# 111. Sailing Without Ahab w/ Dr. Steve Mentz

**Dan Dissinger:** [00:00:00] Hey everyone. Welcome to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm your host, Dan Dissinger and today we have a really special guest, uh, someone from my St. John's past, a professor of mine that I had when I was a student in the doctoral program there at St.

John's. Steve Menz, who's professor of English at St. John's University, author of the recent book, sailing Without Ahab, and also author of Into the Blue Intro to the Blue Humanities and Oceanic, New York, and a bunch of other books, of course. And he's a prolific scholar and. Writer, but Dr. Mentz, thank you so much for being here.

**Steve Mentz:** Oh, it, it's really my pleasure, Dan. It's really nice. I've been a, a, a, uh, a fan of the podcast for many years. Um, and, uh, I've used it in my teaching, in fact. Um, and, uh, I just, you know, I, I've been, I love to see the kind of experimental work that, um. People are doing in and around the, the humanities and the different [00:01:00] kinds of media that are possible today.

And this is one of the inspirational things for me is to, to see this podcast and other, other things like it. So

**Dan Dissinger:** thank you. I mean, I appreciate it. It's so fun. It's, it's been really fun. It's, it's crazy that I've been doing the podcast since 2020. Mm-hmm. And that we've had so many people on from. All over the world and that that's was, yep.

I mean, there's a whole episode about like to do an episode about just the idea of just how podcasting is changing the landscape and scholarship, but you know, we've, you've been on, actually you were on mm-hmm. An episode that you actually hosted. It was almost like a special Yes. Guest host episode, Melissa.

Elli and Megan Nolan, shout out to them. So everyone you could check that episode out. And, and, and

**Steve Mentz:** Danielle Lee. Yeah. And

**Dan Dissinger:** Danielle Lee, who's,

**Steve Mentz:** yeah. Another, another part-time host.

**Dan Dissinger:** That's right. Danielle's been on, she was on a recent episode about civility this year, which actually a lot of people were listening to.

That's a really good one. Um, but thank you so much for coming. And so why don't we, [00:02:00] you throw it over to you to introduce yourself a little bit more to the audience and, uh, and then we'll jump right in.

**Steve Mentz:** Sure. Uh, thanks so much. Uh, as I said, I'm really excited to, to be here on this podcast. Um, I'm a professor of English at St.

John's University. I've been teaching there for more than 20 years now. So I arrived at St. John's in 2003, I believe. Um, maybe it's 2004. Uh, my academic specialties include Shakespeare, English literature, literary theory, and all different kinds of poetics. Um, but in the last, you know, decade plus. I have been increasingly interested in what, uh, a few of us these days call the blue humanities, uh, which is a, a kind of history or, uh, analysis of the ways in which humans relate with water, um, and to a certain amount, a certain extent.

This sort of began with an interest in maritime literature and oceans, and I'm still super interested in those things as, as this book shows. But in recent years, I've been trying to think about. All the different [00:03:00] kinds of ways in which we engage with water, not just the oceans that cover most of the planet, but the water that, you know, fills up most of our body's tissues and, you know, fresh water for agriculture.

The place of, uh, you know, I. Water and pollution in, in urban environments. I mean all these different ways. Water is of course the, one of the relatively few substances that we engage with in all three of its physical states, liquid, solid and gas. And, and you know, there's all sorts of ways in which this substance is sort of fascinating to us on a physical and cultural level.

And that's basically the, the stuff that I'm interested in these days.

**Dan Dissinger:** I was thinking about the blue humanities because it, when I saw the book come out about the intro to the blue humanities, I had already known that you were interested in bodies of water. Water was a huge part, not just of your scholastic life.

I know it's a big part of your personal life and in relationship to the water. And um, I was reading your recent book, [00:04:00] sailing Without Ahab last night,

and as we were saying before we hit record and that I started to really think about, wow, there's. Such an interesting correlation between relationship to water for, you know, for you, and then for me as well, but also an author that I.

You know, wrote about a St. John's and I was thinking about this book and I'm like, and Kerouac like also his relationship to maritime. His maritime relationship, merchant, marine relationship, his relationship to rivers and streams and oceans and everything. And I'm like, wow, this, there is such a untapped.

Re, um, like scholastic space. That's so exciting to think about in terms of all authors maybe, and their relationship to water and even poets. I mean, there's so much being, you know, so much to Yeah. You know, in the poetry as well. So how did you, is this a real, when you think of blue Humanities, is it [00:05:00] much more of a personal scholastic connection than like.

I don't wanna say like normal scholarship, but you know what I mean, like in terms of like, it is a much more personal relationship.

**Steve Mentz:** Well, yes and no. I mean, I think the secret history of all scholarship is some kind of personal obsession, you know, that that's one of the things that makes scholars do the work, that work and the thinking that we do.

Um, but in my case, absolutely yes. I mean, I think that the, the great discovery of, of my, you know, the sort of enabling discovery of my work is that my personal obsession with. Water and swimming could, could feed into and support my academic work. Um, so I am in the, in the position now where I, I can sort of, uh, you know.

Tell my family that whenever I like walk down the street to go swimming in the summer, it's, you know, it's research. It's like an important part of my, of my professional life. Um, which is a pretty good joke. But, um, but it, and it's also like, in some sense true, because I do think a lot about the [00:06:00] experience of being an open water swimmer and how that helps me understand sort of physically the relationship between my relatively small body and the body of the, of the ocean, which is, you know, down the street from me in Long Island Sound.

Um, and so the, um, the, the various kinds of relationships we have with water are the things that are really sort of, uh, making me think about, uh, the kind of work that I, that I'm doing now and that I wanna do in the future.

**Dan Dissinger:** Do you feel like it's become, it, it allows for more creativity because, I mean, sailing with a, without Ahab is as is like this interesting hybrid Yeah.

Piece of scholarship like and um, yeah. I was, yeah, I was really engaging in the poetic aspects of it. Mm-hmm. But also the reflective parts. Mm-hmm. I mean, you have in the book the multiple use usages of I being for like mm-hmm. Me and character Moby Dick. [00:07:00] And I felt like, I was like, oh, and here he's talking about himself or possibly the narrator of this text being there too.

