



BERKSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY AT ARROWHEAD

Mount Greylock rises like the fictional leviathan it inspired beyond Herman Melville's studio in Pittsfield.

Haunted by Herman Melville

BY ROB KAISER

What happened in the half-light of an upstairs room as my wife and I toured the home where Herman Melville wrote “Moby-Dick” was still on my mind as we drove away from the mustard-color house in Pittsfield.

“Did you hear me gasp?” I asked her.

“I did,” she said.

What took my breath away was the view from Melville's study in the home where he lived from 1850 until 1863. Rising in the distance through the original wavy glass window — what Melville called his “fairy glass” — was Mount Greylock, the outline of which is said to have stirred Melville's imagination as he wrote about literature's most famous leviathan.

We live in a time when tourist attractions that bank on a capacity for introspection and awe find themselves panned on social media for failing to engender Pixar levels of excitement. Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, for example, the world's longest cave system, cleverly leveraged negative reviews

by inviting would-be visitors to “experience the disappointment.”

So how is it that the still, quiet home of a dead writer, one born 134 Augusts ago, consistently garners rave Yelp reviews and holds down a spot on Tripadvisor's “Best Massachusetts Hidden Gem Attractions in 2025”? The short answer is the room that made me gasp in the home otherwise known as Arrowhead.

“He's pushing his writing table up against the window,” tour guide John Dickson tells our group. “And he writes to his editor, ‘I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country. When I look out my study window, especially now that the ground is covered with snow, it reminds me of looking out a ship's porthole.’”

Arrowhead writer-in-residence Jana Laiz “burst into tears” upon first entering Melville's study. “It was just this energy that was electrifying to me,” she says. “I've had people cry in this room, especially when I work with writers. ... There's something going on in there.”

The Melville house's uncommon effect on visitors owes in part to the way its mystique sneaks up

on them. An uncommon marketing strategy that guards against overexposure is designed to preserve that effect.

“We're really careful about how much we put out there,” says Lesley Herzberg, executive director of the Berkshire County Historical Society, which is based at the Melville home. The historical society doesn't post videos of the guided tours. “I want people to come here and experience it in person, experience a sense of wonder,” says Herzberg.

From the home's fireplace, which inspired Melville's short story “I and My Chimney,” to the stairs he descended to be with family at the end of a day of writing, the house is alive with the late writer.

But is it haunted?

Robert Oakes, author of “Ghosts of the Berkshires,” conceptualized and conducts a spooky new addition to the Melville home's visitor season, which runs through October: a ghost tour.

Though he found no mention by Melville of ghosts in the house, he says Melville spoke of “something about the fairies on the mountain, sprites and fairies and otherworldly presence inspiring him.

“I was worried a little about whether it would be satisfying as a ghost tour,” Oakes says. “With Arrowhead there aren't as many reports of ghosts and ghost stories. But I remember having this mo-

ment on the first tour when I had just presented [Melville's] thoughts on his inspiration from the mountain. I said, ‘Let's go look at the piazza,’ and as soon as we were standing there looking at the mountain, a feeling of awe came over us. We actually saw some lights up there. Two of the lights I know their source, but we saw these other lights, these kind of little flashes, and for that moment, we all got that little zap of mystery. I thought, *Oh, this is going to be all right.*”

Oakes started doing ghost tours at the author Edith Wharton's nearby home, The Mount, in 2010. In the preface to her book of ghost stories, Wharton wrote of the public's eroding ability to appreciate such tales: “Ghosts, to make themselves manifest, require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity.”

The silence of the Melville house may not inspire ghosts to manifest, but it does, our tour guide Dickson tells us, reliably elicit a spine tingle. “I think the goosebumps come when I read the last line of the first chapter of ‘Moby-Dick,’ when Melville says the whale is ‘like a snow hill in the air.’”

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