GC: Well I was asked to talk about how I came to write a book, my relationship with *Moby-Dick*, and things like that. I could say to begin with that I've always been a fan of the book but not in any way what I would call a *Moby-Dick* fanatic, but every eight or so years maybe in that damp, drizzly November of my soul I'll pick up and read the book. And in 2008, it's actually the origins of this project. I was faced with the delightful prospect of going on a fam— vacation with my in-laws in close proximity on a cruise ship to Alaska. And so, an anticipation of various escapes as well as seeing whales I was thinking about, well what would I take to read with me and *Moby-Dick* seemed an appropriate companion. While riding the waves and seeing the whales, I decided that I wanted to spend more time with *Moby-Dick*. I was working on another project at that time and as is my want, I ditched that. And so, I started to think about well, how am I going to deal with *Moby-Dick*, you know, it's often times said that all scholars and whatever else I am stand on the shoulders of giants and many giants have devoted their lives to looking at *Moby-Dick* coming up with one wonderful insights sometimes crawling over it like ants at a picnic. But I started to then think about well, I'm not necessarily a close reader of text, I'm not somebody who burrows into symbols but I do have an interest in how books are received overtime, how by dint of what people have done with books, their interpretations, their films, their poetry about them that becomes kind of like a horizon of expectations through which we approach the book so that when we read *Moby-Dick* for those of my generation we probably imagine Ahab looking like Gregory Peck and other generation perhaps like Patrick Stewart and a new generation like well maybe William Hurt, but I suspect you could do better than that. So, I began to write what I would call a reception history of *Moby-Dick*, that is to look at how it was
received when first published and then to follow its journey in all areas and nooks and crannies of culture, elite and popular, and take it to the present. And at one point I was— I'd done a few chapters and my agent thought it was time that we send it out. And so, it went out to a few places and one of the people that I wanted it sent to is a guy named Paul Elie. I think that's, E-L-I-E. Some of you may be familiar with him. He wrote a marvelous book called *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. And it's about a four catholic thinkers, Walker Percy and Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, I think Carlson O'Connor is forth. And he was an editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux and he just wrote back, tersely said, "I don't feel the passion in this book." And I thought about it. And he was right. And I was just doing a kind of perfectly reasonable academic exercise and I've written a couple hundred pages. And so, I decided I needed to retool and rethink and it was at that point that I decided to do something that was more offbeat. That is— that rather than write a reception history as such going from 1851 to the present, I would read each chapter and then by dint of a word, a phrase, an image, a symbol, whatever, whatever it evoked in me I would write in response to that and sometimes that would summon forth images from a film, it might summon forth somebody else's analysis, it might make me think about a particular scholar in his or her life and how they had engaged with the text. And then, but of course, as you can imagine 135 chapters plus epilogue, etymology, and extracts seem daunting. But, you know, it was much easier to write at my other books and it came very quickly because I realized I don’t have a very long attention span. And so, on a good day I could write two or three chapters in draft because some—you know, so that both the shortest chapter of Moby Dick would be my shortest chapter. And as I recall, that one was—I think it was that they had a tweet contest in some newspaper in England about, you know, can you give the plot of a novel in—is it 140 characters to tweet? In 140 characters or less, so that tweet then became my chapter for that one. Others were more ruminative, some of them were dealing with philosophical issues that might interest me. Others were biographical about some of the amazing people who have spent time with *Moby-Dick*. And so, after—it just took a couple of years to write this book and Oxford I think did a very nice job in terms of being open to getting illustrations and things like that. It's difficult for me to talk about the book because once I've finish a book it's gone, you know, I have no interest really on pursuing it anymore, I mean, it's tough being here. I'm on to other things, other failures whatever, but—so I'm done [laughs].

CW: Well I feel sort of bad now for asking questions [laughs].

GC: It's all right.

CW: Well I want to start by saying this book is a real pleasure to read because of the way that it's nontraditional and sort of opens up all these interesting questions about other arts and philosophers and thinkers and historians and library giants. And one of the things I was thinking as you spoke is that it sounds when you talked about the book like you're using what we might call an associative sort of logic or form, or one thought leads to another, leads to another and you never really know where you're going to end up. And I feel like that sort of the experience of reading the book where you never really know where it's going to take you next. And one of the things about that associative logic or form is that it seems very, capital R, Romantic today. It seems very much like, you know, following the feelings that lead you down a road you may not
expect. And that seems to me sort of transcendentalist, but the book seems to suggest that you don't see this in the text and that Melville is sort of rejecting this. And one of my favorite parts of the book is on chapter thirty—the beginning of—

GC: Oh, my book.


