

Literary Landscape

MUSING WITH MELVILLE

Have you ever wanted to spend an hour writing in Herman Melville's study?

At Arrowhead, you can work on your own novel in the space where Melville penned 'Moby-Dick'

By JENNIFER HUBERDEAU
The Berkshire Eagle

In Pittsfield, Herman Melville sat, in his second-floor study, gazing north out of the window at the mountain range rambling and rising along the horizon.

It was in that room, at Arrowhead, he gazed out a window (that was sometimes a porthole) at snow-capped mountains (that were sometimes a giant white whale).

"I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered with snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port hole of a ship in the Atlantic. My room seems a ship's cabin; & at nights when I wake up & hear the wind shrieking, I almost fancy there is too much sail on the house, & I had better go on the roof & rig in the chimney," Melville wrote.

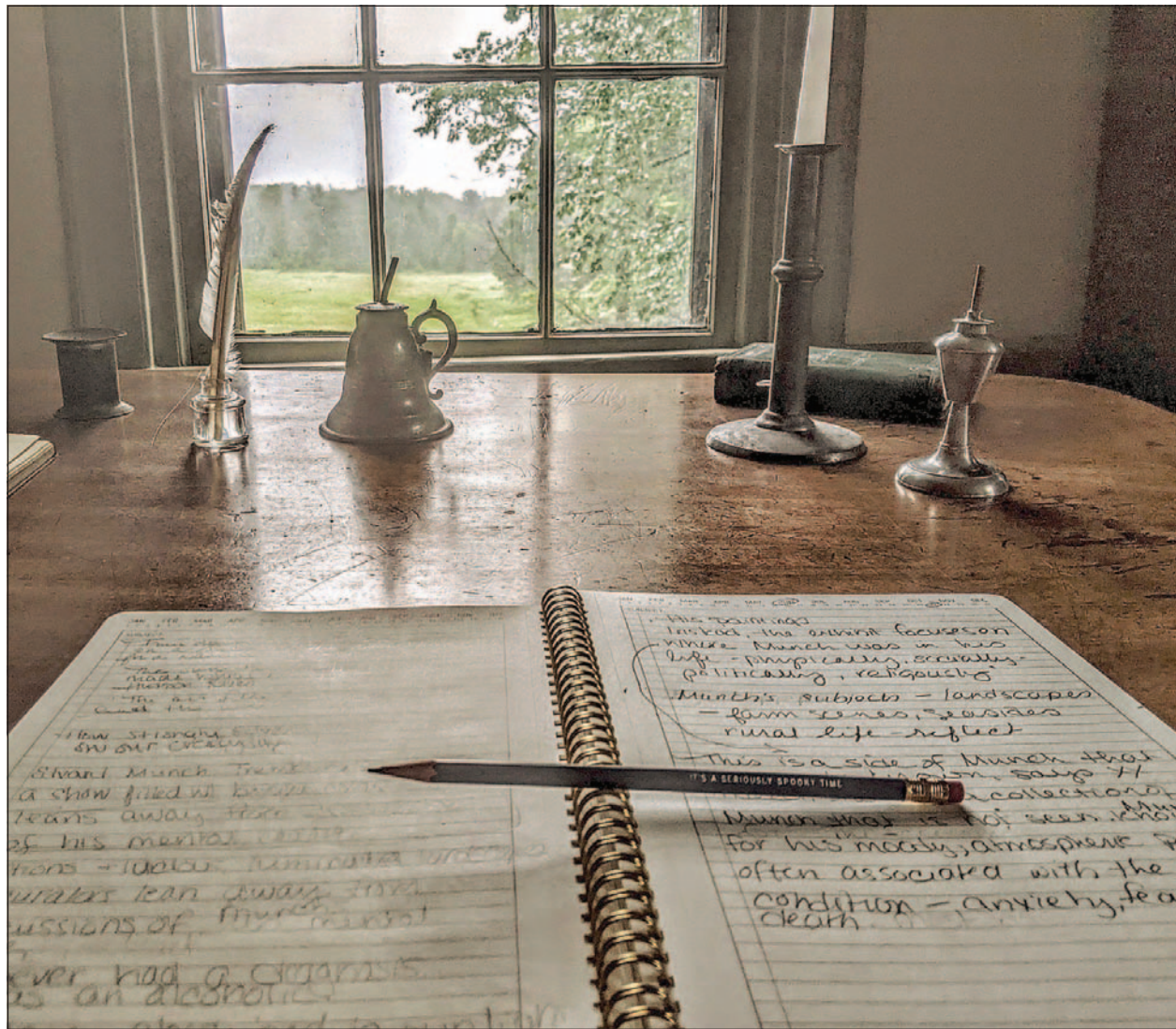
There he penned "Moby-Dick," locked in seclusion, ignoring the world beyond; his wife, sister and mother often having to rouse him from his work, to eat; to tend to the horse and cow. Sometimes he remained in seclusion, his lunch or dinner left outside the door.

No one was allowed in his study, the largest room on the second floor of the house. No one, that is, except for Nathaniel Hawthorne, his intimate confidant and sometimes editor. Should he tarry too late at Arrowhead to return to Lenox, Hawthorne stayed in an adjacent guest room. They would stay up talking, Melville and Hawthorne, stoking the fireplace with a harpoon Melville kept on hand for doing so; for inspiration.

