



In the Wake of Madness: The Murderous Voyage of the Whaleship Sharon

Joan Druett

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After more than a century of silence, the true story of one of history's most notorious mutinies is revealed in Joan Druett's riveting "nautical murder mystery" (USA Today). On May 25, 1841, the Massachusetts whaleship Sharon set out for the whaling ground of the northwestern Pacific. A year later, while most of the crew was out hunting, Captain Howes Norris was brutally murdered. When the men in the whaleboats returned, they found four crew members on board, three of whom were covered in blood, the other screaming from atop the mast. Single-handedly, the third officer launched a surprise attack to recapture the Sharon, killing two of the attackers and subduing the other. An American investigation into the murder was never conducted--even when the Sharon returned home three years later, with only four of the original twenty-nine crew on board.

Joan Druett, a historian who's been called a female Patrick O'Brian by the Wall Street Journal, dramatically re-creates the mystery of the ill-fated whaleship and reveals a voyage filled with savagery under the command of one of the most ruthless captains to sail the high seas.

In the Wake of Madness: The Murderous Voyage of the Whaleship Sharon Details

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Author : Joan Druett

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Reet Champion says

"In the Wake of Madness" is an informative look at the horrifying last voyage of the whaler Sharon. It starts out somewhat slow. I felt throughout much of the first part there was so little known about the story that the authoress was grasping at straws, attempting to supplement the story with other thing not entirely of interest to this reader. Yet, she makes up for this later on as the story picks up momentum. The story is told in superb prose so that the reader feels like they are there witnessing everything for themselves (is that good or bad considering this is a mutiny story?). While there are photos available for many other historical nonfiction books I was disappointed that this one didn't have any. But Druett helped make up for that by supplying the descriptions (e.g. heights, coloring) throughout the story.

Overall the book is worth a read. I don't go in for murder stories, and when you get down to it that's what this book was, but anyone with an interest in maritime history should read this.

Renae says

I wanted more maps and diagrams.

Robert says

Interesting to read about Whaling's dark side in the 19th century. Good companion book to Philbrick's "In the Heart of the Sea".

MaryannC. Book Fiend says

3.5 Stars

Snuck this one in because I needed a fix for something sea faring and this didn't disappoint. A fascinating and sometimes horrible account of Captain Howes Norris who was brutally murdered by some of his crew as he presided over the whaleship Sharon. Loved the details of ship life and the information that abounds in this book. Becoming an instant fan I'm already searching for more of her books.

Lois says

I'd give this book one more star if only it included some photos or illustrations of the whaling ships and/or people in it (particularly the captain), but this story of mutiny, cruelty and murder has held my interest.

Stef says

This was a return at the library that caught my eye. I've always been interested in history, and more recently, maritime history about New England. In the Wake of Madness seemed like the intriguing story of a tragedy that befell a whaleship in the far Pacific Ocean.

The write up inside the cover suggested that this book would be the first to answer the question, what really happened the night the captain of the Sharon was killed, and who really were the murderers. I got hooked into the idea that the three Pacific Islanders that were left alone on the ship would turn out to be framed by the predominantly white crew and that there was a much deeper story to the murder. Without ruining the book, I can say that I was disappointed with the big "reveal" because it didn't really clarify the points that the author was claiming to clarify, but did give a lot of insight into the social hierarchy of whalers and their the brutal conditions that people were forced to serve in. Remember, these ships are far out at sea away from any American workers laws, and usually relied upon young naive men or foreigners looking for adventure to fill up the empty spaces in the whaleboats. When these ships finally return to port its almost like a Fight Club-esque scenario: "The First Rule about Sailing is you don't talk about Sailing".

Even though I was somewhat let down at the end of the tale, this book is a quick, enjoyable read that would be of interest to history buffs and fiction lovers alike. It isn't a long academic tract about whaling, its written much more like Nathaniel Philbrick or Erik Larson. I'd call it popular nonfiction or microhistory, but I think the technical term is more like "creative nonfiction". This doesn't mean the facts are skewed or the story is made up, but unlike a history book you'd read for a college class, this one doesn't have a thousand footnotes or dry repetitive text. It focuses on such a narrow subject matter that it becomes a self contained and doesn't require as much of the history that David Hackett Fischer would include. In order to help make this type of narrative flow, there is a lot of created dialog or personal impressions that help to connect the reader to the emotions of the people who are being described. The author probably doesn't know exactly what the captain or the ship's carpenter was thinking at a specific moment, but she could make a pretty good assumption based on ship's logs, letters, and journal entries.

In addition, the author added chapter guides at the end of the book that gave more of the nitty gritty that was missing from the narrative, broken down by chapter, and included many of her references and the repositories that she visited.

Seadogs and landlubbers alike would enjoy this book if you're looking for a good mystery and like a bit of adventure thrown in. Its not as crazy a tale as Clive Cussler's Sahara, but in a way the journey of the Sharon draws you along in a similar manner. Both types of stories rely heavily on places and strong personalities to engage the reader, and its even more astounding to think about when you realize that Captain Howes Norris was really alive and was really brutally murdered by his own men. There is just this wow factor when you step away from it that you wouldn't get with Cussler. Also if you hated Moby Dick when you read it in school, or have waited to pick it up in fear of the 100 pages that just describe the white whale, then maybe you should give this one a try. Herman Melville apparently described a similar route followed by the Sharon in his novel and would have heard the rumors surrounding the murder of this deranged, solitary captain during his own travels.

