

the middlebrow**Peter Benchley**

The man who loved sharks.

By Bryan Curtis

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Peter Benchley, who died Saturday at age 65, was the very model of a pulp writer. The grandson of Robert Benchley, the humorist and Algonquin troubadour, and the son of Nathaniel Benchley, the novelist, Peter had one truly inspired idea that he proceeded to pound into the ground for nearly three decades. The idea, of course, was *Jaws*, which spent more than 40 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list when it was published in 1974. A year later it served as a rough outline for the Steven Spielberg film that became the highest-grossing movie in history and rang in the era of the summer blockbuster. On the occasion of Benchley's death, it feels like an apt moment to survey *Jaws* in its pre-evolutionary state—to re-read the novel and discover what made its dark heart tick.

Jaws is a pulp collage—a how-to guide to writing airport literature. Start with heavy-handed symbolism: The seaside town the shark will terrorize is called Amity. Next add ungainly metaphor: "The past—like a bird long locked in a cage and suddenly released—was flying at her, swirling around her head, showering her with longing." Finally, throw in a charmingly awkward lovemaking scene: A couple "thrashed with urgent ardor on the cold sand." The novel opens with that ardor, and after its climax, the still-naked woman slips into the ocean, becoming an opening course for the shark circling below. At first, the shark takes a rather leisurely approach to its meal. It moves slowly beneath her, as if surveying a chandelier. Then its jaws close on her right foot, snapping it off at the bone. The woman screams once, then is pulled below. Game on.

The shark will strike four more times, but *Jaws'* most pitched battle takes place on land. It's between local police chief Martin Brody and Matt Hooper, a visiting ichthyologist smitten with Brody's wife—the two men who (wouldn't you know it?) must make common cause to fight off the predator. For Benchley, their conflict is a microcosm of life in Amity: the salt-of-the-earth locals, the "real people," versus the blithe summer visitors, who come in their Lacoste shirts to spend money and get laid. Benchley has nothing but contempt for the latter group. "These were not Aquarians," he writes. "They uttered none of the platitudes of peace or pollution, or justice or revolt. Privilege had been bred into them with genetic certainty." Growing more jaded, he continues, "They had no body odor. When they sweated, the girls smelled faintly of perfume; the boys simply smelled clean. None of which is to say that they were either stupid or evil." (*Jaws* is nothing if not a 1970s guilt-trip.) During the book's final pages, the shark will claim two more victims: the oversexed Hooper and then, appropriately enough, the old seaman Quint, a kind of Ahab knock-off who is allowed a Melville-like death.

Academics have bravely tried to pin all kinds of meaning on *Jaws*. (My favorite theory, found in a Web search, ventures that the shark is the embodiment of the [vagina dentata myth](#).) But the moral (and morality) of *Jaws* seems pretty straightforward: The preppies are gonna get it. They've been sitting out the 1970s, Benchley is saying, practicing free love on Long Island when they should have been marching with protesters in Harlem. ("Nothing touched them—not race riots ... not police corruption.") The shark—like a thousand horror villains before and after—is nature's revenge for their carefree debauchery, their unwillingness to get with the program of equality and universalism. "People who are sexual outside of marriage get punished," says Stefan Fleischer, a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo who teaches Benchley's novel. "And if it's society as a whole that has loose morals, it'll get eaten up by a shark."

It's an appropriately wicked conceit, and it might have worked better if Benchley had a sense of humor. But there's hardly a flicker of comedy in *Jaws*. The Associated Press reported this week that Benchley's

initial 100-page book draft was filled with puns. His editor, Thomas Congdon, wrote in the margins "NO JOKES," and when Benchley returned the book it was a merciless, headlong affair. Steven Spielberg, who had a keen sense of humor, was appalled at how unrelenting it all was, how Benchley's character sketches bordered on misanthropy. When Spielberg read Benchley's film script, "he rooted for the shark," Peter Biskind reports in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Universal enlisted script doctors, and the film's humor—the macho one-upmanship that develops between the men on the *Orca*; lines like, "You're gonna need a bigger boat"—feel like the work of Hollywood rewrite men, not the author.

What makes *Jaws* the novel worth pausing over? It's the author's scientific affection for his titular great white. Benchley might have had no time for humans—his puritanical views on sex are the stuff of pure pulp—but he loved sharks. He was a lifelong enthusiast of sea life; he got the idea for *Jaws* after writing a series of oceangoing magazine articles. Whether because of his amateur scientific interest, or just the dizzying amount of detail he inserted into the book, the appearance of the shark in *Jaws* allows Benchley to unplug his pulp impulses while remaining firmly in the realm of plausible horror. Benchley gives the shark no supernatural powers, nor a fierce native intelligence. Even at its most gruesome, the shark remains a simple fish—"a dumb garbage bucket," Quint calls it—and a sum of its biological impulses.

A hundred yards offshore, the fish sensed a change in the sea's rhythm. It did not see the woman, nor yet did it smell her. Running within the length of its body were a series of thin canals, filled with mucus and dotted with nerve endings, and these nerves detected vibrations and signaled the brain. The fish turned toward shore.

The fish turned toward shore. It may be a dull passage, but in the middle of an ocean of pulp, it's an arresting one. The shark—all leathery and dead-eyed—is such a bewildering creature that it can't be shoehorned into genre conventions, can't be reduced to stereotype. Benchley and *Jaws* established sharks as an all-too-ordinary menace. Benchley, a committed conservationist, later expressed his dismay for having created a worldwide shark-frenzy. It was his greatest literary achievement.

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