The Surgeons Mate by Patrick O'Brian

Another Stellar Effort For Patrick O'Brian As Aubrey And Maturin Wear A Bit About The Edges

Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin tales are widely acknowledged to be the greatest series of historical novels ever written. All eighteen books are being re-issued in hardback by HarperCollins with stunning new jackets to coincide with a new film based on the adventures and to introduce these modern classics to a new generation. Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin are ordered home by despatch 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 through the fogs and shallows of the Grand Banks is as thrilling, as tense and as unexpected in its culmination as anything Patrick O'Brian has written. Then, among other things, follows a shipwreck and a particularly sinister internment in the notorious Temple Prison in Paris. Once again, the tigerish and fascinating Diana Villiers redresses the balance in this man's world of seamanship and war.

My Personal Review:
Patrick O'Brien's scope of imagination is staggering. We are now into the seventh book in his series, and Captain Lucky Jack Aubrey and surgeon/naturalist/spy Stephen Maturin continue to find themselves in realistic-yet-dire circumstances of a personal, military, and intelligence nature. Through it all, these two characters never seem like invincible juggernauts, but instead very human, very capable men living by the best their wits and luck can offer.

At the outset of the novel, Aubrey and Maturin need to flee the New World for the old, but find themselves hard-pressed to do so. Thanks to Dr. Maturin's single-handed destruction of French spy networks in Boston (including a wee bit of murder), a wealthy intelligence figure hires ships to track down the fleeing Maturin. The result is a thrilling chase off Nova Scotia and the nearby waters - while I prefer Aubrey's sinking of the Dutch 74 the Waakzamheid in Desolation Island, this chase is one of the most thrilling in the series so far.

And the joys of this novel don't stop there. O'Brien once again finds various ways to inject humor into his novel. Dr. Maturin hits a personal and professional high (as a naturalist) when he gets the chance to address a body of learned scientists in Paris... only to bungle the presentation horribly. Aubrey allows himself to be seduced by a wanton woman while
celebrating his escape from the jail in Boston, and is confronted with news of the natural biological result of such a transgression. Maturin and Aubrey are accompanied on many of their adventures in SM by the Swedish captain Jagiello, a supremely attractive young man, and Aubrey finds himself at a loss as to why the women fall all over themselves for this young buck when they could have a sailor with the handsomest set of whiskers in the fleet. There are joys in this novel that you just don't find in most swashbuckling thrillers.

But at its heart, SM is an adventure yarn, and OBrian does not disappoint. In a story that sweeps from the New World to Paris to Denmark to the infamous Temple Prison back in France, Aubrey and Maturin find themselves thrown from one pan into another fire. And God bless them for it!

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