

The Sea Captain's Daughter: One who refused to stay ashore

It's high romance and high seas adventure in the mid-1800s as a captain's wife manages to join him aboard a globe-trotting merchant ship, daughter in tow

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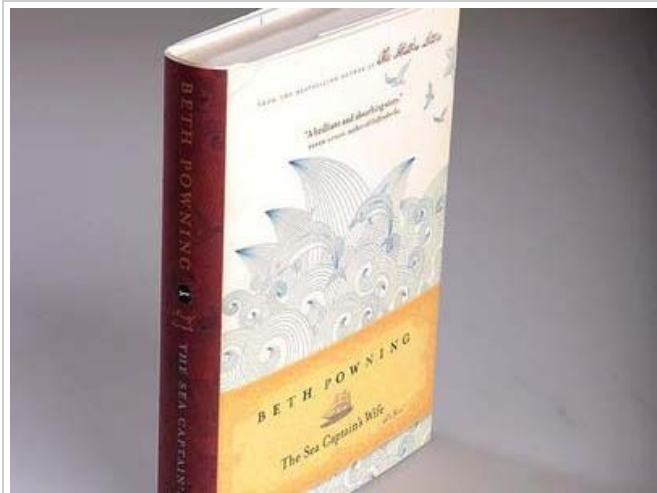
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Donna Bailey Nurse

New Brunswick's Beth Powning lets her imagination run away from her in *The Sea Captain's Wife*. This turns out to be just fine, as we lucky readers get to go along for the voyage. It's highbrow Harlequin meets high-seas adventure. Powning gussies up both forms: Rather than typical "boy-meet girl" romance, her love story anatomizes a struggling young marriage; rather than a salty sailor, this ocean epic recounts the escapades of a sea-faring wife.



"The Sea Captain's Wife," by Beth Powning (Knopf Canada, 372 pages, \$32)

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

The novel opens in the early 1860s in a New Brunswick town called Whelan's Cove, where Azuba Galloway marries Nathaniel Bradstock. Both are the offspring of wealthy shipyard owners. Nathaniel is the man of Azuba's dreams and captain of the merchant ship *Traveller*. Nathaniel promises to take her with him when he sails.

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When the time arrives for their departure, however, he changes his mind. He is afraid of exposing his young wife to the dangers of life on a merchant sailing ship. While away, Nathaniel misses the birth of their first child, Carrie. After he departs a second time, Azuba suffers a miscarriage. Lonely, angry and frustrated, Azuba determines Nathaniel will never leave her again.

She gets her way eventually, when her ill-fated friendship with a minister ends in scandal. Humiliated before the town, Nathaniel is forced to take Azuba and Carrie with him on a perilous journey around Cape Horn and across the Pacific. Azuba is happy enough at first, despite the resentment of the crew. Of course, she gets more than she bargains for: deadly storms, shipwreck, desperate hunger and mutiny.

Powning's craft elevates this novel above pure genre. She vividly conjures the unceasing industry of the merchant ship, complete with shanty tunes, charmingly incorporated into the narrative. Her characters and elements of the natural world, especially the plant life, are thoroughly imagined. This accumulation of detail never overwhelms; it simply convinces.

Dated letters and log entries enhance the sense of a world unfolding in real time. Hovering ominously in the background is the blight of slavery and civil war. When *Traveller* takes up a load of guano on Peru's Chincha Islands, Azuba learns of 50 slaves who joined hands and

leapt to their death.

Ultimately this is a novel about relationships, the changes wrought by time and the long, rocky voyage that constitutes marriage. After the scandal, Azuba strives to earn back Nathaniel's trust, while seething at his tendency to treat her as a lesser crew member. Nathaniel struggles to accept his wife as autonomous, capable and strong.

While the *Traveller* takes on cargo, the family lodges in port cities. They stay in luxurious accommodations appropriate to their status, a far cry from the privations of the ship. In London, San Francisco and Antwerp, seamstresses make dresses for Azuba and Carrie in rich, colourful fabrics. They take in all the local sights from the seats of hansom cabs.

The Sea Captain's Wife is one of those rare works that reconciles and satisfies both aspects of the female soul – the quest for adventure and the desire for beauty and love.

Donna Bailey Nurse is a Toronto author and freelance writer.