 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Powning's signature style weaves exciting story of obligation, devotion

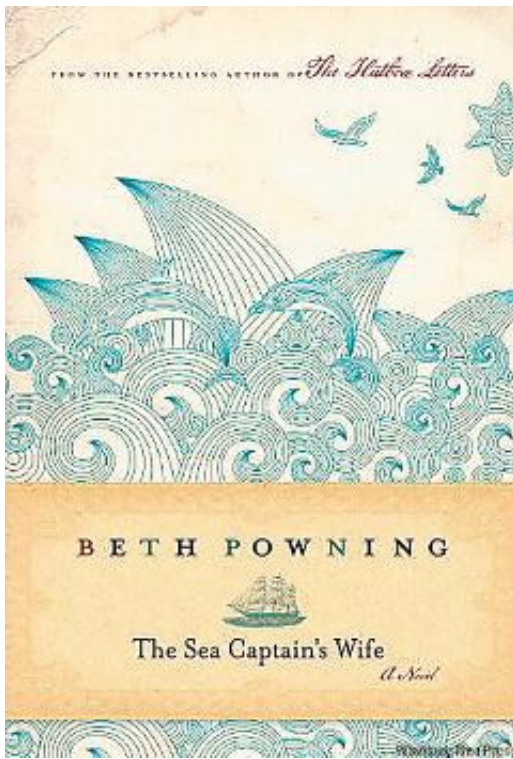
By: Reviewed by Jennifer Ryan

16/01/2010 1:00 AM | [Comments: 0](#)



[Enlarge Image](#)

Beth Powning



[Enlarge Image](#)

The Sea Captain's Wife

By Beth Powning

Knopf Canada, 372 pages, \$32

Maritime-based literary writer Beth Powning, author of the successful *Hatbox Letters* and the nature-themed memoir *Edge Seasons*, proves her versatility with her latest novel, *The Sea Captain's Wife*.

Part historical fiction, part love story and part tragedy, it is bound together by the strengths of Powning's signature nature writing.

The sea captain's wife is Azuba Bradstock, a young mother who lives in New Brunswick in the 1860s. Azuba means "the deserted," which her mother describes as "a poor meaning (...) for a beautiful name." However, deserted is exactly how Azuba feels.

She is headstrong, slightly adventurous and not content to stay at home while her sea captain husband, Nathaniel, sails the world on his aptly named ship, Traveller, for years at a time.

She longs to be a family at sea, like the rough and tumble women she remembers meeting as a child on the shipyard.

She lives with her daughter, Carrie, near the coastline, yet in her heart she is landlocked. Azuba is jealous of Nathaniel's lifestyle, and feels trapped in the somewhat prestigious role of captain's wife.

"I'm like a pet. You come home to visit me in my pretty pen. Peacocks, Grammy calls the other captain's wives."

The Sea Captain's Wife is reminiscent of Ami MacKay's 2006 CanLit bestseller, *The Birth House*, from the same publisher. Both novels are set in the Maritimes within decades of each other and feature strong female characters paving a way for themselves in roles that challenge tradition.

Powning deftly develops Azuba's character in the first few chapters, but Nathaniel is a little foggier, perhaps because Azuba herself feels that she hardly knows him. He steadfastly refuses to let Azuba and Carrie join him on his voyage.

But when Azuba finds herself embroiled in a minor scandal involving her minister, Reverend Walton, Nathaniel changes his mind. Soon, Azuba is packing their lives into sea chests and embarking on the oceanic adventure she had always dreamed of having.

As Traveller makes its way around the world -- London, Antwerp, Callao, Hong Kong -- with the Bradstock family aboard, it encounters extreme climates, near-starvation, the threat of mutiny and piracy, and the immense ferocity of the Earth's oceans.

This is where Powning's writing comes alive. The contrast between her loving descriptions of the Bay of Fundy and those of the violent seas is stark, and readers will race through these pages, their insides unsettled from the vivid description of waves causing seasickness.

At first glance, Powning's handling of the passage of time seems, at times, clumsy or disjointed, but it is the ocean's whim that forms the story arc.

When the trip is going smoothly, Powning nonchalantly skips ahead without warning. When they are stalled in the doldrums for weeks, the lethargy is palpable. The sea becomes a character in itself, just like Traveller, who Azuba views as "a fellow creature."

If only Powning had spent as much time developing Reverend Walton's character as she did the sea's. His relationship with Azuba is not painted with a bold enough stroke to warrant her continued longing for his companionship.

The entire plot is instigated by his involvement in a weak scandal, yet Reverend Walton is forgotten as soon as the ship sets sail.

Whenever he does cross Azuba's mind, he seems like an afterthought, and is reduced to being an annoying interruption to the exciting story happening aboard Traveller.

Without doubt, it is an exciting story. *The Sea Captain's Wife* reveals Powning to be intuitive and reflective, yet self-assured in her mastery of the art of nature writing. She skillfully weaves both a harrowing and touching story about marriage, obligation, and devotion.

Though there is no fairy tale ending, under Powning's careful pen, Azuba's disappointments transform into her treasures, and readers reap the rewards.

Jennifer Ryan is a creative writer and producer at Citytv Winnipeg.

Find this article at:

<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/entertainment/books/pownings-signature-style-weaves-exciting-story-of-obligation-devotion-81861667.html>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.