

Book review: Historical yarn takes us into New Brunswick's past and around the world on a merchant ship

BY VERONICA ROSS

The Sea Captain's Wife

by Beth Powning

(Knopf Canada, 372 pages, \$ hardcover)

Stories about the past can be so much more interesting than tales of the present day. The present is still formless. Who know what will happen tomorrow, how things will turn out in the mysterious future?

But much is known about the past. All those details always seem exotic to me — like the celery "vases" that grace the dining room table at Woodside National Historic Site in Kitchener and the lovely dishes and old piano in the parlour. These artifacts cast a patina over what can only be imagined about the lives lived there (Sunday afternoon ennui, the women suffering from their corsets and so on).

Historical fiction is enriched by the use of past details. But the term itself always seems to describe a dress-up parade and I hate to use it for Beth Powning's brilliant novel, which is set around the year 1860.

The Sea Captain's Wife is the story of a marriage in trouble. It is also about life in a New Brunswick boat-building village and about life on the high seas. Novels about faltering relationships can be boring, but this one is set apart by Powning's superb writing and by her knowledge of the period she describes. It's all compelling reading.

Azuba Bradstock is the wife of Nathaniel, captain of an oceangoing ship, *The Traveller*. She lives in Whelans' Cove, N.B. The Bradstocks operate one shipbuilding yard and Azuba's father owns the Galloway yard. Azuba and her little daughter, Carrie, live in the big house on the hill, built by her father as a wedding present.

It's a genteel life, with upper crust women socializing at teas and calling one another by their last names. People attend church, there are occasional lectures, and servants to help at home.

Azuba has always wanted to go to sea. Before they married, Nathaniel told her she could accompany him on his long voyages, but later he decided she would be safer at home. He sails all over the world and is gone for long months. She misses him terribly, especially after a she suffers a miscarriage.

Trouble and complications arrive with the Rev. Simon Walton, whose first passion is art. He and Azuba go to collect plant specimens, but they are, oh dear and woe, caught by the tide and must spend the night together. Nothing happens, dear reader, but the talk is dreadful and when Nathaniel returns home he feels his honour has been blighted and all the rest of it. Azuba and Carrie will come with him next time, he insists.

Thus a new life begins for Azuba. They sail to Europe, then down around Cape Horn, up to San Francisco and back around to Europe again. Europe and hotels are a welcome change from seasickness, cramped quarters and the day-to-day boredom of being at sea. Sometimes they are weeks without sight of another boat; the trip around the Cape is treacherous and there are tales of slaves who throw themselves into the sea.

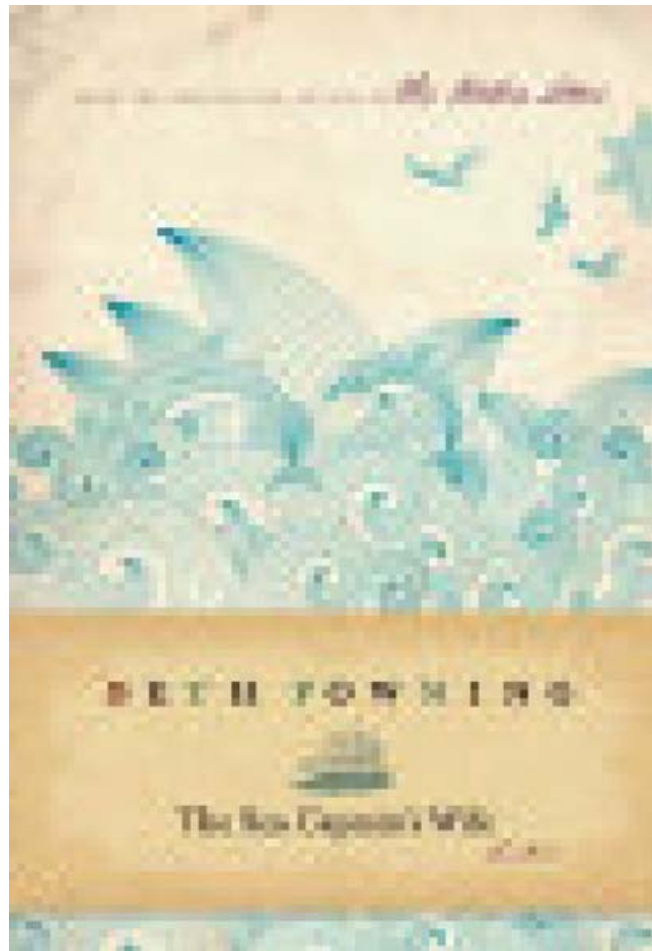
After the food stores are pillaged, starvation almost kills everyone aboard the ship and the crew threaten to mutiny. It gets so bad that Azuba grinds up the bone buttons on their clothes to feed the remaining hen so it will continue to lay eggs.

By now she is pregnant again. She and her husband have slowly been reconciled, but it was a reconciliation made harder by Nathaniel's position as captain. At times he expected Azuba to be as obedient as any crew member. Now longs for home, for her mother's kitchen, for neighbours and gardens.

A disaster aboard *The Traveller* (a young Belgian woman is taken into white slavery) eventually does bring the family home. But of course, things are different . . .

This is a good novel, one to be savoured and reread.

Veronica Ross is a Kitchener writer and author of *To Experience Wonder*, a biography of the late Edna Staebler.



Book cover