

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Blood & Guts: Dispatches from the Whale Wars

AUTHOR: Sam Vincent

ISBN: 9781863956826

PRICE: \$29.99

SUBJECT: Non-Fiction

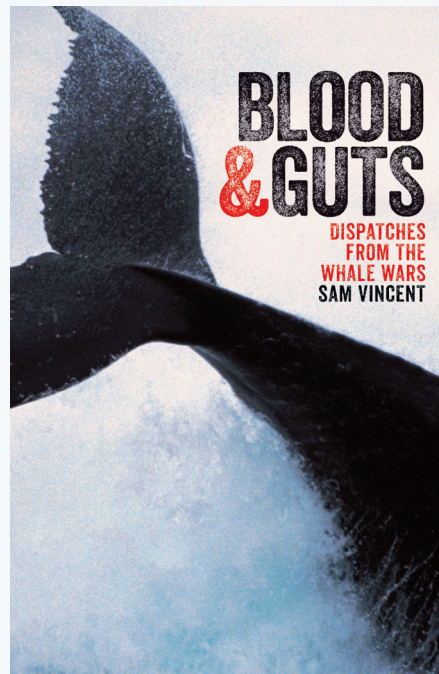
About the Book

As Sam Vincent points out, the ‘whale wars’ are usually portrayed in Australia as a ‘struggle between good and evil: NGO “eco-warriors” pitted against the might of the Japanese state; “majestic giants of the deep” pursued by industrial weaponry’ (p6). In this book Vincent gives us a more complex understanding of this ‘flashpoint of diplomatic, cultural, economic and environmental tension’ (p7) by taking us directly to the NGOs, the Japanese state and the so-often anthropomorphised whales. Although, he tells us, the whale wars have little to do with the actual whales.

He first takes us to meet the ‘whale huggers’, the activists on board Sea Shepherd ship the Steve Irwin. He pokes fun at some of them, admires some of them at the same time, but most importantly questions the rhetoric used by the organisation and individuals, especially their ‘megalomaniac misanthrope’ leader Paul Watson. He witnesses the clash between the Sea Shepherd ships and the Japanese whaling ship he describes as a ‘slaughterhouse’.

He then travels to Japan. Here he meets whale meat restaurateurs, Greenpeace members, academics, and ultra-nationalists. He discovers an entirely different conception of nature to that held by the West. He also discovers nationalistic myth-making and an attitude to whaling that is at least as much about reacting to anti-whaling as it is an attitude to whaling in and of itself.

And finally he takes us to The Hague to see the legal battle between Australia and Japan



over what Japan claims is a scientific whaling program.

Throughout, Vincent wants to understand what the ‘whale wars’ are really about. What motivates the individual ‘whale huggers’? Why has Sea Shepherd become such a popular organisation in the West? Why has saving the whales become shorthand for conservation efforts, and how much does saving the whales contribute to conservation more broadly? Why is Japan so determined to keep hunting whales when demand for whale meat is declining? Why is Australia whaling’s most strident opponent?

Vincent deliberately seeks nuance and complexity. He finds them, and on so many levels: moral, cultural, environmental, political, legal, and personal.

About the Author

Sam Vincent is a freelance travel writer and investigative journalist. He is a regular contributor to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* and has a degree in international relations from the Australian National University. He has been published in the *Monthly* and the *Griffith Review*. When not travelling, he works as a researcher and editor at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government.

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Praise for *Blood & Guts*

'A pull-no-punches report on this controversial and complex issue.'—*Qantas the Australian Way*

'*Blood & Guts* is proof that good investigative journalism is alive and well.'—*Readings Monthly*

'This book is a perfect introduction to the whale wars. Whether you're a whale hugger or a whale hunter, you'll be charmed by Vincent's honesty. In his fair-mindedness, he shows affection for both Japan and Sea Shepherd's ragtag bunch. *Blood & Guts* is a gem of journalistic writing. The whales, their hunters and their lovers are lucky to have such a chronicler.'—the *Australian*

'revealing, sometimes hilarious'—*New Statesman*

'authoritative, strangely entertaining'—*Spectator*

'a fair-minded and fascinating account of the whale wars'—*Ausmarine*

Questions for discussion

1. Did *Blood & Guts* change your mind about the rights and wrongs of whaling? Is there room for the nuance that Vincent argues for?
2. Is Vincent the 'objective eyewitness' (p7) that he says has been missing from the 'theatre' to date?
3. What do you get from Vincent's 'embedded' journalism that you wouldn't get from a more traditional approach?
4. Whales are a 'flagship species' or 'ambassador species'. Do you think 'flagship' or 'ambassador' species are useful or beneficial?
5. One senior member of the Steve Irwin acknowledges that Paul Watson lies but says that 'he's pretty damn good at his job. At the moment, this organisation – though not perfect – is the most

successful at saving whales' (p83). Do you think Sea Shepherd is effective in achieving its conservation aims? How does it compare to other organisations such as Greenpeace? How do their aims differ? Which aims and approaches achieve more for the greater good?

6. Further to the quotation above, do Sea Shepherd's ends justify the means? Is it OK for Paul Watson to lie? Is it OK that the organisation focuses on what Vincent describes as 'propaganda'? More broadly, do the ends always justify the means? Never? Sometimes? If sometimes, how do you decide when?

7. Vincent describes the crew of the Steve Irwin as white and middle-class, reminding him of 'sufferers of the quarter-life crisis' (p27). Does this make their activism less valid? Do Paul Watson's personal flaws make his activism less valid?

8. Vincent describes different cultural understandings of whales, and therefore of killing them. Where do you think your attitude to whales and their killing comes from?

9. Do you think whaling should be allowed in any form?

10. Is cultural tradition a valid reason for killing whales? Is cultural tradition a valid reason for other practices that our culture might consider immoral?

11. Is it hypocritical to advocate for saving whales while still being a meat eater?

12. Vincent frames the Sea Shepherd's view of the whale wars as 'a question of philosophy: whether whales are resources to be exploited or sentient beings to be respected' (p36). Where do you sit on this question?

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13. Whaling raises broader questions about, and is intimately tied in with, the changing way Australians view the natural environment (p196). How has this changed in your lifetime? Is the Japanese conception of the natural world that Vincent describes understandable to you?

14. Do you agree with Adrian Pearce's idea that the 'new symbols' of environmentalism 'can be made without the middle classes having to modify their (over/excess) consumption practices in the slightest' (p197)? Are you willing to change your consumption to protect the environment?

15. Is Australia's and Australians' view on whaling hypocritical? If so, should we change our stance on whaling, or change our stance on broader issues?