GC: I thought you're talking about Moby-Dick.

CW: Oh no, I'm—you know, I think these lovely people need to hear some of your language. It's delightful because you talked about how—

GC: What page?

CW: We're on the page 71, and you talked about how Ishmael climbs the crow's nest and he's at the top of the crow's nest then it says, "the upshot of this magical moment is presumed to bring forth a mystical loss of identity when an individual takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep blue bottomless soul." And then you say this sounds like a moment of transcendental hogwash [laughs]. Which I think is rather delightful. So, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about where you position your book in terms of this sort of transcendental era in which Melville is sort of participating in, but not really, right?

GC: I mean, I have to admit I hadn't thought about that at all, you know. My feeling, when I approached this book my relationship to Melville, in my worse moments was like Foucault's relationship to Nietzsche. In which he says, “When I approach Nietzsche’s text, I want to make Nietzsche moan and groan under the weight of my interpretation.” There's a certain sadomasochistic appeal to that I admit [laughter] and sometimes I may have done that with. But I think you're right. There is transcendental aspect to what I was doing in the sense that this was, you know, there are things in Moby-Dick that I first talked about ever so briefly and pathetically in the book on existentialism and I see Melville in many ways as an existential fellow traveler, so the themes that are associated with that and, to a degree, with some of transcendentalism and I think, and I think Emerson, in his better moments are, you know, dealing with the questions, the Odyssey questions, dealing with the nature of life, dealing with the ever present reality of death, dealing with faith, dealing with the rocky waters upon which we are all sailing. In that sense, I guess I could say I felt like a fellow traveler with some of the transcendentalist but I'm not one who likes to get lost in the rarified air of the top mass that I tend to—as trained as a historian, I tend to go back to Terra Firma.

CW: Right.

GC: Whenever I can.

CW: Well I thought your language it was always very entertaining, so I enjoyed that.
GC: It was fun writing this book. I mean, I think it did give me more freedom because, you know, to try, you know—I think it was Ervin Howard once said, you know, the whole point is to write two or three sentences that will live. You know, that might be asking for a bit much but just to have the two or three sentences that I felt good about was more than satisfying. I mean, yeah.

CW: So, as I was reading I also kept thinking to myself, who does George envision as the audience here? Because I thought like I was the perfect audience for your book. I loved it, I thought it was fun and it, you know, it sort of brings in enough sort of erudite in the clouds stuff along with, you know, Bob Dylan, right, and Led Zeppelin and, you know, the DeCastro, Pub Scene, right? So, who did you envision and did you have an audience in mind that you were sort of sticking too or was it more for yourself?

GC: I did download an image of you from the English Department and I had it on the upper left— [laughter]

CW: That's not a good picture. No.

GC: It helped. Gee, you know, once again I don't think about these things. You know, I just—I read the chapter and I said, "Oh yeah I can see this." I mean, you know, sometimes the baby needs a new pair of shoes, you know, you're writing this book, you do want to attract an audience and you want to—I mean, I was not thinking of an academic audience. I do ride the horse of academe and many of the insights that writers have gotten and offered. But in recent years, I've just found myself more and more—alienated is too strong—I guess just bored by much of what I read in my profession and I wanted to do something that maybe flirted with being different and original. So, in that sense I guess I was looking for, you know, that hypothesized general reader. You know, obviously someone like, you know—you of course are, you know—I attended a seminar that you did on Moby-Dick and so, she knows everything about Moby-Dick. But the point is a person who has a general interest in American literature, you know, maybe a nodding acquaintance with philosophy. Maybe the book would be a lure to get them to read the original if they haven't. Some people have told me they're reading it in tandem. They'll read a chapter from Moby Dick and a chapter from my book. But I know that the press was kind of—you know, the press always has, you know, dollar signs in front of their eyes. And so they're trying to market it to classes so let's say a guide to Moby-Dick. I didn't write it as a guide to Moby-Dick. I didn't write it as a guide to Moby-Dick [laughter]. I mean I wrote—you know, they, you know—all it was, was my reactions and my way of trying to get at the reception and how people thought about it in all areas of culture as well as how I think about it at times, but if it serves those purposes fine. So, I guess my ideal reader would just be anybody who, you know, might be interested in Moby-Dick or what I have to say, like 12 people [laughs].

