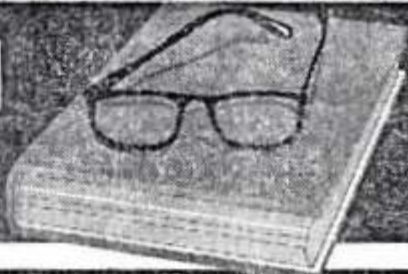


THE BOOK REPORT



Call her inspired

Sena Jeter Naslund reels in "Moby Dick" for her own whale of a tale

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Ahah pursued the great white whale across the oceans of the world and was dragged down to the depths of the sea for his troubles. Sena Jeter Naslund stalked Herman Melville's masterpiece "Moby Dick" over several years, determined to write a book that would tell the stories Melville didn't.

Instead of critical carping or — worse — being ignored, Naslund finds herself riding a wave of

acclaim. With the Oct. 1 publication of "Ahab's Wife" the 57-year-old writer has produced the literary event of the fall.

"It's wonderfully exhilarating," exclaims Naslund from her home in Louisville, Ky. "It's hard for me to believe, really. But it's fabulous."

It's fabulous indeed, considering the author, who'd published four other books without an agent, found herself in the middle

of a fierce bidding war followed by a high six-figure advance. "Ahab's Wife" has since received rave notices from such writers as Wally Lamb, Gail Godwin and the poet Mark Doty.

Of course, the mere idea of going toe-to-toe with Melville's epic is shocking to some. Naslund admits that a few "very well-known writers" said to her, "How dare you?" And when she told her friend and fellow author Wendell Berry what she was working on, he said, "You don't lack for boldness, do you?" Naslund now laughs. "Well, no, I don't," she says.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of following "Moby Dick" — coming up with an opening line that can rival "Call me Ishmael" — was solved at the start. Naslund got her opening line — "Captain Ahab was

neither my first husband nor my last" — in a flash of inspiration even before she'd thought about writing the book.

She then plunged into the first few pages, began her research and knew it was meant to be when she started dreaming about her main character's childhood.

"It was very strange; I've never had that experience before with any other book," says Naslund. "One time years ago I took a break from writing to make a cup of tea. And when I went back to the table, I realized I'd made two cups of tea — one for myself and one for the character. So the dreaming is not unprecedented, but it was certainly unusual and wonderful."

This also isn't the first time the University of Louisville teacher has tampered with a beloved



Sena Jeter Naslund: taking up where Melville left off.

classic. With her well-received "Sherlock in Love," Naslund described the romantic side of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective. She also remembers, growing up in Birmingham, Ala., the enthusiastic response of a teacher to her spin on Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar."

Further speaking about her childhood, Naslund reveals that she was "trained not to ask questions." But if you'd guess she had a stern, repressive parent like the one that figures in "Ahab's Wife," you'd be surprised.

In fact, her family was, as she puts it, "very permissive." Naslund

recalls: "I was allowed to write on the walls with lipstick. I was allowed to eat with my hands, [so I didn't know how to] use a knife, fork or spoon till high school. I could stay up as late as I wanted to — reading and doing whatever pleased me.

"I guess because I was given so much freedom in my own actions and thoughts that somehow I was supposed to respect their world and not question too much."

Her nominally Methodist parents created such a rules-free environment that Naslund rebelled in the only way possible: She turned to the Bible. "I was quite a little fundamentalist Christian from age 9 to 19," says Naslund, who, married to the physicist John Morrison, has an 18-year-old daughter. "And my parents just left me alone with it, let me do my thing. Sometimes I felt compelled to convert people. It was a strange and different sort of childhood."

Strange or not, it helped inspire a singular imagination — and a singular work of fiction.

In review

**"Ahab's Wife,
or The Star-Gazer,"
by Sena Jeter Naslund,
William Morrow,
666 pages, \$28.**

Here's a prize catch, indeed. Only a scant few lines in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" make reference to Ahab's wife. But writer **Sena Jeter Naslund** has spun those small hints into "Ahab's Wife," a bold, audacious book that's a fitting companion to Melville's masterpiece just as her heroine, Una, is a fitting companion to the monomaniacal sea captain.

Naslund wisely avoids mimicking Melville's eccentric prose. "Ahab's Wife" owes more in style to Charles Dickens, both in its episodic, pell-mell narrative (you'll be kept up nights by sudden marriages and chance meetings) and Naslund's apparently endless store of memorable characters (the dwarf bounty hunter David Poland and accomplished

astronomer Maria Mitchell are just two among many).

At the center of it all is the formidable Una, a bright young girl who is beaten by her father when she refuses to embrace his new-found faith.

Una is sent to live with an aunt and uncle who operate an

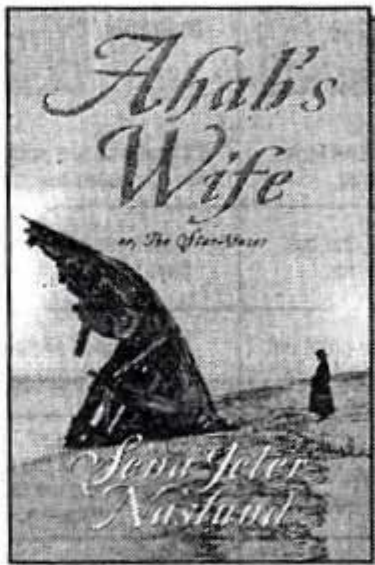
cannibalism, a charming first husband who goes mad, Ahab himself, childbirth in the woods of Kentucky, helping and being helped by a slave girl on the run, and much more.

It's a rousing tale, peppered with sly humor (Una is the first to spot the white whale, which she describes as innocent) and perhaps one too many historical figures who make quick cameos.

Naslund also strains our credulity in other ways: seemingly every man who sets eyes on Una wants her for his wife. But it's a credit to Naslund's skill and the complex, intriguing woman she's created that we accept it without question until the fifth or six proposal rolls along. Small quibbles for such a full-bodied, entertaining story.

It's certainly not the equal of "Moby Dick" (almost no novel is) but what might have been disastrous hubris turns out to be an unabashed delight.

— Michael Giltz



isolated lighthouse, where she finds open spaces and open minds. Intrigued by two young sailors who come to the island, Una decides her first love must be the sea and disguises herself as a cabin boy on a whaler. This leads to a sinking ship,