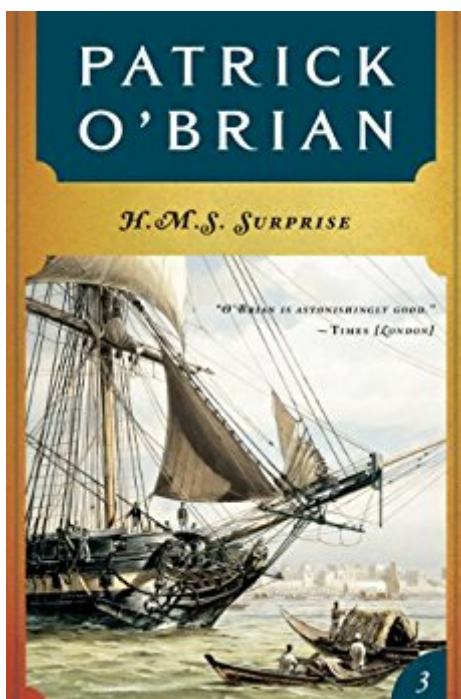


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H. M. S. Surprise (Vol. Book 3) (Aubrey/Maturin Novels)



Synopsis

"The best historical novels ever written." —Richard Snow, New York Times Book Review
Third in the series of Aubrey-Maturin adventures, this book is set among the strange sights and smells of the Indian subcontinent, and in the distant waters ploughed by the ships of the East India Company. Aubrey is on the defensive, pitting wits and seamanship against an enemy enjoying overwhelming local superiority. But somewhere in the Indian Ocean lies the prize that could make him rich beyond his wildest dreams: the ships sent by Napoleon to attack the China Fleet...

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In praising Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin books I am on well-trodden ground. In a sense, it is superfluous to do so: so many people, of such varied and excellent taste, have praised these books to the skies that further lauds from the modest likes of me are hardly necessary. Still, I'm glad to add my words. These stories concern Jack Aubrey, a ship captain in the English Navy at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, and his great friend Stephen Maturin, an Irish-Catalan doctor and spy who in the first book joins Jack's crew as ship doctor. As H. M. S. Surprise opens, political machinations cost Jack his prize money (earned in the previous book), and Stephen's cover in Spain is blown. As a result, and also because Stephen is scheming to see his lover Diana again (who has been taken by

her keeper Richard Canning to India), Jack takes command of the aged frigate H.M.S. Surprise, and is sent to Cambodia (stopping in India) to deliver the new British envoy to the Sultan of Kampong. Thus the setup for a long, wonderful, account of the voyage to the Orient and back. The pleasures of this book are remarkably varied: high comedy, such as the famous drunken sloth incident; high adventure, as the men of the Surprise battle not only the South Atlantic at its fiercest, but also the French; and bitter disappointment and even tragedy, in Stephen's seesaw relationship with Diana, as well as Stephen's involvement with a young Indian girl. The pleasures of this book, however, are not restricted to a fine plot. The ongoing development of the characters of Jack and Stephen, and of their complex and fully described friendship, is a major achievement. In addition, the many minor characters are fascinating: the envoy Mr.

I, like many others I suspect, was sucked into reading the Aubrey/Maturin series by the Peter Weir film. Little did I know that the books would be so much deeper than the film or topic would lead one to believe. Stephen Maturin: physician, scientist, naturalist, spy (and Patrick O'Brian alter ego) studies people (including his great friend Jack Aubrey - and himself) dispassionately, and we are the beneficiaries of his study. Jack Aubrey: ship's captain, sentimentalist, musician and astronomer is a man of the past - he is a hero with flaws but he holds honor and duty above himself (usually). H.M.S. Surprise is the best of the early series. We get adventure: a daring rescue of Stephen by Jack, a brilliant sea maneuver led by the Surprise on the Indian Ocean. We get a novel of manners: Maturin's and Aubrey's continued wooing of Diana Villiers and Sophia Williams. We get a marvelous frigate and her crew - O'Brian's depiction of the Surprise is a microcosm of the world at the time of Napoleon. And my, the Surprise is yar! Some of my friends have expressed surprise (pun intended, and Aubrey would love it!) that a feminist landlubber would admire the same series that Charlton Heston and other manly men have loved before me. My response is that great writing is enough. There are few female characters in Aubrey/Maturin, and those that O'Brian includes are not particularly sympathetic (although I can imagine every actress alive wanting to play Diana Villiers), but it doesn't matter when I feel as much a part of the crew as Pullings or Bonden. When you get down to it, Patrick O'Brian is just a great writer. At moments I have been reminded of Melville, Austen, and Robertson Davies. His grasp of the technical is thorough. His ability to share the historical feeling of the period is amazing.

Some critics have referred to the Aubrey/Maturin books as one long novel united not only by their historical setting but also by the central plot element of the Aubrey/Maturin friendship. Having read

these fine books over a period of several years, I decided to evaluate their cumulative integrity by reading them consecutively in order of publication over a period of a few weeks. This turned out to be a rewarding enterprise. For readers unfamiliar with these books, they describe the experiences of a Royal Navy officer and his close friend and traveling companion, a naval surgeon. The experiences cover a broad swath of the Napoleonic Wars and virtually the whole globe. Rereading all the books confirmed that O'Brien is a superb writer and that his ability to evoke the past is outstanding. O'Brien has numerous gifts as a writer. He is the master of the long, careful description, and the short, telling episode. His ability to construct ingenious but creditable plots is first-rate, probably because he based much of the action of his books on actual events. For example, some of the episodes of Jack Aubrey's career are based on the life of the famous frigate captain, Lord Cochrane. O'Brien excels also in his depiction of characters. His ability to develop psychologically creditable characters through a combination of dialogue, comments by other characters, and description is tremendous. O'Brien's interest in psychology went well beyond normal character development, some books contain excellent case studies of anxiety, depression, and mania. Reading O'Brien gives vivid view of the early 19th century. The historian Bernard Bailyn, writing of colonial America, stated once that the 18th century world was not only pre-industrial but also pre-humanitarian (paraphrase).

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