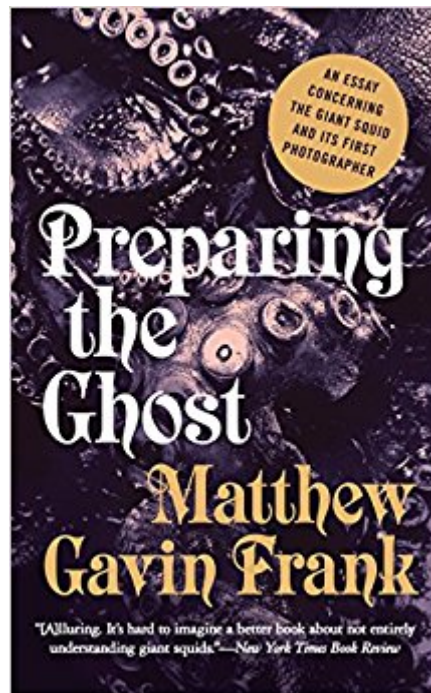




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# Preparing The Ghost: An Essay Concerning The Giant Squid And Its First Photographer



## Synopsis

Memory, mythology, and obsession collide in this “slyly charming” (New York Times Book Review) account of the giant squid. In 1874, Moses Harvey “eccentric Newfoundland reverend and amateur naturalist” was the first person to photograph the near-mythic giant squid, draping it over his shower curtain rod to display its magnitude. In *Preparing the Ghost*, what begins as Harvey’s story becomes spectacularly “slippery and many-armed” (New Yorker.com) as Matthew Gavin Frank winds his narrative tentacles around history, creative nonfiction, science, memoir, and meditations about the interrelated nature of them all. In his full-hearted, lyrical style, Frank weaves in playful forays about his trip to Harvey’s Newfoundland home, his own childhood and family history, and a catalog of peculiar facts that recall Melville’s story of obsession with another deep-sea dwelling leviathan. “Totally original and haunting” (Flavorwire), *Preparing the Ghost* is a delightfully unpredictable inquiry into the big, beautiful human impulse to obsess. 15 drawings

## Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Liveright; 1 edition (June 29, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1631490567

ISBN-13: 978-1631490569

Product Dimensions: 4.6 x 0.9 x 7.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #374,512 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #39 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Photography & Video > Individual Photographers > Essays #111 in Books >

Arts & Photography > Photography & Video > Criticism & Essays #150 in Books > Science &

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## Customer Reviews

“Slyly charming. . . . stunning writing and perversely wonderful research. . . . Alluring.

It’s hard to imagine a better book about not entirely understanding giant squids.” -

Jon Mooallem, New York Times Book Review “In a book as coiled, strange and tentacular as its subject, Matthew Gavin Frank considers the squid. . . . An act of love and erudition.” -

Annalisa Quinn, NPR “One of the handsomest, most elusive creatures on earth and its first