CW: Plus all of these people.

GC: Oh yeah.
CW: So, what's your favorite chapter, of this or your book?

GC: Well I'll tell you if you tell me, OK?

CW: OK.

GC: All right. I think the first. I think you always, you know, I've screwed this up in earlier books, you know, where there's a first chapter that's the logical chapter that you have to open with. And then variably in my earlier books I think it's the least interesting chapter and that's always a mistake. I think with Melville though his first chapter is my favorite chapter and maybe because he introduces us early on in a way that's I think alluring and easy to some of the key themes that are going to be in the book. And also to some of the wonderful ironies that, that motor this book along. I mean, you know. Yes of course there is the first line, you know, “Call me Ishmael.” And there's a history to that line. There's the history that that first, you know, the obvious jokes that are associated with it. Gary Larson, I talk about this but, you know, that's what immediately came to mind. He has this great cartoon of Ahab seated at his desk and you can tell he's all frustrated and strewn all around him are sheets of paper with call me Al, call me Sam, call me Jack [laughter] and then, you know, it's going to come, that Flaubertian moment where he comes up at the right thing. And then another joke is, you know, a guy walks in to a bar and there's a women sitting next to him and he turns to her and says, “Call me Ishmael.” You know. So, it's become a pick up line. Well, the more you get into the book the more kinds of things you discover and that's what I like about doing research is the things you discover that you didn't know. Like I always assumed that that first line was, you know, the baffle line, you know, it's just the killer. Frankly, it's only on the 1940s and '50s that the line becomes at all significant. Up until that point most people disdained Ishmael because he was, at best, not the most interesting of characters compared certainly to the volcanic characters that you have, but also he's a terribly unreliable narrator. And so I was looking through old editions of *Moby-Dick* at abridged editions and one, took out the first 12 page—chapters, there was no call me Ishmael and you can still go. I think Will Eisner—he was a famous graphic artist—when he begins his graphic comic, he doesn't have that first line. So, these things develop. So, there's that kind of history of even what we think is the greatest line, but then you have of course—it opens—there's humor in that chapter, there's the wonderful line where he talks about how, is it water or the sea in meditation are of course wedded forever. Well this is a marriage that is not going to prove particularly bountiful for anyone aboard that boat. And meditation is not exactly going to be the stew that Ishmael partakes, nor in that chapter—he also talks about, in that chapter, about the democracy of the whaling ship probably when he takes to the ship and then he has that wonderful life and perhaps why that chapter in the book in general live on so much, is he talks something ain't we all slaves, you know, so you got the racial issue coming up and that's one that's redolent throughout the book. And then of course, the reason that Ishmael, a young somewhat intellectual fellow takes to the sea is because, you know, he has these thoughts of ball whatever past—you know, that he thinks about suicide. And for somebody seeking an environment away from suicide and death, clearly the guy blows it big time [laughs]. So, I think you've got all of these things happening in that first chapter and I think you've got
Melville at his best that he probably edited it a little bit more than some of the other chapters and that wonderful Melvillian language at once Biblical, Shakespearean and just bravado it—oh wow.

CW: I totally agree with you. I think chapter one in your book and chapter one in Moby Dick are so, fabulous and—

GC: The rest is downhill? It's all right [laughs]. It’s a win lose thing.

CW: [laughs] so, yes, you know, I think, you know, you mentioned this line, “Call me Ishmael.” One of my favorite parts of your book is when you talk about the editorial history and the excisions and the just brutal sort of removals of things that we probably now consider, the most important parts of the book. And I think “call me Ishmael” is clearly one of those and I think throughout your book one of the things you do best is to constantly remind us that race really is a central part of the novel and imagine that some of his contemporaries, maybe didn't read it the same way as you discuss some did. But one of the things that I like about your book is that you go through multiple chapters where you talk about race and then it's only well into the book where you bring up this most recent article about Ishmael which is that maybe Ishmael himself is mixed race or black or that maybe Ahab himself is mixed race or black. And I was wondering as I went along maybe for you what that like to first come across the scholarship and say, wait a second, this is the book I've known for a long time in one way and now maybe we need to look at it in another way. It changes the book so much.

