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## Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whalefishery, 1720-1870 (Gender and American Culture)

By Lisa Norling



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During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the whaling industry in New England sent hundreds of ships and thousands of men to distant seas on voyages lasting up to five years. In *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, Lisa Norling taps a rich vein of sources—including women's and men's letters and diaries, shipowners' records, Quaker meeting minutes and other church records, newspapers and magazines, censuses, and city directories—to reconstruct the lives of the "Cape Horn widows" left behind onshore.

Norling begins with the emergence of colonial whalefishery on the island of Nantucket and then follows the industry to mainland New Bedford in the nineteenth century, tracking the parallel shift from a patriarchal world to a more ambiguous Victorian culture of domesticity. Through the sea-wives' compelling and often poignant stories, Norling exposes the painful discrepancies between gender ideals and the reality of maritime life and documents the power of gender to shape both economic development and individual experience.



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**Editorial Review**

Review

[Norling] has made full use of the vast archive of women's papers that, willy nilly, were collected along with those of their men, as America began preserving the memory of one of its greatest early industries. ("Times Literary Supplement

Gracefully written.

"William and Mary Quarterly"

A thorough and penetrating history.

"Sea History"

"[This book] gives a larger, more nuanced picture of whaling behind the scenes than anywhere else I know of.

"American Studies""

This book is required reading . . . for anyone interested in maritime gender systems.

"International Journal of Maritime History"

A signal achievement in American women's and gender history. . . . Scholars will ignore her at their peril.

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Review

A thorough and penetrating history of the whaling masters' wives of Southern New England and the complex culture created through their interactions with their often absent husbands and each other.--*Sea History*

Wonderful. . . . The questions raised by [this book] attest to Lisa Norling's thoughtful and nuanced presentation. Gracefully written, the book is about contradictions: between what society expected of women and men and what the vicissitudes of life demanded and actually produced.--*William & Mary Quarterly*

With a deft pen Lisa Norling illuminates the everyday lives of families living in the whaling communities in Southeastern New England during the 18th and 19th centuries. . . . Anyone who is appreciative of well-written history will enjoy [this book].--*Virginia Quarterly Review*

The details of whaling and women's crucial role in this industry are here and well worth the read.--*Journal of the Early Republic*

In *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, Norling seeks to restore the experiences of women to maritime history and to illuminate the emergence of discourses of domesticity in the nineteenth century. She attempts not only to reconstruct individual daily life but to do so in the context both of community interdependencies and changes in the texture of inward identity. Impressively researched and quite beautifully written, the book evokes the daily context of early-nineteenth-century women's lives at an unusual level of detail.--Jeanne Boydston, author of *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*

A fine book, not just about whalemens wives but about the entire shoreside world that sailors left behind. Norling's reading of the social connections between land and sea and the sensibilities that governed them is second to none.--Daniel Vickers, author of *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1850*

Passionately exploring one of the last uncharted seas in American maritime history, Lisa Norling reveals that just as harpoons grimly fastened whales to boats, nineteenth-century domestic ideology bound whaling women (and men) to confusing contradictions unsuited to the realities of their lives. Norling's rich and sobering scholarship shows how compelling cultural attitudes can fly in the face of material--and psychological--well-being.--W. Jeffrey Bolster, author of *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*

Consistently fascinating, absorbing, filled with absolutely wonderful first-person accounts of lived experiences, emotions, and attitudes. The subject of women in maritime history is a great one, and the author has a masterful command of it.--Alfred Young, author of *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*

Nicely written, skillfully researched, and richly intriguing. *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* will prompt academic and public historians to rethink their approach to the industry and society of early Yankee whaling.--*New England Quarterly*

[Norling] succeeds admirably, in an engaging style bolstered with evidence that she reads with skill and imagination . . . . [This book] gives a larger, more nuanced picture of whaling behind the scenes than anywhere else I know of.--*American Studies*

Norling's wonderful book about the New England whalefishery, is replete with people and paradoxes. . . . In exploring the evolution, of the whaling industry, Norling persuasively shows how gender and the economy were inextricably linked. . . . The questions raised by [this book] attest to Lisa Norling's thoughtful and nuanced presentation. Gracefully written, the book is about contradictions: between what society expected of women and men and what vicissitudes of life demanded and actually produced.--*William and Mary Quarterly*

A subtle and nuanced account of changing ideals and behavior, of the mutual dependencies of women and men united and separated by economic endeavor.--*American Historical Review*

Lisa Norling's provocative marriage of feminist theory and whaling lore reveals that nineteenth-century domestic ideology was fully as threatening as any peril of the sea.--W. Jeffrey Bolster, author of *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*

This book is required reading, not only for whaling experts but also for anyone interested in maritime gender systems. . . . Norling's argument is an eye-opener for maritime gender studies, and it will be seminal for the study of maritime women. . . . Norling's beautifully-written, nicely-illustrated and elegantly-executed study on the wives of Captain Ahab serves as a show-piece of how to do research eminently well.--*International Journal of Maritime History*

From its provocative title to its rich bibliography, Lisa Norling's *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* does not disappoint. This is an ambitious book, one that tackles important questions and analyzes them over an inconvenient span of time that few historians are brave enough to attempt at all, let alone in a first book. . . . A signal achievement in American women's and gender history, but anyone interested in the interplay between culture and economics in any period of American history would do well to read this book. Her thesis is provocative, but it is also thoroughly researched and cogently and engagingly argued. Scholars will ignore her at their peril.--*Journal of American History*

Norling has adeptly woven together a number of threads--the history of New England whaling, Nantucket Quakerism, and the social and economic world of whaling communities. . . . [A] wonderfully readable synopsis of whaling history and whaling women at home and at sea.--*Choice*

[A] thoughtful study. [Norling] has made full use of the vast archive of women's papers that, willy nilly, were collected along with those of their men, as America began preserving the memory of one of its greatest early industries. . . . Norling has performed a valuable service by relating the extreme experiences of these women to the evolution of American gender roles more generally.--*Times Literary Supplement*

A passionate exploration of one of the last uncharted seas in American maritime history!--W. Jeffrey Bolster, author of *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*

From the Publisher

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