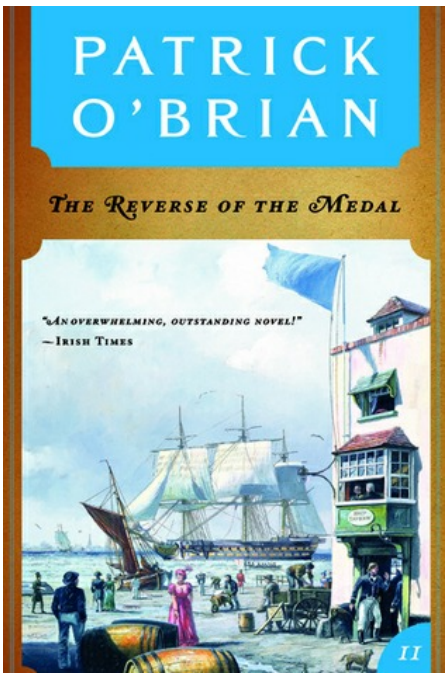

The Reverse of the Medal

Patrick O'Brian

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Patrick O'Brian

The Reverse of the Medal Patrick O'Brian
Captain Jack Aubrey, R. N., ashore after a successful cruise, is persuaded by a casual acquaintance to make certain investments in the City. This innocent decision ensnares him in the London criminal underground and in government espionage—the province of his friend Stephen Maturin. Is Aubrey's humiliation and the threatened ruin of his career a deliberate plot? This dark tale is a fitting backdrop to the brilliant characterization and sparkling dialogue which O'Brian's readers have come to expect.

The Reverse of the Medal Details

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From Reader Review The Reverse of the Medal for online ebook

Nooilforpacifists says

Primarily of interest to those who know of Lord Cochrane's trial for stock fraud.

Algernon says

Such a long journey, already! I've been pacing myself for a while with this series, afraid I would get fed up with the obscure nautical jargon used by Captain Aubrey or with the wealth of scientific observation provided by doctor Maturin. Yet the dominant note as I delve into the second half of this twenty book epic is the desire of never reaching the end, of sailing on towards the ever distant line of the horizon in the company of these two fictional people that have become intimate friends through the magic web of words woven by this master storyteller that is Patrick O'Brian.

There is a lot of plot development in this eleventh episode, most of it taking place on dry land – a dramatic development whose seeds were planted several books back and one that underlines the often brutal disconnect between the purity of life on the high seas and the corruption, betrayal and venality of life on shore. We already knew that as accomplished as Jack Aubrey is on the deck of his frigate, he becomes a sap for crooks, gamblers and political handlers when he returns home to England. In an attempt to repair his badly shaken finances after losing a fortune with bad investments in horses and mining, Aubrey jumps at the chance to make a fortune on the Stock Exchange after receiving secret tips from a man he meets in a tavern. Not only this, but Jack Aubrey wants to spread the good fortune to his friends and so he tells his politician father and a couple of other close acquaintances about the secret deal. The resulting debacle offers the author a chance to describe the shortcomings of the British legal and political elitist system where Truth comes second to personal animosity and power plays in the House of Lords. Jack Aubrey is about to lose the very reason of his existence – his commission into the Royal Navy and might very well end up with a long stint in jail. He is also about to lose his beloved ship, the frigate 'Surprise', and its hand-picked crew, as the Admiralty has decided to send it to the scrap yard. Is this the end of the journey? or is friendship more important than money, career and even family. Stephen Maturin must pull a miracle out of his bag of spy tricks in order to save his friend Aubrey, all this while trying to uncover a deeply seated Bonapartist mole in the Admiralty and searching for his runaway wife.

