

# Fantasy

By: Michael Carroll



## Michael Carroll

With a B.A. degree from Boston College and an M.A. degree from the Bread Loaf School of English, Michael C. Carroll specializes and lectures on literature from the Anglo-Saxon era, specifically the epic poem of *Beowulf*. His master's program brought him to Oxford University where he studied Old English and the *Beowulf Manuscript* with Oxford professor and author Francis Leneghan. The thesis that he wrote for the program became a 150-page book that explores the climactic dragon fight that concludes *Beowulf*. Michael C. Carroll has a passion for

## All the Inner Sea part One of Two

“

...and the foam flying

spattered the rock in either direction,  
But when in turn again she sucked down the sea salt water, the turbulence showed *all the inner sea...*”

*The Odyssey (XII.239-241)*, trans. Richmond Lattimore

## Wellfleet, Massachusetts: 1949

As the sun set below the churning waters of Cape Cod, the granite clouds of the horizon kept the last shreds of daylight from fading into night. Raindrops trickled between the cobblestones that speckled Wellfleet's seaside boulevard. Ocean waves tested the noble rocks in the harbor below. Every storefront along the coastal road had shut its doors for the evening. The shop owners had flipped their “Welcome” signs to “Closed.”

When the rear door of a lonely taxi slammed shut, only the

seagulls nestled on their seaside perches noticed.

A young, slender traveler stood in the wake of the vehicle's exhaust cloud. Across his shoulders, the traveler wore a thin backpack. In his hand, he held a photograph.

From the center of the abandoned street, the young man could see a wooden sign peeking through the mist. Despite many years weathering the coastal elements, the sign above the boardwalk's final tavern remained intact.

In the sign's center, an old sailor clutched the spokes of a wild helm. A curved pipe dangled from his lips. Over the captain's head, like a rainbow bent above a boundless sea, a set of bold letters announced the alehouse's name.

Ithaca Tavern, est. 1929.

The young man held his polaroid up to the light that pierced the bar's foggy window. Between the drops of rain trickling down his brow, the traveler smiled.

On the sign above the tavern door in the photograph he held, the same captain pinched a pipe between his patient teeth.

The young traveler stared at the familiar men standing in the picture's foreground. His father stood on the right with his

literature, a deep understanding of the Old English source material at the heart of his writing, and a love for grammatical editing born from more than a decade of teaching. Follow him on Instagram at [Michael.C.Carroll](#) for more information about *Beyond the Fall of Kings*, Book One in *The Sons of Hrethel Trilogy*.

arm slung across the shoulder of his business partner. Behind them, a refurbished fishing boat rested on the rack of a tired trailer, the letters of its hand-forged nautical plate—NowYouSeaMe—just within the photograph’s frame. In the vacant space at the bottom of the polaroid, the young man could still decipher his father’s handwriting.

“Wellfleet, MA: 1929. Richmond and Oliver. Maiden Voyage of *Poseidon’s Pest*.”

Tucking the photograph into his pocket, the young man turned the doorknob of The Ithaca Tavern and stepped inside.

Hazy light spilled across the floorboards from lamps hung along the bar’s paneled walls. The night’s final customer gave the traveler a nod as he zipped his jacket and stepped toward the tavern’s door. Along the ceiling’s edge, license plates from cars and boats alike, peered down at the empty bar like seraphim watching over the mortal world.

“Sign says we’re closed,” said the man behind the bar. His broad shoulders did not budge when he spoke. Snatching a towel from beneath the bar, the bartender wiped a pint glass dry with a practiced hand. In his massive palm, the glass looked like a child’s toy in the paw of a grizzly bear.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—” the young traveler said. “I’m

looking for someone named Richmond. If that’s still what he goes by—”

The traveler’s voice trailed off.

With a grunt, the bartender put the glass down on the bar.

“Wait here,” the barkeep said with a grumble as he walked through the tavern’s back door and disappeared from sight.

