

Jaws Short Guide

Jaws by Peter Benchley

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Characters

The great white shark is introduced in Chapter One. A beautiful young woman swimming late at night after making love on the beach is its first victim. When Benchley's editor, Tom Congdon read the first draft of *Jaws*, he was impressed by the power of the opening chapter and felt that the shark was the most convincing character in the book. After the work was published, most critics agreed with Congdon's original opinion that the shark was the most believable of Benchley's creations. His knowledge of the shark enables him to present the great fish as perhaps the most terrifying of the ocean's predators. Its appetite is never satisfied for long.

Most of the humans in the book are at best only slightly more than stock characters such as might appear in an average adventure novel. Benchley does develop his protagonist, Martin Brody, Chief of Police in Amity, to some extent. Of working class origins himself, Brody knows that his wife Ellen will become discontented as the tourist season continues. Benchley presented her originally as a happily married woman, but the editors at Doubleday felt the need for more spice in the novel. She was born into the same class as the summer residents — Benchley's own class, actually — and misses the luxuries that are so much a part of their lives. Ellen becomes an adulteress. She has an affair with a young oceanographer, Matt Hooper, whose family used to vacation in Amity. Eventually, Brody and Hooper become allies in the hunting of the white shark. Class consciousness is forgotten in the face of a common danger.

After the shark has claimed several victims and Brody closes the beaches, he finds himself in the situation of the classic western lawman. The community, including his former friend, Mayor Larry Vaughan, opposes his decision as he tries to protect them. Brody finds an ally in the professional shark hunter, Quint (no first name). Quint has been as isolated all of his life as Brody now finds himself. He goes after the shark for profit and does not care about the community. He alone has the knowledge to bring the shark to bay. As experienced as he is, he still underestimates the threat the white monster poses. His boat is wrecked and he loses his life in the climax of the novel.

Brody, who is the only survivor of the shark hunt, is effective here in the context of the plot. He has the required courage and resourcefulness to finally win in his struggle against the shark and is made sufficiently attractive as a human being to make the reader glad he survives.

Social Concerns

Benchley was quite young when he first became fascinated with the ocean.

His family was accustomed to spending summer vacations on Nantucket, and he became a skilled skin-diver, observing marine life directly. The relationship of humans to the sea is his main preoccupation as an author. It is surprising that he became an English major at Harvard rather than a marine biologist. His love for the ocean's creatures is not sentimental. He realizes that mankind's future is dependent on keeping the seas unpolluted and on maintaining the natural order of their inhabitants. Man himself is the worst predator on earth. The fossil record seems to indicate that he was a killer early in the course of his development.

Quint is as terrible a hunter as the great white shark, and his instincts are not much more refined.

Despite the means man has developed to control and manipulate nature, his mastery is not complete. On land most of the great predators have become endangered species, but the sea still has creations that terrify those who encounter them. Benchley's formula involves pitting humans at their most vulnerable against the sea's pitiless monsters. In *Jaws* he makes summer tourists the victims.

The officials of the town of Amity are concerned primarily with promoting a good summer for the tourists.

The town's economy is heavily dependent on tourism. Consequently, they are reluctant to close the beaches, and they underplay the menace of the shark lurking off their shores. Economic concerns versus the value of human lives is a significant theme in this book.

Techniques

Jaws was attacked by reviewers as a very clumsily written novel. These attacks were as much against the editorial staff at Doubleday as they were against Benchley. Together they constructed a book which was eagerly devoured by the public. Benchley combined two formulas commonly used in best sellers: He had chosen a subject about which most people knew something but were eager to learn more. He had suggested an external menace, a life-threatening force preying on a community. The great white shark answers the purposes of both formulas.

Ted Morgan, the journalist, pointed this out in an article written after Jaws became a big success. Benchley had instinctively found a surefire way to sell books. He would use variations of these formulas throughout his career.

All of Benchley's books provide a wealth of information on the sea, its creatures, ocean archaeology, and the histories of the settings of his books, Bermuda and the Bahamas. The marine explorer, Jacques Cousteau, complained that too many people were using Jaws as a handbook on sharks and forgetting that the book was a work of fiction. That Benchley slightly demonized his sea monster is undeniable, but making due allowance for the fictive elements in his novels, a reader can learn a great deal. The menace presented by the shark captured the imagination of readers so profoundly that shark sightings were reported everywhere, even in Nebraska.

Adaptations

As a movie, *Jaws* was the first big hit of a young director, Stephen Spielberg.

Starring Roy Scheider as Brody, Robert Shaw as Quint, Richard Dreyfus as Hooper and Lorraine Gary as Mrs. Brody, it made money faster than any 2189 motion picture in history up to that time, grossing \$124,322,872 between June 22 and September 5, 1975. Many critics such as Pauline Kael praised Spielberg's accomplishment, considering it to be much superior to the book.

The marine biologist, Hooper, is allowed to escape the wreckage of Quint's boat; his affair with Chief Brody's wife is omitted in the movie.

