

The bite stuff

A gripping tale of shark attacks
on the Jersey shore in 1916

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Sharks are back in the headlines: Worldwide attacks hit a reported high last year, and in Daytona Beach, Fla., a few weeks ago, a number of "nipping" incidents were reported.

As Pulitzer Prize-nominated writer Michael Capuzzo points out, "You're more likely to die from a bee sting or a construction accident. But people are so fascinated by the primal fear, they don't want to hear that."

Capuzzo feeds that fear with "Close to Shore," a gripping depiction of the New Jersey shark attacks that sent shivers down the nation's spine in 1916.

Due out this Tuesday, "Close to Shore" deftly sets the stage for panic: At the beginning of the 1900s, going to the beach for leisure was just catching on with the public, and bold young men who dove into the surf were considered daredevils. Scientists were convinced sharks were harmless to humans.

So when newspapers breathlessly recounted the horror of five shark attacks (and four deaths) in just 12 days in July 1916, the outcry was so great that even the president got involved.

While researching another novel, Capuzzo stumbled across a vague reference to these once-famous attacks and thought he had a good story.

(He wasn't alone. Author Richard Fernicola also has a book on the attacks: "Twelve Days of Terror.")

Intense debate rages to this day as to whether all the attacks were the work of one rogue shark. But the memory of that

summer rampage is still strong among scientists.

"It's the Babe Ruth of sharks," says Capuzzo, who lives with his wife on a 10-acre former farm in rural New Jersey. "All the shark biologists know about it."

He spent the next two years researching and writing that story, "tracking down rare copies of old newspapers, stumbling across postcards written by visitors to the shore and visiting the sites of the attacks."

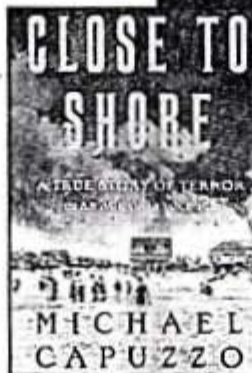
Even though there is reference to the story in the movie "Jaws" and it served as one of the inspirations for Peter Benchley's novel, Capuzzo knows the average person has never heard it.

"I liked the idea of bringing something back into history that had been sort of lost."

Capuzzo even gets into the mind of the shark, imagining where it might be in the water, the scents it might be coming across, and the curiosity it feels about this new prey.

He also gets into the minds of the people. Almost every chapter introduces a vivid new person who becomes involved with the shark attacks.

There's Dr. Eugene Vansant, who takes his family to a resort for vacation. A bold new "specialist," Dr. Vansant flies against the tradition that demands a doctor have a generalized



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"People are fascinated by the primal fear," says Michael Capuzzo, the author of "Close to Shore: A True Story of Terror in an Age of Innocence" (inset).

knowledge of medicine. But when his beloved son, Charles, is mauled by a shark, Vansant watches the boy slowly die. He spends the rest of his life haunted by the idea that if he'd been more of a generalist, he might have saved his son.

Equally compelling is Frederic Lucas, the head of the American Museum of Natural History, who insists to newspapers around the world that these so-called attacks couldn't possibly be the work of a shark — only to later recant after being persuaded he was wrong.

Also striding onto the stage is a famous actress who wards off a possible shark attack by striking the water in front of her; a little boy who takes a dip in a creek miles from the ocean, only to have a shark brush past him on its way to another attack; and Mrs. Childs, the grande dame who spies one of the first victims being pulled onto the beach and swings into action.

"I love Mrs. Childs and the clarity of that scene," says Capuzzo. "That was the moment when the sea monster enters the 20th century, sort of replacing

Melville's whale. So many people witness the body being taken out of the water that it really is the first pre-'Jaws' hysteria."

Other memorable moments? Terrified citizens tossing dynamite into a river where the shark was spotted, and the absurd finale: a pitched battle between the beast and a man who beats it off with only an oar. (It's no surprise Hollywood is already nibbling at the book.)

After two years of exhaustive research, Capuzzo is still fascinated by sharks and how relatively little we know about them.

"They are built to be the apex predator — to be more or less invincible and to kill everything that needs to be killed," says Capuzzo.

"They heal quickly from wounds, and their teeth roll out on a regular basis and are replaced. God or Mother Nature doesn't want the apex predator to suffer from a chipped or yellow tooth."

Still, that hasn't spooked him from going back into the water.

"I tend to have an overly active imagination," he says, "but I can't imagine being afraid to swim."