And I've found that use really well. Do you feel like moving into something. Like to be blue. Humanities is opening up the creativity and the approach in terms of scholarship for you.

**Steve Mentz:** That's definitely been true for me. I mean, I think that I have been like, it, it's like working in both critical and creative modes, you know, in dialogue with each other and as as much as possible, sort of simultaneously in the same text has been something I've been really interested in for, you know, since the beginning of my career.

And. I have, I do think that the blue humanities is particularly hospitable to this kind of work. Um, you know, uh, like sailing with that Ahab is really a book of poems. Um, although it's also a reading of Moby Dick, um, or, or a kind of distorting, misreading, I guess, of Moby Dick. Um, but that, that it is so, [00:08:00] so those things are happening at the same time and really in dialogue with each other.

And I think that the. Interest in experience in having my own physical experience of encountering water be part of my, part of the thing that I'm thinking about. Trying to make sense of, um, that, that leads, leads directly, at least for me, to the creative work. Um, that, you know, it is through writing poem as well as crafting arguments and doing scholarly research and going to the archive and those sorts of things.

Like all those things are contributing to sort of getting, um. Our heads around and our language around this, um, this slippery object, um, which is, you know, planetary water.

**Dan Dissinger:** I, that's, I like that because it's the, in, in poetry. Like there is, uh, it's interesting to say this way, like a slipperiness, like you can do the way in which you can move between lines and in between line breaks and kind of create, yeah.

This co-mingling of [00:09:00] things, depending on when you break a line. When you were doing this book, um, what made you, or what inspired you, I guess, to move into it as a poetic space? Mm-hmm. As opposed to, you know, writing just mm-hmm. A book.

**Steve Mentz:** Yeah. I mean, a couple different things, right? On the one hand, Moby Dick is, you know, a book that I've, that I read when I was a kid in the 1970s, and I teach it and I'm kind of obsessed with it, but it's also not my.

Professorial area of expertise. I mean, I've read a lot of Moby Dick criticism, but I'm not really a, a Melville scholar per se. Like I, my field is like 16th century England rather than 19th century America, though I said, so I, I was trying to sort of come to terms with this book that I'm obsessed with and that I love, but that I also have this like a little bit amateurish.

Position or the amateur that in the [00:10:00] etymological sense, like a book that I love, but it's not my profession to profess about. And so, um, I, I was thinking like, how can I craft something that will enable me to respond to this particular book? And I was thinking for a long time about the, the intensity of the kind of binary structure of the novel between the, the narrator Ishmael and the, you know, the tyrannical captain and I.

Thinking that, you know, like we spent a lot of our lives under the subject to tyrannical captains of one kind or another. Um, and like, wouldn't it be nice to not have that tyrannical captain, uh, in control of our ship? And so that was the, the kind of germ of it as a little dream of, of a freedom or alterity, like a different way of understanding, um, the Great American novel, uh, the experience of, you know, being an American, um, and.

The experience [00:11:00] of sort of being a, a terrestrial mammal on a watery planet as well.

**Dan Dissinger:** Mm-hmm. How does it, how did it feel to give yourself, it's interesting you used the term, you describe yourself in this like. Quote unquote, like er, amateurish, like mm-hmm. Approach. Right. For me as a student, I, I would never consider I would be a problem, but it's, it's interesting 'cause I was, I still feel that way in terms of when I go to write something.

Yep. Academic, right? Like, I still have these things where I'm like, oh man, I gotta try to, to get this in there and do this. Yeah. Um. So what was it like to give yourself over to a form that you feel like you're growing inside of? You

know, and I know we all grow as writers no matter what. Mm-hmm. This is a form that

**Steve Mentz:** Yep.

It was a form That's really new to me. Right. I mean, I, I started writing this. The early kind of experiments that eventually became the book probably about eight or nine years ago. Mm-hmm. Um, and it real, uh, and then I sort of red redoubled my connection to it [00:12:00] during the weird years of the pandemic when we were all stuck inside.

But, um, I. Like, I was really trying to cultivate a different, uh, uh, a style of writing that's sort of equally intense and engaged, but also like radically different. Like I wanted to write without footnotes. I wanted to write without certain kinds of, um. I don't know, professional paranoia that you're gonna be called out if you don't do it the right way.

And you know, I, I've, I, I've written plenty of books with footnotes. I still write stuff with footnotes. Now I believe in footnotes. Um, but I also think that there are other ways to write. And so really what I was trying to cultivate in this book is, uh, is an alternative engagement with, um, with this particular literary text and also with the sort of.

You know, the water in the environment. Hmm. Um, and it, and it's also means very much an Anthropocene book in the sense that it's like a book about the present and our own, um, dynamic and unstable [00:13:00] relationship with a cli changing climate. Um, you know, the, as the, as the world gets wetter, um, and we get more, you know, catastrophic rain events and flood events and, you know, things like the LA fires, um, you know that we are.

We are encountering a, uh, an environment that is less sympathetic or it's just not the environment that we think we're used to. And, um, my sort of enabling thought is that, you know, we have a long history of these stories about humanity and nature that are somewhat sympathetic, you know, like this sort of green dream or, or, or an idea of kind of pastoral, um, cohabitation with a natural world.

And then we have these other stories, which, for which I sort of have, have been using the color blue. Which are stories about the ocean or about water, which are often stories about like storm and disruption and, and, and [00:14:00] chaos and, and subjection. Um, and, you know, we have a long history of these stories

and they, I think, are stories that tell us how we're gonna have to live in an environment that gets wetter and less predictable, um, moving forward.

**Dan Dissinger:** It's really amazing to think about what you're saying in terms of our relationship to. The changing of the world mm-hmm. In terms of how water is going to change our environment. Yeah. While at the same time I hear also what you're saying to like how water can also hold lots of stories, whether myths, legends or, you know, history.

Um, we were talking about like, I, two years ago went to Greece and mm-hmm. And then I went to Cyprus as well. And in Cyprus they have, um, you could go. You go to this beach area, we were brought, I was brought to this beach area and I was told this is the birthplace of Aphrodite, like right here. Mm-hmm. Like you see this right here.