—«»—«»—«»—

I was going to go easy on the synopsis, but I got a little carried away trying to put some order in what I remember about the plot, some three months after I finished the book. My old notes though deal less with factual details and more with the real reason I love this series so much: passion, competence and joy of life – three constants that have come to define the journey and the characters for me. Let's illustrate with Jack Aubrey in one of those lyrical interludes that O'Brian writes so well:

There were mornings when the ship would lie there mirrored in a perfectly unmoving glossy sea, her sails drooping, heavy with dew, and he would dive from the rail, shattering the reflexion and swimming out and away beyond the incessant necessary din of two hundred men hurrying about their breakfast. There he would float with an infinity of pure sea on either hand and the whole hemisphere of sky above, already full of light;

and then the sun would would heave up on the eastern rim, turning the sails a brilliant white in quick succession, changing the sea to still another nameless blue, and filling his heart with joy.

Equally strong in Jack Aubrey is the call to arms, the hunter instinct that revels in the sound of broadsides and in the storm winds wiping through the rigging:

Furthermore, the glass was sinking, a sure sign of wind; and throughout the meal the steady chipping of shot told him that all was well on deck. A chase in sight, his ship in perfect order, and a blow coming on: this was real sailoring – this was why men went to sea.

For those less well versed in maritime lore, as I was before starting the series, 'chipping' refers to the hammering out of surface defects in the round shot for cannons, making the balls more accurate over long distances.

The strength and the calm that Aubrey finds in the solitary communion with the sea, Maturin discovers in the equally solitary contemplation of the wonders of the natural world:

'Why do I feel such intense pleasure, such an intense satisfaction?' asked Stephen. For some time he searched for a convincing reply, but finding none he observed 'The fact is that I do.' He sat on the as the sun's rays came slowly down through the trees, lower and lower, and when the lowest reached a branch not far above him it caught a dewdrop poised upon a leaf. The drop instantly blazed crimson, and a slight movement of his head made it show all the colours of the spectrum with extraordinary purity, from a red almost too deep to be seen through all the others to the ultimate violet and back again. Some minutes later a cock pheasant's explosive call broke the silence and the spell and he stood up.

Similar to Aubrey, the good doctor has an action oriented side to his personality, necessary in his undercover work and put to good use in this episode in the hour of need.

'Does Dr. Maturin understand the stock-exchange?'
'I very much doubt it.'
'Yet so philosophic a mind might well contemplate the City, and observe the conflict of greed and fear in the minds of its inhabitants, symbolized by the Stock Exchange quotations.'

Secondary characters serve well to elaborate and shine new light (often in humorous tones) on the musical themes played by the two protagonists. For example, reverend Martin displays a hidden passion for that most English pastime – cricket – to the annoyance of Dr. Maturin: *Do you not find watching good cricket restful, absorbing, a balm to the anxious, harassed mind?* And former ensign Pullings, now a captain in his own right, displays a passion for the sea almost as strong as that of his former master:

There was a brief lapse into the young fellow Stephen had known so long ago when they turned a corner and the long harbour came in sight, with the 'Surprise' lying against the quay on the far side, lit by a clear sea-light and a high, gently dappled sky as though for her portrait. 'There she lays,' he cried. 'Oh there she lays! Ain't she the loveliest thing you ever saw?'

Let us hope the valiant 'Surprise' and her loyal crew will recover from the present dire straits and set sail again to the high seas in the next volume.

Ken-ichi says

Another fun romp, but ... the ending! Or lack there of! Now I must buy the next.

Words (that I looked up in a wonderful, dead-tree dictionary, which felt *awesome*)

andiron (n): the metal stand that holds wood in a fire place (p. 189)
chirurgical (adj): of or pertaining to surgery (from A Sea of Words) (p. 162)
chouse (v): to dupe or swindle (from A Sea of Words) (p. 269)
delf (n): glazed earthenware made in Delft (my dictionary lists it as "delft") (p. 189)
myrmidion (n): a hired goon or lowly servant. This is derived from the Greek root *myrmex,* which means "ant", but not before passing through a few referrants. (p. 215)
peccant (adj): sinning, causing disease. (p. 167)
pettifog (v): to practice legal trickery or other forms of backhand dealing. My Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary postulates that this may derive from a family of merchants in Augsburg named "Fugger" in the 15h-16th centuries, which made me wonder if said family is in any way related to the word "fuck," which my dictionary lists as "origin unknown, 16th c." (p. 219)

