


The Truelove

Patrick O'Brian

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The 15th installment in the Aubrey/Maturin series.

This splendid installment in Patrick O'Brian's widely acclaimed series of Aubrey/Maturin novels is in equal parts mystery, adventure, and psychological drama. A British whaler has been captured by an ambitious chief in the Friendly Isles (Tonga) at French instigation, and Captain Aubrey, R.N., is dispatched with the Surprise to restore order. But stowed away in the cabletier is an escaped female convict. To the officers, Clarissa Harvill is an object of awkward courtliness and dangerous jealousies. Aubrey himself is won over and indeed strongly attracted to this woman who will not speak of her past. But only Aubrey's friend, Dr. Stephen Maturin, can fathom Clarissa's secrets: her crime, her personality, and a clue identifying a highly placed English spy in the pay of Napoleon's intelligence service.

In a thrilling finale, Patrick O'Brian delivers all the excitement his many readers expect: Aubrey and the crew of the Surprise impose a brutal pax Britannica on the islanders in a pitched battle against a band of headhunting cannibals.

The Truelove Details

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Author : Patrick O'Brian

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Ben says

Patrick O'Brian continues the brilliant career of Captain Jack Aubrey and Steven Maturin in *The Truelove* (Clarissa Oaks in the United Kingdom). *Minor Spoilers Below* .

Some of the Plot:

The book begins with the *HMHV Surprise* on its way back to England after the completion of the mission it set out on in *The Thirteen-Gun Salute* and *The Nutmeg of Consolation*. Jack is unhappy the crew managed to sneak a convicted felon and former crewmate, Padeen Colman, aboard during the ship's visit to New South Wales. Unbeknownst to Jack, Midshipman Oaks also has hidden away a young woman and escaped convict named Clarissa Harvill. Jack discovers her and threatens to maroon both Clarissa and her lover but thinks better of it and when Midshipman Oaks marries Clarissa under the authority of Parson Martin.

Jack spots a cutter named the *Éclair* pursuing the *Surprise* from New South Wales and, believing the cutter is seeking to reclaim escaped prisoners, he seeks to evade it. Unable to do escape, he finds that the cutter instead has new orders for him. He is to proceed to one of the Sandwich Islands where he is to assist one of two Polynesian factions contending for control of the island of Moahu. The *Surprise* embarks on this mission and finds itself again in the throes of the machinations of the Napoleonic French, but this time in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

In the meantime, harmony aboard the *Surprise* begins to fall apart as Clarissa Oaks carries on liaisons with several of the crew's officers. As the *Surprise* nears the island of Moahu and prepares to engage French privateer captained by a fanatic utopian captain, it faces its greatest danger not from without, but from within.

Recommendation:

While I cannot recommend this book for newcomers to the Aubrey-Maturin series, anyone who has enjoyed its previous 14 entries should enjoy this one. In particular, O'Brian finds a clever mechanism for disrupting his typical storytelling in the person of Clarissa Oaks. By the end of the book, I could tell why Captain Aubrey has rules against women on the ship: her liaisons almost destroy the *Surprise*'s ability to function. On the other hand, Clarissa herself is an engaging character who earns readers' sympathy quickly. Her morals may be suspect even in the 21st century, but her background makes her nonchalant attitudes about sex and intimacy understandable, if not commendable. For a dose of O'Brian's classic sea-faring style mixed with a fascinating female character, fans of the Aubrey-Maturin series cannot go wrong with *The Truelove*.

Nente says

This book is perhaps the point where the series starts going downhill. Sure, the installments started running into each other way earlier: the last book that can be read on its own is perhaps *The Fortune of War*. But we enjoyed that, didn't we, dear fellow readers? Why shouldn't a good book be endless, or seemingly endless? - so are the periods of sweet sailing, repeatedly described by O'Brian as taken out of time, self-sufficient and fulfilling.

However, while this book is perhaps as rich in tension as many of the earlier ones, I found both the set-up

and the resolution almost incoherent. Maybe the problem is my failure to understand the titular Clarissa? She seems to me very nearly sociopathic, and childhood abuse isn't actually a trump card that would explain anything and everything. (view spoiler) In any case, I don't find her character realistic the way it's written, and as the whole plot turns on her, there's nothing for it but label this just OK.