And immediately I was like, I need to be inside this [00:15:00] water. Like I need to go in the water. And I feel like there's. An interesting pull that human beings have towards water. Mm-hmm. And like I see it too when I go to San Diego when people just come to the beach just to watch the sunset. Mm-hmm. And we'll swim in the water even if it's still really cold.

And Yeah. I mean it's, I guess this is a grand question, but maybe it could be more personal. Like what is the draw that to the ocean that we have or that maybe you have like in terms of like that you've experienced it? Like how do. How do we put that into any sort of language? Like

**Steve Mentz:** Yeah, I mean I think like that's, that's the hard part.

Mm-hmm. Um, and I would say that it is the draw of a place that is at the same time. Mm-hmm. Like deeply. Personal, you know, and part of our body is part of our cultures, but also deeply alien and threatening, right? Mm-hmm. Um, so there's this line in Moby Dick that I used as an epigraph for a book, [00:16:00] uh, for the book called Ocean a couple years ago, which is a biography of the ocean and, you know, 25,000 words or something.

But, um, uh, you know, a nice short, compact biography of this big thing. And the, the line from Melville that I use for that is, um, shipmates. It is a two stranded lesson. Mm. And that's from Father Mapple in the, in the beginning of the book and the, in the sermon at the, at the whale chapel. But the idea that I was drawing out of that is that the ocean is always two things at once.

Right. It's always alluring and also always threatening. Um, you know, there's like. Lots of sharks off the coast in San Diego too, um, as we know, and, and here in Connecticut and, and New Jersey also. Um, so like, there, there are always these, the relationship with the ocean is always this kind of unstable mix.

I. Of, uh, beauty and sympathy and Aphrodite and also, you know, storms and [00:17:00] violence and, you know, let's say Poseidon, right? Yeah. Um, that there, there's this, um, this constant, um, shifting relationship. And that's the thing that I'm trying to capture, um, really in, in almost all the work I'm doing right now, but definitely in, in this.

In this book as I was trying to like capture through the, like attention focuser of the short poem. Yeah. Like how do we understand, um, you know what we get out of proximity to the ocean.

**Dan Dissinger:** Hmm. Yeah. I, I am, that's one thing I always thought. It's like my proximity to water is very important. It's very important.

So when I lived in Colorado, I was like landlocked. So my,

**Steve Mentz:** yeah,

**Dan Dissinger:** my relationship with was with mountains and now it's, yeah, back with water and. It's really interesting to kind of see how even the relationship to water, but also in your text as well, like relationship to others, right. And like how water brings people and creates comradery, right?

**Steve Mentz:** Yep. Particular [00:18:00] kinds of community. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah. And, and also these, you know, relationships between men as well in terms of how we understand that. I mean, for me. Always looking at that in terms of Kerouac and, you know, on the road. Mm-hmm. Or his earlier novels. You, you see how his relationships between, uh, his relationships with other men on a merchant marine ship is very emotional.

Yeah. Because also there are a lot of people that died that he knew in terms of that. Yeah. And mm-hmm. Um, so I saw a lot of that in this text too. It was really interesting to kind of see how. You focus in on a lot of different relationships, whether it is between man and water, but also mm-hmm. How water creates the relationship between other men.

I found that very, very ative. Yeah. And,

**Steve Mentz:** and part of the, part of the discovery, like the, the sort of. Initial move is to try to erase Ahab from the text, right? Yeah. Is that there? We're gonna go sailing [00:19:00] on the peak. Wads voyage, and we're gonna do all the same stuff, but we're not gonna have this domineering, tyrannical captain figure.

And one of the things that happens is, um. As I was working on it is like all the other characters sort of flood into the foreground. You know, ITAB takes up a lot of space in Moby Dick as, as Melville wrote it. And when that space is empty, a lot of other things can come into focus. And so in particular, the relationship between Ishmael and who is I and the text, and obviously there's a.

As you noted, there's this sense that Ishmael is also I, me and also I Ishmael, um, but the relationship between Ishmael and Quick Wag, the, um, ways in which the kind of community of the, of the whale ship operates, you know, sometimes violently and sometimes collectively, um. Um, but also like an effort to really think through, like one of the things about being a literary person is that we walk [00:20:00] around with these old stories in our heads.

So I live on the Connecticut shoreline just outside New Haven, and I've lived here for 20 some odd years, and. All the places that I go where I like walk my dogs in the morning, where I go swimming in the summertime, where I go running. Um, these are all places that I have a kind of deep history and relationship with, and they're all imprinted with my reading of Moby Dick and my understanding of.

Other literary texts that I teach and also all the things that I write. So, so the book is both a, a kind of rereading and reimagining and, and, you know, reassembling of Melville and also an attempt to sort of inhabit my own place with some of the, um, connections and, and, and ideas from, um. From Melville, but also from the way that I'm trying to grapple with water as a kind of [00:21:00] non-human teacher.

**Dan Dissinger:** Mm. Um,

**Steve Mentz:** you know, an alien presence. Wow. So I thought I would maybe read, um, yeah, an early piece. This is, this is, um, so some of the po, so there's 137 poems in the book, the same number as chapters in Moby Dick, and they do match. Um, but maybe half the poems take their title from the chapter title in Moby Dick.

And half of them have titles that I created myself. So this is one of the ones that uses the title from Melville, and it's called The Pulpit. So it, I don't know, it's early in the early in the text. So maybe chapter I don't, 8, 9, 10. Um, and this is one of the ones that's really set. Here in Connecticut as opposed to in an imaginary whale ship.

Um, but I'll, I'll read it real quickly 'cause I think it, it, it shows a little bit what I'm thinking about here, about trying to bring the, the thinking into the local. So it's called the pulpit, when I stands on granite, forced to skew by glacial retreat. [00:22:00] Eye places bare feet on abrasive stone. An eye looks down past the watermark on an outstretching rock from which eye dies.

In high tide, summers an eye smells, seaweed, salt, and ripeness. And below that sees slow surging waters. And if eye is lucky, sometimes the white shock of an egrets bended neck aiming at something beneath the surface. High above in impossible Blue. The hidden Ospreys call tells that he sees something we can't, that he has spied fish movement beneath sun glare, and he'll dive soon passing from the sea of air to that thicker, greener, more viscous fluid seeking food and knowledge and illumination.