Anna says

Unusually for a Master and Commander novel, whilst reading ‘The Reverse of the Medal’ I was almost more diverted by the plot than the character interactions. Whilst the latter were, as ever, charming and delightful, it was a more plot-driven installment than usual. This may have been connected to being set largely on land, in England. Also, Aubrey and Maturin did not spend a large portion of the book in each other’s company, their conversations largely being with others. Nonetheless, the whole was very enjoyable indeed and had many moments of great hilarity. The tension of the plot was also well handled; O’Brian has an unusual way with pacing, skipping ahead suddenly. Here it works very well.

I cannot mention my favourite parts without spoilers, however. (view spoiler)

In conclusion, it is absolutely adorable that when Stephen comes into a fortune his first instinct is to buy Jack his favourite ship. (hide spoiler)]

Nelson says

These novels are maddeningly, consistently, entertainingly four-star novels. Until now. O'Brian's writing is as incisive as ever, his well-developed sense of irony as sharp here as in any of the previous books. But from almost the first word through the incredibly thrilling conclusion, this entry is just a slightly more brilliantly plotted work than what has come before. There are more surprises and amazing turns of narrative here than in perhaps the last two or three combined--and that is really saying something. Most of the novel takes place

on land, in London, among the world of stockbrokers and law courts. As ever, O'Brian is more than up to the demands historical fiction makes, and renders this part of his world as completely as he does so very many others. There are at least two or three moments of genuine beauty where one is compelled almost to stop and just savor how the plot and the writing come together (the first (surely?) appearance of Samuel Panda, the long-awaited reunion with Sophie and Jack's experience in the pillory, to name three). In this novel as well, one has the sense that O'Brian is getting ever more ambitious with how he focuses the text. Sometimes he locates the narrative in the conversations between Maturin and Aubrey, and very often he will locate the focus in the conscious thoughts of one of the two. Perhaps consistently more often than in any entry to this point, we see the two main characters through the eyes of others. It's a very deft move; at this juncture both Aubrey and Maturin have significant reputations. One senses that future entries will play more on the public-private distinction; clearly O'Brian is more than equal to this shift in narrative focus. The characters continue to develop in interesting and surprising ways. Much of this book takes place in Maturin's element, yet he is deeply fallible here. More importantly, he is conscious of his mistakes: they deepen his friendship and sense of obligation to Aubrey, which, ultimately, is the linchpin on which all of these magnificent novels turn. What else? One almost always has a tendency to rush the endings of these novels because the suspense gets wound up to fever pitch--this time O'Brian really outdoes anything he has accomplished before in that line. While he seems to still regard the novel as a discrete unit of narrative measurement, here guns cocked two and three novels before finally go off. The control and talent to sustain suspense over such a very long stretch of narration without ever slackening the pace or interest is really hard to fathom. And this one ends even more thrillingly than anything that has come before--the last sentence leaves one in agony for the next. The highest peak in a chain of impressive mountains. So far.

Ben says

I have a true confession: Patrick O'Brian has made me a fan of naval historical fiction. His engrossing world in both *The Reverse of the Medal* and the entire *Aubrey-Maturin Series* is at once as alien as any science fiction story and yet startlingly compelling. Readers who embark on this series of books will find the Napoleonic language difficult at first, but will be well-rewarded in the end as they become immersed in it. On the human side, O'Brians characters are flawed and yet thoroughly likable. Captain Jack Aubrey, the main character in most of the novels, is amazing at sea and quite a "lubber" on land. And yet Aubrey's friendship with Dr. Steven Maturin and their adventures together are remarkably compelling. Minor Spoilers below.

