

IN SEARCH OF THE GHOST LOBSTER

Illustrations by
Alan Berry Rhys



25.

SEA MONSTERS are an alluring fiction. They blend ancient mythology with the mystery of deep water. Dinosaurs once roamed the earth. Who's to say equivalent beasts don't occupy an underwater kingdom? To believe this is to turn a blind eye to scientific findings from underwater exploration.

Words by
Sophie Monks Kaufman



AND OTHER TERRORS OF THE DEEP



Sea-monster fiction exploits our latent desire to surrender the rational mind, to freeze while also compelled by the prospect of awful spectacle. These range from the fantasy-horror of HP Lovecraft's octopus-dragon-god Cthulhu, whose gaze drives humans to insanity to larger-than-life evocations of real creatures, like the Great White Whale of 'Moby Dick' or the great white shark of *Jaws*. We spend a lot of time quashing fear. There is relief in letting it flourish in response to one satisfying embodiment of monstrosity.

A ghost lobster was caught off the Yorkshire Coast in December 2019 by the fisherman William Jenkinson in a vessel named *Our Sharon*. Realizing that this chalky decapod was not a regulation order lobster, Jenkinson called the offices of North Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority who came to collect the lobster from the shellfish merchant in Scarborough. Ghost (or "albino") lobsters occur once in every 100 million lobsters. This specimen was identified as a male, over the age of seven, and was deemed lucky to have dodged predators for so long. Its pale shell, caused by a lack of pigment, makes it easier game than its blue-black brethren. The ghost lobster, which was given the temporary name "Boris" was first offered to several large aquariums, before ending up on public display in the educational sanctuary that is the Old Coastguard Station in Robin Hood's Bay. ▶



To my delight and astonishment, my pitch to visit the ghost lobster is accepted by this very outlet. I am a film journalist, accustomed to covering the crafty tales released onto big and small screens. A commission away from cinema scans like an opportunity to develop muscles for being and working in a more grounded way, yet not too grounded, for it is all deliciously laced with the exotic flavor of a rare crustacean from the deep.

Cinephilia has hampered my ability to think rationally about the world around me. I experience new settings through an instinct for their dramatic potential. I have a vivid sense-memory of treading water in the middle of a lake in the south of France, at the age of 9, having just watched Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. I knew that sharks didn't live in lakes, and this knowledge steeled me to stay put, even as my mind's eye exploded with the fantasy of a Great White Shark darting up through the weeds to drag me under. Ever since, water has acted as both a hypnotic source of awesome knowledge and a canvas for the worst nightmares that the collective storytelling imagination can serve up. On a sensual level I love swimming in the sea. But, existentially, each dip feels like surrendering to a mysterious power, and so very reckless. When little creatures emerge from the depths [s/o to Herman the pig-nosed turtle at Brighton] >



“To my delight and astonishment, my pitch to visit the ghost lobster is accepted by this very outlet”

28. The Lobster Roll Issue

Sea Life] they impress me, like visitors from a science-fiction universe. But how helpful is it to exult and mystify what is simply part of our natural eco-system?

Helping me through this question is a man who has made it his business to see with his own eyes the reality of what lives in the deepest recesses of the oceans. Dr Alan Jamieson is senior lecturer in Deep-Sea Biology at Newcastle University in the UK and is a world leader in explorations of The Hadal Zone. This spans the deepest part of the ocean, running from 6,000 meters to 11,100 meters, and is named after the Greek god of the underworld, Hades. With his dive team, The Five Deeps Expedition, Jamieson has been down in a submarine to such locales as the Java Trench off Indonesia, the Molloy Hole in the Arctic and the Kebrt Brine Pool at the bottom of the Red Sea. He has been 7,100m beneath the surface in the Puerto Rico trench and 10,700m down to the deepest point of the ocean: the Mariana Trench. I ask if he ever feels like he's dreaming when he's down there. He says, "I think your adrenaline's so high it's not dreaming when you're there it's more afterwards when you think, 'Did I just do that?' Sometimes you're coming home and you're sitting on the train from Newcastle to Hexham next to a couple of kids who are talking about Love Island and you're going, 'A few days ago I was at the bottom of the Mariana Trench'.

