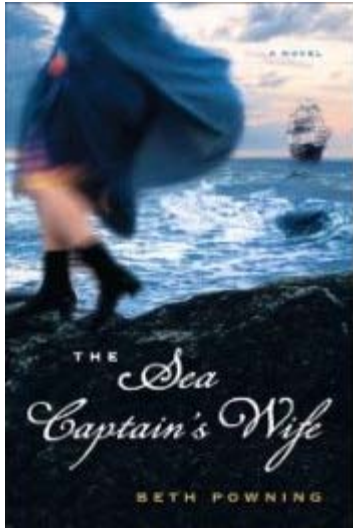


Book review: *The Sea Captain's Wife*, by Beth Powning



With a name like Azuba Galloway, one would expect the heroine of Beth Powning's *The Sea Captain's Wife* to be anything but ordinary. A young woman growing up in Whelan's Cove, New Brunswick, in the 1860s, Azuba yearns to leave her quiet village and its society women behind and sail around the world on the open ocean.

At nineteen, Azuba falls in love with and marries Captain Nathaniel Bradstock, and they share dreams of spending their lives together on his ship, *Traveller*. To her dismay, he refuses to entertain the idea after she falls pregnant. She raises their daughter, Carrie, with the help of her family and servants, and she doesn't like what she sees as her future: her life unfurling alone, constantly worried about her husband's safety, his picture becoming more real to her and Carrie than the man himself. She tells her understanding grandmother, "I don't live to fill my rooms with silver tea sets and satin cushions, delivered to me by my husband from Paris or Bombay," and determines to accompany him on his next voyage.

Azuba gets her wish, but the reason turns out differently than she expects. After an indiscretion causes rumors about her to fly in Whelan's Cove, Nathaniel is forced to bring her and Carrie on board against his will, their new togetherness as a family marred by resentment and fear.

With clear and poetic language and a sharp eye for period detail, Powning charts the shifting patterns in the Bradstocks' unusual marriage. Although Azuba longs to be treated as Nathaniel's equal, she remains a woman of her time, quickly learning that on board *Traveller*, his position as her captain takes precedence. The meaning of freedom begins to change for her, too. While she delights in exploring foreign port cities from London to San Francisco, her home has shrunk to the dimensions of their cabins. The dangers of the journey force her and her family into situations that shake their composure and threaten their lives.

Although Carrie doesn't get many lines, she is one of the novel's most original creations. A curious, observant, and intelligent child, her trust and devotion capture Nathaniel's heart, and she becomes the only one who can connect with him during the voyage's most stressful moments. Even minor characters are brought to life with a brief flourish of words. Of one of Azuba's seafaring equals, the tactless wife of Captain Lattimer, Powning writes: "Her permanent state of displeasure suggested that within herself she was but temporarily lodged." The normally smooth writing becomes choppy in one major dramatic scene; rather than speeding up the action, it slows it down, but the abrupt shift in style demonstrates the suddenness with which trouble can hit.

Reflective, occasionally bleak, and filled with the invigorating spirit of adventure, *The Sea Captain's Wife* is nautical fiction on the distaff side. Well worth reading for anyone curious about the lives of the brave 19th-century women who followed their husbands when they went to sea.



The Sea Captain's Wife is published by Plume on February 22nd in trade paperback (\$15.00, 374pp, with glossary of nautical terms at the end). It was previously published by Knopf Canada in 2010. For more information, see the [book's official website](#).

Posted by Sarah Johnson at [12:00 AM](#)

