



The Sea Captain's Wife - a much loved book

By Charlotte Stein

December 15, 2010

The Sea Captain's Wife By Beth Powning

The Sea Captain's Wife by Beth Powning begins in 1861, at Whelan's Cove – a fictional town – near Saint John, New Brunswick. The Bradstock family are ship builder's; the eldest son, Nathaniel, captain of the schooner Traveller. The sea captain's wife is Azuba. We meet Azuba as she is recovering from a miscarriage – she became pregnant the last time her husband was home – he is away again now and will not be back for some months. This is the life of a sea captain's wife, long absences while her husband is at sea. Nathaniel and Azuba's daughter, Carrie, did not meet her father until she was three years old.

The home of Nathaniel and Azuba is a grand house, on a hill above the town, facing the Bay of Fundy, built by Azuba's father for his daughter as a wedding gift. Azuba and Carrie have a life here, visiting with the family, parents and grandparents, gardening, picking strawberries in the fields and periwinkles on the beach at low tide.

I found myself, reading these first few pages, with skin tingling. My grandmother was the daughter of a sea captain, of a boat building family in Saint John, New Brunswick, she lived in a house, built by her parents, looking at the Bay of Fundy – I often picked periwinkles with my mother on this same beach. Beth Powning is writing about the life my great-grandparents might have lived.

Nathaniel is still away in the spring of 1862. After her miscarriage Azuba was paid a visit by the local minister, Reverend Simon Walton. Simon is a young man, alone here, he paints and draws, and enjoys walking with Azuba and Carrie - they become friends. On a day when Carrie is with her grandmother, Azuba and Simon are hiking on an island when a storm comes up and they are trapped by the high tide – overnight. A night, of complete innocence, that becomes a scandal.

When Nathaniel returns home Azuba is unable to convince him that the gossip is false, that she is innocent of any deceit and loves only Nathaniel. Azuba has wondered about sailing with Nathaniel – some few wives do, but they are rare. Most wives live a life alone, raising children alone, but this is not the life that Azuba wants for herself or her daughter. Nathaniel agrees to allow her to come with him only to remove her from Whelan's Cove and Reverend Walton.

Azuba and Carrie adjust to life aboard ship, with Nathaniel still hurt and resentful. We learn, as we read, about life aboard a schooner, trading goods from one part of the world to another. Azuba observes, and learns, navigation and the workings of the ship.

There are good days of brisk sailing, sunny fresh days and starry nights - and days of terror. Rounding Cape Horn, navigation difficult in the rain, sleet and snow, freezing, fearful. There are fabulous sights of icebergs and seas of broken ice, and the sobering sight of an abandoned ship stuck in the ice.

Azuba, doubting her decision to accompany Nathaniel, fearing for the safety of her daughter, finds herself pregnant. She and Nathaniel have reached an uneasy peace. It seems that there was theft at the last port, and supplies that should be on the ship were stolen – food is short. From her studying Azuba realizes that they are carrying too much sail as they race toward Antwerp, only to be caught in the doldrums. Becalmed for weeks, the shortage of provisions becomes a prelude to starvation. Finally hearing rain – there is fresh water; they wash themselves – their clothing – and set sail. They are on one-quarter rations, their sails are

rotting – but they arrive safely in Antwerp. They unload their cargo and check into a first class hotel, their son is born.

Antwerp is a reprieve, they are clean and well fed, there is a nursemaid to look after the baby, Bennett, and Carrie and Azuba explore the city while Nathaniel prepares to receive his next cargo and plan his voyage. The plan is for Azuba and the children to return to Canada by passenger steamer but something changes and they are once again aboard the Traveller, this time to Hong Kong. They are making safe passage – things are good, a lighter mood between husband and wife – so much so that I found myself fearing that a tragedy was to come.

And that's all you get. I've already revealed far too much of the story – just pretend you know nothing except that this is a book I loved – the setting, the characters, the history, the writing – *The Sea Captain's Wife*.

This article is for personal use only courtesy of cottagecountrynow.ca - a division of Metroland Media Group Ltd.