The Reverse of the Medal is literally a reverse from some of O'Brian's other naval books. Unlike other entries in the series that begin on land and end with victories at sea, the story begins with demonstrations of Captain Aubrey's amazing abilities at sea and ends with his devastation on land as he gets caught up in the historical Great Stock Exchange Fraud of 1814. O'Brian makes an otherwise bland, if important historical event a joy to review and even goes so far as to incorporate international spying and espionage through the character of Dr. Maturin. After all the devastation of Aubrey's career, O'Brian has a touching send-off for Jack Aubrey that launches both him and the doctor into the next book. Readers of the series will feel compelled to immediately begin its sequel, *The Letter of Marque*.

Robert says

This is the eleventh in the Aubrey/Maturin series of novels, which stretches to twenty volumes completed in the author's lifetime and a 21st published posthumously having (I assume) been finished or at least tidied up by another.

THIS REVIEW HAS BEEN CURTAILED IN PROTEST AT GOODREADS' CENSORSHIP POLICY

See the complete review here:

http://arbieroo.booklikes.com/post/33...

Sherwood Smith says

My history with this book serves as proof that I at least cannot do justice to a series if I don't begin at the beginning.

When I first heard of the Aubrey/Maturin series, I took a look for it in the bookstore. This particular book was the only one available. I read the first few pages and had no idea what was going on or who anyone was, so I put it back.

The next time I picked up this book was after I'd read the previous ones in the series. This time all of the background was there. The threads were in place, the complicated emotional background compelled me, and the relationships imbued the words with meaning and measure. From the first word I was passionately with the story, which promptly began to build to one of the most emotionally resounding climaxes I have ever read.

It is a brilliant book in so many ways. It is utterly unpredictable. The characters are so complex, in a way that only happens when you have lived and breathed with them through ten books.

The glimpse into the underside of London is both fascinating and disturbing, and that underside includes the labyrinthine judicial system that Dickens was going to pillory so effectively in *Bleak House* mid-century, touching off desperately-needed judicial reform. The villains . . . the victim . . . and the seamen's response . . .

Well, to say anything more would be unjustifiable spoiler, but I note that everyone I have ever spoken to who has read this book has made mention of *that* scene.

Jamie Collins says

[is heartbreaking, with the very moving scene of Jack facing the pillory, but supported by a huge crowd of naval men (hide spoiler)]

Darwin8u says

"When virtue spooms before a prosperous gale
My heaving wishes help to fill the sail"
- John Dryden, The Hind And The Panther

There is a fairly exciting cat and mouse chase in this book, but for the most part 'The Reverse of the Medal' involves another Captain Jack Aubrey financial mistake. In what I'll only describe as a mix between a classic economic espionage novel ala John le Carré and David Mamet's The Spanish Prisoner, Jack Aubrey loses about everything. At the same time, Dr. Maturin is trying to take care of his friend financially by procuring *the Surprise* at a Navy auction all while dealing with the absence of his mercurial wife.

Without divulging too much of the plot, let me just say that one of the final chapters of this novel actually made me cry. It wasn't sad, per se, but the tears that swell up when you witness men doing manly things to help other men. Anyway, it was beautiful and touching and worth the time.

Jason Koivu says

The journey continues and the friendship grows regardless of the setbacks that abound in *The Reverse of the Medal*

After an epic voyage to the Pacific in *The Far Side of the World* the HMS Surprise sails home, chasing a privateer, during which background information is relayed that will be useful later on, so pay attention. Then later on comes quick-like and our hero Captain Jack Aubrey takes a sketchy tip and dives into the stock market on a "sure thing". Aubrey is lucky to have his good friend Stephen Maturin, a doctor and intelligence agent...but that's on the DL, so keep it under your hat. Maturin does his best to extricate Aubrey, but there are forces at play beyond them both.

Much of the action takes place on land, where Aubrey is a complete fish out of water. Seldom of anything good ever comes out of one of these novels when they're set on land. That's not to say I don't enjoy them. I certainly do! But the characters on the other hand usually end up the worse for wear.

Author Patrick O'Brian grinds an ax against lawyers in this installment of the Master & Commander/Aubrey & Maturin series. He has very little good to say about them, neither through character dialogue nor actions. The lawyers and judge that appear herein are displayed as vindictive puppets for political motivation. Their machinations are crafted by the author to illicit hatred and he succeeds.

