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Book Review Aubrey Maturin Novels

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Book Reviews

There are over one million books in print. A few of these deserve to be part of the collection of every library, from the smallest rural public library to our grandest research institutions. This column is devoted to those special books that should be available to all of us through our public and academic library community.

Column Editor: **Barry Fast**, VP Marketing & Sales, Academic Book Center

The Aubrey/Maturin Novels
by **Patrick O'Brian**
WW Norton & Co.
\$9.95 each, Paperback

Fourteen novels comprise this series: Master and Commander; Post Captain; HMS Surprise; The Mauritius Command; Desolation Island; The Fortune of War; The Surgeon's Mate; The Ionian Mission; Treason's Harbor; The Far Side of the World; The Reverse of the Medal; The Letter of Marque; The Thirteen Gun Salute; The Nutmeg Consolation.

Historical writing, whether fact or fiction, cannot be entirely trusted. The writer always brings a point of view to the subject, and by definition distorts historical reality. The finest historical novels are, for the educated layperson, as valid to the understanding of history as non-fiction works.

The New York Times called these books "the best historical novels ever written". The setting is the Napoleonic Wars, and the sea is the canvas on which these novels are painted. Jack Aubrey is a British naval officer whose career involves him in virtually all the action of that worldwide conflict. Jack is a simple man, honest, courageous, the embodiment of the best that British seamanship can produce. When he is ashore with his family and friends, he is literally a fish out of water, the victim of financial charlatans and a clumsy husband and father. He longs for a ship, and when he gets one, his only worry is that "peace will break out". His element is the sea and the ritualized community of life aboard a man of war.

As counterpoint to Jack Aubrey, O'Brian has created Stephen Maturin, a brooding Irish surgeon. Maturin is the perpetual underdog, the romantic ideal-

ist or cynical pessimist, a spy against the French and Spaniards, an enthusiastic naturalist, a cultivated musician and writer. Aubrey and Maturin are the closest of friends, and one of the delights of these novels is the long philosophical discussions they share during the voyages. It is through these exchanges that we learn about the political situation, the intrigues among the warring powers, and attitudes of contemporary people toward the events that shape their times.

We tend to characterize books as a "man's or woman's" read, and on the face of it, these novels seem decidedly masculine. But O'Brian brings to life the early nineteenth century woman in two portraits: Sophie Williams, who becomes Jack Aubrey's strong and practical wife, and Diana Villiers, the life long elusive love of Stephen Maturin. Villiers, like Aubrey and Maturin, moves on the world's stage. She has many lovers, living for a time in India, America and London. She exemplifies the life of a daring woman, unwilling to settle for a quiet life in the English countryside. Flawed though she is, dependent upon men for "protection", she manages to live a life as adventurous and dangerous as the two male characters in these novels. Over the years she grows and deepens, becoming, like Maturin, a realist, a survivor.

The great struggle with Napoleon shaped the nineteenth century as surely as World War I, a hundred years later, defined the twentieth century. The Aubrey/Maturin novels do not provide a complete picture of those years, but the lead to an intimate understanding of how people felt, acted, and triumphed in a world of fear and uncertainty.

No novelist does a better job of recreating the life of seamen in the early nineteenth century, when the British navy

was at its zenith. The Hornblower stories are adolescent compared to these. No novelist writes with the grace and power of O'Brian when he describes the sea, in tranquility or storm, and only Samuel Eliot Morrison is this equal in understanding seamanship and tactics. He is a solid historian and a novelist of fine perception and subtlety. Patrick O'Brian is our modern Conrad, our British Melville. ■

Franklin Book Company Acquires Pergamon Reprint Division

Franklin Book Company, Inc., (Elkins Park, PA) on October 31, 1991 acquired the exclusive worldwide rights to titles which were then currently in the reprint program of Pergamon Press PLC and future titles as they are declared out-of-print.

In May 1991, Franklin received a notice from Pergamon that they would no longer be reproducing high quality xerographic reproductions of their out-of-print titles. Franklin's over twenty-two years of experience with librarians trying to provide requesters with "the needed" books made them reluctant to see Pergamon Reprints disappear from the marketplace. Shortly after the notice was received, Franklin contacted Pergamon's representative and suggested the sale of the out-of-print titles.

Pergamon specialists within Franklin's customer service department offer brief synopses of all titles available in the reprint program. For further information, contact Carolyn Wiker at (215) 635-5252; FAX (215) 635-6155.