



The Nutmeg of Consolation

Patrick O'Brian

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Shipwrecked on a remote island in the Dutch East Indies, Captain Aubrey, surgeon and secret intelligence agent Stephen Maturin, and the crew of the *Diane* fashion a schooner from the wreck. A vicious attack by Malay pirates is repulsed, but the makeshift vessel burns, and they are truly marooned. Their escape from this predicament is one that only the whimsy and ingenuity of Patrick O'Brian—or Stephen Maturin—could devise.

In command now of a new ship, the *Nutmeg*, Aubrey pursues his interrupted mission. The dreadful penal colony in New South Wales, harrowingly described, is the backdrop to a diplomatic crisis provoked by Maturin's Irish temper, and to a near-fatal encounter with the wildlife of the Australian outback.

The Nutmeg of Consolation Details

Date : Published December 5th 2011 by W.W. Norton & Company (first published 1980)

ISBN :

Author : Patrick O'Brian

Format : Kindle Edition 324 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Adventure

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From Reader Review The Nutmeg of Consolation for online ebook

Ron says

Great historical fiction, only passingly good fiction. A fun read, nonetheless.

The usual suspects maneuvered around the western Pacific to touch on as many real--or realistic--situations as possible. Some sub-plots better developed than others, but surely the Aubrey-Maturin true believers will love it all.

O'Brian resisted the temptation to leave us hanging from another cliff.

Jocelyn says

Stephen's experience is life in a nutshell. You have a ship. Your ship is gone. You have money. Your money is gone. You have shipmates. Your shipmates have been killed. You have a nice supply of coca leaves. Then you don't. But you find a new ship. You make more money. You get new shipmates. So many major life changes in just a few short weeks.

What remains constant: Friendship. Devotion to his professional goals. The mission he has sworn to carry out. (Marriage isn't included in this list, because although Stephen is still married, his relationship with his wife has never been exactly stable.)

Amy VanGundy says

This is honest-to-God one of my favorite authors/series. I love this books. They are tremendously well researched. It's ridiculous to compare these to any other "historical fiction" that I am aware of. You would think they had been written when the events within them actually occurred.

Nutmeg of Consolation has Aubrey and Maturin recovering from a shipwreck on an island. They manage to get off the island with the help of a passing ship that came to collect birds nests which are used for "bird's nest soup". Hah. They manage to return to Batavia, modern-day Jakarta, and are given another ship by the governor. They then set off to intercept a French vessel that they encountered in a previous book. The chase is a good one, as they usually are, and after they successfully sink it, they continue on to New South Wales, or Botany Bay, which is Australia. The description of Australia as a penal colony, the politics that went on there, and the treatment of the prisoners is very interesting. Maturin has an unfortunate encounter with a platypus and the book ends on this strange incident, something that Patrick O'Brian has done on more than one occasion.

But it's never the big plot items that I enjoy the most about these books. It's rather the small details that are always included about life on a British ship at this time, the interactions between the characters, the friendship between Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, the extremely dry wit, and dailly life they live. I cannot recommend this more to friends, though I admit they are probably not for everyone, but then rarely is there a book that is.

Patrick says

Like other novels in Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin series, the title of *The Nutmeg of Consolation* contains within it a dark joke. In the story, those words* are the name of a ship, and one of the many names of the Sultan who featured in this book's precedent, *The Thirteen Gun Salute*. It's a pleasing image, a phrase which feels obscure, ancient, nicely rounded — more so because it isn't clear exactly what it means. Comfort and fortification in its most absolute form. It might have been an odd name for a ruler, but for a ship, or a home, or simply a hearth, it seems entirely fitting. But what is it we are trying to console ourselves from in this instance?

'The world' will do, perhaps. Maybe that's for the best, because the world of this book is full of terrors. It begins as we left off in the previous novel, with Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin shipwrecked alongside the crew of the *Diane* somewhere in the South China sea. It is not long before they come under sustained assault from a local band of pirates; they only survive after a brief siege and a series of terribly bloody battles. It is a bleak and shocking way to open the novel; the violence is described with a cold remove, as though we were watching it through a telescope on a nearby hilltop. It's visceral, but there is a strange silence to it.

