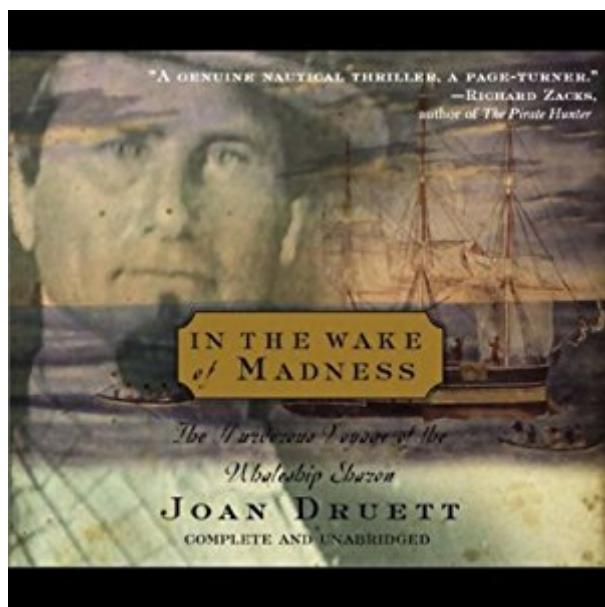


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In The Wake Of Madness: The Murderous Voyage Of The Whaleship Sharon



Synopsis

After more than a century of silence, the true story of one of history's most notorious mutinies is revealed in Joan Druett's riveting "nautical murder mystery" (USA Today). On May 25, 1841, the Massachusetts whaleship Sharon set out for the whaling ground of the northwestern Pacific. A year later, while most of the crew was out hunting, Captain Howes Norris was brutally murdered. When the men in the whaleboats returned, they found four crew members on board, three of whom were covered in blood, the other screaming from atop the mast. Single-handedly, the third officer launched a surprise attack to recapture the Sharon, killing two of the attackers and subduing the other. An American investigation into the murder was never conducted--even when the Sharon returned home three years later, with only four of the original twenty-nine crew on board. Joan Druett, a historian who's been called a female Patrick O'Brian by the Wall Street Journal, dramatically re-creates the mystery of the ill-fated whaleship and reveals a voyage filled with savagery under the command of one of the most ruthless captains to sail the high seas. --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a lover of such true adventure stories, I was a bit disappointed in places where there are details missing. I think that given the paucity of known facts in this case, though, Ms Druett has done a remarkable job of ferreting out what there is to know and of surmising the sequence of events and their timing. Certainly an entertaining presentation of what is knowable about the case.

Whaling as romantic adventure has been with us since before Herman Melville put pen to paper. Even today, amidst a reassessment of the brutality of whale killing and its ecological impact, we still maintain a peculiar nostalgia for the days of the sail ship and harpoon. "Moby-Dick" is at least partially to blame for this. Joan Druett's "In the Wake of Madness" is a powerful antidote to the idea that whaling was a rollicking high-seas adventure amongst exotic and eccentric characters. Her account of the systematic torture and murder of a cabin boy, at the hands of a sick captain named Howes Norris (while the crew did practically nothing), ranks as one of the most abominable things I've ever read. Norris' eventual murder at the hands of several Polynesian crew members, and the third mate's courageous attempt to re-take the ship, appear almost anti-climactic. Druett's book is extremely well-researched, and it succeeds in showing whaling to be what it really was: grueling work for years at a time that involved hunger, danger, and isolation, surrounded by boorish and uneducated (and occasionally sadistic) men, and long periods of inactivity and tedium. She builds suspense early on ("Secrets were kept..."), and as another reviewer remarked, the specter of Melville hovers over everything. My only criticism is how she elevated the third mate to heroic status (his photo appears on the dust jacket). As far as I'm concerned, his paralysis during George Babcock's torture and murder, and his silence once the "Sharon" returned home, render him an accessory to the crime. But perhaps this is the publisher's doing. Whatever the case, "In the Wake of Madness" will keep you immersed in its tale, and its tragedy may keep you awake at night.

Joan Druett adds her name to the growing list of authors who have, in the last few years, tackled the topic of seafaring misadventure. We have had several excellent entries in this genre, including Nathaniel Philbrick's "In The Heart Of The Sea" and Mike Dash's "Batavia's Graveyard." Joan Druett's book is not quite on the level of those two books- they are "richer" in their narrative drive and complexity- but "In The Wake Of Madness" is still a good, solid "read." The author points out that at the time of the mutiny on the whaleship "Sharon," people who were not on board the ship assumed that the South Sea Islanders who killed Captain Howes Norris did so because they were "cannibals" and "heathens." The people who had direct knowledge of the events preceding the mutiny did nothing to dispel this notion- to do so would have raised questions concerning their own active or passive complicity in Norris's actions and could have damaged the careers of some highly ambitious ships' officers. It turns out that Captain Norris had, over a long period of time, systematically beaten and abused an 18 year old crew member (and apparent fugitive slave) named George Babcock. A combination of floggings and backbreaking labor finally resulted in the death of

Babcock. Worse still, it appears that Norris knew, way before the final denouement, that his actions would result in Babcock's death. It was the result he was looking for. Druett speculates on the motivation(s): racism, anger/fear (Norris had had trouble keeping control over his crew on a prior voyage on a different ship), frustration (the "Sharon" was having very bad luck finding and catching whales), etc. Of course, harsh discipline was nothing unusual on board ships at the time. But Norris seems to have been especially brutal, even by 19th century standards. Babcock at one point tried to get help from his fellow crewmembers, as he feared for his life. His mates did try to protect him, before finally yielding to the authority of the captain and his officers. Why did the officers support the captain? We have to remember that a captain was sovereign of his ship. Going against his wishes could result in being branded a mutineer...not exactly good for your career. In any event, it appears that the South Sea Islanders who killed Captain Norris were either similarly abused or felt that, given enough time, they would suffer the same fate as Babcock. "In The Wake Of Madness" works as both an adventure story- as Mrs. Druett describes the recapture of the "Sharon" by her crew- and as something broader- as we learn a bit about the day-to-day operation of a whaling ship and of the cultural dynamics that came into play when New England whalers met Pacific Islanders. Stopping off at the islands was a bit like playing "Russian Roulette." On some islands, the natives were very friendly and would provide women and food for trade goods (although they did have a propensity for stealing anything made of iron that wasn't nailed down). On other islands you could run into cannibals or natives who would murder the crew and steal the ship. Not infrequently, some crewmembers who felt misused would jump-ship at some friendly port-of-call and "go native" or try to "sign-on" with another whaling ship with a more easy-going captain. We also learn a little about life back home on Martha's Vineyard. The book seems a bit abrupt and frantically paced, with Mrs. Druett attempting to juggle all this in only 230 pages. Still, this is a generally well-written, interesting book, and worth your time.

This book is captivating and one of the best whaling stories ever told. I have been recommending to everyone asking for a good read.

This was a fantastic account of a fateful whaling voyage based on fact from journals and writing of the people who lived it. What could be better? Whaling was not for the faint at heart and was often a terrible situation, calling for mutiny, and even murder. What really happened can be speculated based on the facts written in the journals of those on board and the past actions of the Captain. The author spent an enormous amount of time researching all those on board, and also other ships and

crew that were out at the same time. I loved it!

Very detailed and interesting.

This is a very well written true-life adventure. It is one of those books that I couldn't put down until I finished it. Very interesting historical information about sailing ships and the perils of being shipwrecked.

The author follows the life and adventures of several captains and crews of whaling ships in the 1800s. It's a dangerous, and crazy life. Very entertaining but not a real page turner.

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