Then I preaches from my pulpit.

**Dan Dissinger:** Hmm hmm.

**Steve Mentz:** So that one is trying, I mean, thinking very specifically about a rock down the street from me where I walk my dogs every morning. [00:23:00] Um, and thinking specifically about like what is the, the kind of lesson about the world that I get from my physical proximity and kind of repeated proximity to this place and the other, especially the non-human inhabitants of this place, um, especially in this case, the birds and the fish.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah. And it feels so textural, like mm-hmm. You know, I, you could feel the, the way the feet, especially when you have those experiences of like bare feet on stone mm-hmm. Or bare feet, anything. Mm-hmm. You're, you can actually feel those different textures moving around in the poem. Mm-hmm. It, it even, I mean, as much of the experiences I have of water or are similar and different, it just still, you can imagine even this idea of the pulpit and standing in a mm-hmm.

Like a hired space, like where you're looking mm-hmm. Over. Yep. Where like when you're about to either [00:24:00] jump in on the water or just staring out at it. Mm-hmm. It feels like there's. An unending audience of some sort that has

been there and that it was really that. Even hearing you read it though too, it changes the whole experience of mm-hmm.

Kind of the reading I was, it brings that whole out, that whole thing out very well. Mm-hmm. Wow.

When you thought to do this, did you feel that, Hmm, with Moby Dick, how? What is the response when you teach Moby Dick? I, I'm really curious. This is a book that, 'cause I know you, you know, do students still engage with it? Um mm-hmm. And engage with it in mm-hmm. In a way that they, I don't wanna say understand it, but I, I guess what I'm trying to say is like, what, how do they enter the text in a way, like a text?

So large?

**Steve Mentz:** My sense. I mean, Moby Dick is a challenge just because of its [00:25:00] scale, right? Mm-hmm. And it's a challenge, you know, that isn't just like that. It's a challenge for everybody. Um, and definitely a challenge in, in the present. But I think that, I mean, one of the things that I think helps students engage with Moby Dick is to realize it is just so weird.

It is intentionally, deeply strange. And the narrator who, Ishmael, who we might think of as like a, you know, some sense of as every narrator is in some sense of stand in for the reader. He's a weird character and he is obsessive and he is perverse and he is describing. To the audience, his own kind of radical change from being like a, a school teacher from upstate New York up the Hudson River Valley to becoming an obsessive follower of whales on whale ships around the world.

And so that weirdness, I think, really helps. I. And then on a very practical level, um, the last couple times I've taught Moby Dick, I have spaced it out over the whole semester so that we have like a week [00:26:00] on, week off kind of structure.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah.

**Steve Mentz:** And, um, I'm a big fan of the Big Read podcast, uh, which Philip Ho put together in England, which is an audio book presentation of the text.

Every chapter is read by a different. Actor and performer. And, um, you know, some of them are musicians and some of them are, they're doing all sorts of really interesting things with these chapters. And, um, so I, I do, uh, encourage

my students to avail themselves of the audio book if the, if the tome is, is difficult.

I mean, if know there, if you're. Engaging with the text to then subsequently write on it. Like it's hard to take notes on an audiobook, but mm-hmm. Um, but I do think that the, the kind of performance interpretations could be really useful. Um, and that's what I've done with it in the most, most recent couple times.

And I think people liked it and also think it's excessive, which is Right. Um, but it's a success. That is the joy of it too. Right. Right.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah. I mean, even in the [00:27:00] idea you're saying performance, it's always, it's always great to hear the poet read their work too, right? Mm-hmm. Like, because I have, I have. I have a different, have an written in my head an idea.

Yeah. Mm-hmm. So how has it been performing these poems? Like, as you know, you are used to doing conference presentations. Yeah. What's, how has it changed you to kind of perform those? It's been,

**Steve Mentz:** I, I really like it. Um, and. And I, you know, I think a lot about rhythm, even when I'm writing just like regular academic prose.

Yeah. And I'm trying to get the sound of the words right or the, or the, the pacing really of the words, right? Mm-hmm. And so to have it be sort of formally inverse and sort of designed for oral presentation in a slightly different way has been, has been fun. It's been lively. Um, I do think, um. And I say this to, to students all the time that like, like it is moving back and forth between these modes that that can help both of them.

So I, I, I feel like the, um. The, the kind of [00:28:00] extended commitment into poetry that produced these 130 some odd poems has also helped my critical, you know, my, my more, my more stayed and professional writing. Um, and I'm really looking for a structure that, that can, you know, sort of bring both of them out and bring both of them together.

**Dan Dissinger:** Excellent. That's amazing. Um, can I ask you to read one of the poems? Sure. Yeah. Because I had a couple. I would love to hear, um, mapping Oceans. Mm-hmm. It's really, I love the opening couplet. I thought that really drew me in really well. It's on 22. Um, yeah, that opening couplet was really great. I'd love to hear this one.

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

**Steve Mentz:** Uh, yeah, this is an another, um. Another I I poem rather than Ishmael poem. Yeah.

**Dan Dissinger:** But,

**Steve Mentz:** uh, mapping. Mapping oceans true places. Never Mark maps home occupies no territory. When I was a boy and my life [00:29:00] was about to change, I swam out into the froth off the Jersey shore after a late summer storm. The disorganized surf echoed the three days below tropical violence had followed the Gulf Stream North into the place I was about to leave the water, remembered the storm's power confusedly in so many directions at once, so that the froth and curls pushed me one day, one way then another before dipping over my eyes and salt stinging my throat.

I went out too far. I knew it when I turned to face the shore and saw where the undertow had towed me. It was a long, slow arrhythmic swim back each time, trying not to lose too much distance to the backward suction of the wave forming behind me and trying to gain as much as possible from each sloppy breaker shouldering the way I want it to go.

I made it to shore. Walked up the, to my [00:30:00] parents' home needing a new map and new territories. Yeah, I like that one.

