

Life imitates art in struggle with Japanese whaler

The release of C. George Muller's latest book, *Echoes in the Blue* is timely, given Japan's defiance over demands from New Zealand to move a crippled whaling ship from Antarctic waters. MARTIN PEGAN speaks to the New Zealand wildlife biologist and award-winning novelist about his eco-thriller.

While New Zealand is asking Japan to explain why a whaling ship which drifted off the Antarctic after being crippled by fire was not moved for close to two weeks, despite offers of help from the likes of Greenpeace, eco-terrorism reigns in another part of the Antarctic in C. George Muller's latest book, *Echoes in the Blue*.

Conservation Minister Chris Carter said last week that New Zealand wanted the whale processing vessel, Nisshin Maru moved out of the Antarctic area to avoid an environmental disaster if the weather deteriorated and the ship foundered. "It [the ship] has got 1,100 tons of toxic oil in it and we want it out of there," he told reporters.

However, Japan was determined that the ship would leave the region under its own steam, while New Zealand and conservationists say offers of help to tow the ship away should have been accepted because of the risk it could spill oil or other toxic chemicals in the area, which happened to be in the vicinity of the world's largest Adelle penguin breeding colony.

All of this is hardly news to New Zealand wildlife biologist and award-winning novelist, C. George Muller. His latest book, *Echoes in the Blue* deals with issues surrounding Japan's insistence on sending whaling fleets deep into the Antarctic to kill whales under the guise of 'scientific research'.

"It is disappointing but hardly surprising," Muller said about the latest saga in the Antarctic area. "Despite Greenpeace's Esperanza being the best-suited towing vessel available, the Japanese would rather risk an environmental disaster than suffer the loss of face that would result from their old foe Greenpeace not only rescuing them, but also physically removing them from the whaling grounds."

His eco-thriller sees an unlikely hero in Richard Major sailing from New Zealand with a whale research expedition. On the windswept Southern Ocean he must confront a terrifying adversary – the ruthless fishing industrialists and massive multi-national conglomerates who would wipe out entire species to satisfy an insatiable lust for money and power.

"One of the themes of the story is that Richard starts out not as a hero but as an ordinary guy faced with a difficult choice – about whether to make a stand for what he knows is right," Muller said about similarities between himself and the main character. "From that standpoint Richard may be more a reflection of how I once was, rather than how I am now. I'd have to admit that there's also a lot of me in Richard's brother Cal, a professional marine biologist who has already made the decision to devote his life to trying to make the world a better place."

Mirroring the recent events in the Antarctic and ongoing environmental tragedy, *Echoes in the Blue* could be seen as an exploration of mankind's continual conflict with nature, and the heroism of those who would risk everything to defend a threatened future. Muller seems to see the threat posed to whales as the best example of the destruction of our surroundings.

"Whales are the largest animals ever to have shared our planet, and responsibility for their passing would rest squarely on our shoulders," Muller said. "In some ways they have become a metaphor for the decline of the wilderness areas themselves, a symbol of mankind's relentless conflict with nature."

"The facts warn us that whaling is not sustainable in the long term, as is graphically demonstrated by historical greed and over-hunting, but that is only part of the story," Muller stated. "Cold hard facts alone may not be enough to reach everybody. Let's face it, only other scientists read scientific papers."

"This was one of the main reasons I decided to present the facts surrounding whaling within the pages of an 'eco-thriller' novel – to show people not only what is happening, but what it's really like out there," he added.

While Muller is committed to the cause, he is not overly optimistic that things will change in the foreseeable future. "The Japanese whaling industry uses very underhanded tactics to get their way, including cynical exploitation of the International Whaling Commission's 'scientific whaling' loophole, vote-buying, bribery, intimidation and more," he said.

Perhaps for this reason he is more hopeful that basic economics will influence whaling nations such as Japan – and Norway and Iceland – rather than international pressure.

"One of the ideas explored by *Echoes in the Blue* is that despite the high prices and huge revenue gained from the sale of whale meat, whaling itself is inherently unprofitable due to the massive fuel costs involved and is made possible only by generous subsidies from the Japanese government," Muller explained. "The book points out that if the whaling ships are badly damaged it is likely they could cost too much to repair or replace.

"There is a chance, therefore, that the recent fire aboard the factory ship, as predicted in *Echoes in the Blue*, may yet be able to achieve what 20 years of protests, criticism, and diplomacy could not."

Echoes in the Blue by C. George Muller is published by Koru Press and is available on Amazon. A Donation from every book sold goes to 'Save the Whales'. See www.cgeorgemuller.com for more info.

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