

REVIEW

Underwater Rodeo: Saga of a Deep Sea Diver (2000)

An Autobiographical Novel by Eugene Chicchinelli

Here is the most authentic novel ever written about deep sea diving, a series of exotic adventures with an environmentalist theme. *Underwater Rodeo* (1st Books, 2000; 692 pages; now AuthorHouse) by Eugene Chicchinelli is based upon his own experiences as a king crab fisherman on the icy Bering Sea, as a student diver in Seattle and in England, and for most of the story as a professional deep sea diver maintaining the pipelines in offshore oil fields from the Gulf of Mexico to Borneo and Bombay.

The title refers to the circuit of potential jobs for deep sea divers and to the bravado of the divers, who ride oil pipelines in powerful ocean currents and through underwater explosions and the like, bucking higher than any cowboy on bronco or bull. They perform in the depths unseen and little appreciated, with the courage of heroes.

Underwater Rodeo is very easy to read, with fastpaced episodes of dramatic action vividly rendered, most of them involving how well the men at a job site work and get along with each other, often including a serious injury or death to one of them. Their fates are usually determined by their supervisors, who are often petty tyrants embodying common human traits. Pikerston is a piker, Dhufous is a doofus and so on, whereas the hero Cole C. Cronan is a crony or friend, not Conan the Barbarian but Cronan the civilized man in balance, able to nourish his soul even while working with the most advanced human technology.

Cronan's best friends are Asians, including a Thai family and a tribe of Iban in the jungles of Borneo, who were formerly headhunters. His best diving team is composed of an Indian, an Australian, a Maltese, and an American. One of the main pleasures in this book is its fulfillments of the communal dream, when a diversity of people get along as equals and work together in harmony for the common good, in this case rugged independent men transcending their egos, accomplishing dangerous tasks with trust and teamwork.

In his evocations of palmy tropical seascapes, in his adventurous spirit and in his style, Chicchinelli recalls Jack London, including also his identification with the working classes and his criticism of the self-indulgent rich. *Underwater Rodeo* derives power from the symbolism of diving into the sea, the realm associated in dreams and literature with the unconscious or the soul. Deep diving as a metaphor of exploring the deeper self and the universe is one of several this novel shares with Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, including the pursuit of oil, the monkeyrope interdependence of people in this world and the relationship of the topside ego to the deeper self.

This book is full of wonder in describing the natural world, the sea life around and attached to the oil platforms, the curious little fish, the manta rays, the parrot fish, the frilly toxic lion fish, the deadly stone fish, and the sinister barracuda. Deep sea divers work and dangle above a black abyss, close to death, depending upon an umbilical, until, rising by stages--they are reborn again topside. Cronan compares himself and his feelings to animals repeatedly throughout the book and hopes if reincarnated to return as an orca perhaps, or as a humble little fish. One of his most erotic experiences, among many, is between a little fish and his fingertip.

Cronan is sensitive to beauty above and below the surface. He transcends his roughneck environment, appreciates and respects women, does not flirt, and tries not to hurt them. Chicchinelli narrates from a female point of view at times to convey how difficult relationships with offshore workers can be for girlfriends and wives due to schedules that take men out to sea for long periods and to the danger of such work, especially for divers, who before every job must sign a form stating where they want their remains to be sent.

Underwater Rodeo takes you diving from a bell at a depth of over three hundred feet when all your lines get cut and you are lost in the dark, conveys what it feels like to notice over your shoulder a monstrous shape emerging from the blackness and gliding toward you as wide as a sailboat on extended wings, and

details what happens to the intestines of a diver sitting on a toilet in a decompression chamber when a diving tender mistakenly opens a valve to the toilet. Chicchinelli excels at narrating action, making technical details entertaining and rendering the psychological dynamics of men working under the sea.

Chicchinelli is now a dentist in Brookings, Oregon--and a very good one, I can attest. He is well over six feet tall, a rugged man with longish hair, big articulate hands and a sailboat. In bad weather he wears a long Australian Outback raincoat and a wide-brimmed black hat. Agents missed out when he self-published. His book is solid. It needs some copyediting, but the mechanical flaws are easy to ignore.

Michael Hollister (2015)