**Dan Dissinger:** I like that one because it's, um. It's so true. Sometimes you, you jump into the ocean forgetting mm-hmm. It's alive. It's gonna do what it wants to do. Yep. Mm-hmm. And when I read that last night too, I was just like, it reminds me so many times, especially the Atlantic and the Pacific, like you, you sometimes underestimate, especially.

Going to the ocean in New York, it could be very, it could be pounding and it can be rough. And it's not as, it doesn't look as beautiful and clean, it will mm-hmm. It can hurt. And I've learned many lessons taught by the ocean to kind of respect it. Mm-hmm. And this poem really stuck out to me in that way.

But it's also like, it just seems like a. Like a, like an, okay. Like I get it, I get it. I see you [00:31:00] kinda, I see you ocean. Yeah. I'm not gonna take that risk. Mm-hmm. It was really, that's a really, that's one of my favorites. Yeah. That's really beautiful. Yeah.

**Steve Mentz:** Oh, thanks. I'm so glad you liked it. I mean, that one is definitely about, I mean, again, it's sort of reaching, it's my, it, you know.

Oh, I wrote about an experience I had when I was a teenager and like thinking about, I mean, this is one of the ways that writing works, right? Is like part of your. Your mind, part of your source are these things that happened to you in the past. And so that's one that came back to me, you know, whatever, 30 years later.

Um, and, uh, or, or maybe 40 years later and, and can still, you know, like it's, it's fantastic that it actually communicates. Um, that's, that's the miracle of language, right? Is that you can actually feel something and like, you know. Create these sounds or these marks on the page, and then somebody else can feel something which might not be exactly the same, but has a, has a relationship to it.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah, I mean even the opening couplet in terms of like how we understand home, where, you know [00:32:00] mm-hmm. We try to place it, like we try to put a pin in a map possibly, or mm-hmm. Say I'm from here and like draw borders around it, where it's just like that, that opening couplet to me was really, uh, interesting.

Like, the home, home occupies no territory and it's like,

**Steve Mentz:** yeah. Mm-hmm. Okay.

**Dan Dissinger:** Like I'm, I'm getting this and mm-hmm. Um, it just, and it just reminds me too, it's interesting to see the correlation sometimes between. Authors like how Kerouac, his sense of home was very, very bound, like borderless. Mm-hmm. Even though when he would try to buy a house and set a home, yeah, it just never felt like home.

Like he was always moving and always moving and trying to, you know, see as much as possible and being in an explorer and even in like his book, um. Um, The Sea is my Brother. Yeah. Mm-hmm. One of the split personalities of him is, is a professor Yeah. Who then ends up as a merchant marine, so it's like mm-hmm.

It's very interestingly [00:33:00] connected. I mean, obviously he's read Moby Dick. I mean, there's no reason that there's no way he didn't, I mean, it's, I think it's written down on a list of books that he even read. Yeah. Um. So you definitely see the interesting correlation between like some sort of white collar

professor into working class, like throwing themselves into extreme working class conditions.

Yep. Mm-hmm.

**Steve Mentz:** Right? Which is also the story of Ishmael and Moby Dick, right? Mm-hmm. He's a school teacher who, uh, reimagines himself as a, um, as a. As a whale man, as a, as a deck worker on a ship, right? Mm-hmm. And, and like a particularly unskilled one, like there's all this emphasis in the beginning that like the only reason they take him on the whale ship is because he became friends with who's the, like superhero ar punier whale is basically unskilled labor.

Uh, you know, figure it out. Uh, you know, egghead because your, your, your books and your knowledge are, are, are going to. You know, need to, they, they might inform some [00:34:00] of the things that Ishmael understands about, about the whale ship and the practice of whaling, but he has all sorts of knowledge that he needs to gain experiential knowledge.

**Dan Dissinger:** I'm like the, this is why I love podcasting. 'cause, um, that immediately reminds me in to see is my brother, how that happens. Mm-hmm. The main, the, the two main men in the book, and one of them as a professor and the other one is a merchant marine who comes to New York. Mm-hmm. And they meet each other. The only reason the other man, the other person comes onto the merchant marine ship is because of him.

He gets it on. Right? Mm-hmm. He brings them in. Ahab seems like, I guess maybe all the fathers that they have as well, in terms of like these, like, yeah. Old, older, generational men that have been, are trying to chase something or are being left behind by a world. Mm-hmm. That is like totally abandoning them at this point, but trying to find iden like.

You know, identity in that. But it's interesting to see the two correlations between these two characters, like mm-hmm. It's, it's, it's, it's right there.

**Steve Mentz:** So, mm. So maybe there's a, an, [00:35:00] an essay for you about Ishmael Andwe and the, and the, and the, the Sea Is My brother.

**Dan Dissinger:** There Always Is there Always there.

There's, there always is. And I think it's, and it's, I mean, his obsession with the ocean and, and the sea is, is. I mean, it's, it's, it's absolute all the time. What was it like to have to write, I mean, did you feel like you had to, when you wrote in

the, as Ishmael, like, did you feel you were trying to write in the voice of, of Ishmael or was it, how did you develop those sections where much more of the Moby Dick sections and the italicized top, uh, titles?

**Steve Mentz:** I mean the, the merging of the I character and the Ishmael character, like. There are two enabling things that structure the books. One is the, is the erasure of the Ahab figure. Um, and that was the first one, right? That was the enabling one. The title actually came to me pretty early in this project. And then the merging of the, the i, [00:36:00] me and the i ishmail is something I sort of wrote my way into.

Hmm. Um, but that's partly because I really was doing my best to inhabit the, the. Perspective and the, and the kind of experiential. Sense of like being this novice whale man learning to row the boat, to, to, you know, to, to figure out how the, how the ship operates to climb to the masthead and do a really bad job looking for whales because he does a bad job, but he's trying to do it.

Yeah. Yeah. And, and, and to, to sort of. Think about what it is to learn a new set of skills that are purely physical and tactile, especially when your primary set of skills are intellectual and kind of bookish. Hmm. Um, that was what I was thinking of throughout, like, what is it to be, to be, to become Ishmael when [00:37:00] you are the school teacher?

Um, yeah. Which, you know. I'm probably not the only academic who can, who can identify with that, with that split.