While there is action and intrigue aplenty, certain scenes are drawn out in a way that might bore some readers. O'Brian liked to paint a picture of the day to day when he could fit it into a scene that also moved the story along. I love it, but it does make the story move along just that much slower, so I could see some readers skipping pages. I'd advise against that. You'll miss the subtle character development and the nuanced plot evolvement, which are the bread and butter of these books.

The ending is both dramatic and heart-felt. After some slow going for a few chapters, the whole thing winds

up in a hell of a heart-racing hurry that will make you reach for the next book in the series the moment you finish the last wonderful words of *The Reverse of the Medal.*

Michael says

This one is mainly of interest for O'Brian fans (like me). I wouldn't recommend it to someone new to this series about British Naval activities in the Napoleanic Wars. This is because most of the novel's action takes place on land. There is an exciting chase of Jack's frigate in pursuit a privateer in the first part of the book, but we are deprived of a chance to see his special friend and ship's surgeon, Stephen Maturin, engage in his naturalist avocation in exotic locales. Those who have already come to love Lucky Jack for his heart and courage in battle will be moved by the jeopardy he stands up to in the court case in this story. Stephen is really in his element dealing with the political intrigue that lies behind this case.

The rich and vibrant friendship between Jack and Stephen is the true heart of the series, and it brings me much elation and tender feelings over their mutual welfare. O'Brian's portrait of the special society and teamwork aboard a ship of the Royal Navy is effectively the soul the collective work. On top of this bounty, the tales thrill me with exciting battles and educate me a lot on the history of competition between the colonial giants of Europe. It is no exaggeration to say that the capabilities of British Navy to project power throughout the world's oceans was the most important key to the success of this island nation in building an empire.

I envy anyone who is just now setting out to read from this body of work. A reason this particular book was special to me is that it completes my thirty year tour of the complete set of 20 novels. In celebration, I share four great book covers from some of my favorites from the series, which were painted by Geof Hunt (in order: *The Surgeon's Mate, Master and Commander, H.M.S. Surprise, and The Yellow Admiral*).

Lisa says

*Reverse of the Meda*l is the 11th book in Patrick O'Brian's *Aubrey & Maturin* series, and having got this far it's safe to say it's one I've enjoyed. In fact, that would be rather understating it – at this point I have lost any objectivity I may have once had, and am a fully-fledged fangirl (especially when it comes to Maturin). *Reverse of the Medal* hasn't knocked that status at all, and in fact gave me a little more than I'd have expected to stress over, with a turn of events I would never have predicted.

Starting the book still Captain of the Surprise, though he and his crew are seeing her through the last leg of her journey to retirement, Jack spends the first half of the book in his element on his beloved ship, and anxious about his return home having left his financial and legal affairs in a mess and having had a previously unknown of bastard of his turn up on his wife Sophie's doorstep. Stephen, however, is anxious to find out how things stand between he and his wife, Diana, after news of his association with an attractive woman (all in the pursuit of an intelligence operation) has reached her ears. But setting foot on shore brings

far, far worse problems than that, as Lucky Jack Aubrey isn't anywhere near so lucky on land, and soon finds himself unwittingly caught up in a conspiracy that could see him booted from the service, while Stephen is finding that conspiracies also abound in his intelligence network.

I was so bound up in *Reverse of the Medal* that I virtually devoured it in one, and with Jack being literally out of his element for the second half of the book I was more far more worried for the outcome than I would ever have been with a tremendous sea battle. Ending on a bit of a cliffhanger, I'm sure I'll be reading the next book pretty soon, as I'm desperate to find out how the book's climax affects…well, everything.

