Tidewater Tales: Books from Both Sides of the Ditch

Book Collecting Contest
January 21, 2019
Swimming in the Chesapeake Bay is one of the great joys of my life, from jumping off the bow of my parents Morgan 30’ as a child to swim in the almost fresh and almost always nettle-less Sassafras River, to moonlight swimming in the Chesapeake Bay proper from the beach at the end of the street where I grew up in Arundel on the Bay, and even the frosty exhilarance which comes with the Polar Bear Plunge at Sandy Point State Park. If you grew up within a 25 mile radius of the Chesapeake Bay, you refer to it ubiquitously as the Bay, an omnipresent waterway which bisects Maryland in two. And while the Bay can be experienced a number of ways be it sailing, powerboating, fishing, crabbing, or even a stroll at the water’s edge; swimming puts you in the middle of it. It is in this way that swimming is an apt metaphor for the experience of reading. Swimming in the Bay can take many forms too: from doggy paddling on the surface on the first perfect day in May, to diving down to murky black bottom looking for some refreshing water in late summer. Swimming is endlessly satisfying, an activity for both young and old, yet another way it is just like reading. It is hard to gain any perspective when you are swimming at the surface, so this collection is an attempt at providing some, about a beautifully varied subject.

My father gave me the first book in this collection, a worn out paperback copy of William Warner’s watershed (terrible pun I know) book *Beautiful Swimmers: Waterman, Crabs, and the Chesapeake Bay*. It was battered and yellow even then, it might have even come with the boat when my dad and his partner Captain Ed purchased her, but it was an electrifying read. It was thrilling to read something that I thought I knew about at age ten, only to discover how much there was to learn, and how crabs are an essential to the greater ecosystem of the Chesapeake Bay. My original copy no longer exists, but its replacement serves as the foundation
for this collection, as it was the impetus for my collecting of “tidewater tales”. The books in this collection are as varied as the Chesapeake Bay is itself. The Bay is an estuary, a brackish body of water, that is neither wholly fresh or the ocean. Each tributary, river, and creek has a distinctive feel. Communities around the bay also differ drastically. Everywhere from Baltimore to Smith Island are encapsulated in the tidewater region. The collection attempts to mirror this diversity. Some volumes are as deep as Bloody Point, massive tomes with weighty themes, and major concerns. Other books in this collection are slim ephemera, like shallow nameless creeks, but not without their own distinct beauty. The Chesapeake Bay is a liminal space, it has a neither here nor thereness that defies categorization. An estuary, not entirely northern or southern in orientation, a place of distinct middleness. A place obvious worth exploring. Some items of greatest interest include:

*The Tidewater Tales* by John Barth is not only the inspiration for the name of this collection, it is a maximalist epic of the Chesapeake Bay depicting Peter Sagamore and Katherine Sherritt Sagamore’s sail around the Chesapeake Bay, exploring both the unique geography, as well as encountering a series of literary figures from classic works. John Barth’s novel revels in puns and wordplay, erudite allusions, and a freewheeling circular narrative. Barth is often referred to as a master of postmodernism. And while *The Tidewater Tales* exhibits many of the hallmarks of postmodernism with its self referential style, what makes it an integral part of this collection, is the fact that it is an almost unparalleled achievement of verisimilitude. Barth captures the distinct milieu of Maryland in 1987. Capturing the world of sailors and storytellers alike at the time and place. *The Tidewater Tales* also features chapters set on the
Severn River and in Annapolis. Some local landmarks featured include Fawcett Boat Supplies, The Treaty of Paris, and even depicts at St. John’s College Student.

It is fitting that John Barth wrote the introduction for another piece worth going into detail about, *Western Wind, Eastern Shore: A Sailing Cruise around the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia* by Robert De Gast, a fascinating chimera of book. *Western Wind, Eastern Shore* is half a collection of photography by De Gast, the other half being his first hand account of the circumnavigation of the Delmarva Peninsula. The photographs are beautiful, black and white, and almost totally devoid of signs of humanity. Conversely the text itself is endowed with a thoughtful sincerity in De Gast’s prose. De Gast’s work provides a time capsule into communities that may have change drastically in the intervening years since the books original publication. But the stark beauty of the photographs and De Gast’s writing makes the book timeless.

