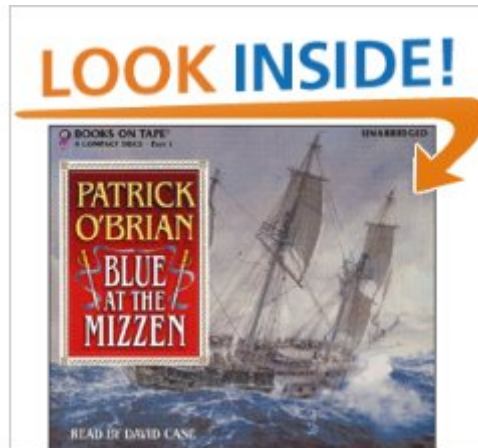


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# Blue At The Mizzen



## Synopsis

"The old master has us again in the palm of his hand." —Los Angeles Times (a Best Book of 1999) Napoleon has been defeated at Waterloo, and the ensuing peace brings with it both the desertion of nearly half of Captain Aubrey's crew and the sudden dimming of Aubrey's career prospects in a peacetime navy. When the *Surprise* is nearly sunk on her way to South America — where Aubrey and Stephen Maturin are to help Chile assert her independence from Spain — the delay occasioned by repairs reaps a harvest of strange consequences. The South American expedition is a desperate affair; and in the end Jack's bold initiative to strike at the vastly superior Spanish fleet precipitates a spectacular naval action that will determine both Chile's fate and his own. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Almost three decades after commencing his maritime epic with *Master and Commander*, Patrick O'Brian is still at it. The 20th episode, *Blue at the Mizzen*, is another swashbuckling adventure on the high seas, complete with romantic escapades from smoggy London to Sierra Leone, diplomacy, espionage, the intricacies of warfare, and imperial brinksmanship. As always, these events are bound up in the ongoing friendship between two officers of the Royal Navy. Jack Aubrey is the naval captain, bold yet compassionate, innovative yet cautious, as fearless in war as he is bumbling in affairs of the heart and household. His boon companion Stephen Maturin is the ship's surgeon--and additionally a spy for the British government, a wealthy Catalonian aristocrat, a doting Irish father, and an avid naturalist. That may sound like a lot to keep track of. However, it's not

necessary to carry around a scorecard or ship's roster while reading *Blue at the Mizzen*. The ostensible issue is whether Jack will finally be promoted to Admiral of the Blue. But long before he hears any word from the Napoleonic era's equivalent of Personnel, he loses half his crew to desertion, his ship undergoes a disastrous collision, and the entire company comes close to perishing in the ice-choked seas off Cape Horn. Meanwhile, the widowed Maturin issues a surprising proposal of marriage to a beautiful, mud-bespattered fellow naturalist while trekking through an African mangrove swamp. (The two lovebirds happen to be searching for a rare variant of *Caprimulgus longipennis*, the long-tailed nightjar, which they hope to surprise in full mating plumage.) Still, this is hardly a plot-driven novel. O'Brian takes time to get anywhere, and invariably enjoys the journey more than the arrival. So even as we get constant hints of the climax to come--Jack's spectacular naval action on behalf of the infant Republic of Chile--we don't mind hearing about the nuances of shipboard existence or the secret life of the white-faced tree duck. We're treated, for example, to this snippet about managed care, circa 1816: Poll, Maggie and a horse-leech from the starboard watch have been administering enemas to the many, many cases of gross surfeit that have now replaced the frostbites, torsions, and debility of the recent past, the very recent past. Strong, fresh, seal-meat has not its equal for upsetting the seaman's metabolism: he is much better kept on biscuits, Essex cheese, and a very little well-seethed salt pork--kept on short commons. And we're grateful! We can only hope that the elderly author will favor us with at least one more novel, so that his avid followers can avoid their own form of short commons. Life without Aubrey and Maturin would be a deprivation indeed. --Andrew Himes --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