With the darkness ushered in by the setting sun, the tavern’s cloudy windows made the world inside look like a dusty fishbowl. As the slender traveler took his seat at the bar, he saw an old, nautical plate propped alongside the whiskey bottles on the tavern’s top shelf.

The NowYouSeaMe.

The young traveler smiled. He had come to the right place.

When the door to the tavern’s office opened again, it was not the bartender who stepped across the threshold. From his sandy boots to the top of his salty hair, the man who emerged from the tavern’s office looked not unlike the captain who graced the establishment’s sign. As the old man walked, the rickety cane that supported his weight interrupted his otherwise rhythmic footfalls. While the old man’s downcast gaze focused on the damp floorboards, his mind seemed trapped in a memory long ago formed but not yet forgotten. As the hobbled man approached

the traveler, his stare climbed the barstool to the young man's face. Then, like a dreamer emerging from his slumber, the old man's thoughts returned from whatever weary shore they had visited. The young traveler felt eager to break the silence. "I—I'm sorry. I know you're closed. I'm looking for the owner. I believe he goes by Richmond."

When the old man remained silent, the young traveler spoke again.

"My name's Lattimore," the traveler said. "I believe you knew my father. He wrote in his will that you and I had some business he wanted for us to discuss."

After another pensive pause, the young traveler watched a delicate smile curl at the corner of the tavern owner's mouth.

"My God," the old man said at last. "You look just like him."

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"Do you know the odds of prying open an oyster and finding a pearl?"

As the tavern owner spoke, he unfurled a map of Cape Cod across the top of the bar. With a nimble hand, Lattimore snatched his pint glass before the map's rolling edge spilled his porter across the island of Nantucket. "I haven't the faintest idea," Lattimore said. "My father was always the one with an intimate knowledge of the sea."

Richmond's chin sank at the mention of his old friend. "Yes, I suppose he was."

After a sip from their respective glasses, a contemplative silence overtook the room.

When the old man at last found the words he wished to say, he spoke them quietly. "I owe you an apology for not attending his funeral. With accidents on the open sea, it's easier for sailors like me to weep for a night and then forget it ever happened. And when forgetting doesn't come easy—"

The tavern owner uncorked the whiskey bottle he had positioned alongside the map and filled his glass until the amber liquid rose nearly level with the brim. With a nod, Lattimore took a long drink from his glass.

Lattimore did not blame the old man for burying his sorrow as deep as possible. After all, the old man was not at fault for steering the vessel the night of his father's drowning. The old captain's gloves were gripping the helm when the boat's fishing net ensnared his father's leg and dragged him to the depths of the hungry sea. Instead, Lattimore blamed his father for failing to tuck into his sock a knife that could have saved his life.

He blamed his father, and he blamed the sea.

"To your father," Richmond said, breaking the young traveler from

his trance. "May his beer be cold, and his nets be full, whatever waters he now floats upon."

Lattimore nodded and took a melancholy sip. When he lowered his glass, he saw the nautical plate on the bar's top shelf glisten in the lamp light. Richmond caught the traveler glancing toward the plate and turned to retrieve the heirloom.

Before he spoke, the tavern owner held the plate like an injured sparrow in his hands. "It seems you've discovered a trace of our past. It didn't feel right to position this one alongside the others. Not after all the work your dad put into our business. We could never agree on the inscription. I told him if he named the boat, I could forge the plate. He still refused. Didn't speak to me for a week when he saw what I chose. 'NowYouSeaMe.' I liked the magical flare. Your father hated it. He wanted it to read to do with pride. Something from a story he loved."

"Odysseus' escape from Polyphemus," Lattimore said, his stare never veering from the map. "It's the alias he uses to outsmart the cyclops."

"Ah. A deep sea diver *and* a scholar. Very good." Impressed, Richmond took another sip and grinned.

Lattimore did not.

The young traveler regretted his outburst. He wished he had kept

his father's love for Homer's epic to himself. It was a secret passion he and his father had shared, a thread that knit their adventurous souls together.