Here is Aubrey considering the action afterwards:

'To some degree it was the prodigious contrast between two modes of life: in violent hand-to-hand fighting there was no room for time, reflexion, enmity or even pain unless it was disabling; everything moved with extreme speed, cut and parry with a reflex as fast as a sword-thrust, eyes automatically keeping watch on three or four men within reach, arm lunging at the first hint of a lowered guard, a cry to warn a friend, a roar to put an enemy off his stroke; and all this in an extraordinarily vivid state of mind, a kind of fierce exaltation, an intense living in the most immediate present. Whereas now time came back with all its deadening weight – a living in relation to tomorrow, to next year, a flag promotion, children's future – so did responsibility, the innumerable responsibilities belonging to the captain of a man-of-war. And decision: in battle, eye and sword-arm made the decisions with inconceivable rapidity; there was no leisure to brood over them, no leisure at all.'

The point about 'two modes of life' was also invoked at the start of *The Thirteen Gun Salute*, only there it was in the context of a sort of holiday. Here it is life and death by comparison. But again, the intent of both passages is the same: to make us wonder which of these lives is the real consolation for the other. Perhaps a state of war isn't always so bad if the moments in between feel like 'time...with all its deadening weight'.

There is precious little solace to be found in the world outside the crew. The news, arriving many months late from England, is that the bank in which Stephen has recently stashed his fortune might have gone under, as so many did in those days; he might therefore be broke. Of wives and children we hear next to nothing until a scrap of hope near the end. When our heroes strike out on a chase, they end up losing the advantage and become the ones pursued by the French. It is only a happy accident keeps them from being captured or killed.

I was very struck by this haunting anecdote, told by a guest at dinner and never really remarked upon or explained, in the middle of this book:

'...three white bears were seen coming over the ice, a she-bear and her cubs...As she was fetching away the last piece the men shot the cubs dead and wounded her severely as she ran. She crawled as far as the cubs, still carrying the piece, tore it apart and laid some before each; and when she saw they could not eat she laid her paws first upon one, then upon the other and tried to raise them up. When she found she could not stir them, she went off; and when she had got at some distance, looked back and moaned; and since that did not induce them to come away, she returned, and smelling round them, began to lick their wounds. She went off a second time as before, and having crawled a few paces, looked again behind her, and for some time stood there moaning. But her cubs still not rising to follow her, she returned to them again, and with signs of inexpressible fondness went round one, and round the other, pawing them, and moaning. Finding at last that they were cold and lifeless, she lifted her head towards the men and growled; and several firing together they killed her too.'

This is as awful as anything else that men do to each other in this book; worse even in its brutality than the scene our sailors come upon later, on a remote island, where the entire population of natives has been killed by a smallpox epidemic. One of these scenes is pointlessly cruel, the other is merely sad.

O'Brian never quite seems to know how to handle a scene of human disaster, but as with all the nature sketches in these books, there's a quality to the sequence above which is immediately affecting. It is equally hard to forget Stephen's glimpse of a dugong and its calf, for example: *'...at all times she showed the utmost solicitude for her child, occasionally going so far as to wash its face, which seemed a pointless task in so limpid a sea.'*

Is this mere anthropomorphism? I think it's more complicated than that. ('Inexpressible fondness' — who chose those words? Who thought the washing a pointless task? Surely not the man telling the story at the captain's table.) For O'Brian, looking and thinking about nature becomes a way of thinking about ourselves: a coded discourse, like art or poetry or music, which exists beyond the crude manipulations of language. It is by no means unrelated that Stephen spends so much of this book thinking about children.

Eventually we come to Australia, where the *Surprise* puts in some time to restock and refit. They stay longer than expected, in fact, after Stephen gets into a disagreement with an Army officer (who he ends up cutting to ribbons with one of Jack's swords). New South Wales is portrayed as a ghastly place, rendered almost surreal with despicable inhuman misery; sketchy and weird, like something out of Beckett or Kafka. At one point there is described 'something like a business account, with amounts carried forward from one column to another, but the numbers were those of lashes, days of close confinement in the black hole, the weight of punishment-irons and their duration.'