"Moby-Dick" (1851) was not the only novel Melville wrote in that room. There was also "Pierre" (1852); "The Piazza Tales," (1856), a group of short stories; and "The Confidence-Man" (1857).

"Did Melville come to you?" It was not a question I expected after telling playwright Elizabeth Doss, Melville's great-great-granddaughter that I had recently spent an hour writing in solitude in his study.

I had done so on the invitation of Lesley Herzberg, executive director of the Berkshire County Histori-



JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

"Musing with Melville," a new program of the Berkshire County Historical Society at Arrowhead, allows writers to spend an hour or two writing at a desk in Herman Melville's study.

cal Society, in order to experience, first hand, "Musing with Melville," the organization's latest offering: On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, through October, writers — one or two at a time — have the opportunity to write for an hour or two in Melville's study. For one writer, the price is \$300 for an hour, or \$500 for two hours.

"I can't exactly say whether he did or not," I replied. "But, I do know that I now understand the lure of a writing retreat."

I had spent the hour, alone in the study, watching clouds roll over Mount Greylock as rain pelted the

glass panes of the study window. Did I find inspiration, as I sat in the silence, staring out that window? Indeed, I did. I had scribbled notes about the experience for this piece, and later the beginnings of a long thought about review of "Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth."

"I had long not understood the value of a writer's retreat," I admitted to Doss. "I used to question how it was different that staying home and writing in your own room, or work space. But now, I realize the difference. I couldn't get up, wander off, throw in a wash, do the dishes or some other chore. Being there,

for that hour, I had nothing else to do but think and write. And I did."

Doss was at Arrowhead for an immersive production of "ReWritten," which explores the intimate relationship of Melville and Hawthorne, and to plan for next summer's production of her play, "Poor Herman," which had a reading at the homestead in 2017.

We spoke about the play we were about to see, this iteration held in different rooms in the house, ending with a performance in the same barn where Melville and Hawthorne used to go to hide from the women, to climb into the rafters to "smoke

If You Go

Musing with Melville

What: Spend an hour or two writing in Herman Melville's study at Arrowhead.

Where: Arrowhead, 780 Holmes Road, Pittsfield

When: Tuesdays and Wednesdays through October.

Cost: \$300, one person/one hour; \$500, one person/two hours; \$400, two people/one hour; \$600, two people/two hours.

More information: berkshirehistory.org

cigars and drink brandy."

Days after our talk, I still ponder her question, "Did Melville come to you?"

I had not considered the possibility of that as I sat in his study, looking at Mount Greylock, pondering if it was raining in Adams, where my home is snuggled in the valley, my view quite different than this one.

I'm a believer in ghosts, in the afterlife and I've spent many years looking for and sometimes finding signs of their existence. But it was not Hawthorne I had heard about that day, but of Connie, Arrowhead's celebrated ghost. Would she make an appearance, I pondered. She did not.

Did Melville come to me?

Perhaps. Perhaps he came in the form of inspiration, or perhaps it was his fire I smelled, strong and heavy, as if the fireplace behind me was suddenly host to a fire.

The smell was strong, clung to the air, but disappeared within seconds. A ghostly smell that did not linger. Was it Melville? Was he questioning who this woman in his study was? Or was he there, stoking the fire with his harpoon, oblivious of me? I'll never know, but I do know why he chose that room, with its view, to be the room where he locked himself away from the world. It's inspirational.

Jennifer Huberdeau is the features editor at The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at jhuberdeau@berkshireeagle.com or 413-496-6229. On Twitter: @BE_DigitalJen

'MOBY-DICK READ-A-THON'

Got 15 minutes to spare?

Spend it celebrating Herman Melville's birthday by joining the 7th annual 'Moby-Dick' Read-A-Thon at Arrowhead

The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — How do you celebrate the birthday of Herman Melville?

Join a group read-a-thon at the homestead where he penned "Moby-Dick," of course.

Beginning 10 a.m. Aug. 3, fans of Melville can gather in-person or virtually to celebrate his birthday (Aug. 1, 1891) at Arrowhead, Melville's farm and current home of the Berkshire County Historical Society, to read-aloud from his tale of Captain Ahab's obsession with a great white whale. Participants will read aloud for 15 minutes, with the next participant picking up where the prior reader left off.

The read-a-thon will run 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Aug. 3-5 and will end when the book is completed. Advanced registration for in-person and virtual slots is required and can be done at berkshirehistory.org/moby-dick-read-a-thon. Participation is free, but a \$5

donation is suggested.

Arrowhead is located at 780 Holmes Road.

WHEN MELVILLE MET HAWTHORNE

Not into reading aloud but want to celebrate Melville?

Commemorate the day Melville met fellow author Nathaniel Hawthorne (Aug. 5, 1850) on a literary hike up Monument Mountain to read local poet William Cullen Bryant's "Monument Mountain" with a hike up the mountain 9 a.m., Aug. 5. The guided hike and literary talk, led by the Berkshire County Historical Society, will take about 2 1/2 hours and is appropriate for families.

Hikers should meet at the Monument Mountain Reservation parking lot on Route 7 in Great Barrington. Bring your own water and bug repellent. Proper footwear and hiking gear strongly suggested.

For more information, visit berkshirehistory.org.

The seventh annual 'Moby-Dick' Read-A-Thon begins on Aug. 3. The read-a-thon is held in honor of Herman Melville's birthday, which falls on Aug. 1.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE BERKSHIRE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