The Deep (1977) was sold to Columbia Pictures for \$350,000 before publication. As a motion picture, its chief distinction lies in its magnificent underwater photography. Directed by Peter Yates, it starred Robert Shaw, Jacqueline Bisset, and Nick Nolte. *The Island* (1980) was also filmed, and despite the presence of Michael Caine in a starring role, it was not regarded too highly. It was directed by Michael Ritchie. *The Beast* was produced as a 1996 miniseries for NBC television, which dragged the story out over several nights of over-wrought melodrama.

Key Questions

Novels like *Jaws* satisfy two requirements: They entertain, and they inform.

While Benchley's later books are better written than *Jaws*, his prose style never measures up to high literary standards.

A discussion might attempt to analyze why his books are popular. How are they calculated to reach a wide, appreciative audience?

Benchley is genuinely concerned about what is happening to the once abundant life of the world's oceans.

His later works defend the right of even the terrible predators to exist. Is our species so important that we can justify the wholesale slaughter of dolphins, sharks, and whales? Benchley's 2190 sea stories are fun to read, but also seriously present ocean life in all of its diversity.

1. Benchley began his career as a writer of articles on diving and deep sea creatures. *Jaws* is his first work of fiction. In the novel he mixes fictional characters and situations with factual material. Has he produced an effective blend of imagined and real elements?
2. Jacques Cousteau insists that sharks just do not behave like the one in *Jaws*. They do not haunt one particular area but claim a victim and move on. Is he right? Compare Benchley's sea monster to the ones presented in purely factual accounts, such as National Geographic's special on NBC television on the white shark.
3. Which do you find more believable, the white shark or the human characters in *Jaws*?
4. Benchley believed that *Jaws* could not be made into a motion picture because it would be impossible to present the shark on film. He underestimated the ingenuity of the studio's craftsmen. Did their model seem as terrifying to you as the shark in the book?
5. Class consciousness is made part of the relationships in *Jaws*. Ellen Brody was a member of the upper classes, those who vacation annually in Nantucket, the Bahamas, or in a resort town such as Amity. Benchley's family is also upper class and wealthy as is his oceanographer, Matt Hooper. Chief Brody, from the working class, is antagonistic toward Hooper. How well does Benchley understand a person of Martin Brody's background?
6. The editors at Doubleday asked Benchley to spice up his book, so he put in Ellen's affair with Matt Hooper.

The film version of *Jaws* omits this incident and concentrates on making the tension of the threat to Amity more relentless. Which version makes the better story?



7. Contrast the characters of Matt Hooper and Quint, the one as dedicated scientist, the other a single-minded hunter, and both united in their efforts to destroy the threat to Amity.

8. Is Quint a simplified version of Melville's Captain Ahab? Is his death necessary?

9. How successful is Chief Brody as the hero and only survivor of the hunt for the great white shark?

10. Is Jaws a classic adventure story?

Is it a book that can be read many times?

Literary Precedents

Benchley's book can be read as a parody of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), a great American epic. A great white shark fills the role of Melville's albino whale. Like *Moby Dick*, the great fish is seen by hunters not simply as an unusually dangerous force, but as something possessing a malignant will.

It seems to be hunting them. "He was waiting for us," yells Brody on the final day of the hunt. As in Melville, the hunt continues for several days. On the final day, Quint's boat suffers the fate of the *Pequod*, and Chief Brody, like Ishmael (Melville's hero), is the only survivor. While a far less complex character than Melville's Captain Ahab, Quint, like the captain, perishes with his boat, caught in the line of a harpoon.

Related Titles

The Deep (1976), The Island (1979), Beast (1991), and White Shark (1994) also contain a great deal of information about the sea. The reader can learn much about the history of Bermuda and its people in The Deep, and Benchley shows that he has done his research thoroughly on Caribbean buccaneers in The Island. The menace is human in these books — dope smugglers and anachronistic buccaneers, respectively.

The Island offers a less believable plot of the two. How could this band of cutthroats armed with weapons from the seventeenth century survive for centuries in an area not far from where powerful naval forces patrol regularly?

They have not only kept their society unchanged but have taken over 600 ships in recent years.

The two of Benchley's novels that most closely resemble Jaws are Beast, which again pits a small seaside town against an aquatic menace — a great octopus! — and White Shark, in which a half-man/half-shark is the menace.

The Girl of the Sea of Cortez (1982) is different in tone and style. Its heroine is Paloma who at sixteen is as much at home in the water as a mermaid, thanks to her father's teaching. He also taught her to respect all forms of life in the sea. She is given an almost mythic character, a young Nereid, the guardian of a seamount that her brother Jo and his friends want to destroy for profit. In defending her sea mount, which is unusually rich in fish and other forms of marine life, she gets help from a strange source, an enormous manta that she has helped after it had been severely wounded by a fisherman's net. Like Androcles, she frees the animal and treats its injury. Riding on the back of the manta, she charges Jo's boat, capsizing it and scaring Jo and his friends out of their wits. They will not return soon to that part of the sea. Explicit in this novel, more so than in any other of Benchley's books, is his belief in the necessity of conservation.

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