It is a blasted plain, a rare example in these books of a place almost entirely without merit — except, of course, for the wonderful wildlife. Here the animals are certainly better than the people. The one memorable character who emerges from it is John Paulton, a rare local intellectual who strikes up something of a friendship with Maturin.

Paulton, it turns out, is a frustrated novelist, who retired to the wilderness thinking that the isolation would help him finish his great multi-volume opus. It is hard not to think of the author in relation — O'Brian himself, scribbling away in that idyllic village in the south of France — except the point that's being made here is that what Paulton doesn't appreciate is the virtues of society and conversation as an imaginative stimulus. Paulton isn't a failure (though the brief excerpt we read from his novel is amusingly impenetrable) — he's just misguided.

Here is Stephen, gently suggesting an alternative to his longing for the perfect ending:

'There is another Frenchman whose name escapes me but who is even more to the point: La bêtise c'est de vouloir conclure. The conventional ending, with virtue rewarded and loose ends tied up is often sadly chilling; and its platitude and falsity tend to infect what has gone before, however excellent. Many books would be far better without their last chapter: or at least with no more than a brief, cool, unemotional statement of the outcome.'

This is another one of the author's little games; that Frenchman was Flaubert, who wouldn't even have been born yet in the 1812 in which Maturin is speaking. What he is saying is that it's foolish to want to end. Taken literally, it's a sly comment on the perpetual nature of these books. But it's bittersweet, given that so much of what we've witnessed in this book is a show of misery. Perhaps the only consolation to be found is in sealing one's self tight against the seas — like those timbers of the Nutmeg herself, after she was raised — and flushing the bilges, in spite of the rats — and carrying on.

Craig says

SPOILERS BELOW.

This particular edition to the series may well have been entitled "When Maturin, Cannibals and Platypuses Attack." This (and the previous book in the series) is rather meandering and doesn't seem to have much in the way of a concrete objective in terms of where the author wanted to take the characters, but it's Patrick O'Brain, so who cares? His descriptive detail, the viewpoints of the characters, (mostly and seemingly increasingly from Maturin), the vast knowledge of contemporary technology, proceedings, and customs, as well as just the feeling of having been taken back in time, does more than enough to compel one to read this series. As the saying goes, it's the journey, not the destination, which is just as well, because when O'Brian brings his books to a close, he doesn't do so by gently closing the door so much as yanking out the plug. May he rest in peace.

Renee M says

The one with the lady pirate, the cannibals, Australia, and the platypus. A very Stephen-centric novel, but without the spying and intrigue. Lots of interesting info about the New South Wales section of Australia, and a creepy new fact about the cuddly platypus.

Marko says

Patrick O'Brian continues as excellently as always. This story doesn't really have a dramatic arc of any sort and is simply a continuation of the voyage that started in the previous novel. But that does not mean that important issues are not handled: Captain Aubrey is shown to suffer from a condition that changes his behavior while Maturin struggles with his sense of responsibility for an old friend who is now suffering as a convict in Australia. The harshness of life and the evilness of men in a land that serves mostly as prison to westerners is very well described, down to the corruption of the aboriginals who show off their skills with boomerangs for shots of rum and drink themselves to death.

In short, another gem from the master of (historical) fiction!

Julia says

This, the 14th novel in the British naval historical fiction series telling the stories of captain Jack Aubrey and physician/spy Stephen Maturin, may be my favorite so far in this engaging, erudite, albeit long series. I've given it 5 stars and as I think back on how deeply I've enjoyed this whole series, I am considering going back to my other reviews and changing them all from 4 to 5 stars. Anyway, this installment is chock-full of fabulousness-- shipwreck on a desert island, Malay pirates, bird's nest soup, enemy French warships, Australia. (Australia, by the way, comes off as a truly miserable place at this period in its history, with its population of prisoners and ill-treated Aboriginal people.)

And whatever you do, beware the platypus.

purplechick says

Every one of my Patrick O'Brian reviews are the same: I love these books! I think the best bit of this one is them being shipwrecked (again!) and having to find a way out of it. This kind of thing really makes you realize how little ability modern people have with their hands. I know that *I* couldn't build a ship from scratch using the materials from a wrecked one plus whatever was available on a desert island. How about you?