photographer get their close-up in Matthew Gavin Frank's marvelous *Preparing the Ghost*.  
 - Elissa Schappell, *Vanity Fair* "Totally original and haunting in the way you'd expect a book about a real life Presbyterian clergyman and amateur naturalist from the late-19th century and his relationship with a giant squid to be."  
 - Jason Diamond, *Flavorwire* "A great essay takes us into the author's polymathic mind and out to the wondrous world, teaching us something we didn't know we wanted to know."  
 - Patrick Madden, author of *Quotidiana* "Reads like a cross between Walt Whitman and a fever dream. Who would think squid and ice cream go together? I remained riveted to the very last word."  
 - Sy Montgomery, author of *The Good Good Pig* "Matthew Gavin Frank reinvents the art of research in extraordinarily imaginative ways. His meditation on the briefly known and the forever unknowable courts lore (both family and creaturely), invites the fantastical, heeds fact, and turns the human drive to notate and list into a gesture of lyrical beauty."  
 - Lia Purpura, author of *On Looking and Rough Likeness* "Inventive, original, and endlessly interesting, *Preparing the Ghost* is a gorgeous exploration of myth, history, language, and imagination. . . . A journey through passion, obsession, fear, and adventure, and the hunger to behold what lurks within the depths of the sea."  
 - Catherine Chung, author of *Forgotten Country* "The most original book I have read in years."  
 - Lidia Yuknavitch, author of *The Chronology of Water and Dora: A Headcase* "A mysterious but seductive mix of history, creative non-fiction, memoir, and poetry. . . . keeps the reader riveted with the lure of the unknown and dark, sultry prose."  
 - Megan Mayhew Bergman, author of *Birds of a Lesser Paradise* "What a marvelous essay. . . . Take it all in. Revel in its majesty."  
 - Lee Martin, author of *Such a Life* "A multi-tentacled and entirely captivating saga of profound mystery and relentless pursuit."  
 - Dinty W. Moore, author of *Between Panic & Desire* "A mash-up of a meditation on the nature of myth, the magnetic distance between preservation and perseverance, and the sympathetic cravings that undergird pain. In Frank's heart-thumping taxonomy, monstrous behemoths square nicely with butterflies and ice cream. Don't ask me how: read this book!"  
 - Mary Cappello, author of *Swallow: Foreign Bodies, Their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor who Extracted Them* "Part history, part lyric poem, part detective novel  
 Matthew Gavin Frank's *Preparing the Ghost* is just as intriguing and hard to classify as its subject. I never thought I'd care so much about the elusive giant squid, but thanks to this book, I can't help but see its shadow everywhere."  
 - Brenda Miller, author of *Season of the Body and Listening Against the Stone*

Matthew Gavin Frank has previously written about everything from wine-making in a tent in Italy to the social hierarchies of a pot farm in California. He teaches creative writing and lives in Marquette, Michigan.

Delightfully unexpected! Yes, it contains the biography of Moses Harvey, the first man to obtain a photograph of a giant squid, but from that jumping off point the discussion alights on topics ranging from family, death, insects, ice cream, pain, guilt, commerce, obsession, otherness, and mythology. Miraculously, no matter how bizarre the subject matter, Frank connects each element so organically that it seems perfectly natural that the giant squid, butterflies, and death by chocolate ice cream occupy the same space in thought. *Preparing the Ghost* is an eye-opening, mind-bending whirlwind that you don't want to miss.

"Now for the R! Up we go! Attach! Descend! Pay out the line! Whoa! Attach! Good! Up you go! Repeat! Attach! Descend! Pay out line. Whoa, girl! Steady now! Attach! Climb! Attach! Over to the right! Pay out line! Attach! Now right and down and swing that loop and around and around! Now in to the left! Attach! Climb! Repeat! O.K.! Easy, keep those lines together! Now, then, out and down for the leg of the R! Pay out line! Whoa! Attach! Ascend! Repeat! Good girl!" That's Charlotte in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* narrating her acrobatic writing process. You can almost see the little gray spider leaping, twirling, jumping. Creating a miracle of language. Something that's intricate and fragile at once. A thing puzzling and wondrous. I've been carrying a book around in my book bag that is just as strange and beautiful as a dewy spiderweb. Matthew Gavin Frank's *Preparing the Ghost*, a 282-page meditation on the giant squid, Moses Harvey (the first man to photograph it), monomaniacal obsession (think Captain Ahab chasing a *Moby-Dick* with tentacles), death by chocolate ice cream, a fatal Chicago heat wave, a grandfather's saxophone legacy, and an Insectarium. Listed like this, these topics seem like dots of paint on a pointilist canvas. But, stepping back, and back, and back, the book becomes an impressionist landscape of our deepest passions. Frank does not lay out his story easily. Like Charlotte the spider, he plays out his lines slowly, weaving his threads together. The reader gets passages of prose poetry mixed with lists of arcane fact. The result is a blend of reality and myth that questions the very fabric of narrative: Myth as quite possible. Myth as commodity, as bought and sold, as served with a side of potato salad. Myth, in Portugal, encourages the mosquito to eat leather and turn into a flesh-eating cow. Myth, in India, inspires the tribe to receive all necessary sustenance, from the smells of food,