With bittersweet pleasure, readers may deem this 20th and possibly final installment in O'Brian's highly regarded series featuring Capt. Jack Aubrey of the English Royal Navy and Stephen Maturin, ship's doctor, the best of the lot. Post-Waterloo, the frigate *Surprise* sets sail to South America as a "hydrographical vessel," ostensibly to survey the Straits of Magellan and Chile's southern coast. In fact, Jack and Stephen are to offer help to the Chilean rebels trying to break free from Spain. On their way down the coast of West Africa, romance blossoms for both men. Jack's liaison (with his cousin, Isobel, in Gibraltar) is brief, but widower Stephen's passion for Christine Wood, a naturalist who has been his correspondent for some time, turns serious in Sierra Leone. The doctor's correspondence with Christine begins with accounts of his explorations in Africa and South America, referencing, say, an "anomalous nuthatch" or the "etymology of doldrum," but they're quite wonderful love letters, functioning as a chorus to the action. Once in Chile, despite the conflict

between opposing rebel camps, Jack leads a successful raid on a treasure fort in Valdivia, followed by the seizure of a Peruvian frigate to be turned over to the Chilean rebels, triumphs that reap him a just reward; at that point, readers will learn the title's significance. Throughout, familiar characters abound and entertain, especially the amusingly nasty steward, Killick, and Stephen's "loblolly girl" (nurse), Poll Skeeping. And finally, there is Horatio Hanson, bastard son of a nobleman, who comes on board as a midshipman, a dashing young foil for the ship's elders. O'Brian has rightfully been compared to Jane Austen, but one wonders if even she would have done justice to "those extraordinary hollow dwellings, sometimes as beautiful as they were comfortless." To use one of Stephen's favorite expressions, "What joy!" Agent, Georges Borchardt. (Nov.) FYI: Over three million copies of the books in the Aubrey/Maturin series have been sold. O'Brian will make two mid-November appearances in New York, one already sold out. (Nov.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

Boffo success. How can usual be so excellent. Once again the adventures of our (by now) dear friends engage us in close brutal actions and salty sailing on the indomitable bark HMS Surprise. Sadly the penultimate treat in this feast of a sea saga.

This book, the 20th and last of the completed Aubrey/Maturin novels, acts as a bookend in a number of ways. There will never be another volume since the author died some time after this one was published, leaving incomplete notes for a 21st novel, but this one gives a pleasing closure: Napoleon is exiled for the last time early in the volume, and we are treated to a second-hand account of the Battle of Waterloo from a military officer who dines with Surprise's officers. Those who have read the entire series may note a pleasing counterpoint: shortly after the first meeting between Lt. Aubrey and Dr. Maturin in "Master and Commander," the first book, Aubrey receives orders promoting him (on p. 13 of the paperback edition I have) to commander; while on the penultimate page of "Blue at the Mizzen," Captain Aubrey receives orders promoting him to Rear Admiral of the Blue, giving the title to the entire work. (Those readers who, like myself, have watched their careers peak and go into decline with no possibility of a coup so huge as being promoted to flag rank or being awarded an endowed chair, or even tenure, at a university, may want to have a box of Kleenexes with them when they read this part.) So, I find lots to like about this final volume in the series. On the other hand, there are other elements that don't seem to pay their way. Dr. Maturin starts a romantic dalliance that seems, well, rather odd for someone his age who has already been married and lost his wife in a traffic accident. The absence of "Boney," the French

Emperor who is their arch-enemy throughout the entire series, leaves a cavernous hole that is poorly filled with the comparatively lightweight intrigue in South America. This intrigue seems poorly motivated, and perhaps it was in history: Britain was an ally of Spain, and had been for several years before Waterloo, so it seems odd that their government would want to deliberately foment revolution in Spain's American colonies (note, however, this was before the United States had enunciated its Monroe Doctrine). It appears the main objective was abolitionism, as Spain's colonies were "slave states" in American terms. The British Empire did achieve emancipation in 1833, long before the US, so presumably it had an equally potent strain of abolitionism. While there is a naval battle in this book and an amphibious assault, a great deal of it is consumed with less direct action and overall it gives the impression more of a summary than a blow by blow account. Perhaps we are seeing the author's powers weakening and "channel fever" seizing him, his intent being more to finish the book than to perfect it? Perhaps not -- he did start work on another one, so he was evidently unaware of how long he had to live. In any case, while this book is a worthy final volume in the canon, readers should not expect a reprise of one of the early volumes in the series. The characters and the author have all aged, their arch-enemy is gone, and it almost seems they have seized on South America because they know they would be bored simply returning to their English haunts and leaving the sea. Perhaps that's exactly how the British role in the independence of Spain's New World colonies came to be!