Also posted at Cannonball Read 10

Patrick says

The Reverse of the Medal features the first proper return of Patrick O'Brian's historical novels to English shores in what seems like a long time. The internal chronology is difficult to establish, since it seems to have been 1812 for a very long time in this world; but it has been several books since Jack and Stephen were back in London, at any rate. On paper it's notable for being, like The Mauritius Command, another example of the author casting some of his own characters in the place of actual historical figures. The author's note is candid in its admission that the story is effectively a retelling of a real scandal that involved Lord Cochrane, one of the great seamen of that period. But the book takes some liberties with history, and pursues its own ends at its own pace in telling this particular story.

(Considerable, unavoidable spoilers to follow.)

After the events of The Far Side of the World, the HMS Surprise is slowly making its way home. The expectation is that it'll be their last journey on that vessel, perhaps forever; there's a brief by typically gripping sea chase with a privateer, but otherwise, the central event of the early part of the book is the sudden appearance of a young man bearing proof that he is Jack's son:

''God's my life,' said Jack, and after a moment he slowly began to open the package. It contained a sperm-whale's tooth upon which he had laboriously engraved HMS Resolution under close-reefed topsails when he was a very young man, younger even than the tall youth facing him; it also contained a small bundle of feathers and elephant's hair bound together with a strip of leopard's skin…'

The surprise is not so much that Jack should have fathered a bastard; it's that the bastard should announce himself so suddenly as an educated young black man. He, Samuel Panda, was raised by Catholic missionaries, and appears to have become one too. His appearance in this book is a curious thing: Samuel pops up with little warning, seemingly asks nothing of his father, and he disappears soon after. Though he merits some mention later, it seems like O'Brian is only setting him up here to do something else with him in a later story.

And yet this idea of the illegitimate child making an unexpected reappearance serves as a perfect thematic touchstone for this novel. There's much which comes home to roost here, and we see here a great drawing together of many of the political threads that have been spinning out in ever longer, ever tangled lines through the previous books. For a long time our heroes were protected from the consequences of their actions simply by being on a ship far away from the rest of the world; now they are back at the centre of the industrialised world, and the world is very much taking an interest in them.

But here, more so than ever before in the series, the book really feels like a celebration of all that has come before. Not only are all our old favourite characters here and on show, they're gently re-introduced, and sometimes championed. There are whole sequences here which don't really have any purpose except to be utterly, utterly charming; I'm thinking in particular of the endless cricket match with Jack and his old crew, into which Maturin wanders; and the long and beautifully absurd sequence where the men quite literally take apart every piece of Jack's house, clean it all, and put it back together, in time for the long-awaited reappearance of his wife. None of this needs to happen for the plot of the book; but it does, and it's wonderful. As so often in O'Brian's writing, the musical quality of his prose reaches a peak in those moments when nothing in particular is happening:

'A cheer from far away changed the current of his mind, and some moments later this was followed by the peculiarly English sound of a bat striking a ball and then by further cries. He passed quickly through what Jack called the rose-garden – lucus a non lucendo – through the shrubbery to the edge of the hill and there below him on a broad meadow was a game of cricket all laid out, the fielders in their places, keenly attentive to the bowler as he went through his motions, the sound of the stroke again, the batsmen twinkling between the wickets, fielders darting for the ball, tossing it in, and then the whole pattern taking shape again, a formal dance, white shirts on the green.'

Having finished the book I think more and more often of those scenes of togetherness. It is in these, I think, in which the book really shows its inner light. Aubrey's crew are one big family here, one which at times outshines Aubrey's own actual family. Sophie and the children are present, but their role is relegated to distant, smiling bystanders; and curiously, Diana Viliers is written out of the story through a strange sort of narrative contrivance. But it is the sailors as a collective who really matter here. Each is given his own little moment — Babbington, who began this series as barely more than a boy, is now a captain, and gets his own romantic sub-plot — and there's even some good lines for the walk-on Irishman, Padeen ('Will your honor explain the Saxon game now?'). All of this is necessary because in the end they all step up as required to save Aubrey from himself.