GC: Yeah. Well, I'll deal with the second part first.

CW: Sure, sure.

GC: So really, first chapter is your favorite chapter too?

CW: First chapter and I like chapter 35. That's the one which I just quoted from where, you know, we see Ishmael fantasizing or not about falling from the top basket. And I love the epilogue.

GC: Yeah.

CW: The epilogue is Bob Dylan part.

GC: Oh, in my book, yeah.


GC: Ah. But speaking of epilogues, I mean, so here, you know, books have lives of their own. And so, when Moby Dick is published in England it actually comes out a couple of months earlier, I think it’s a couple of months whatever. In England and in the United States there was a
screw up and the British publishers left the epilogue out. So, the first edition of The Whale which is Moby-Dick in England lacks the epilogue which in a sense ties everything together and—

CW: And they don't know that Ishmael survives.

GC: Yeah, bingo.

CW: It's a big deal.

GC: Yeah.

CW: Yeah.

GC: And it makes it tough to explain how this book is narrated [laughs]. Yeah, that didn't help—

CW: He's speaking from beyond [laughter].

GC: Yeah, that didn't help the initial reception. On the issue of race, you know, it was very little talked about as far as I remember from the contemporary reviews and you would think that in the southern reviews that this would be something because Melville's politics were problematic at best on racial issues, but you sense in the book that he was at his best because, you know, in those two crucial chapters, “Renegades” and “Mariners”, is that what would—you know, he talks about, you know—whaling was a multicultural, multinational kind of thing and there were quite a few African-Americans and one of the most appealing characters in the book is Pip who is an African-American cabin boy who is clearly far superior in intelligence in every way to Dough-Boy the white cabin boy. So, you have a very open attitude on Melville's part to racial issues which probably didn't resonate much one way or another in the 19th century, but that's what makes the book live is the ability—a great text—I mean, Michael Chabon was recently asked, you know, if you are on a desert island what book would you want to have with you? And of course he said, “Moby-Dick” and the reason is because there are just so many levels of the book and you keep returning to it over and over again and drawing things out and of course he said—of course the other book you wanted to have is one on how to build an airplane from coconut trees, but [laughs]. And then so, yes, Catherine to get back to your other point, the racial issue with, you know, this one scholar is, it's speculative and yeah. I suspect that most Moby-Dick scholars do not take it seriously, but there are aspects of the description of Ahab and of Ishmael that seem—hint in the broadest sense that they might be mixed race if not African-American. And I think that's what makes this such a great book is that it's open to revision, there are all kinds of areas that one can take it. I know this is another topic but, many of the initial scholars, the poets and writers who were drawn most strongly to Moby Dick were gay men, yeah, were gays. And because they saw not just simply in the homoerotic relations between Queequeg and Ishmael, something that was appealing. But also because of Melville's tempestuous life, difficult life and also the sense of Melville being an outsider in American culture wanting to produce this unvarnished gem and being such an outcast. All those things,
so, you have that and then even—I know I'll stop, you know, obviously this is a text where women are few and far between expect for Aunt Charity, I think and there's I think a couple of passages where Starbuck ruminates about his wife, you know, back home and then at once point towards the end of the novel when Starbuck is trying to seduce Ahab to give up this mad quest he talks about Ahab's wife and child back and then tuck it. But some of you I'm sure have read Sena Jeter Naslund. Her book, *Ahab's Wife*, which is basically, you know, taking a rather amazing young woman and having her clearly Ahab's equal and then Louise Gooch. I came upon this, you know, that's what's nice about research it takes you all different directions and sometimes you just got to go with the flow and I found that a Christian novelist had written a book about Ahab's wife and son. Much to my chagrin, I will admit it was a three volume work [laughs]. And I—but I didn't read it through. And actually I got an e-mail from the author, yeah. And she didn't—and, I thought I was being a little bit flipped with it, but she didn't remark on that. She said, the only thing that disappointed her ever so slightly was that I gave away the ending.

CW: It's true.