I'll be sad when I come to the end of the series. But wait, that means I can start again from the beginning right?

Wolfgang says

Intelligently written. Good story. Interesting characters. Unsure about the characters, they seem a little bit to complex for sailors...

Darwin8u says

"I read novels with the utmost pertinacity. I look upon them - I look upon good novels - as a very valuable part of literature, conveying more exact and finely-distinguished knowledge of the human heart and mind than almost any other, with greater breadth and depth and fewer constraints."

? Patrick O'Brian, The Nutmeg of Consolation

For action, this book is a bit light. There is a bit of fighting when the crew of the shipwrecked HMS Diane

are trying to building a schooner. Tobacco and alcohol might soon run out and the ship is nearing St. Famine's day (not marked by a famine of food, but smokes and booze). Things might get rough. After losing a few members heading off an attack of some local pirates, they eventually chase down a French ship. I won't give those details away. However, after that, the book ends up in Australia (New South Wales) where Dr. Maturin contemplates happiness, money, family and addition. He also confronts the harsh conditions in New South Wales, where everything has been degraded by the penal colony economy.

It might have been a 3-star (the first?) book, if not for the beautiful musings of Stephen throughout. I really do love these novels.

K.M. Weiland says

A little slower and little more self-indulgent than some of the previous entries, but a delight from start to finish, as always. The early part, on the island, put me in mind of *Far Side of the World* (only better than what we find in that installment), and the return to India (which was very enjoyable in the previous book) and the exploration of Australia was lovely. Not too many sea battles here, but it's perhaps funnier than any of the previous books. Wonderful to finally get back to the Surprise, but I must say that I hold a special place in my heart for the Nutmeg, and I hope we haven't seen the last of her.

Susan says

After taking a hiatus from the Jack Aubrey series from the last unsuccessful attempt (*The Thirteen Gun Salute*), I finally picked up this volume.

You would think that this book wasn't that good considering the time it took me to read. Not so. Finding the time was the problem, but when I did I was completely immersed in this latest adventure. It was good to see the camaraderie between Jack and Stephen once again.

I thought the story was interesting, though perhaps not quite as exciting as some of their other world-wide excursions, but still, it flowed along at a good pace.

All in all the story entertained, pleased and endorsed what I already knew - I love these books! :)

EJD Dignan says

Repeated from review of Book 1

That Patrick O'Brian chose to place his characters on the sea in the not so distant past just raised the hurdle I had to leap to get to know this wonderful author.

I had never been enamored with sea stories, didn't much care for European history, and yet was wonderfully taken with this series. The sea is a major character, but history is not greatly illuminated, almost a backdrop

to the specific circumstance the characters find themselves in. Which perhaps reflects the author's view, while the wide sweep of Europe's history progresses, men are left to deal with far smaller local problems.

And it is in men that O'Brian shines. O'Brian creates characters flawed enough to be human, without becoming base. Not the best of men, but rising to better as circumstance demands.

And while the author leaves the great sweep of history largely aside, the detailed history of these men's lives, the sacrifices, the conditions of life at sea are truly fascinating.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

This, the 14th volume in Patrick O'Brian's brilliant Aubrey-Maturin canon, is one of my absolute favorites of the twenty completed novels in this wonderful Napoleonic wars seafaring series. "The Nutmeg of Consolation" is a page-turner from page one on.

We join Captain Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin in the East Indies as they are rescued from a deserted island, acquire the beautifully Dutch-built small frigate the *Nutmeg of Consolation*, fight a running sea-battle with the much larger French frigate *Cornelie*, meet up with all of their chums aboard HMS *Surprise*, and then visit the penal colony of New South Wales in Australia. The action at sea and ashore is tense and engaging; as well as being full of the wonders of science and nature that Stephen and his friend Martin explore on the islands they visit and in the Australian outback.

This is a terrific book, and oh so cleverly plotted and written. All of the 'Aubrey-Maturin' novels are superb; and this particular episode just happens to be, in my opinion, one of the 'crown jewels' in the series. I unhesitatingly recommend this novel, as well as the entire series.
