

An independent woman at sea in the 19th century

Historical novel's feisty heroine balks at being another lonely member of the sea-captains' wives club;

BY DEBBY WALDMAN, FREELANCE FEBRUARY 7, 2010

The Sea Captain's Wife

Beth Powning Knopf Canada 384 pp.; \$32

The daughter of a ship builder, Azuba Galloway grows up in a small town on the Bay of Fundy watching ships go out to sea. Studying the captains as they lead their wives and children on board, she fantasizes about their endless adventures in foreign ports.

Some day, the young Azuba tells herself, that will be me, sailing around the world with my husband and family. When she falls in love, at 19, it's with 28-year-old Nathaniel Bradstock, the youngest of three sea-captain brothers. Nathaniel shares Azuba's dream of a shipboard marriage. That is, he does until he sees his wedding present from his new father-in-law: a veritable palace where Azuba can live comfortably with a houseful of children while her husband is tending to his trade.

One look at the structure and Nathaniel is jolted back to reality: a wife's place is at home, on dry, stable ground, free from the storms and pirates and potentially mutinous crew members that threaten a sea captain every day of his working life.

Perhaps if Azuba were a more typical 19th-century woman, meek and acquiescent, she'd accept her husband's decision and stay put, abandoned for months or, more likely, years with only sporadic contact as she's left to raise their children and attend endless tea parties with other lonely members of the captains' wives club.

But Azuba more closely resembles modern feminists, feisty, independent and determined to have a marriage that includes a husband at her side, not halfway around the world. It's a little jarring to come across such contemporary attitudes in a 19th-century setting, although New Brunswick author Beth Powning makes Azuba's feelings entirely understandable. Nathaniel heads out to sea six months after the wedding and doesn't show up again until his daughter is almost three years old.

I'm a married woman, Azuba thinks, but I might as well not be.

When she suffers a miscarriage shortly after Nathaniel has left her and

four-year-old Carrie at home after a year-long furlough, she has to acknowledge that she may never fill all the bedrooms in her massive house with children. Even if her body recovers, what are the odds her husband will stick around long enough to help her make a big family?

In her debut book, the memoir *Shadow Child*, Powning wrote about coping with her own miscarriage. Her ability to weave personal experience into fiction gets *The Sea Captain's Wife* off to a dramatic and engrossing start, and the pace rarely flags. Azuba copes with her loss -- of her baby, her imagined future and, at least temporarily, her husband -- by developing a relationship with Simon Walton, the new young minister in Whelan's Cove. It's not as innocent as Azuba tells herself, but neither is it remotely close to the scandal that erupts when the two go hiking and are trapped overnight on a spit of land when the tide comes in.

The reverend is relocated to another parish, and Azuba gets what she always wanted: the chance to live with her daughter and husband aboard his ship. But as so often happens, the reality doesn't quite live up to the dream. Azuba learns quickly that the captain of *The Traveller* is a very different man from the one who courted her and lavished love on her and their daughter. On board he's a stern dictator and Azuba chafes under his command.

Complicating matters, of course, is that she can't quite determine how much of his sudden emotional distance stems from his reaction to her relationship with Reverend Walton and how much from his position as the captain of a ship that's at the mercy of so many unpredictable elements. And because he's at the mercy of them, so, of course, is his family.

That it takes Azuba so long to understand and accept her husband's role makes her frustrating -- she is dangerously self-absorbed in the way that is typical of those who haven't seen much of the world. But Powning has done a fine job balancing Azuba's shortcomings. She's a lively, likable character, one who is devoted to her family, kind to those considered her social inferiors, and entirely lacking in patience for the pretentious people she meets as the wife of a ship's captain.

During the two years Azuba spends circumnavigating the globe with her family, her relationship with Nathaniel changes in ways she never could have imagined. The journey provides Powning a natural framework on which to hang Azuba's growth, not to mention the opportunity to show what life was like on a late -9th-century cargo ship. Powning has a terrific eye for detail, and her dramatic scenes read like a treatment from an action movie. Equal parts character study, travelogue, and action-adventure tale, *The Sea Captain's Wife* is a marvellous read.

Debby Waldman is an Edmonton reviewer and author. Her latest picture book is *Clever Rachel*.

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