**Dan Dissinger:** Absolutely. I mean, even in a world now where a lot of. Trades or physical. Mm-hmm. Physical work is like, it's becoming more nostalgic or, and kind of becoming a race that it's interesting mm-hmm.

To read something like this where everything is very tactile, you know, everything is very physical. Just to even act the idea, the act of swimming, there's a, the physicality of the ocean around you instead of like just hearing about the experience. Right? Yeah. Mm-hmm. I really loved that part because it, it, it does remind me of a lot of the work and a lot of the men and women that have these labor jobs that are Yep.

You know, slowly, slowly being Yep. Um, mechanized in a way as well, you know, so it's, that was an interesting th through line [00:38:00] in the text as well for me.

**Steve Mentz:** Yeah. Because I mean, as with, you know, Moby Dick is, is a. Novel about a form of skilled physical labor that is also in the process of ending, right? The, the, the wha whaling industry, the, the, you know, the sailing whaling industry is, is, um.

In the process of, of, um, uh, diminishing in the mid-century when, when Melville writes this book. Um, but there'll be lots more whales killed over the next a hundred years, but mostly by diesel boats and, and, um, you know, you know, rocket powered Harpoons. Um, so like this particular kind of, of, uh, manual physical labor is in the process of, of vanishing.

As Melville writes this, his kind of, you know, nostalgic portrait of it.

**Dan Dissinger:** Did you, when you were writing the poems, I noticed that each, a lot of the poems have different forms, like you. Mm-hmm. Did you allow the language for the, the [00:39:00] poem to take on its own form? Like almost a mm-hmm. Because there is a mention in the essay you wrote.

I think it's in the essay you wrote in the end, I think Charles Olson is in, you were talking about Charles Olson. Charles Olson is, you know, famously wrote, um, I forgot the essay about the, about, um, uh, objective, uh, objective verse. Mm-hmm. And about how allowing the poems to take on the form to communicate with form, it should take.

Did you, mm-hmm Did you have forms in mind as you were writing them, or did it kind of

**Steve Mentz:** teach you Yeah, I mean. Sometimes, I mean, it, it, sometimes it comes first and sometimes it comes last, right? Mm-hmm. Sometimes like I'm trying to communicate something and I figure out the form as I go, and sometimes I say, okay, like I wanna write a, um, you know, a, a longer poem in, you know, with a kind of, you know, call and response structure, or I wanna write a really short rhyming poem like there are.

Technical decisions that [00:40:00] you make at the beginning and some that you figure out on the, on the way. Um, but I was definitely interested in variety.

**Dan Dissinger:** Right. I

**Steve Mentz:** was definitely interested in, in having the pieces of this book, the individual lyric pieces be different from each other.

**Dan Dissinger:** Um, were you reading anything in particular, poet, poetry wise?

Uh, during this time, I mean, or. Is this something that you were like very solely focused on?

**Steve Mentz:** Know, I'm, I'm always reading Shakespeare because I teach Shakespeare almost every semester. So like that level of, of like constant reinvention and new voices is always, you know, in, in my head. Um, you know, I I, a, a couple years before this, um, I wrote this book Ocean that I mentioned before.

Yeah. And one of the things I did in that is I tried to sort of surface a couple of, um. Poets who we don't necessarily think of as poets about the ocean, but who absolutely [00:41:00] are and, and write really interestingly. And so I, I wrote write a little bit in that book about Emily Dickinson's Yeah. See poems and also about, um, uh, uh, Lorcas, see poems in the poet in New York.

Um, and, and so like, those are definitely people who I'd recently been reading and thinking about, um, uh, and. I mean, and, and some others. I mean, you know, I, I always read pretty, pretty Yeah. You know, randomly at sometimes. But, um, uh, but I would say those are a couple of the ones that I was, that are really sort of in my, in the back of my mind as I'm, as I'm putting this together.

**Dan Dissinger:** I'm sure that would like surprise a lot of people that, like Emily Dickinson wrote poems about the Sea because I feel Yeah, I mean,

**Steve Mentz:** you know, Emily Dickinson wrote hundreds and hundreds of poems. I know. And like you can probably collect about 30 that are about the sea, but it's an amazing body of sea poetry.

Um,

**Dan Dissinger:** yeah. I mean, when you dig about, or beach

**Steve Mentz:** poetry in some ways, so [00:42:00] they're, some of them are about ships, but a lot of them are about the beach.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah, I mean, I think people really have like such a hard line about di uh, Emily Dickinson about how, like, how closed into a room she was, and I'm just like, I mean, come on.

Like, we can't do that. Yeah. No,

**Steve Mentz:** no. Like in some ways I think her imagination is as is is just as expensive as Melville's, you know? Yeah. Like it's the same infinite. You know, and the same like ability to capture the hugeness of the world.

**Dan Dissinger:** Mm-hmm. When you wrote these PO when you wrote the poems mm-hmm. Did you feel like your.

Did your writing, uh, did your writing routine change or was this more, do you, do you type more as drafting? Mm-hmm. Do you write, do you journal? Like how did the

**Steve Mentz:** Yeah, I would say they did. It did change because again, there was a, a kind of core moment of the writing process that took point, took that, that sort of.

Came out of me during those kind of dark months [00:43:00] of covid, of the sort of first covid lockdown when, when things were really pretty uncertain. And, um, you know, I didn't commute to Queens during that time. Um, so I had this like weirdly extra bit of time in the early mornings when, you know, I mean, my, my kids bounced back home, but, you know, they're, they're.

College students and high school students, they didn't get up early. And so I had this kind of extra time in the morning when everybody else in the house was asleep. And this became my, um, my kind of daily practice is to, you know, to sort of go through and it's like, okay, let's see, like what the next piece of this project might be.

Um, and, and I didn't even notice. I wasn't sure really that I could complete it. 'cause 137 poems is a lot of poems. And then, and then eventually I realized that I could, and then I, then I started thinking more about the larger shape of the, of the [00:44:00] thing. Mm-hmm.

**Dan Dissinger:** That's awesome. I like that. Yeah. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Sometimes you need to find those moments of quiet to do your writing. I mean, it's, yeah. And it's hard to find it. Mm-hmm. It, it's, it gets very difficult. It gets very difficult and I think, you know, it's sometimes you feel selfish like taking that time. Mm-hmm. I think that's like, I think when I was doing my MFA, I would just write anywhere.