"Alright," Richmond said after the whiskey finished searing his throat. "Enough about the past. Let's get back to the oysters—one in ten thousand. Those are your chances of prying open one of those beautiful bottom-feeders and finding yourself a pearl. One in ten thousand."

"Admittedly, not the best odds," the old man continued, placing his glass on the map's edge to keep the page from curling. "But keep that ratio in mind—one in ten thousand—and take a look here."

Old age had corroded the hand that hovered over the map's topography. Lattimore leaned over the bar for a better view of the region Richmond indicated. "Right along the harbor here," the old man's finger traced the bay's interior coast, "there are about a dozen oyster farms. Their main objective? Filling the mollusk pots of our coastal restaurants. Whatever rogue pearls they find are sold to the shops on Newbury Street for an extra buck. Not bad work. But there's one farm that follows a different mode of operation."

"Tucked away in this cove here," Richmond pointed to an inlet on the map with his left hand and reached for his whiskey glass with his right, "is the oyster farm of The Athena Corporation. It sits just beyond an unforgiving pass—the Charybdis Canal—through which no ship has ever navigated. Their builders spent years lowering lumber down the bluffs rather than test the waters of that treacherous waterway."

Richmond leaned closer to the map. "Not long after constructing their farm, the number of oysters sold by the Athena Corporation to restaurants dropped substantially. It became clear that they had a new objective in mind."

Richmond grinned. He was enjoying the attention of a captive audience. "One in ten thousand was no longer favorable odds, it seemed. The Athena Corporation wanted to tip the scales."

Rain trickled down the murky windows in steady streams. Wind tested the tavern door. The sign for the candy shop across the street swayed back and forth on its metal chains.

"The Athena Corporation put their money into the development of their oyster farms with the sole purpose of harvesting pearls," Richmond said, leaning on his cane. "One pearl for every *hundred* oysters. That was their goal. I'm sure you can imagine the money they would make with such a skewed ratio in a market otherwise left to chance."

"It sounds more like witchcraft than harvesting to me," Lattimore said, taking a meager sip from his porter. Before the young man could set the glass upon the wooden bar, however, the old man had already taken the glass from his hand and placed it under the tap to fill.

"Well," Richmond said, returning the overflowing drink to the young traveler, "if the rumors around the bay are true, they found a way to manipulate the oyster's diet. They started importing truckloads of ingredients from all over the world to craft the perfect regiment for their mollusks. Ambrosia they called it. Nectar of the gods. Not long after that, they developed a system to monitor the saline levels of their bay."

Richmond shook his head as he continued, "And then, in case manipulating God's creation was not hubris enough, they built a turbine to regulate the temperature of their inlet's water."

Noticing Lattimore's incredulous face, Richmond laughed. "That's right, lad. You heard me correctly. They raised the temperature of the bloody ocean! Their small corner of the ocean, at least."

Lattimore's gaze wandered towards the license plates along the ceiling's edge as he calculated the profits The Athena Corporation would see. The sound of Richmond's cane striking the floorboards halted the

traveler's tally before he could reach its final sum.

"It paid off for them, Lattimore," the old man said, "because they did it. The bastards did it. One pearl for every hundred oysters." "Unbelievable," Lattimore said, glancing at the compass in the corner of the map. Despite the stained color of the artifact, the depictions printed on the map's canvas had hardly faded.

According to the scale in the map's corner, the bay that held The Athena Corporation's oyster farm was about five miles from The Ithaca Tavern.

"But they didn't stop there," Richmond's voice rose like a priest delivering an impassioned sermon. "They flew even closer to the sun. A pearl in every hundred oysters was not enough. About that time, they stopped selling their products to restaurants altogether. They had themselves a golden goose. What purpose would feeding hungry mouths now serve? Decorating the ears and necks of the women of Boston became their business. And business was good. Business was *very good*."

With another sip of whiskey, Richmond leaned closer to the young traveler. "So good, in fact, that they aren't just harvesting a pearl in every hundred." Richmond's voice rose in a crescendo as he drew toward his conclusion, "They aren't harvesting a pearl in every ten.