Jamie Collins says

This entry in the Aubrey-Maturin series (which is essentially one very long novel) is mostly a character study as the officers of the *Surprise* cope with the presence on board of a desirable and not completely inaccessible young woman, surreptitiously rescued from the penal colony at New South Wales and possessing an enigmatic past.

Some of my favorite scenes in these books are the dinner parties at sea: the obsessive polishing of silver (Killick's joy); the donning of formal dress no matter how great the heat; the host's anxiety over the variable quality of the food; the feat of timing the courses ("Sir, cook says if we don't eat our swordfish steaks this selfsame minute he will hang himself"); the prepared anecdotes to prevent a dreaded silence from falling over the table; the vast quantities of alcohol consumed ("The bottle stands by you, sir").

ETA 2014 after my third pass, listening to the audiobook this time:

Clarissa Oakes reminds me of one of my college roommates, who slept with several members of a single fraternity and then was bewildered to find that none of them liked or esteemed her. While I can understand that Clarissa herself would be immune to jealousy and indifferent to sex, it's harder to believe she would be so ignorant of the more typical reactions.

Robert says

I've mentioned before that a series of naval tales stuck in a perpetual 1812 and following the exploits of two individuals that is staggering on past double figures in terms of volumes must run in to problems of repetition and consequently risk dullness.

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

Susan says

This book kept me interested but all in all I'm afraid that not much really happened in the story. This book is different from others in the cannon I've read so far in that there is a woman on board ship. While this was a new element to introduce, I really couldn't get a grasp on why she was the 'main' character of the story (one edition - don't know if it was American or British - called this book the Clarissa Oakes).

Through it all, I got to see the continuing good relationship between Jack and Stephen which is always a treat. And noticed some dialogue and situations were incorporated into the Master & Commander movie.

Once again, any time spent with Jack and Stephen is never time wasted, IMHO. Love those guys!

Sid Nuncius says

This is now my third time reading through this brilliant series and I am reminded again how beautifully written and how wonderfully, addictively enjoyable they are.

Clarissa Oakes/The Truelove sees the Surprise in the South Seas and finds the eponymous Clarissa aboard as a stowaway from the penal colonies. There are the fine naval and intelligence developments we have come to expect, but the chief underlying theme of the book is the effect of a young woman on the closed, celibate male community of a man of war, which O'Brian does superbly, along with a fine, nuanced portrait of Clarissa herself. This is for me one of his finest psychological studies – but the narrative and action are as gripping as ever.

Patrick O'Brian is steeped in the period of the early 19th Century and his knowledge of the language, manners, politics, social mores and naval matters of the time is deep and wide. Combined with a magnificent gift for both prose and storytelling, it makes something very special indeed. The books are so perfectly paced, with some calmer, quieter but still engrossing passages and some quite thrilling action sequences. O'Brian's handling of language is masterly, with the dialogue being especially brilliant, but also things like the way his sentences become shorter and more staccato in the action passages, making them heart-poundingly exciting. There are also laugh-out-loud moments and an overall sense of sheer involvement and pleasure in reading.

I cannot recommend these books too highly. They are that rare thing; fine literature which are also books which I can't wait to read more of. Wonderful stuff.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

Following on the heels of the "five-star" "The Nutmeg of Consolation," I am giving this, the 15th volume in the Aubrey-Maturin series, a solid 4.5 stars. This 'chapter' of the canon continues the voyage of HMS *Surprise* in the Pacific Ocean following her departure from New South Wales, Australia. We meet the beautiful and mysterious Clarissa Harvill, and become aware of the influence and affects that her presence aboard the ship have on her crew. Miss Harvill helps Stephen Maturin clear up a mystery that has played such an important role in the preceding four or five volumes too. Finally, the reader accompanies Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin as they visit the Hawaiian Islands to deal with French and American intrigues. A wonderful, erudite, and eminently readable addition from the pen of Patrick O'Brian.

Patrick says

'The wake stretched away, as true as a taut line now, and after a while he said, 'He longed for a daughter, I know, and it is very well that he should have one; but I wish she may not prove a platypus to him,' and he

might have added some considerations on marriage and the relations, so often unsatisfactory, between men and women, parents and children, had not Davidge's voice called out, 'Every rope an-end,' cutting the thread of his thought.'

