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Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin are ordered home by dispatch vessel to bring the news of their latest victory to the government. But Maturin is a marked man for the havoc he has wrought in the French intelligence network in the New World, and the attentions of two privateers soon become menacing. The chase that follows is as thrilling and unexpected as anything O'Brian has written.

The Surgeon's Mate Details

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From Reader Review The Surgeon's Mate for online ebook

Sherwood Smith says

This is one of my favorites, which partially brings an arc to a close. These arcs are intersecting, which is one of the brilliant aspects of Patrick O'Brian's *roman fleuve*. But there is a sense of closure in this one, which (in a reread) marks a milestone.

Structurally, it is remarkable in a number of ways. It feels like three novellas tightly wired together. It begins with Aubrey and Maturin sailing triumphantly into Halifax with the news that the *Shannon* had defeated the *Chesapeake*. This ship-to-ship duel, based on the details of the real battle, had closed the previous book. Now we get the glorious sense of triumph on the British side as the news spreads.

This first novella takes place in Halifax, and ends with Stephen and Jack leaving. Before then, Stephen and Diana deal with their difficult situation, Stephen fairly emotionally battered, and Diana gallantly trying to maintain her identity and her own sense of honor in a world of men.

Jack, unfortunately, as all too often happens on land, gets himself into trouble. It seems to eat neatly ended by the end of the book, but . . .

There is a thrilling ship chase from Halifax up north and down toward England. When Jack and Stephen get back to England there is a great deal of turmoil and trouble which not only is going to set up the rest of this book, but is also going to launch the next several books' arc; this includes a trip to Napoleonic Paris for Stephen and Diana.

Jack and Stephen are sent to the Baltic, where once again a real situation is fictionalized so that our guys can be central to the action. As a result, they end up as prisoners in France.

The writing in this book is so strong, so vivid, and so brilliant, reaching the heights of the sublime to the very delicious humor that O'Brian excels at.

Compare this passage, while Jack and Stephen are sailing up a narrow passage between Denmark and Sweden and being fired upon from the heights of Elsinore. While waiting for cannonballs to smash down all around them, they talk about Shakespeare, and specifically Hamlet's grave.

"So there he lies," said Jack, his telescope leveled. "Well, well: we must all come to it. But it was a capital piece, capital. I never laughed so much in my life."

"A capital piece indeed," said Stephen, "and I doubt I could have done much better myself. But, do you know, I have never in my own mind classed it among the comedies. Pray did you read it recently?"

"I never read it at all," said Jack. "That is to say, not right through. No: I did something better than that — I acted in it . . ."

Then there is Stephen's hapax phenomenon, which Jack has not seen above a few hundred times. But Stephen is amazed:

He pointed cautiously with one finger and Jack looked out to the southwest. At this height they were above

the low blanket of fog that covered the sea: clear sky above, no water below; no deck even, but a smooth layer of white mist, sharply cut off from the clean air; and ahead, on the starboard bow and on the starboard beam the surface of the soft, opaque whiteness was pierced by an infinity of masts, all striking up from this unearthly ground into a sky without a cloud, a sky that might have belonged to an entirely different world.

Both Jack and Stephen in this book continue to reveal their complexities. Each has chances to be heroic, Stephen covertly, and Jack not only in ship action but in his practical method of tackling an escape from the infamous Temple prison in Paris.

The book ends with a marriage, with high emotions, and with enough threads dangling to make one desperate for the next.

John Frankham says

Patrick O'Brian back to his very best in this seventh Aubrey-Maturin novel.

Such a good writer of English, as well-as a master story-teller, and a good expression of characters and their development through time.

The GR blurb mentions only a little of the incidents and adventures, from the Atlantic to the Baltic, to inland France, and back to the home fleet where there are a couple of key developments:

'Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin are ordered home by dispatch vessel to bring the news of their latest victory to the government. But Maturin is a marked man for the havoc he has wrought in the French intelligence network in the New World, and the attention of two privateers soon becomes menacing. The chase that follows through the fogs and shallows of the Grand Banks is as tense, and as unexpected in its culmination, as anything Patrick O'Brian has written.'

Susan says

I really enjoyed this entry in the Jack Aubrey canon. Actually, I think it is one of my favorites, right up there with the first in the series.

The characters of Jack and Stephen continue to amaze and delight me in so many ways. I enjoy their dynamic together and how they deal with the situations they find themselves in.

The best part about these stories are the sea adventures and this one did not disappoint in that category.

