

Reviewed by Gale Zoë Garnett

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For travellers, virtual and actual, *The Sea Captain's Wife* offers a fine and variegated journey: back in time (to the 1860s) and around the world on a merchant sailing ship.

Azuba Galloway Bradstock, the book's protagonist, born and raised in coastal New Brunswick, within sight, sound and scent of the sea, loves her town but yearns to see and know the wider world.

When she marries Nathaniel Bradstock, captain of Traveller, Azuba expects to sail at her husband's side. This is frowned upon by both the local coterie of sea captains' wives and by Nathaniel, who knows both the joys and perils of sea voyages.



The Sea Captain's Wife, by Beth Powning, Knopf Canada, 371 pages, \$32

Azuba, strong and smart, but a woman of her time, accedes to her husband's wishes. They soon have a daughter, Carrie. Mother and daughter adjust to waiting many months, and then rejoicing in the return of husband and father.

This pattern alters when Azuba befriends the local reverend, a talented painter. The friendship, also enjoyed by young Carrie, is chaste, but not without a polite undercurrent of romantic potential. It complicates when the two adults, who've wandered up a coastal hill to picnic, paint, eat and drink, fall asleep and are trapped by high tide until morning, with an anxious small town looking for them.

“The book is clearly thoroughly researched, yet never reads as written research”

Captain Bradstock returns, hears the gossip, feels cuckolded by it, and tells his wife she cannot be trusted. He informs her that “you’ll get your wish. You and Carrie will come with me.” Azuba, despite her husband’s anger and refusal to discuss the gossip and/or truth of the matter, says, “I am glad for your decision. ... I’m glad to be going with you.”

“I have no choice,” Nathaniel replies. “Therefore, it is your choice. Remember that.”

If this sounds like a formulaic historical romance novel, it is somewhat that sort of thing at the start. I thought, “Oh no. Not Scarlett O’Hara, Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes.” The next thought was, “I’m a hypocrite. If this were Jane Austen or *Masterpiece Theatre*, I would be raptly and happily taking it in.”

The third, and most important point is that Beth Powning is an extraordinary writer, one whose previous books include *The Hatbox Letters* and *Shadow Child*. Her people are as real as personal friends, neighbours or compelling strangers. The watchful, visually engaged girl-child, Carrie, is, through both descriptive power and economy of prose, one of the most deeply affecting characters I’ve

encountered. Language choices are always the most alive and apposite. The writing rings true to its period without ever sounding like a device (“it was borne upon her that she must learn to fold waiting into living ... stillness within motion”).

The journey that follows shows us vertiginous sea storms, tropical islands and cosmopolitan 19th-century European and American port cities. We experience the turbulent, otherworldly, dangerous beauty of Cape Horn, the stifling heat and stillness of a becalmed ship with radically diminished provisions, a starving hen attacking Carrie's bone buttons, needing calcium for the shells of its eggs.

When we and the Bradstocks least expect it, there is a pirate attack; vividly bloody, almost unfathomably violent, yet without a trace of gore-junky indulgence. All this, and more, shapes the external journey of the ship and the emotional journey of the family.

Late in the book, *Traveller*, a huge vessel for many chapters, is reduced in relation to the new technology of the metal-clad Liverpool, run by men and powerful machines, from the bowels of the hold. We witness this through Captain Bradstock's eyes, as he realizes that the life he knows and loves will soon pass into history.

For all its originality of voice, *The Sea Captain's Wife* does evoke other books, most notably Bharatee Mukherjee's superlative *The Holder of the World*. Azuba, with her gutsy, sea-seeking spirit, reminded me of Tarl Prackett in Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Greenstone*. Her deepening knowledge of seafarers' medicines crosscuts with M.F.K. Fisher's *A Cordial Water*.

The book is clearly thoroughly researched, yet never reads as written research but as lives fully and panoramically lived. It reads as real. I am a witness to its truth and sweep. I read, and was there.

As a teenager, contributing reviewer Gale Zoë Garnett sailed from Marseilles to Malmo, Sweden. A landlubber who could cook, she was put in charge of the galley. The on-deck crew of four seemed pleased with the food.