It's hard to put my finger on a single thing which, for me, makes Clarissa Oakes the weakest instalment so far in Patrick O'Brian's series of historical novels. It is in many ways the most typical one yet: the one which bears most boldly every trace of his style. But it's also where all his deficiencies become most apparent.

As usual, the story picks up almost exactly where the last book left off: with Maturin getting stung by a duck-billed platypus, and Jack Aubrey sailing away from the grim confines of New South Wales towards South America. Their long-postponed mission to Peru is about to be put off once again, first by a twist of fate and then by a new task. Firstly, Jack discovers that a woman has stowed away aboard the surprise: she is Clarissa Harvill, a fugitive from the colonies in a relationship with one of his officers, Oakes. And then he is given a new task: to visit Moahu, a tiny island not far from what is now known as Hawaii, and to settle a dispute between local rulers in favour of the British.

For a long time the novel is most notable for its total lack of explicit drama. Jack's annoyance at the presence of a woman on board is emphasised constantly, but it is never really permitted to boil over. All we get is pages of pettiness: smirks and sniggering behind his back, and once or twice punishments that are modest by the standards of the navy. Even the question of what should be done with Clarissa is somewhat sidestepped. There's a great sequence where Aubrey makes a sort of show out of pretending to sail up to a deserted island to drop her and Oakes off there; how convenient that their boats cannot find a safe space to land.

Part of this deception is because he understands that he has to be seen by the crew to be doing something, but to punish them too hard would be regarded as insufferable hypocrisy. As Stephen points out: *'...the service is a sounding-box in which tales echo for ever, and it is perfectly well known throughout the ship that when you were about Oakes' age you were disgraced and turned before the mast for hiding a girl in that very part of the ship.'* And so he takes the only other honourable option open to him: he marries the couple on board.

Except that this is not the end of the deceit. After many pages of slow and sometimes interminable travel, it becomes increasingly apparent that Clarissa has been sleeping around below decks. The reader is never permitted to see any of this directly. As so often in O'Brian, much of the real action happens off stage. We only hear about it in drips of information — first through Maturin's suspicions about the strange behaviour of the crew, and eventually through his confidential (but chaste) exchanges with Clarissa. It is not long before a sort of tribalism emerges amongst the officers and seamen; every myth about women acting as a disruptive influence on an all-male crew is proved to be worthwhile.

Clarissa herself is sometimes intriguing but ultimately insubstantial. For too long we know nothing about her, except that she is good looking enough to turn heads. And when she does tell her story, it is tragic, but tragic is all it is: it's a grim retread of every story of every fallen woman from that era. (That she shares the name with the protagonist of Samuel Richardson's eighteenth century novel is almost certainly not a coincidence.) She has a certain endearing independence, but none of the stage presence of Diana Viliers or Sophie. For most of the book she is simply a cipher for femininity.

And I was troubled by the novel's diagnosis that the root of Clarissa's promiscuity is in her abusive childhood, where she was so often the victim of rape that sex ceased to have any meaning for her. Here she is describing her later life, working in a brothel:

'...it has a certain likeness to being at sea: you live a particular life, with your own community, but it is not

the life of the world in general and you tend to lose touch with the world in general's ideas and language – all sorts of things like that, so that when you go out you are as much a stranger as a sailor is on shore. Not that I had much notion of the world in general anyhow, the ordinary normal adult world, never having really seen it. I tried to make it out by novels and plays, but that was not much use: they all went on to such an extent about physical love, as though everything revolved about it, whereas for me it was not much more important than blowing my nose – chastity or unchastity neither here nor there – absurd to make fidelity a matter of private parts: grotesque.'

Parts of this bring to mind the old idiom that everything looks like a nail when all you have is a hammer. This notion of 'the world in general' strikes me as oddly anachronistic for the early nineteenth century: such was the diversity of standards of living at that time that I doubt Stephen would have recognised any such thing. And there's something dismissive of the actuality of sex about this, I think: the author is not especially interested in what happened to Clarissa, more in looking at her as another example of an alienated soul, living out of time, at large in the world.

