

It might be better in the movie version

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The Raw Shark Texts

By Steven Hall

Canongate. 448 pp. \$24

Reviewed by Mark Sarvas

It's not difficult to see why Steven Hall's debut novel, *The Raw Shark Texts*, should have set off a heated bidding war for the film rights. One can all too easily imagine that pitch session - "It's *Jaws* meets *The Matrix*!" Nothing makes a film executive's heart beat faster than an easily reducible concept, the more derivative the better, as any trip to the multiplex these days can attest.

But what makes for a studio green light works against a novel with literary ambitions. And Hall clearly has ambitions. His allusions, which he wears on his sleeve, range from Orpheus to Paul Auster to - rather ham-fistedly for a novel about amnesia - Clio (the muse of memory). But *The Raw Shark Texts* runs aground on an overly familiar narrative and brings to mind the oft-quoted if apocryphal bon mot attributed to Samuel Johnson: "Your manuscript is both good and original. But the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good." Without necessarily intending to, *The Raw Shark Texts* also raises interesting questions about a generation of novelists whose primary influences are film and television and forces us to consider the line between homage and mere imitation.

Hall opens his story with an unpromising trope - amnesia. Eric Sanderson awakens with a thud to find he has no memory whatsoever, a loss sparked (it seems) by the death of his beloved Clio. But it's clear he's caught up in something unpleasant as his story unfolds via a series of hundreds of letters sent to him by his pre-amnesiac self. He comes to learn that his memories - and his life - are under attack by a "thought fish" intent on devouring him:

The animal hunting you is a Ludovician. It is an example of one of the many species of purely conceptual fish which swim in the flows of human interaction and the tides of cause and effect.

It's a provocative and, yes, original concept but one for which Hall fails to find a meaningful

vocabulary. Throughout the book, the word conceptual is forced into service again and again to describe what's going on, and Hall leans on it to its breaking point. We're offered "a purely conceptual stream," "a living glide of thoughts swimming forward, a moving body of concepts and half felt images," "Two black conceptual sockets," "The concept of the grass" and "A large conceptual thing just below the soil." This is by no means a comprehensive list. Thus, a potentially interesting notion is made so opaque and vague as to be finally meaningless - original but not good.

Just as it appears that Eric is going to succumb to the forces arrayed against him, rescue comes in the form of Scout, an attractive young woman bearing a portentously meaningful resemblance to the departed Clio. Together they embark on a shark hunt to free Eric from his torment once and for all.

The Scout sections settle into a brisk narrative clip and the story hurtles forward engrossingly at times - unsurprising given that it's a near facsimile of the last third of *Jaws* (albeit on, of course, a conceptual level). And it's here that *The Raw Shark Texts* is good (if lazy) - but not original. It's also where we're forced to consider the question of young novelists weaned on pop culture.

Vaulting ambition inevitably risks the possibility of overreaching. It's clear that Hall has a potentially interesting agenda, this mix of high thought and low culture. He is a clever writer, but one is left wishing that he'd given his prose and characters the same level of attention he gives the conceptual ebb and flow of things. Eric's psychiatrist is completely unconvincing both in voice and action. Throughout the book, Hall's dialogue strains for a breeziness that feels forced. And what can only be presumed to be comic relief in the form of a grumpy cat named Ian comes off as little more than tedious mugging. It all bears the imprint of a few too many hours of prime time and Netflix.

Still, there is a generation of readers for whom *The Matrix* is a more relevant touchstone than Italo Calvino. Consider a chapter like this: "The Crypto-Zoology of Purely Conceptual Sharks, Dictaphone Defense Systems and Light Bulb Code Cracking in Selected Letters from the First Eric Sanderson." Or an exchange like this:

I smiled. "So who died and made you so wise?"

"Hmmm . . ." Thinking about it, Scout did a childish shrug. "Maybe God?"

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Wow."

"What?"

"Just - wow."

*If that sort of thing gets you going, then *The Raw Shark Texts* - or the film version, coming sooner or later to a theater near you - might just be your kettle of conceptual fish.*