GC: But I'll give away the ending now. [Laughter] Basically, you know, Ahab is of course a blasphemous fellow and so it causes all kinds of problems for his surviving family. And his son—oh just is a bad boy for a while because he's disappointed and he's onboard—he's fighting in the civil war. And also onboard ship is one of Starbuck's children a son who's really ticked off at Ahab's son because Ahab got his father killed. But an incoming missile is hurt and Ahab's son saves Starbuck's son's life. But guess what? He loses his leg in that attempt [laughs].

CW: Of course. [Laughter]

GC: He becomes disillusioned, he becomes a drunkard, he loses faith, I think he remains in love with Starbuck's daughter and I'll just leave the ending, you are open but. I'm sorry, that was a long winded answer.

CW: I thought that was good. Well, another one of my favorite parts of your book is that you several times repeat comments about Melville's relationship with this father in law who was responsible for some of the more troubling legislation of the 19th century specifically the fugitive slave law which said that, Northerners had to return slaves that they found to the south. And, you know, that was another thing that struck me in terms of the way that the novel approaches race. You know, in terms of psychologizing Melville which is something you do really well I think. How much of this maybe is sort of targeted at his father in law? I thought people might be interested in that.

GC: Yeah. It's possible.

CW: Yeah.
GC: I mean, I like—you should go with this one. His father was Lemuel Shaw who was a very influential justice, not necessarily a racist in his personal views but he had the rather unfortunate task of being, I think it—he was the judge of the Massachusetts superior court and the case, if I'm not mistaken, was the Anthony Burns case which was the question of whether Massachusetts should return—as a result of the fugitive slave law that Catherine brought up—to slavery back in the south and a number of radicals including Charles Sumner and some others set up this organization with Frederick Douglass and they basically tried to free him and other slaves from this. But basically Shaw upheld, if I'm not mistaken, that the fugitive slave law and one can read, I think, perfect, you know, that maybe here is Melville taking on his father-in-law in some ways, it's possible. I mean, Melville had, as best as we know. Elizabeth Renker wrote about this that he was abusive towards his wife. I suspect that he was abusive at some ways if there's possible that at one point he did throw her down the staircase. It's also possible that when Melville in the 1850s I think went to visit to Europe and the Holy land. He went with the fund supplied by his father-in-law perhaps to get him away from Elizabeth. Also because they—at one point there were supposedly a plan to kidnap his wife to get him away. So, he had, you know, I mean, Lemuel Shaw was a larger than life figure. In many ways the epitome of a successful man and I suspect that Herman was not exactly Shaw's ideal son in law because, you know, this was a man who had lived among the cannibals, who had rather open views on, well, on Christianity, on homosexuality, was not a good provider for his wife. Yeah, you could well be—[laughs]. You may be right in your next project.

CW: Oh we'll see. Actually, that leads me to my next question. Because right now I'm working on a project on mesmerism which is sort of the earlier version of what we might call eventism but there's a lot more implications for it. And of course I noticed, George, that multiple times you talk about the mesmerizing effects of particularly Ahab on other characters on the novel. And you call attention multiple times in really smart ways I think to this idea of magnetism. Personal magnetism and the responsibilities that come with being personally magnetic and drawing others to you. And so, you talk about Hitler and you talk about various other world leaders in terms of this potential for abuse of power or for, you know, the lack thereof like Starbuck's lack of personal magnetism disallows him, you know, fighting Ahab a little bit. So, I just thought it would be fun maybe to hear your thoughts a little bit about leadership in a way that you presented in the book in a way you talked about it in the book.

GC: Well, getting back to the historical period, you would be able to talk about that much better than I could, but you're right. There was a fascination in this period with heroes. I mean, this is the period when I guess Carla writes heroes and heroes worship, Byron is a byronic figure. You have all these fascination with phrenology in this period with mesmerism, with reading bumps on the skull to see, you know, what people can do, Mary Baker Eddy and others. So, there is all that and Melville, you know, is fully aware of all this stuff but Melville and the transcendentalist are trafficking in this, Hawthorne is certainly hooked into all of this in his writing.

CW: And he did a great job talking about Hawthorne. I thought well maybe this is part of a connection to Hawthorne.
GC: Yeah. I mean, yes so he's got all these things coming at him and, you know, he's a blotter for his period, you know, he's just taking all this stuff in and in this incredible volcanic eruption that is this book, it all comes into it. Sometimes maybe a few erasures would have helped, characters are lost and then found again—

CW: Yeah.