However, as much as I commend the author on his wonderful storytelling, I still find he does not write women well. I cannot take a shine to Diana Villiers, though she showed unselfishness in this outing. I can't help but get the impression that whatever suits her comes first and never mind about poor Stephen. I just don't like the character.

But the pull of Jack and Stephen are too great, so I will continue on with the series!

Leigh says

Another exceptional instalment in the series... Nothing more to say!

Darwin8u says

"The pretext: dictatorships were absurdly sensitive to the public opinion they continually outraged; they always had to be in the right, to be morally impeccable; and that was one of the reasons why those who had been much mutilated in their interrogation were rarely allowed to live, whether they had given their information or not."

- Patrick O'Brian, The Surgeon's Mate

When I was first introduced to these novels and read the first couple, I couldn't believe how GOOD they were, but was skeptical that they could continue with the same level of near perfection the early novels evoked. Now, seven books in, I'm less amazed at the continuity of output. I figure it is something like building a cathedral. If you have a master-builder, it doesn't matter if the church is 10 feet high or 1000 feet. The scale matters, but a genius will produce genius work.

I am, however, a bit more accustomed to how O'Brian pulls this off without the books seeming to sink into the trap of most serial authors. Setting. If O'Brian only told his novels at sea, there might be some inevitable boredom and repetition, but O'Brian doesn't.

For example in this book, the setting goes something like this:

Halifax (Land) => HMS Diligence (Chased from Halifax to Home) => England (Land) / Paris (Land) => HMS Ariel (Baltic Sea/Bay of Biscay) => Paris (Prison) => HMS Oedipus (English Channel).

This one has a bit more setting changes than most, but O'Brian's change of settings and occasional diversions into spy-craft and/or spouse-craft allows enough shadows and depth into these novels to keep the reader from becoming sea-blind.

Edward Erdelac says

Great installment. It's really at this point that I feel the Aubrey-Maturin series is less of a sequence of separate novels and more like overlarge chapters in one very large story. The events of the previous book led directly into this one. Maturin and Diana cross paths with the nefarious Johnson again, Jack has an ill-advised tryst with a loud mouthed society butterfly, and is humorously baffled by the boyish good looks of Lithuanian Swiss Army soldier Gedymin Jagiello and the incessant passes by the opposite sex he engenders (even while extolling the virtues of a burlier, harier, more competent crewmate). Not as much action in this outing per say, but an enjoyable character study all around.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 Extra:

Benedict Cumberbatch reads the seventh historical novel in Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin series.

In the early summer of 1812, Captain Jack Aubrey and Dr Stephen Maturin arrive in Canada on HMS Shannon after escaping their American captors.

Produced and abridged by Lisa Osborne.

Callie Hornbuckle says

So very good! Even when the characters frustrate me so much I want to kick them in their imaginary shins, it's a sign of the excellent writing. I also appreciate that even though fate (a.k.a. the hand of the author) swoops in to save the characters often, they are always actively working to solve their own problems before that happens.

Wealhtheow says

Jack is deeply dismayed when a ill-judged fling in Nova Scotia threatens to come back to England and reveal his perfidy. He's thrilled to be ordered back to sea, this time to transport his friend Stephen to co-opt a Catalan base to England's side. Meanwhile, Stephen has just returned from a trip to Paris, where he presented a scholarly paper (very badly, though it was well received) and found a place for Diana to stay for her confinement. The mission is a success, the base is taken--and then on the way home, flush with success, they are captured by the French. They suspect Stephen is a spy, and so while Jack scrapes away at their prison walls searching for escape, Stephen spends day after day trying to seem as innocent as possible to his captors, all the while keeping a capsule of poison precariously held in his cheek.

This book contains a number of subversions of a reader's expectations. Jack is scared of a woman coming back to England with his bastard--and instead (view spoiler). Stephen and Diana battle over her pregnancy--(view spoiler). Jack scrapes away at his French prison walls, and much of the book is given over to the complications of shifting the stone--(view spoiler)

This is also the book where finally, FINALLY, after six books of tension and torment, (view spoiler)

Stephen's reluctance is pretty rich coming from a man who talked dispassionately about gunning down or knifing a cadre of Frenchmen just pages ago. Ah well, even he cannot be perfect. And in fact, I find I like Maturin least when he's silently martyring himself, as he has a tendency to do, and like him most when he's

squabbling with Aubrey over silly things like bad jokes and seaman slang. When I think O'Brian thinks Maturin is being particularly impressive, I actually dislike him. (hide spoiler)]

Overall, another fantastic installment of a great series. I can't wait to read the next!