Millions of years ago Robin Hood Bay was below water. Fossilized ammonites, belemnites and bivalves on the local beaches testify to the sea creatures that long ago were buried in the mud. Now, it stands as a tiny and stunning coastal settlement in Whitby, on the east coast of England. It is also where director Paul Thomas Anderson filmed portions of his 2017 motion picture *Phantom Thread*. I have one night booked at The Victoria Hotel, where dressmaker to the stars, Reynolds Woodcock (Daniel Day-Lewis), famously ordered what has become known as his "hungry boy" breakfast (essentially, everything on the menu). Doreen, duty manager of the family-run establishment, shows me a bulletin board of film memorabilia that includes a napkin with a note from DDL to the staff of the hotel. The following morning, after a Reynolds Woodcock tribute breakfast, I take the eight minute walk along steep up-and-down coastal streets from The Victoria Hotel to the Old Coastguard's Station.

Entrance is through a gift shop that joins onto a classroom-like space lined by educational resources. Pride of place in the middle of this latter room is a marine tank. The ghost lobster peers out of its house, an upside down lobster pot, in the centre of the tank which is bustling with other aquatic life going about their business. The ghost lobster has bright orange antennae and beautiful black eyes. Six little legs cycle its bulk across the bottom of the tank, sending up clouds of pale gravel. There are a mesmerizing number of moving parts: two purpley-grey pincers lie still as pale tendrils propel whitefish into a mouth that lurks somewhere amid all that exoskeletal composition.

A six or seven-year-old girl recognizes a ▶

29. 🦞 The Ghost Lobster

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30. The Lobster Roll Issue



fellow enthusiast and asks about the origin of a piece of fluff that a particularly whiskery prawn is clasping, before venturing a theory that a child held a cuddly toy with a loose seam over the tank. Maybe I am high on the ghost lobster's closeness, but this strikes me as a genius stroke of logic. She is treating me like an equal and I am feeling like we are a team of aqua detectives. Her mother says it's time to go. She runs over, hugs my legs, whispers "bye" then runs off. Is this how life is when you try to broaden your beat? You have a halo that makes children want to hug you?

A woman wearing the name-badge 'Margaret Cripps' insists several times that she is no lobster expert, still, to my unschooled ears, she is an oracle. She tells me that the ghost lobster is going to shed its shell soon, a sign of physical growth. It would eat its tank-mates if they came too close, but they are wise to this. This hungry boy is a scavenger and, once shed, its own calcium-rich shell is on the menu. Before tucking in, it will bury the shell so that nothing can steal the delicacy. I say it looks a little like a sea monster. Margaret reacts with mock horror. I say, "in a good way," and she lets me off the hook, adding that it's easy to understand how, in days of old, people's ignorance about marine biology led them to misdiagnose lesser-seen creatures as sea monsters.



31. 🦞 The Ghost Lobster



"It's about as big as we'd want it to be in that tank," says Margaret of the ghost lobster. Once it sheds its shell she will call Inshore Fisheries who will return it to the sea, releasing it on to an underwater landscape dominated by chalk reef that matches its coloring to maximize survival odds. Octopi are its main predator, those gelatinous, tentacular beasts that inspired Cthulu and the Kraken.

My sentimental cinematic imagination freaks out. The thought that, short of denying it a return to its natural habitat, there is nothing we can do to guarantee the lobster's safety is unbearable—as if life and death isn't happening everyday underwater and on land, with the only difference here being heightened visibility of the forces at play. The art of storytelling involves loading universal meaning onto one specific narrative, so that it is heavy with significance. Yet nature is the opposite with significance spread across the wider picture. Individual humans and lobsters shuffle around inextricably wedded to our contexts, making sense within the language of statistical value. Humility is understanding how little control you have to change the order of things, and finding a way to marvel at the glories you experience while pursuing a path through the unknown.

"Generally I do not like undersea films," says Dr Jamieson. "They always play on people's fear of deepwater and darkness. It's all just stupid monsters and ridiculous sci-fi which then prevents the general population understanding and caring for what is the majority of the planet. If you ask people, 'picture the deepest fish in the world' they always think of something black with big fangs and weird eyes. But actually the deepest fish in the world are little pink cute things that look like tadpoles, called snailfish."

Jamieson—whose team discovered a new species of snailfish in a dive off Tonga—also has a deep-water shrimp named after him (*Princaxelia jamiesoni*). There is something euphoric at the thought of him in the silent darkness of the deepest ocean floor categorizing living knowledge that is cuter than we ever dared to imagine 🦞

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