I think I just didn't Right. Really care. I was just very, very. Singularly focused on just writing. Um, and now, you know, teaching podcasting life. Mm-hmm.

You know, you, you just, you know, try to stitch it back together. The writing practice. Yeah. And uh, which I'm slowly doing that much more now. Yeah. Um, are there any other poems you'd like to read?

'cause I have one in mind, but I would love to know if there are other ones you would like to read.

**Steve Mentz:** I'll give you one more. 'cause we were just thinking about, um. This is another early one. Um, and just because we were, we were just talking about the sort of [00:45:00] like the experience of writing these poems. Yeah.

Or, or the way in which in order to get the focus and intensity needed to write, you sometimes are in this odd relationship with like, the rest of the things in your life and your world. Yeah. And so this is, this is the poem, um, called Out of Place, um, which is, uh, thinking about. Um, a family vacation I went on when my kids were small.

Um, and this is one of the, I think I wrote this one a little bit before, some of the, some the sort of main push of the, of the project. Um, so we used to go to this place called Labrador Pond in rural Maine and rent a little house on the, on the edge of the water. Hmm. Um, there's a whale in Labrador Pond.

It's too big. A freshwater pond only about a half mile wide. Each edge rounded off by lily pads and marsh fed by a trickle through a rusty under dirt road culvert. There's no [00:46:00] place for a whale. He came here with me. I finds no place for him. So in he splashes fin full and overflowing. Displacing with his massive girth water that surges onto the porch to soak my feet where I sits with my family playing clue.

It's hard to know who did it. The whale swimming stirs up green froth. Its body rips, algae fronds from the silty bottom, air bubbles, ascend balloon and pop in the morning. I wakes to devastation. I bruise coffee and hot chocolate and bakes biscuits while sleepers dream of a bigger place.

**Dan Dissinger:** I mean, I. The thing about, I'm a sucker for like a poem or something that throws in like a little bit of food and drink at the end anywhere in it. And it just 'cause it grounds, like when I hear it and I read those, when I read poems like that, it, [00:47:00] it grounds me in it and allows me to like return back into it to kind of go back.

Um, but yeah, you paint a really great picture. I, it's just. It feels so, it flows so well and, uh, the drop in of clue and the things. Mm-hmm. Yeah. It feels good

at the same time. It feels very. You feel for the whale in terms of how you're saying that, that too. Mm-hmm. Oddly enough, like for my other podcast and Nostalgia Test, we just rewatched Free Willy and we're gonna be doing that.

And I was just, and it makes me think of like seeing a whale in a small, enclosed space and

**Steve Mentz:** just the Right, exactly. The depression, all those, all those whales and, and other citations that have been imprisoned by humans for, for, you know, for, well, for about a hundred years. Yeah. Um, is mostly when we started doing that.

Um, and it's, it, yeah. I mean there is this, like the relationship that we have between humans and whales, which, you know, Melville is in the beginning of it and it changes a [00:48:00] lot in the late 20th century, you know, around whale song and the environmental movement. Um, but the, you know, I mean, we do recognize that whales are like really smart mammals with big grains.

Um, and, and. Why exactly we think we can, we can keep them in captivity is a little, has always been a little bit unclear, and I think we're starting to realize that it's actually quite cruel.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah. And in this poem, it's interesting to kind of, it's almost as if this whale is like. I don't know, serendipitously dropped into this space.

Like, you, you question how does this happen? How does it, yeah. How, how does he

**Steve Mentz:** show up in this little space that is inappropriate, inappropriately sized for a whale? Yeah.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah. And it's, yeah. Even, I mean, it's like a big question. I mean, you could look into even so many different avenues of like, how do we get dropped into the place that we've been dropped into?

Mm-hmm. How do we, yep. Understand and navigate the things that we can't navigate when we do end up in a place and really look and be like, how did I [00:49:00] end up right here? You know?

**Steve Mentz:** Right. Mm-hmm. Right. Why are the, why are the boundaries of my pond exactly where they are? Yeah,

**Dan Dissinger:** exactly. And even thinking you don't have to be a massive mammal to feel that restriction.

Mm-hmm. Right? Yes. And the confusion. Yeah. Mm-hmm. That's really great. Excellent. Wow. Yeah. I am. You know, we're coming towards the end of the episode. Mm-hmm. And, um, if you don't mind, could you read one more because there is a poem? Sure. Absolutely. Mm-hmm. I was like flipping. I wanted to read as many as I could and, oh, you did do this thing.

I just wanted to say this. It was so amazing to kind of see this, 'cause I'm an, I'm a sucker for ellipses and you had a poem where the title was an ellipse in a bracket. Yeah. And I was like,

**Steve Mentz:** that's the, that's the Ahab chapter I Okay. That

**Dan Dissinger:** I loved. I'm, I'm a sucker for fun. Stuff like that. I loved it. Um, but I really.

Would like to hear you read, if you don't mind. I know it's a little longer, but mm-hmm. Um, mm-hmm. The epilogue poem I just found mm-hmm. [00:50:00] The structure Oh yeah. Was just gorgeous and it, it really would like to hear it out loud, if you don't mind.

**Steve Mentz:** Yeah, of course. Um, so this is the, um, moment in, in the end of the novel when the whale ship is sunken.

Ishmael is the one survivor. Um, and this one I. I mean, in, in quite a few poems, I, I sort of pull out lines and sometimes phrases from Melville, and I think that's probably as a percentage of the final poem. There's probably more Melville in this one than in almost any other one. I'm like coming back into the novel to some extent, although not, not entirely, but, but some.

The words are the same, and I'm trying to put them in a different kind of a lyric structure than, than Nobels pros.

**Dan Dissinger:** Excellent. Wow.

**Steve Mentz:** So epilogue, which is again, the same title as the, as the one Melville uses. I, I alone I all alone I [00:51:00] floating coffin, buoyed, inscribed wood. The last caress eye feels of Q's drowned body.