Lattimore, my dear boy, every single oyster they harvest in that bay has a pearl inside."

"Every one?" Porter nearly spilled from Lattimore's nose.

Richmond struck his cane on the floorboards after each word.

"Every. Damn. One."

"That's impossible," Lattimore shook his head.

"I thought the same thing myself, but they've done it. They played God, and it paid off. They could fill their pockets with the pearls they lift from that harbor and have enough left over to throw at the seagulls that pester their docks."

"That must mean," Lattimore said, glancing towards the license plates again as he calculated, "that each of their employees could retire from the profits of a single colony."

"Wrong," said Richmond, smiling over the rim of his whiskey. "It means whoever has their *oysters* could retire from the profits of a single colony."

Lattimore fixed his attention on the old sailor and raised his brow,

"But you can't mean—"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"You can't be serious," Lattimore pushed aside his beer. "With a fortune like that hooked to their docks, they must have a dozen guards monitoring the roads to their property. And even if you were able to somehow make your way past their security, how do you plan on extracting a fully

matured oyster colony from their harbor without anyone noticing?"

"Those security measures only matter if you arrive by land, my skeptical Paul Revere," Richmond said. "And I don't plan to extract one. I plan to extract three."

"You're insane," Lattimore could no longer censor himself.

"I prefer bold...cavalier. Besides, I haven't even come to the best part."

In defeated disbelief, the young man motioned for Richmond to continue.

"You're right. From the road, the corporation's security can't be breached, but from the water,"

Richmond rubbed his hands together with enthusiasm,

"there's only the canal and a turbine monitor that fluctuates when the tide surges. And when that harbor takes on a storm like it will tomorrow night—"

"The waves from the storm will naturally set off the monitors."

"Precisely," the word hissed across Richmond's whiskey-dampened lips, "which just leaves the channel."

"This was always your plan, wasn't it?" Lattimore shook his head. "You and my father planned this heist back when you were fishing the bay. And he died before you had a chance to enact it."

"Listen," for the first time since he entered the tavern, Richmond looked directly at the young man's face. Lattimore did not

dare look away. “The night your father drowned, I swore this plan would die with him. I tucked this map away and promised myself I would never take it out again. Then, you walked through my tavern door holding that photograph, and I would have sworn you were his bloody ghost. I never thought your old man would have wanted you caught up in all of this, but when you mentioned his will—”

The old man caught himself before drifting off into the uncharted waters of his mind. “It seems your father wanted to provide you with a future.”

The young traveler exhaled before he spoke again, “A canal that narrow, in a storm as severe as the one to come...we’d be lucky to make it out alive, much less with our treasure in tow.”

“Lattimore, this heist can be done.” Richmond’s voice was even. “We just need a sailor. That’s me. And a diver.”

The old man tipped his glass toward the young traveler, “That’s approving smile as well. you.”

Running a contemplative hand through his hair, the young man leaned backwards on his barstool and stared at the low ceiling. How many times had his father sat in his same chair and shared a drink with this wild, old man? Did those jagged lines depicted along the bay’s coast give him the same uneasy feeling in his gut and bones?

Overlooking the ancient map in a tired Wellfleet tavern, Lattimore wondered if his father had ever felt the stare of those same nautical plates burning the back of his neck as well.

Deep within his veins, Lattimore felt the current of his blood quicken and pulse. He felt the words churning from within like an undertow beneath a powerful wave. He felt his answer reverberate from the hollow chambers of his heart before he opened his mouth to speak.

“Alright, you crazy, old sailor. I’m in.”

“Yes!” said Richmond, an elated expression plastering his face.

The old man raised what little liquid remained at the bottom of his glass in triumph. “Tomorrow evening, we disembark. Tonight, we drink.”

Lattimore tipped his glass toward the old captain and smiled.

The nautical plate from *Poseidon’s Pest* nestled on the tavern’s top shelf gave an