Boots says

it was very difficult to choose a star rating for this installment of the aubrey/maturin series. on the one hand, i can't stand diana and she was all over this in every worst way. on the other hand, once we got rid of her, there were some genuinely interesting moments ~ particularly an escape plot from a fortress which provided some solidly hilarious exchanges (reminding me why this series is fun!).

in the end i had to give it only two stars because it's about 150 pages too long and Lt. Pullings isn't in it, alas.

overall this feels very much like a transitional book that ties up threads that have been feeling sorta endless for the last couple of books (particularly with regard to the aforementioned and much-detested diana).

Eric_W says

You may remember from Fortune of War by Patrick O'Brian that Jack is without command after having sunk the Waakzaanheid, a Dutch 74. At home in England he finds he has been cheated by a scoundrel and Stephen is busily taking on a new espionage assignment that also gets Jack a ship, the Ariel. Jack hopes for a colonelcy, a device used to financially reward post-captains. When his wife Sophie protests that perhaps taking a colonelcy in the army with no duties attached might be considered corrupt Jack utters the loveable, “in others is anathema to me. But you would scarcely credit the depths of turpitude I should descend to myself for a thousand a year, and a colonel’s pay is rather better than that.”

Unfortunately, because of a lieutenant’s hasty confusion of larboard with starboard during a tense moment Jack and Stephen are taken prisoner, Stephen is recognised as a spy, and things look dicey. To be continued, of course. If you haven’t tried one of the Aubrey/Maturin you are really missing some delightful reading. I recommend reading them in order.

Andy says

Another old favourite, book 7 for this series!

Picks up straight away from the previous yarn, fresh from their success against the American Man-O-War... Huzzah! Lucky Jack & Dr Maturin abound Halifax & join in with the general gaiety of the time before making way for a dash for Blighty which involves a sea chase, what ensues thereafter is a spot of home troubles, some intelligence work, a new commission, a dalliance with Diane Villiers for the Doctor..... In truth it's all quite formulaic across each tale but it detracts nought as I do rather enjoy them... The sea chases are indeed epic with the tension ramped up by the hour. The chemistry between Aubrey & Maturin is

wonderful & at the forefront of each novel, great characters.

A clear 4 stars again & perhaps I think the trick is to leave a timely interval between each one so as to saviour each adventure.

Jason Koivu says

The glorious saga continues!

Ugh. "Saga." The word sounds bloated, melodramatically windswept, ponderous. I don't find Patrick O'Brian's seafaring war epic to be any of those things. It suits me.

Perhaps it will suit you, too. Do you like historical fiction set circa the early 1800s? Do you like good, sometimes elegant writing? How about bursts of action aboard cannon-blasting ships? Contemplation of the human spirit? Observations on nature? Can you endure drawn-out scenes of everyday life that may seem unnecessary, but that often include subtle hints of the unfolding plot? If yes, maybe this is for you.

However, I have to admit, I did come for those sea battles!

And yet, I'm just as happy when the battle's over, the ships have been blown out of the water, and the plot turns upon a domestic scene, such a ballroom dance...

In *The Surgeon's Mate* a very Austen-esque ball is the stage upon which the story unfolds. Long-away and almost estranged from his wife, Captain Jack Aubrey, a man of large appetites, becomes embroiled in a scandalous liaison. His unlikely, but long-time friend, doctor and sometimes intelligence agent Stephen Maturin has his own affair to juggle.

Love and revenge chase them across the Atlantic. The ongoing war with Napoleon drives them into the Baltic to subvert a dangerous battery and troops allied to the enemy. And that's just the first half. Later there's violent storms, prison and wild escapes, the looming threat of torture...jesus, this *is* starting to sound like a melodramatic saga!

Beyond all the fun and excitement, one of the real joys of these books for me is witnessing the friendship between Aubrey and Maturin. It's the glue that bonds the series. I found it particularly touching in this book when Jack remained onboard his ship fretting away like a mother hen as Stephen undertook a potentially deadly mission.

While not an unbridled thrill-ride from start to finish, *The Surgeon's Mate* is a very fun read in which readers will be dosed with a fair share of love and war, sorrow and happiness.

My review of book six, The Fortune of War

Nooilforpacifists says

To date, five out of the seven have been Napoleonic spy stories, not Napoleonic naval stories. There is some enjoyment in the former, to be sure. But to compare O'Brian's heroes to Hornblower, Ramage, Parkinson, or even Kent/Reeman--well, I just don't understand. Aubrey loses more ships in these seven books than those other lead characters lose in each's entire series.