Amy K. says

This is a re-read for me. You cannot beat Joan Druett for clear, crisp, utterly compelling prose. She hooks you from the very first word and makes you eager for the next and the next, etc. In this case, it helps that the subject matter is so horrifically engaging on its own--the brutal murder of a whaleship captain in retribution for his own act of vicious murder. The historical details of life on a whaler, of whaling as a profession, of the economic exigencies of such a life and of the times, interwoven with the personal accounts of crewmen and the contextual details of the US in the 1840s makes for a holistic picture that is infinitely interesting. I'm glad I re-read this and will likely re-read it again.

Danielle Martin says

Didn't finish.

Perrin Pring says

In the Wake of Madness is a quick interesting read about not only the incident that happened on the Whaleship Sharon, but it's a good look at the history of the whaling industry of the first half of the 19th century.

In 1841, the captain of the Whaleship Sharon was murdered while in the waters of Polynesia. What followed was a daring re-capture of the ship by the third mate. America became enraptured with this cunning tale of American heroism over the Polynesian murders, but according to Druett, America didn't know the entire story. Using crew member's journals to piece together what really happened on the Sharon, Druett tells a story not of cold blooded savage murder, but one of self defense against a deranged and evil captain.

Filled with tropical islands, scurvy, mutiny, and New England pedigrees, In the Wake of Madness is a great look into a once vital American industry that has since gone extinct. I finished Druett's book feeling not only enlightened in regards to the Sharon, but with a much enhanced knowledge of how vital whaling was to America previous to the discovery of kerosine.

I recommend this book, especially if one is into American history or nautical adventure.

V.E. Ulett says

Part true crime narrative, part social exposé, In the Wake of Madness is also and most prominently a thoroughgoing history of whaling in the mid-nineteenth century. The economics, challenges, and hardships of life aboard a sailing vessel unfolds as author Druett follows the voyage of the whale ship Sharon into remote regions of the Pacific. The Sharon of Fairhaven, Massachusetts is captained by Howes Norris, a family man respected in his community. Ill fortune in the voyage when few whales are taken seems to spur the unraveling of Captain Norris, who vents his frustration in brutality toward his crew. His particular victim is a young black man, the Sharon's steward, whom Norris humiliates, tortures, and eventually beats to death.

The terrible crime and its aftermath described in the personal journals of the Sharon's mates, but never reported by those same men, reflects the cultural, and socio-economic prejudices of the time. When Captain Norris meets his own violent end at the hands of three Pacific islanders and a young sailor from Fayal, one can't help but feel justice was done. No one inquires into motives, however, and the death of Captain Norris is soon known throughout the maritime community while those of the steward George Babcock and two Pacific islanders involved in Norris's murder go unremarked. Although *In the Wake of Madness* depicts a grim set of events, the history and detail in the book, including beautiful interior illustrations, are outstanding. Author Joan Druett has produced another nuanced and scholarly book that examines whaling in its heyday, and nineteenth century norms and society, while telling the tale of, as one whaling wife put it, a man who had left his soul at home.

Donna says

This true-life tale of a captain so harsh that he was murdered on his own ship had some interesting twists and turns, but the facts were more gripping than the writing. The account of everything after the ship's recapture was draggy, especially the repetitive lists of sailor desertions. I was almost happy to find that the last 60-some pages of its already short page count were appendixes and notes.

I'm also starting to think that it's against some nautical nonfiction code for an author to write about whaleships without invoking the life and writing of Melville at every opportunity. References to *Moby Dick* were sometimes piled as high as three to a page. That would probably make this a great read for a fan of that novel looking for whaling stories that Melville may have heard, but as someone who reads a lot of similar books it feels kind of tired. As soon as an author brings up harpoons or try pots, it's like I'm mentally counting down to a mention of Queequeg.

Shandra says

This subject had huge potential. The presentation of the event was a bummer. To many tangents and then very fact oriented without flow.

Cletis Reid says

Not a lot of heavy mutiny going on here. More like Keystone Cops Go Whaling.

Holly says

I thought the book was good but ugh, every aspect of whaling was awful.

CJ says

In 1841, the whaleship *Sharon* left Fairhaven Massachusetts under the control of Captain Howes Norris. A year later, he was murdered by three Pacific Islanders (who had joined the crew after unprecedented desertions throughout the trip) while the rest of the crew were out whaling. The third mate launched a heroic rescue to re-take the ship from the Islanders, and although that dramatic experience was widely publicized, little was said at the time regarding the reasons behind the murder. Racism at the time, as well as the traditional code of silence among sailors, made the easiest answer--the Pacific Islanders just went crazy because that's what "those people" do--the accepted answer. The author attempts to explain the murder by researching journals written by the crew, as well as combining other evidence to build a picture of a power-crazed, violent man who was frustrated by his failure to capture enough whales and haunted by difficulties on previous voyages. She posits that Captain Norris was killed because he terrorized his crew--going so far as to beat a young black steward to death--and because of their race, the Pacific Islanders had feared for their lives during some still unexplained confrontation with Norris. Although the full truth will never be known, since the only men who knew all died without ever confessing, Joan Druett does a very good job at presenting her case along with evidence that supports her theories.

On the whole, a good, well-written, well-researched book, but with nothing particularly spectacular to add to the genre. There is quite a bit of extra information regarding the whaling industry of the mid-nineteenth century, which is fascinating. I'd recommend it only to someone who is already interested in the subject.