Maturin's position is, as ever, set askance to the rest. He is a beloved part of the crew, but at the same time, he will never quite be the same as them. It's significant that his main job here is to keep them together by stumping up from his (conveniently vast, hidden) private fortune: he buys the HMS Surprise, which was otherwise due for the wrecker's yard, with the intent of giving it to Jack. He states several times throughout this book that he's doing it to save Jack from 'going mad' on shore, but his own true reasons are oblique. There's a real sense, I think, in which Maturin would submit to something much darker if he were divorced utterly from somebody's service, and left to his own devices. But though he literally says at one point that his personality makes for a poor deux ex machina, that's exactly his role here; one is tempted to wonder how many other times Jack Aubrey's career might have come to an ignoble end, had it not been for Stephen's quiet machinations.

If the events of the scandal follow history, the outcome differs for dramatic effect. What happens is that Jack Aubrey is set up in a kind of stock exchange fraud, which turns out to be far more serious than his previous trouble for private debts. It's fairly obvious to all concerned that he's been put up to it by political enemies of his father, but Jack himself has the utmost faith in the British legal system to clear him of any wrongdoing. His judgment on land is, as ever, entirely misguided; he is sentenced to be pilloried.

This is where the outcome of the story differs from history; Cochrane was also found guilty, but he was never actually put in the stocks, since he was so popular that the authorities feared inciting a riot. Aubrey doesn't quite have such luck. Though his life is in danger – it wasn't unknown for people to be very badly hurt from the pillory – the thing that upsets him most is the loss of his position:

‘For to Jack Aubrey the fact of no longer belonging to the Navy counted more than a thousand pillories, the loss of fortune, loss of rank, and loss of future. It was in a way a loss of being, and to those who knew him well it gave his eyes, his whole face, the strangest look.’

This is, in fact, about all we see of his feelings about it. The upstanding Englishman with a distant stare, accepting his fate with a quiet grace that betrays a deeper sense of betrayal. But his men won’t allow him to come to harm. They pour into London, all the old Navy salts who served with him, and they literally crowd out those who’ve arrived with malicious intent. It’s a neat way of drawing a distinction between the good hearted men who serve and the corrupt establishment who command; but again, this seems to me less vital to the novel than the picture of a big, tough, happy family, all gathered around one patriarch to literally shelter him from the world.

It’s an odd thing, the pillory scene. It’s carried off very well. It is not really a serious threat, in the end; it has all the brisk, funny, heartwarming bluster of a Hollywood movie. It might be one of the most affecting moments in the series so far. But what’s remarkable is how sparse it is. O’Brien has this repeated tendency, seen in almost all the novels so far, of cutting off his crescendo just before it hits what we expect to be the most powerful notes. The reader feels they are about to see the scene of Jack in cold irons bound before a jeering crowd; they might even want to know how he would feel, in his head.

But when the thing happens, we’re immediately transported to after the event. We get neither the trauma of the event itself, nor do we encounter his immediate feelings when he’s saved. It’s as though all this might be inconceivable. The author gently whisks us away to someplace else entirely. I can’t quite decide how to feel about this constant sense of climax deferred which comes so often with O’Brian. I enjoy the drama of it, but as so often I’m left with the sense of an author who would prefer not to dwell too long on the worst implications of his own suggestions.

Perhaps the book’s ultimate suggestion is that this what separates great leaders from the merely adequate. Perhaps they belong, in the end, to something bigger than the organisation which sustains them. It would be nice to think so, though I can’t think of many examples from our own age.

For me the vision of Jack’s fall from grace works best on the level of human fantasy. There is something wonderfully comforting about the idea of being protected from the world by an actual body of humanity; a body all the more potent for acting of its own free will, and not through discipline. It is a little like the feeling of comfort I get from reading these books: they really do block out the modern world in a way few other novels can. There’s something redemptive, even triumphant, about it: of how Jack’s small wrongness in the moment is overcome by a wider injustice of his trial, only for that to be overcome again by the moment of solidarity. Any reader would want it for themselves, surely; any writer too, perhaps.

Karla says

The most bromancey book of the series so far. Stephen's use of his huge wealth, solely for Jack's freedom and happiness and pride, brought tears to my eyes. My beautiful boys... *sniff*