the whale is both regrettable and surprising, especially since television cameramen expended thousands of feet of film on the trapped animal. An occasional factual error is found in the discussion of subjects other than his whale, his fishing village and the economy of the south coast of Newfoundland. For example, the International Whaling Commission is based in London, England, not Oslo, Norway. There is no evidence that cormorants have good vision underwater.

Mowat's most objectionable error is in giving the reader the impression that Norwegians are the whaling scoundrels of the seas. They are the most numerous at Newfoundland whaling stations, to be sure, but on a worldwide basis no whalers can approach the Japanese in contempt for conservation and relentless slaughter of endangered species. Norway has been a leader in unsuccessful efforts to save the whales of the world from the rapacious Japanese and Soviets.

But these few shortcomings are almost trivial when measured against the book's outstanding contributions to the conservation battle and our knowledge of fin whales. Besides, Mowat is a fascinating writer. The rips and eddies of his fast-flowing prose move like those of the irresistible tides. A Whale for the Killing is a pertinent entry in the log on the voyage to a better understanding of whales and men.

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