Except in her case it is a dismissiveness that's consistent with the vague sense of contempt so often evident in O'Brian's work for the sexual impulse in general. So often in this books there is the sense of passion as something dangerous, even monstrous, in human nature; something that must be controlled at all costs. Maturin is the exemplar of this, whereas Jack is the exception that proves the rule — in moral terms, O'Brian allows him certain urges, even to sleep around on his voyages, so long as it occurs in the wider context of maintaining his life as an officer and a married father. In a certain light he has something of the bearing of a prize steer.

There is still a great deal to enjoy in Clarissa Oakes. The dialogue is frequently delightful — some of the author's best — and as always, there's a plethora of interest to be found in the minor details of the text. I especially enjoy the dark joke hidden in the novel's alternate American title of *The Truelove*; this is a book entirely without romance, and the ship of that name is only a beat-up old whaler of negligible interest. Yet most of this is incidental. This is the first book in this series where I was expecting something more which never came.

Mark says

I've been rereading Patrick O'Brien's novels in the last few months and a few novels ago (I think it happens around number 12 or 13 in the Aubrey Maturin series) I reached the point at which "novel" stopped actually being a reasonable description of the books. I really enjoy these books, so don't get the impression that I'm putting them down when I say this. It's simply that all pretense of being individual, novel length, plots is, by the point, firmly abandoned. The book starts where the previous one left off, and ends where the succeeding one begins (roughly). Actually the whole effect is charming – something like reading a really, really long novel or watching a television series. Aside from this I'm not sure what exactly to say about it – the normal odd features that are in most of these books are here as well. Patrick O'Brien has an odd aversion to significant plot events, which is not to say that they don't *happen* (the books aren't boring), but that as often as not they happen either as quickly as possible or, often, while the narrative is off somewhere else. For example, the battle at the end of the novel, ostensibly the point of the mission that Cpt Aubrey is on, is described from the perspective of someone half a mile away, and in the space of, roughly, a paragraph. (It sounds like a brief succession of bangs.)* The details are filled in by what all the characters have to say to each other, later on. Once you get used to this feature it can be perfectly reasonable – though I admit the first

time I read some of the earlier novels he wrote I was left entirely in the dark about what had happened (this is a mild example – sometimes the narrative simply jumps forward a few days to the aftermath of whatever-it-is).

*Seriously – here it is. “He” is Stephen Maturin, the doctor, who is sitting at the medical outpost waiting for what casualties might show up, and trying not to imagine the battle.

“In his harsh unmusical voice he chanted plainsong, which had a better covering effect: he had reached a Benedictus in the Dorian mode and he was straining for a high *qui venit* when the clear sharp voice of gunfire – carronade-fire – cut him short. Four almost at once, it seemed to him, and then two; but the echoes confused everything. Then four quick hammer-strokes again. The silence.

Padeen and he stood staring up at the mountain. They could make out a vague roaring, but nothing more; and the birds that had started from the trees below all settled again. Perhaps battle had been joined: perhaps the carronades had been overrun.

Time passed, though less slowly now, and presently steps could be heard on the path. A young long-legged man raced down past them, a messenger of good news, his whole face alive with joy. He shouted something as he passed: victory, no doubt at all.”

John Jr. says

This volume in Patrick O’Brian’s series of historical novels may seem at first to be a study of the influence of a woman’s presence on a sailing ship full of men. It is that, but it proves to be more.

Relatively early, Clarissa Harvill is found to have been smuggled aboard when the ship was in Sydney, thus violating Captain Aubrey’s well-known prohibition against women; what’s more, she’s an escaped convict from the British penal colony there (not a pretty place as depicted by O’Brian). So there’s a mystery about her past as well as a question about her present and future: what did she do back in England to get transported, and what will Aubrey do with her and the sailor who brought her aboard? The situation is complicated by many things; on the one hand, Aubrey has made an exception to his rule before (and will do so later in the series), while on the other, Clarissa’s presence becomes disruptive.