Blue at the Mizzen is a bit of a departure from the style of many of the other Aubrey-Maturin books, in that much of it is written in Maturin's hand via letters to England. (The reasoning behind this to be explained below.) This works, giving a detail and depth to a character whose rich inner-life has largely been absent, his role as intelligence officer, physician, scientist and erstwhile companion and confidant to Aubrey overshadowing his personal proclivities. The Napoleonic Wars ended - The Hundred Days (Vol. Book 19) (Aubrey/Maturin Novels) - Aubrey, like many RN post-captains, faces the likelihood of becoming a "yellow admiral" - a promotion to flag-officer rank without a ship or squadron to command, effectively ending one's naval career. To forestall this, Maturin and Aubrey take Suprise to Chile, ostensibly on a hydrographical voyage, in reality to help Chile win its independence from Spain. En route, O'Brian tantalizes readers with two new developments: a new midshipman, Horatio Hanson (the bastard of the Duke of Clarence, Prince William) and a budding romance between Lady Jenny Morris (the widow of Lord Morris, ambassador in Sierra Leone) and Maturin (himself a widower). It is frustrating that these plot points will not be more fully developed. The voyage south moves at a fast clip, and the narration of

Suprise on station is also brief, most of the story focusing on Maturin and Hanson - some readers will be disappointed by this, I found it a refreshing departure from the detailed "watch on watch" description of daily life at sea, and allowed me to get a better sense of Maturin as an emotional being. The single naval engagement Aubrey is involved in is also summative, and which I wish more detail was given; however, it wasn't so much a disappointment to deduct a star in my rating. Finishing Blue at the Mizzen is somewhat bitter-sweet, it being the last complete novel in the series. I look forward to 21: The Final Unfinished Voyage of Jack Aubrey (Vol. Book 21) (Aubrey/Maturin Novels), but I sense it will be ultimately unsatisfying, the manuscript unfinished. That I won't see how things will develop between Lady Morris and Maturin and what will happen with young Hanson is similarly disappointing. However, every voyage must end, shipmates going their separate ways, the sea-stories to be regaled and revisited at some later date - and so it is with Aubrey and Maturin. As I've written on most reviews of the series, I highly recommend the books: no one writes nautical fiction like O'Brian, and very few write any sub-genre of fiction like him. Having faced foul weather, stood on the quarter-deck and in the gun-room in countless engagements, and crossed the line several times, I feel a closeness to the characters O'Brian so vividly created. It's been a wonderful, wholly enjoyable experience and one that I encourage any lover of good writing to find for themselves why there is such a passionate and loyal following to these books.

If you have read the preceding 19 volumes, then you will have no need of a literary review of this book. If this is your first bite at the series, I would strongly recommend you put this book down, start at volume 1 (Master and Commander) and read on. If you are gripped by the middle of volume 1, then you will love this last complete book in the series. Whereas some of the middle volumes became perhaps a little formulaic, but still excellent reads, this volume pretty neatly encapsulates the charm, experience and sheer beauty of the best of Patrick O'Brian's craft. I particularly enjoyed the ending, a culmination of the series. It felt like a final piece in the puzzle. I have so far refused to read the partly written "Final Voyage" - it would spoil my enjoyment of what I perceive to be a fitting finale. I bought this book in Kindle format. The experience of reading in this format is, to a degree, enhanced. It can be carried anywhere, easily, unobtrusively. You open the book at precisely the spot you last viewed. The pages appear to have been written on paper - I use the ink screen version of Kindle, and love it. You could, if you wanted, fit all 20 volumes of the series into one slim Kindle. Highly recommended book, and recommended for the Kindle.

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