particularly the apple, and, when traveling, to carry the apple with them, as they will perish in the absence of its smell. Myth as On Special!, as Ladies Night Discount! Myth as embedded in our mouths. Frank's Ahab quest in the book seems simple: to find out the details of Moses Harvey's discovery and photographing of a specimen of the giant squid in Newfoundland in 1874. His prize, however, remains elusive. Hiding behind locked doors. Trapped in essays written by Moses Harvey himself, where Harvey fashions his own myths of discovery. Ultimately, Frank's subject is even more difficult to capture than the giant squid itself: And we're always preparing the next ghost, still in its larval state. This time, let's give it a tailored sheet, a wedding dress, a bow tie, a nice clean shave . . . We're preparing the next ghost, as we do with any myth, to best scare us, and define our fear. So far, BOO! is the best we've come up with. Frank's book is larva and moth, myth and fact. In his explorations, he discovers truths about himself and his family. Poppa Dave, a whale of a man who, eventually, succumbs to his own tentacular mantra: "There's always room for ice cream." The compulsion to eat, even when sated. The need to pursue impossible pursuits that slip away like the giant squid in an ocean of black ink. Take some time in these last dog days of summer. Pick up *Preparing the Ghost*, and get trapped in Matthew Gavin Frank's narrative web. It's obsessively fragile and miraculously intricate. I give it four out of four tentacles.

"Can we ever really kill a myth?" author Matthew Gavin Frank asks in *Preparing the Ghost*. "Even though the giant squid has long been proved actual, the beast retains the mythological narrative, can't shake its sea-monster designation. The legend lives on." It's the idea of myths and legends that is explored in Frank's newest book. Yes, the cover sports a subtitle, "An Essay Concerning the Giant Squid and Its First Photographer." And yes, the book starts out in a typical linear narrative with an introduction of Reverend Moses Harvey, an amateur naturalist in the 1870s who is obsessed with the Giant Squid. Indeed, as readers, we even get to see his captured squid in a black-and-white photograph that is found at the very start of the book. (The picture, somehow, reminds me of the monsters in the old monster movies of the 50s and 60s -- even though the picture was taken decades before). Still readers venturing into *Preparing the Ghost* should be prepared. This is not a linear narrative or a typical biography. Instead, Frank weaves myth, science, history, and even personal memoir throughout Harvey's story. Indeed, there are even glimpses of Frank's own research process, including his efforts to find out more information about Harvey and his family and the very landscape that helped to capture the myth of the giant squid. Yet, even though the author wanders, he always returns to Harvey's story and the mysterious squid. Any reader who sticks with the author's meanderings will be treated to intriguing history, interesting mythology and

strong lyrical writing -- and most of all stories that will grab a hold of you and not let go. Sorta, I guess, like the suckers of a Giant Squid.

An interesting non-fiction that I really love.

The first disclaimer here is that I've also read Pot Farm by MGF, and I loved it. So that says something about my taste and expectations. The second disclaimer is that I have had food and drink with the author and I enjoyed myself while doing so. The third disclaimer is that I've read things by authors I adore that I would never in a million years recommend to anyone else (True at First Light by Hem-dog), and I've eaten food and pounded beers and had a downright debauching good time with writers whose work I wouldn't recommend either. This book is fantastic. If you are at all interested in the giant squid and the kind of obsession it can create for those who hunted it, and for those who now hunt the hunters' stories, you must read this. MGF gives us an opportunity to live the myth of the people who tried their damndest to concretize the spectre of the squid back in a time without digital cameras spilling out of every pocket. This is not a book that focuses on the facts or science as much as it focuses on the truth of how the lack of facts and science can impact a person's obsession. It's likely that once you finish reading this you will want to know more about the giant squid. That is not an accident. This book tempts you to obsess, and it's up to you to decide whether you are capable of dealing with the repercussions of the obsession, should you choose to accept it.

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