Suffice it to say that she proves to be another of O’Brian’s many well-developed supporting characters. She’s central not only to this novel, whose plot mainly concerns the pursuit of a French frigate and the forging of a new diplomatic alliance near the Hawaiian islands, but also to a longer thread running through other tales in the series. Clarissa’s developing friendship with Maturin, the ship’s doctor, may conform to the conventional use of doctors in narratives, as a confidant, but it goes far beyond convention.

Randy says

I'm on my third time through the multi-book Patrick O'Brian series about the friendship of a Royal Navy captain (Jack Aubrey) and his ship's surgeon/intelligence agent (Stephen Maturin).

If I have to choose one set of books to keep, this is the one. I'm pretty certain I will read them many more

times if I live so long. The Truelove is special because of the female character Clarissa Oakes. The nineteenth century Royal Navy was a man's world and most of the yarns involve men. But O'Brian also develops great female characters when the opportunity arises. In this case, Clarissa Oakes who was shipped off to Botany Bay for murder and is snuck aboard the Surprise, Aubrey's frigate, by her midshipman husband. Clarissa is what one might call a sexual philanthropist and her donations to various crewmen in addition to her husband create turmoil among the various factions of the crew. Stephen smokes out her story over the course of this cruise. Jack is slow to get why morale has sunk so low. But when he figures out what is going on we get to see his management style in action as he whips his men back into shape. Aubrey is one of the great characters in fiction: naive and inept on land; a master of his domain at sea. Maturin is a complex character who is a top notch physician and surgeon, whose powers to heal are held in great esteem by the crew and whose inability to learn the essentials of sailing and seamanship after many years at sea cause Aubrey great amusement and sometimes distress. This chapter of O'Brian's epic ends on a South Sea Island where we are introduced briefly to another strong female character—a Polynesian queen. When Jack leads her warriors in an overwhelming land action against her enemy and French mercenaries, he is treated to a lavish feast and a handsome reward.

Judith Johnson says

As always, I love reading the further adventures of Jack, Stephen, Killick, Bonden, Pullings etc, but like Captain Roddy, I'll give this one 4 and a half stars - not quite as thrilling as some. Now I am with child to find out what's happening back at the ranch with Diana, but I'll have to wait - only 5 books left, and I'll have to eke them out! (though there's always re-reading. I'm not a habitual re-reader, but I have read these books several times, and no doubt, should I reach old age, I shall do so again!).
Reader, if you've not read these wonderful books, I wish you joy of them!

Darwin8u says

“I am in favour of leaving people alone, however imperfect their polity may seem. It appears to me that you must not tell other nations how to set their house in order; nor must you compel them to be happy.”
- Patrick O'Brian, the Truelove

When originally published, O'Brian's 15th installment in his Aubrey-Maturin series was originally titled Clarissa Oakes. I'm not sure why the title was changed, but perhaps it is because the focus of this novel is less about Clarissa (Harvill) Oakes (the convict stowaway from New South Wales who marries Oakes, one of Captain Aubrey's Midshipman) than the events that surround her introduction onto the Surprise. Clarissa on the Surprise allows O'Brian to wax on a bit about sexual mores in the Navy and in England in the early 19th century. She also carries forward the series plot a bit.

It isn't the most exciting book in the series, but it is fascinating to watch the discipline aboard the Surprise deteriorate and Captain Aubrey's efforts to regain control. It also provides O'Brian the space, with the introduction of Clarissa Oakes, to discuss sex (both gender and the act) in the early 19th century.

Renee M says

The one with Clarissa Oakes and the Polynesian Queen. I'm still deciding what I think about the deeply pragmatic Clarissa Oakes, which is somewhat surprising given her pronounced position aboard Jack's ship and in a large portion of the story. I am hoping that there will be some closure in the next installment of the series.

Ron says

All but the most dedicated Aubrey-Maturin will want to skip this one. A lot of running in place--or, rather, dog paddling--with very little forward motion. It's as if the series became becalmed in the South Pacific. It's fun to read *only if* it isn't the same stuff we've read in the last fourteen novels.

For example, instead of peppering back story review over the first few chapters, O'Brian dumps twelve--no twenty--pages of narrative on us in the opening scene of the book, semi-disguised as Aubrey's musings over the taffrail of *Surprise*. Not a single ship-to-ship engagement, and the land battle is "off scene".

Read the summary in Wikipedia and get on with your life.
