

**Copestake, Ian D. *Madness and the Sea: A Literary History*
Palgrave Macmillan, 2026**

265 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index

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(softcover)

Historically, the sea has been a source of peace and pleasure – sometimes prompting soulsearching introspection, but also anxiety and almost paranormal fear. *Madness and the Sea* is a broad literary sojourn tracing the history of medical uses of sea journeys to treat forms of mental illness, a prescribed practice that continued into the late nineteenth century. This empirically imposed treatment shaped later cultural interpretations in literature, philosophy, and art by highly regarded historical figures who suffered from mental health challenges and sought recovery. Their encounters with the ocean in all its moods profoundly influenced their varied works. As Copestake notes, “Some mental health care providers interpreted the [Hippocratic] oath as advocating for the beneficial properties of exposure to sea air, salt water, and ocean voyaging” (12).

The author also demonstrates how literary productions were shaped – directly and indirectly – by reference to the Hippocratic medical oath, an updated version of which is still administered today. Each chapter of the book explores the consequences of such treatments on patients’ perceptions of the ocean, charting a movement away from the longstanding cultural fear of the sea. This psychological shift, in turn, influenced the works of specific literary figures, artists, and philosophers profiled who undertook sea journeys as therapy for their personal mental distress.

Copestake also examines the philosophical and religious traditions that historically associated the sea with fear. He then explains the reversal of this perception in the context of nineteenth-century medical discourse and the lived experiences of the writers and artists he profiles. The book outlines the more common medical treatments these men and women pursued and situates them within a broader effort to reconsider the ocean’s role – both positive and negative – in the patient’s imagination.

Central to Copestake’s approach is a hypothetical remedy derived partly from the Hippocratic treatise *The Sacred Disease* (ca. 400 BCE), which attempted to establish a therapeutic relationship between madness and the sea. He states, “The classical work *The Sacred Disease* suggested that the causes of madness are related to a specific abnormality in the brain triggered by the nature of the air that is breathed in” (33). Copestake goes on to argue that this early recognition of the brain as the epicenter of

consciousness – rather than the heart or abdomen – supports the notion that exposure to sea air and the ocean’s shifting moods might alleviate mental abnormalities. Throughout the book the author juxtaposes the works of these literary giants with the thought-provoking work of Michel Foucault whose philosophical reflections suggest that fact, fiction, and dreams of water resemble nightmares – visual representations in which aquatic elements evoke chaos, fear, storms, shipwrecks, and drowning.

Within this framework, the book explores the psychological struggles of numerous wellknown figures from the seventeenth through to the early twentieth centuries. Particularly illuminating are the cases of Ben Jonson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his albatross-laden guilt, Herman Melville with his tormented Ishmael and Ahab, and the tragic but proliferative Virginia Woolf.

Emerson’s transcendentalist essay *Nature* addresses the abstract problem that humans fail to fully appreciate nature’s beauty. He believed that solitude – such as life at sea – offered a means of engaging with the world’s unspoiled, primitive environment.

Coleridge’s works are interpreted as symptoms of depressive moods, linking melancholy with remorse. His persistent guilt, doubt in his moral values, and wavering religious faith are reflected in the mariner’s tale of crime and punishment, which imposes moral order on traumatic, seemingly senseless experiences.

Melville developed debilitating physical and psychiatric disorders in middle age after writing *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. He may have suffered from bipolar affective disorder and possibly post-traumatic stress disorder, accompanied by recurrent ophthalmologic discomfort, photophobia, and severe back pain – symptoms some contemporaries dismissed as psychosomatic.

Virginia Woolf, author of *To the Lighthouse* and many other works, suffered from bipolar disorder marked by severe mood swings, depression, and psychosis. She battled insomnia, hallucinations, and repeated suicide attempts, culminating in her death by drowning in the River Ouse.

The author closes his book by analyzing aquatic art, particularly works by Albrecht Dürer and Edvard Munch. In summary, *Madness and the Sea: A Literary History* examines the link between madness and sea literature, as well as selected visual arts, offering a scholarly exploration of the relationship between the sea and sanity. By studying writers and artists who experienced emotional illness, Copestake provides a sensitive and unusual basis for understanding why these intellectual titans turned to “the sea’s utility in managing mental health” as a means of confronting their

personal emotional struggles. This publication is an exceptionally erudite work containing fifty often psychiatric-technical footnotes and a substantial fifteen-page bibliography. This rather costly book is a challenging read, but – as with most scholarly works – rewarding for those willing to persevere.

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Dolin, Eric Jay. *The Wreck of the Mentor: A True Story of Death, Despair, and Deliverance in the Age of Sail*

Liveright Press, 2026

232 pp., illustrations, appendixes, list of characters, index

ISBN 978132409632 (softcover) US\$27.99

Eric Jay Dolin delivers a masterful account of the 1832 wreck of the American whaleship *Mentor*, a disaster that shattered not only the vessel but the very social order aboard it. What begins as a stormy night off the reef-strewn coast of the Palau Islands, unfolds into a years-long saga of survival, moral fracture, and cross-cultural entanglement among the scattered islands of the South Pacific.

Drawing from archival sources, logs, journals, oral histories, and Indigenous accounts, the narrative transcends the typical shipwreck story. It becomes a study in human resilience and the breakdown of maritime hierarchy, where authority dissolves and survival becomes the castaways' only goal. The author's meticulous research brings depth to the sometimes convoluted yet tragic tale, illuminating the psychological and cultural consequences of contact between vastly different worlds.

Unlike many "Age of Sail" shipwreck accounts, *The Mentor* is greater than the usual cautionary tale of nautical misfortune. It is a rare and complex chronicle – one that spans multiple islands and years, populated by a cast of characters thrust into perilous and morally fraught circumstances. The book explores how the ambitions of the commercially oriented West collided with the realities of Pacific Island life, revealing the precariousness of seafaring and the unpredictable consequences of maritime whaling and far-flung trade ventures.

Dolin notes in his author's introduction that shipwreck narratives have traditionally relied almost entirely on the records left by explorers or merchants, rather than on accounts from the Indigenous peoples they encountered. As a result, it is difficult to recover authentic native perspectives or to verify the accurateness of existing historical accounts. The limitations