

# Jumping the shark

By Pia de Jong - August 2, 2016



*Illustration by Eliane Gerrits*

Every drama needs a villain. For Americans dealing with summer heat waves, hot dogs, and endless beach days, the villain of choice, year after year, is always the same: the shark.

At the first hint of a shark sighting, or even the rumor of a shark sighting, the newspapers and television stations dispatch every available reporter to stand knee-deep in the surf, talking grimly about the terrible threat to unsuspecting swimmers. Could it be the most fearsome monster of all, the Great White Shark?

At the height of summer a cable channel proclaims Shark Week and shows nonstop shark programs, 24/7. Millions of viewers, including my children, are chained helplessly to the screen. Then there is Sharknado, the totally ridiculous low-budget disaster movie where a waterspout

lifts man-eating sharks out of the ocean and deposits them in Los Angeles. This summer we even have the pleasure of the recently released Sharknado 4: The Fourth Awakens, when the sharks invade Las Vegas.

Who knows when the moviemakers will stop jumping the shark? The desire to push the envelope goes beyond what even the entrepreneurs on the reality show Shark Tank might dream up. Several “sharknados” flow together in a huge “sharkicane,” launching sharks in the area where they attack the space shuttle. What will they think of next year? Sharks on Mars? Nobody in the cosmos is safe from these monsters.

Every year, of course, there are some actual deadly attacks, often in Australia. With all this misery we might easily forget that there are more people who die every year from bee stings than shark attacks.

We can trace the beginning of the shark craziness to our own part of New Jersey. The late Peter Benchley was a struggling writer whose office was in the back of a garage in Pennington where furnaces were retrofitted with jackhammers. When he submitted his umpteenth corny script to his publisher, the advice that came back was simple: delete all but the first five lines. So Benchley wrote about a great white shark who terrorizes the shore at a small beach town on Long Island.

The rest is money-making history. When Benchley called his wife to tell her about the enormous advance he received for this book, she burst into tears and exclaimed, “Our lives will never be the same!”

She was right. “Jaws” was published in 1974 and

instantly became a bestseller of a magnitude that the world had never before seen. The following year came the topper with the eponymous film by the novice director Steven Spielberg, the first true summer blockbuster in the history of Hollywood.

Benchley later had mixed feelings about his monster's commercial success. He loved sharks and was sorry that he had given them such a bad reputation. From now on they would be hunted mercilessly. Benchley devoted the rest of his life to the preservation of the ocean and all that swims in it, small and large.

As it happened, with his newly acquired wealth Benchley and his wife had bought a big house in Princeton with a tennis court and a swimming pool. At the bottom of the pool they painted a life-size shark with the familiar gaping jaws. To my surprise, a soccer friend of my son now lives in this house, just a few blocks from mine.

High time for some in-depth investigative journalism. The new owner kindly gives us a tour of this imposing villa. While I wander from room to room, I secretly have eyes only for one thing: the pool. At the end of the tour we slowly approach the water. I hear the familiar swelling music in my head: boom-boom, boom-boom. Or is it my rapidly beating heart? Who dares to swim here?! Very carefully I peer over the edge to look down to the bottom. But, unfortunately, the shark had been painted over.

A surprise ending not even Hollywood would dare write.

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