



Terror and splendour on the high seas

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Beth Powning's 'The Sea Captain's Wife' a beautiful piece of historical fiction and moving meditation on marriage.

G6 Sylvie Fitzgerald

The Sea Captain's Wife is the story of a New Brunswick woman's sojourn into uncharted waters. Beth Powning's latest novel is a herstory, a seafaring tale about a woman embracing her own worth, resuscitating her marriage and learning to navigate unforeseen storms.



Cindy Wilson/Telegraph-Journal

Beth Powning

Set in the 1860's, an era when women of a certain class were expected to dine on a steady diet of church, family, sewing circles and quilting bees, Azuba Bradstock is a woman in need of "nourishment for the mind and soul." She is the wife of a sea captain, a man 10 years her senior for whom "the world began at the harbour's mouth."

Azuba is an intelligent and resourceful heroine whose narrative voice carries Powning's latest book.

Author of one previous novel, *The Hatbox Letters* (2004), Powning has also published three works of non-fiction: *Seeds of Another Summer: Finding the Spirit of Home in Nature* (published as *Home: Chronicle of a North Country Life in the U.S.*), *Edge Seasons*, a Memoir and *Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss*.

Stranded at home in Whelan's Cove, N.B., Azuba yearns for a life at sea. When a minor social scandal erupts at home, Azuba is at last granted her wish and invited, under less than ideal circumstances, to join her husband on board the *Traveller*.

Consigned to a small salon, hemmed in by the chalk line her captain draws to sequester her from the sailors who man his ship, Azuba and her young daughter, Carrie, are exposed to the "terror and splendour of the open sea."

Infused with rich period detail, right down to the bone buttons that adorn their hand-sewn clothes, the *Age of Sail* is alive and of real local import in Powning's looking glass.

Whether sailing through the equator, adrift in "the doldrums" without a whisper of wind, or bound to the "realm of endless winter" to wake "with breath smoking," no detail can be left unattended on board where "one frayed rope could sink a ship."

Powning is at her best in describing the details of the dynamic spectrum of human emotion. There are the pleasures of making port: fruit and cheese, bottles of wine, mail and "solid ground beneath our feet." Then there are the quarter-rationed offerings at sea of maggot-infested soup and brown, mouldy-smelling drinking water, and life at the mercy of forces that cannot be controlled, "insouciant and sinister."

The *Sea Captain's Wife* is also a lesson in navigating marriage. For Azuba's part, "she had seen how she might fly from her cage, and what it might make of her." To Captain Bradstock, "the black-haired beauty with an intelligent face and eyes that sought truth" was a "treasure" to be safeguarded. Would he take his family into danger's way or send them ashore to live "like people in a lifeboat - holding on - enduring." While Azuba craves the sort of intimacy that only comes from a steady, uninterrupted companionship, she learns that "aloneness is a condition of life; a thing one must come to terms with no matter when, or how, or with whom one lived."

Powning's book is a beautiful piece of historical fiction that unfolds a few years prior to the birth of the Dominion of Canada. When the old map-makers of the world came to unexplored terrain they would write, "Beyond this place there be dragons." The *Sea Captain's Wife* has a dragon or two laying in wait.

While Azuba amasses curios of the exotic lands she has dreamed of seeing her entire life, her adventures come at a cost. At the end of Powning's story the sea captain and his wife "are bound by what they have lost - what they had broken - what they must fight to restore."

Sylvie Fitzgerald is a writer based in Saint John.

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