I found *The Bay* by Gilbert Klingel in a maritime consignment store in Mystic, Connecticut. It is a fascinating story of a self taught naturalist, boat builder, and storyteller who built his own diving apparatuses in order to experience life under the surface of the Chesapeake Bay. The passages are incredibly informative, but the book reads like an ecologically inclined Ray Bradbury, juxtaposing the tropes of science fiction with the reality of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Klingel’s experience as a boatbuilder and inventor serve him well in development of this text is a profound source of wonder. While Klingel’s method and prose makes the book incredible, the illustrations by Natalie Harlan Davis help affirm its status as a piece of art. Her illustrations fuse traditional scientific work while capturing the beauty of the creatures themselves.
Twin histories make up the last two books to be singled out from the collection, *Records of the Tuesday Club of Annapolis 1745-1756* and *Secular Music in Colonial Annapolis: The Tuesday Club 1745-1756*. Both are academic histories concerned with elucidating The Tuesday Club, both include introductions providing background on the organization, and both include a wonderful array of primary sources from the group. The two books do a wonderful job of framing the Tuesday Club in a historical context, then stepping out the frame to allow the reader the chance to hear from Dr. Alexander Hamilton himself, and read the Tuesday Club records. The records remain as uproariously funny as a Restoration Comedy. The Tuesday Club was an important incubator for colonial attitudes toward governance, the arts, and the formation of a uniquely American identity.

Here is a mildly embarrassing admission: I have never been away from Maryland longer than three weeks at a time. I have spent my entire life in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, my first 18 years in Annapolis, four years of college in Chestertown, and now five more years in Annapolis. There is a school of thought in creative writing, that to write about a place you need to have perspective, or in other words to write about a place with any accuracy you need to leave it behind. I hope this is untrue. The Bay has been a defining feature in my life, not unlike how Buck Mulligan quoting Algernon Charles Swinburne refers to the sea as “great sweet mother”. The Chesapeake is a great murky mother, perhaps our greatest natural resource, but also hopelessly illused since John Smith made his first voyage up the Chesapeake. The Bay is many things to different people, to the waterman who have the most intimate relationship with the water it is the source of their vanishing livelihood. For many of the people and
characters in these assembled books it is a place of play and delight. It has been for me, an inexhaustible subject, a place of beauty and clarity. This collection is an attempt to provide some semblance of perspective, it assembles an array of different kinds of texts, in order to tell a story with as many threads as the Chesapeake has tributaries, all jutting out into different directions.
Annotated Bibliography


*The Tidewater Tales* concern the circular sailing journey of Peter Sagamore and Katherine Sherritt Sagamore on the Chesapeake Bay. A writer and storyteller respectively, the couple takes turn weaving narratives about their lives and the wider world around them. Over the course of their journey they have encounters with various iconic literary characters, all while exploring the changing landscape of late Cold War era Maryland.


A rollicking picaresque focused on Ebenezer Cooke’s journey from the coffeehouses of Restoration England to the Province of Maryland. Barth’s early masterpiece is part pastiche, part satire, but also uniquely his own. It is at once the story of an artist finding his voice, a boy becoming a man, and the story of the early colonization of America.


A fascinating piece of local journalism, focusing on the lives of Watermen, from their work on the water, to the lobbying efforts in the political arena. Blackistone’s work examines the various fisheries available on the Chesapeake Bay. *Dancing with the Tide: Watermen of the Chesapeake* is less elegy and more a snapshot of a particular time for waterman on the Chesapeake Bay.


A slim volume on the development of the neighborhood of Murray Hill in Annapolis, covering from the earliest settlers and the building of one of the only examples of waterfront Georgian architecture in Annapolis, to the construction of the neighborhood around the turn of the century. In addition to the engrossing history, the book also has some fabulous photographs of Murray Hill.


