

“Falling in love” – sort of Shamu

In the 1980's I would sometimes return from a vacation and tell my friends that I had fallen in love, again. They learned not to ask “Who is she?”. Instead they would say “What was it this time”.

One year I told them it was Shamu, a killer whale at Sea World in Orlando.

That summer I had been to Tampa, where I was born, with my young sons and spent some time with them in Orlando. We went to Sea World and saw a number of exhibits and shows. My favorite was Shamu, the killer whale. We sat on the side of what seemed like a roughly Olympic size swimming pool, but shaped differently, and quite deep. The trainers introduced several killer whales, sometimes alone, sometimes two, or three, I think. Shamu was the star of the show.

Killer whales, of the species Orca, are largest species of the dolphin family. Shamu was a female. Wikipedia states that females range from 5 to 7 m (16 to 23 ft) and weigh 3.3 to 5.5 tons. Orca is the only [extant](#) species in the genus [Orcinus](#) and is recognizable by its black-and-white patterned body. A [cosmopolitan species](#), orcas can be found in all of the world's oceans in a variety of marine environments, from [Arctic](#) and [Antarctic regions](#) to tropical seas.

We sat in the front row in the middle of the long side of the pool. The row was marked with a sign saying something like “If you sit in this row there is a good chance you will be splashed by water from the pool.” We were splashed. This enormous creature would go ten or more feet into the air before crashing, joyfully, into the water.





I was quite taken with Shamu from the moment I saw her, but my infatuation did not reach full flower until the following incident.

At the beginning of the show Shamu entered the pool and cruised around waiting for the show to begin. The trainers were on the other side of the pool from us, in black wet suits, and were setting up props that would be used during the show. Shamu would occasionally visit them for a pat or maybe a snack.

At one point Shamu was over near us and just kind of hanging out. Across from us I saw the trainers moving things around and one of them accidentally bumped into a prop, something like a wooden foot stool, and it fell into the water and sunk to the bottom of the pool. The trainers were looking down at it and talking, probably about the best way to bring it up.

I noticed this. So did Shamu. She swam over and down to the prop and pushed it up to the surface and out where the trainers could grab it. This was not something they had instructed it to do. It seemed to me that Shamu knew they needed that prop out of the water and decided to help them. I was very impressed and thus began my love affair with Shamu.