It supports eye sharks. Bite it not savage. Seahawks circle. Do not descend. Eye floats. Eye alone. Soft sea. Dirge like eye. Eye traces. Eye traces. The lines of tattoos carved into the wood eye alone I sees outside the vital center. Devious, cruising. Rachel towards him. Retracing, resaling, re-pattern patterning, pathless waves in search of only finding I, I alone another orphan.

Yeah,

**Dan Dissinger:** I like that. That's, yeah. Um, yeah. [00:52:00] I mean, to me there's just such a musicality to it. The repetition is. It just is very effective and it's interesting to read that poem. When and when you read the other poems and that coming towards the end, I mean, it's an odd connection, but I think for some reason my brain immediately goes into this, why podcasting is fun for me.

Like, 'cause I could do this and embrace my A DHD is that like I immediately go to the end of dark side of the moon and that that track eclipse is. It kind of just is unlike other songs on the album and it just does that thing. And has that one last line that is spoken in about There is no dark side of the moon.

Yeah. Mm-hmm. When I see the italicized, you know, another orphan, like, I feel like this, I had her teacher, uh, Banu Kail who wrote, uh, has written so many amazing books, but, um, she once told me as a poet, she said, Daniel, I want you to figure out how [00:53:00] you can. Take, write this next line and think about how you can get the reader to float off the end of it.

And that was her feedback. I was like, it took me years to be like, what? What does that mean? I don't know what to do. And I finally feel like I understand that. But when I read the italicized last line of that poem, that's, it felt like that float, right? Of being like, mm-hmm. There's something after this still.

Kind of like how I read the end of ke act books. Like there's always something coming. Yeah. Like there's something there. It's like, it's just another journey now. And I felt that at the end and of that poem, and I really was like, I really, last night I was like, I really want him to read this. I want to hear how it mm-hmm.

How it works and it still has that float. That was really, really great. Thank you. Thank you. Oh,

**Steve Mentz:** awesome. The, the italics also is, is coming back to, to the Melville source. Right. So that's the last, those are the last two words of the novel also. Hmm.

**Dan Dissinger:** So, I mean, it's, it, it, I love it. It works so well. Yeah.

Mm-hmm. Um, is there, [00:54:00] I mean, anything else you'd like to say or thing, anything you're working on now that you could share with us before, you know, we also wrap up.

**Steve Mentz:** Yeah. I mean, I'm, I'm doing. I don't at the moment have a big poetic project that, that like is going to come to come to book size. I mean, I did do a really fun collaborative project with, um, some of my students at St.

John's this fall, um, with, um, a local theater company, the Comp Compan de Columbar, which is based in New York and also in Italy. Um, and they're doing this project with Walt Whitman where they are, they're eventually going to like. Get to present this in every state in the union if they can, you know, keep it up for long enough.

But we did it in Queens in October, and the idea is that they gather local poets. And I think we had 18 stu, well, 18 students and faculty. Um, and we were all sort of writing back to Walt Whitman's understanding, in our case of, of New York. Mm-hmm. [00:55:00] And, um. So that was a really fun project. And, and, uh, there actually is gonna be a, a, a book created by the theater company of the, you know, the second edition of the, they call it Whitman on Walls, because they project these films up on a wall and then we listen to them and they're, they're drawing on performances of parts of song of myself.

And then the local poets come and speak back to Whitman. And it was such an awesome project. It was really fun.

**Dan Dissinger:** That's so cool. I just did something with Whitman in my class recently. I had them watch these videos that were done in, I think 2014 from Whitman, Alabama. Uh, there was a video project where they had people from all over Whitman, Alabama read versus from mm-hmm.

Song of myself. Mm-hmm. Some of my students had never even heard of Song of myself and I was like, trying not to, you know, freak out. But I was like, let's, let's do this then. And it, it was interesting to see them engage something like [00:56:00] Whitman and, and then for me to see new things in the song of myself being like, oh, he does a lot of call and responses, a lot of interesting stuff that no one had ever done before, um, in poetry.

But, um, oh, that sounds like, that sounds so exciting. Yeah, that sounds so Kerouac. Once that

**Steve Mentz:** was super, super fun though.

**Dan Dissinger:** He once said, like, he, someone asked him if you could recommend a book for someone, a new writer to read, what would it be? And he is like, specimen Days by Whitman. And I found that so weird.

Yeah. Mm-hmm. It's just like, really? And I remember reading it. I'm like, I mean, I get it. I like it. Yeah. But I'm like, it's an interesting choice. Yeah. Jack. Um, um, but this was so great. I am, yeah. It's such a, such

**Steve Mentz:** a treat.

**Dan Dissinger:** I feel like I could go on. I, I love talking about this stuff and you know, this book is so good.

I really hope you do another. Another book of poetry. Mm-hmm. Whether it's connected to a text or not, you know? Mm-hmm. I feel like it's always good to see new works of poetry coming out and, um, and it's just exciting and inspiring to, as a poet for me to, you know, get into [00:57:00] back to writing and seeing poetry is out there, it's being published and, um, you know, the world needs just the world and I feel like, you know, especially in the us like there's a, I feel like I love, like the building.

I feel like I've. Love what, how Whitman's energy was to kind of go, we need to build this American poetics. Yeah. And anytime I see a new book, I'm like very excited about it. So

**Steve Mentz:** yes. To to create it. Create the new world that we want.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And but yeah, thank you for coming on and talking and reading some of the poems.

Uh, really great and I'm sure. Everyone please, you know, check out the book. It's called Sailing Without Ahab. It is, I'll put the link in the website. It's gonna be right here, uh, in the show notes and, um, like, subscribe, join everything that the writing remix is doing. We are on Substack, so we're gonna start putting new content up there as well.

Mm-hmm. Um, that you can't get anywhere else. And, um, please share this episode with, um, [00:58:00] anyone that you feel in your life loves poetry. Moby dick, the ocean, I don't know. And just, you know, something you want to challenge someone with as well. And just also like, you know, any teachers out

there, there's so many amazing poems that you can take from this book that I feel like you could be teaching in your class and bringing poetry to other students.

But thank you so much, Steve. Thank you so much. Thank you.

**Steve Mentz:** Dan's really, really a pleasure.

**Dan Dissinger:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. And everyone, thank you so much and see you at the, on the next episode.