I may read more of the dozens of O'Brian books. But only after wrapping my head around the very different mission of O'Brian's mission, and only for lack of a better choice.

Algernon says

Who is this surgeon's mate that the title alludes to? I confessed that I was baffled for a long time reading this seventh title in the Patrick O'Brian acclaimed series. The surgeon is clearly Stephen Maturin, but he acts mostly as a lone wolf, a necessity of his involvement as a secret agent. His best friend, Captain Jack Aubrey of the Royal Navy, is cast in a position of authority rather than as a mate. Maturin takes no assistant to help him in his medical duties aboard ship, and a new character, a lieutenant Jagiello, is used more for comic relief than for drama.

Nevermind, the title will become clear only by the end of the novel (see spoiler). To reach this destination, the reader is treated to what may be one of the most accomplished books in the series. It starts rather innocuously, with Aubrey and Maturin trying to return to England after escaping imprisonment by the Americans in the previous novel. They are accompanied by Diana Villiers, herself fleeing the attentions of her former American beau. The first sign that this is a fully fledged adventure comes in the shape of a killing chase across the breath of the Atlantic by a couple of determinate American privateers.

Matters on shore are far from tranquil also. As good as Jack is on the deck of his war frigate, his business acumen in managing his estate is sorely lacking, to the point of needing rescue from badly worded contracts, hastily signed. Stephen is trying to rekindle his love affair with Diana, but the lady, while favorably disposed, is in the family way as a result of her adventures among foreigners, and refuses to commit.

After a brief scientific interlude in Paris, with Stephen delivering a very erudite, but poorly presented dissertation on his naturalist studies, both men are returned to the sea, on a special mission to sabotage Napoleon's efforts in the Baltic by encouraging a Catalan garrison to defect.

I will stop here, as the surprises and twists of fortune, the naval battles and the spy games begin in earnest, and I don't want to spoil anybody's pleasure of discovering for themselves the fate of their favorite characters. I have previously said all I had to say about the passion for the sea and for the natural world, about the mastery of language and the wicked humour, about the subtle treatment of emotional conflict in the lives of these men who spend most of their lives away on the high seas, courting death repeatedly from hidden reefs, from inclement weather and from enemy broadsides. O'Brian proved his mettle for me from the very first book in the series, and there is no sign of flagging interest or of saturation on my part for the

minute details of ship rigging or sail maneuvers. The bromance between Stephen and Jack remains vibrant and balanced, neither taking the other for granted, neither blind to the other's shortcoming or trying to play first fiddle. Each plays his own partiture, and together they make the journey through the perils of the Napoleonic Wars, both at sea and behind closed doors, a formidable experience.

Romance is not forgotten, even if it necessarily takes a step back to allow the boys their war games. Sophia may be more preoccupied with the Aubrey mansion and with raising children, but she shows already that she may be a better administrator than her impulsive husband. The dashing Diana remains my favorite, mostly because she is both unpredictable and self-reliant, a modern woman trying to make it on her own at a time when such liberty was shunned by society. Her relationship with Stephen may be complicated, but nobody can say that it is boring. (*... it was extraordinary what a stay she had been to him - the pole that held his needle to the north and gave its pointing a significance that it had lacked since her reign came to a sudden halt.*)

There are more than enough scary moments in this book, when life hangs by a thread, and only a master storyteller like O'Brian will know how to insert a moment of laughter to relieve the tension. Witness the payback time Jack Aubrey receives for his earlier dalliances with married women (view spoiler), to the role of middle-aged amusement that Jack and Stephen are relegated to when the attentions of all the young ladies they meet are directed at a dashing young Lithuanian attache, ending in a tourist visit to Hamlet's tomb by the fortress of Elsinore - an occasion for Jack to reminisce about his theatrical experiences as a midshipman:

"So there he lies, said Jack, his telescope levelled. "Well, well: we must all come to it. But it was a capital piece, capital. I never laughed so much in my life."

I can't praise the series enough for its full range of human emotions displayed, for its instances of heroism and its attention to detail, for its wonderful use of the English language, and for the call of adventure that makes want to pick up the next novel right now. I try not to be greedy and space them out over the years, to make the pleasure last longer, but I know I will give in sooner rather than later.

Almost forgot: what about that surgeon's mate?
(view spoiler)