GC: —or lost and not found, but, yeah, I mean, in many ways you can read this book also as Melville reflecting on power and personality. You know, there's that—is it chapter 36 with the masked? I got it written down somewhere, “The Quarter Deck”.

CW: “The Quarter Deck”, right.

GC: I mean, you know, he's great. You know, there's lots of foreplay in the novel. I mean, we don't meet Ahab until like 120 something pages into the book and then we've got him on the deck and then it's when there's that great scene where Ahab is addressing the crew and trying to get them to buy into his mad vision of basically wreaking vengeance on the whale. And it's almost like—at times it's a call and response which clearly is related to his understanding of what happens at black church. It's also a kind of satanistic ritual. It's also this kind of lush ability to convince people to follow you to their own demise and all for the blue and all for madness and then you've got the wonderful Starbuck who basically says, you know, excuse me captain aren't we on this journey to like, you know, turn a profit and kill whales and then, you know, go back and see our wives? And I think it's in that chapter where he sounds, you know, that wonderful, it may not be—but, yeah, the line, I love it. You know, what we have to do is we have to go deeper, you know, go cut through, you know, punch through the pace board masks because, I mean, here, you know, is Ahab who is now not just, I think, you know, looking after revenge, but is actually trying to get at the ultimate metaphysical questions; what's the nature of reality, what is not just simply the nature of the white whale, but is there a God and if there is a God, as this one writer put it, you know, then I got a quarrel with God.

CW: Yeah.

GC: And that's being worked out. And it's not always—and what's so great about Melville is he doesn't always make it clear what his position is on that, at least not to me.

CW: There’s the genius of it.

GC: Yeah.

CW: Well and this is your repeated excerptation too and this is where I felt like you were doing maybe some call and response with this unvoiced reader, the repetition of the “dive deeper”. If you dive deeper then where might you go and what might you pull up from that? And I felt maybe like there was this urge within you or at least within this text to change academic writing itself maybe, you know, to, to—because you said, you know, you thought you were scathing the
surface and then you dove deeper in the project that doesn't look like most academic projects, right?

GC: Yeah. Well, I don't remember when. I was at some conference and somebody asked me if there was a theme that held, you know, the various books that I've done together, or the books that have meant something to me. Because there's one that really doesn't fit. And I said, yeah I guess so. And it has to do with—it's a, it's, well it's not only William James. Well, William James, you know, was interested in the late 19th century question of what makes a life worth living, is life worth living and these kinds of things. And so, and I'm also since I'm prone to those midnight thoughts, I guess all of my books have been examinations of that. So when I write about William James, what strikes me about William James is not this kind of happy pragmatism but rather how he's dealing with ultimately tragic and existential issues. And then of course with the existential book even more. And then with the Morality's Muddy Waters book, again with that one with, you know, how do you live a moral life in an immoral, amoral world? How does one try to, you know, find, or seize or dive deeper into these things? So I think there has been, you're right, more and more of autobiographical or searching in my soul but I'm not a person who tends to rest comfortably with answers or with any kinds of servitude so it becomes this kind of open-ended perhaps endless and boring debate that I'm having with myself, [laughter] but yes I think it appears in this book. And it you want a companion, you know, to talk about what these things, yeah Melville is terrific, you know?

CW: Absolutely.

GC: He was a good drinker [laughs]. Yeah, and I like to speculate, you know, that there was this crackpot basically. Adler who is a professor of linguistics I think it was at NYU many years ago and he was on a boat with him aboard ship and they would have all these discussions. I think it was in 1850 about the nature of life. And here's this guy, Adler, who basically went mad trying to find the etymological meanings of different words and things. And so I'd like to think that, you know, upon returning from that voyage to England and then back to United States when Melville does come up with the idea of writing this book about Moby Dick that maybe this guy was sort of like his own Ahab, I don't know.

