

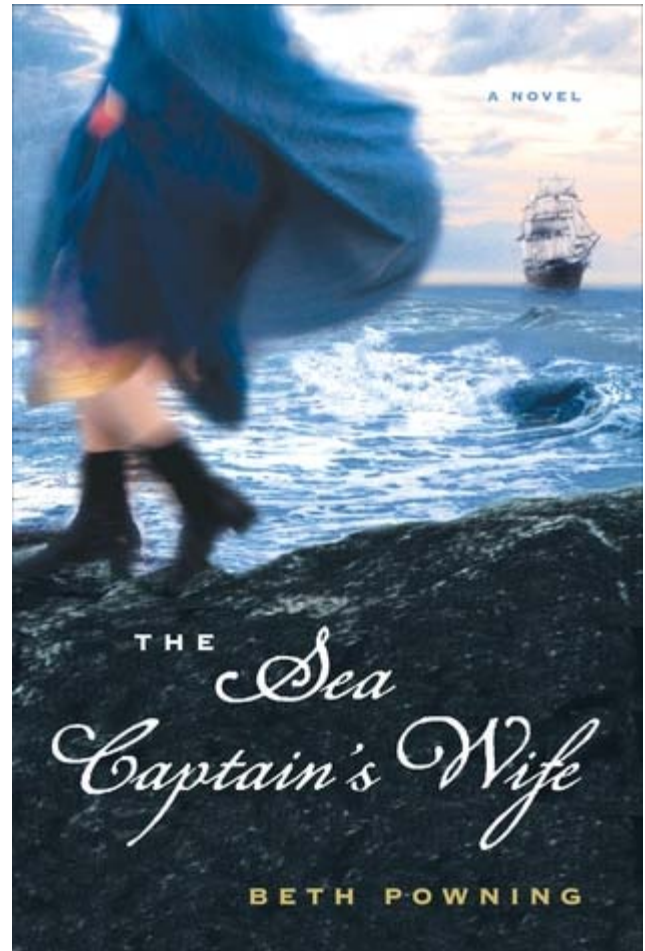
Mystic-al tales of the sea

By AMY J. BARRY Special to the Day

Publication: The Day

Published 02/22/2011 12:00 AM

Updated 02/22/2011 05:17 AM



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Beth Powning to discuss new novel and 19th-century seafaring women

Beth Powning takes her readers on an adventure on a 19th-century sailing ship in her new novel, "The Sea Captain's Wife." She also takes us deep into the hearts and minds of her characters, creating a work of fiction that pays as much attention to the people who inhabit its pages as it does to accurate historical detail.

Powning put in long hours of research to construct this novel—from reading 150-year-old women's diaries and captains' logs to poring through photographs and museum archives to perusing costume departments, and even consulting with physicians about illnesses of the era.

Here in Connecticut, Mystic Seaport played an integral role in Powning's research.

Glenn Gordiniere, ship's historian at Mystic Seaport, helped the author fill in the picture of the novel's fictitious merchant ship "Traveller," which she based on a real 1860s vessel.

"All I had was a tiny photograph with figures in it and all I knew about the ship was that it was built in Liverpool," Powning says. "Glenn Gordiniere clearly studied it with a magnifying glass and gave me all kinds of specifics about it."

"A lot of phenomenal material came from Mystic Seaport-maps, archives, etc.," she adds. "It was a huge resource."

Powning was born and raised in Hampton, Conn., and now lives near Sussex, New Brunswick, on Canada's Bay of Fundy with her husband, the sculptor Peter Powning. She is also author of three nonfiction titles and a novel, "The Hatbox Letters," which was a national bestseller in Canada.

"The Sea Captain's Wife" was first published in Canada, where it won the 2010 Lieutenant Governor's Award.

The story and the back story

The novel's protagonist, Azuba Bradstock, is an intelligent, strong-willed woman, raising a young daughter, Carrie, alone in a small coastal town (similar to Powning's), while her husband, Nathaniel, is perpetually out at sea at the helm of the Traveller.

Lonely and restless, Azuba tries to convince Nathaniel to take her along on his next voyage, but it isn't until a scandal, caused by a friendship Azuba develops with the Rev. Walton that Nathaniel relents-to save his reputation-and takes his wife and daughter onboard.

In unflinching detail, Powning describes the difficult and at times life-threatening passages through heavy seas, pirate attacks and horrendous storms and the weeks spent in hot, stagnant doldrums, as the ship runs out of provisions. This is all in contrast-but consistent with Powning's research of 1800s seafaring families-to their pampered lives in luxurious hotels while docked in various ports in Europe and Asia.

The seed for the novel was planted when Powning was researching another novel and pulled a book off the shelf titled "Women at Sea in the Age of Sail," which caused her to literally change course, and plunge, as she says, into writing the book.

"I realized how many stories there were about these women and how brave they were," she says. "I kept reading their diaries and journals...and I really wanted to get inside these women and find out what they were feeling."

Powning says the hardest part of writing the novel was figuring out who the characters really were, and what motivated them. And then it dawned on her.

"I saw why I was writing this book. It's about marriage and love, compromise and rage, and what life teaches us-very contemporary" issues, she says.

"When we research the past, we realize how alive and like us people were, even way back," she notes. "I read about a woman who was her husband's navigator and about an American woman who sailed a ship in a race around Cape Horn. Women had to be amazingly adventuresome and brave-how many of these women did we study growing up? I always thought men sailed ships and the women stayed home."

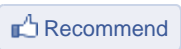

An important theme in her research, reflected in the novel, Powning points out, is how conflicted women felt about going with their husbands out to sea or remaining back on land.

"I moved to New Brunswick in 1972-it was really isolated and I knew what Azuba felt like," she says. "I had these deep New England connections. I will always be torn. I'm deeply at home in two places.

"That feeling of being torn is something that really interests me," she adds. "All those things you go through personally as a novelist are invaluable."

Although it's always important that her characters grow and learn something by the end of a novel, Powning says she never knows what, exactly, it's going to be.

"It comes to me like a revelation-'Oh, yes, this is what she learned,'" she explains. "And until I get to that moment, I don't feel that the book is finished."

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