

Fast tale sails with prose

REVIEW

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Last Updated: 5th February 2010, 1:35pm

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The Sea Captain's Wife, By Beth Powning, Knopf Canada, \$32.

Readers will find a streak of the poetic in all of Beth Powning's work, including her new novel, *The Sea Captain's Wife*. As in her two wonderfully wrought memoirs, *Edge Seasons* and *Shadow Child* and in her widely lauded first novel, *The Hatbox Letters*, the New Brunswick writer proves a master of descriptive dexterity. Her keen eye for landscape and for detail give her work a rewarding resonance.

The captain's wife of the novel is Azuba Galloway Bradstock, an intelligent, imaginative young woman stifled by the manners and mores of her time. The time is the early 1860's and Azuba wishes to sail with her sea captain husband to busy harbours, great cities and exotic locales. Her adventurous spirit is quelled when she becomes pregnant and husband Nathaniel decides the perils and discomforts of an ocean voyage are not to be risked. Azuba, daughter of a shipwright, had counted on accompanying her husband on his travels and had longed to learn about life aboard ship.

Instead, Azuba must wait months, even years, for Nathaniel's return. She must raise their small daughter alone, in Whelan's Cove on the Bay of Fundy, tend the flower garden, embroider, sew, supervise the servants, sit in a church pew and attend tea parties. It is not the life she had envisioned when she had agreed to marry a sea captain.

Shortly after Nathaniel's next departure, Azuba suffers a miscarriage. Her melancholy deepens until she strikes up a friendship with the vicar of her church. Azuba and Simon

Walton, a shy bachelor, find much to share. He is a painter as well as a minister, and the two, accompanied by Azuba's daughter Carrie, take long walks along the seashore, sketching, gathering shells and driftwood and feasting on cake and tea at the end of their excursions. Azuba's world expands.

But Azuba and Simon become victims of a swirl of gossip, when, having fallen asleep after a rich picnic they become stranded, overnight, by the tide. The entire town searches for them and speculation simmers. When Nathaniel returns he hears the snide rumours, denies his wife any attempt at explanation and, gravely angry, determines to take his wife and five-year-old daughter on his next voyage. It is at sea, aboard the *Traveller*, that Azuba and Nathaniel must work through the problems her indiscretion and his unreasonable rage have provoked.

Although there are elements of romantic fiction in *The Sea Captain's Wife*, Powning's impressive prose, her skill at setting a scene, her rare descriptive power override the odd formulaic turn. Nathaniel, for instance, is the masterful hero personified; handsome, brooding, bearded, a Mr. Rochester of the high seas with his own Jane Eyre-like Azuba to save him from himself.

As the *Traveller* sets sail, Azuba is captivated by the sea and sky of the Atlantic. "What had once seemed monotonous changed in Azuba's eyes to a landscape of transcendent beauty. She stood at the railing watching spilling shawls of iridescent froth. Shadows raced, lifting or darkening the sea's mood. Occasionally whales or porpoises rolled from the depths.

It was like being granted a glimpse of divinity."

Life aboard a 19th century sailing ship is dramatically depicted in the novel: tension between captain and crew, between truculent husband and eager wife, tedium and excitement, claustrophobic cabins and dangers above deck, the exhilaration of catching sail, the despair when food runs out during the Doldrums. Animals must be slaughtered for food, weevils may appear on dinner plates, water may run dry and hens refuse to lay. A child who is, at first, enchanted by life at sea, is later traumatized.

And then there is what Azuba has always hankered for: the colour and bustle of foreign ports, great cities like New York, London, Antwerp. Luxurious hotels. European shops. Then the dangers of rounding Cape Horn on the journey to California. The perils of criss-crossing the Atlantic. The voyage to Hong Kong. Pirates off the coast of China, intent on mayhem.

Running like a braid through Powning's lively, well-researched chronicle is the changing relationship between Nathaniel and Azuba, the emotional setbacks and the slowly growing respect which may, or may not, salvage their tattered marriage. Nathaniel's selfish determination to live as he pleases, Azuba thinks, is little different from her own self-absorbed bent, "that lack of compassion on both their parts was the fertile ground in which loneliness thrived."

And Azuba fears Nathaniel's response to a new life on land with its boredom, its bills of lading, its dim-witted cows and horses in harness. "She had seen him engaging wind, clouds, sun, stars, the shape of waves, the colour of water . . . pondering how each affected the other and what his own place was within the intricate puzzle, and how he might accommodate himself either to survive or to take advantage."

The Sea Captain's Wife is a terrific tale, fast-moving and expertly told, one which measures, in the author's phrase, "the true size of the world." Like *The Hatbox Letters*, Powning's second cleverly crafted novel is not to be missed.

Nancy Schiefer is a London freelance writer.

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