CW: So just to say, those of you who've not read this book yet. A lot of the teasers here, the interesting stories that George is telling are in the book. So, just apply, there's more detail to follow up on some of these. So, I think we're about out of time but I do want to say one thing and that is that Walt Whitman is my guy [laughter] and I think, you know, you talk a lot about Melville being sort of this—and especially Moby-Dick, not all of his books, I think, but Moby-Dick being this sort of model of democracy. And as you note of course is a model that excludes women, maybe as a fantasy world for him, [laughter] I don't know. And, you know, Whitman has this model of democracy too and you use this idea of the troubadour, you know, the singer of songs of democracy. And again, this is where you end the book, which is with the Bob Dylan chapter.

GC: Yeah.
CW: And I was just wondering if you would just talk about that a little bit, give the connection between Melville and Dylan and why that's last. Of all the chapters, why put that one last?

GC: You know, I wish I could give you a short answer. I'm a big Bob Dylan fan, but, you know, I don't remember at what point in working on this that I remembered or somebody brought up to me or I was wondering, you know, stumbling around the web and I found, you know, the lyrics of Bob Dylan's “115th Dream”. I mean, it was never one of my favorite Bob Dylan songs from that period. I liked his more serious, you know, “Visions of Johanna”, the ones where you see a moaning about failed relationships and things. That had always drawn me—

CW: Literally moaning.

GC: Yeah, yeah. But, you know, “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat” and this kind of, you know, “Rainy Day”, no not for me. And so this song was not one of my favorites but then of course what this song is in an essence and Dylan is, there's a—Greil Marcus has this wonderful line about Moby-Dick is the sea in which we all swim in. Well, for my generation maybe Bob Dylan was the, you know, the ocean in which we did most of our swimming. And so it seemed appropriate to me to end with Dylan and also to end with Dylan because in this song, playful, I mean, it's not in any depth but he does talk about. He juxtaposes Melville, Ahab who he calls Captain Arab and Columbus and, I don't remember if it's a very end but the lines are, after discovery of America and that, you know, making a buck he just said, I just wished him good luck. And if Melville is in a sense the American novel because it's dealing with some of the themes that Catherine brought up also with beings of colonization, imperialism, patriarchy, power, greed, fanaticism. None of those as far as I could tell have much relationship to the American history [laughs]. It seemed then appropriate to end with that notion of good luck. And of course as you said earlier about the epilogue being a favorite chapter, you know, everybody dies, except for Ishmael. And Ishmael is rescued. So now if one wants, one can read that final chapter as Christian redemption or secular redemption if you want. Or other—

CW: It's sort of the opposite of I think what you said.

GC: Yeah.

CW: Yeah.

GC: Or other possibilities. [Laughter] But that's what I like about Melville, is that he opens it up to different possibilities and in that way maybe that if it's an open sea that he's offering us, I think that he offers it in this book kind of like Whitman, you know, to a whole host of possibilities and he becomes this voice. So like for Hart Crane, you know, he can turn to Melville and then inspires him in his work. Whitman, you know, can have the same kind of thing. And then, you know, I think it was Michael Robertson wrote that great book on the people who were drawn to Melville and how they in turn have created a Melville, or that's what's happened with all these people who've turned to Moby-Dick. So they are two of the giants from the 19th
century. And I'll end with this, many years ago—a historian died—a number—last week was a bad week for historians. Of course, the question is, are there good weeks for historians but [laughs]. Eric Hobsbawm died in his 90s and that was OK. And also Eugene Genovese who is very important to me at certain point in my life died and he was in his 80s. But another historian who was in his 90s, Henry May. And Henry May was a professor of intellectual history at Berkley and—oh gees—I won't say how many years ago, I was having lunch with him in Berkley and he said to me, "George, what are you working on?" And this was when I was working at my first book about the philosopher William James. I said, "I'm writing a book about William James." And he sort of hesitated for a second and he said, "How nice to be able to spend your time with someone like William James." And I thought about it and I said, "It was the same thing with Melville in Moby Dick," and it must be the same thing for you with Whitman.

CW: Oh absolutely.

GC: You know, we get paid for doing this, and you know I—[laughter] I mean, it's wonderful. So, and you also get to spend your time with people like Catherine and that's wonderful also. Thank you.

CW: Thank you.

[Applause]

[Music]

Moderator: [Background Music] This podcast is a 2014 production of the Robert E. Kennedy Library with music by Doug Irion. Visit our blog, kennedylibraryoutloud@lib.calpoly.edu/bog/outloud. There you can find other stories and media from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

[Music]