An academic work that introduces, elucidates, and contextualizes the immensely readable primary sources from the Tuesday Club of Annapolis. Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s record remains funny, humane, and interesting for anyone who wishes to know about the development of colonial letters.

The definitive history of Maryland up into the latter half of the 20th Century. The text serves as a valuable introduction to everyone from the academic to the general reader. *Maryland, a Middle Temperament*, examines the history of the state and its people.

Section of particular note include Maryland’s role in both the American Revolution and the U.S Civil War.


Ginger Doyel collects a variety of stories of Annapolis, from a slew of sources, telling the story of Annapolis from different perspectives. Each of the people that Doyel interviews adds something else to this many layered portrait of Annapolis. Each section is dedicated to another facet which gives the book a jewel like quality.


Ginger Doyel’s work is an achievement on many terms. Her collection of photographs provide an unprecedented glimpse into the development of Eastport from its earliest days to the 1950’s. Her own writing is thoughtful, entertaining, and highly informative. Doyel also cultivates a variety of primary sources through letters and interviews in order to tell the story of Eastport.


Fleming’s photographs are colorful bursts of humanity, capturing Annapolis from all angles, both literally and figuratively. Fleming is capable of providing glimpses of Annapolis that could easily be found on a tourism brochure while paying attention to underserved communities in Annapolis. His photographs are a wondrous celebration of the Annapolis community.


Robert De Gast’s engrossing work of photography is coupled with an equally fascinating account of his circumnavigation of the Delmarva Peninsula. De Gast captures the region’s unique beauty, while single-handing his boat from man made waterways to nameless creeks tucked away from all signs of humanity.

De Gast’s black and white, stark survey of the multitude of lighthouses on the Chesapeake Bay. De Gast portrays these feats of engineering from all angles, attempting to portray them from as close as possible. The book was completed as the lighthouse had moved away from manned operations to automated ones.


Tom Horton’s fabulous *Bay Country* is a survey covering places around the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Horton balances a clear-eyed concern for the deteriorating health of the bay, erudite environmental writing, and sincere interest in the stories of those who live on the Chesapeake Bay.


Klingel’s account of his own exploration of the world on top of, beneath, and around the Chesapeake Bay. Klingel’s unique expertise as a self-taught naturalist, metallurgist, and boat builder lend an inventive flavor to the work. *The Bay* was published in 1951 when visibility was far better than it is today. *The Bay* provides a window into an ecosystem before man muddied the waters.


A harrowing work of creative nonfiction, dealing with a way of life on the precipice of oblivion, the watermen of Tangier Island. Swift conveys the facts surrounding those who live on Tangier Island while also giving voice to those who live there. Where global warming, soil erosion, and population decline are more than buzzwords.


An academic history on the renowned Tuesday Club of Annapolis, exploring how music was an essential component to the association, while discussing it in the context of music in Colonial America.

Tench Francis Tilghman’s incredibly readable history on foundation, apogee, and subsequent struggles of St. John’s College. Tilghman has a wonderful capacity for characterization, endowing the various figures with a humanity, while exploring how St. John’s College grew with the new country.


Landmark collection and Pulitzer Prize Winner for Nonfiction in 1977. William Warner tells the story of the Atlantic Blue Crab in the context of the Chesapeake, as well as those who make their living from catching them.


Marion and Mame Warren put together an unprecedented collection of photographs from the 19th Century and first decade of the 20th century that focuses on an Annapolis long lost. The collection provides context for each photograph, while offering historical background on them as well. The Warren’s do a brilliant job of conveying Annapolis as it was, a sleepy small town, with a strong reliance on the agriculture and maritime industries.


A massive achievement of photography spanning several decades. Marion Warren’s photography is able to capture the distinct beauty of the Chesapeake Bay and the people who live around it. Marion and Mame’s decision to include large swaths of quotations from those featured in the book lends to a real intimacy. The Warren’s commitment to not just capturing the vanishing beauty of the Chesapeake but giving a platform to those whose stories might be otherwise forgotten is truly moving.