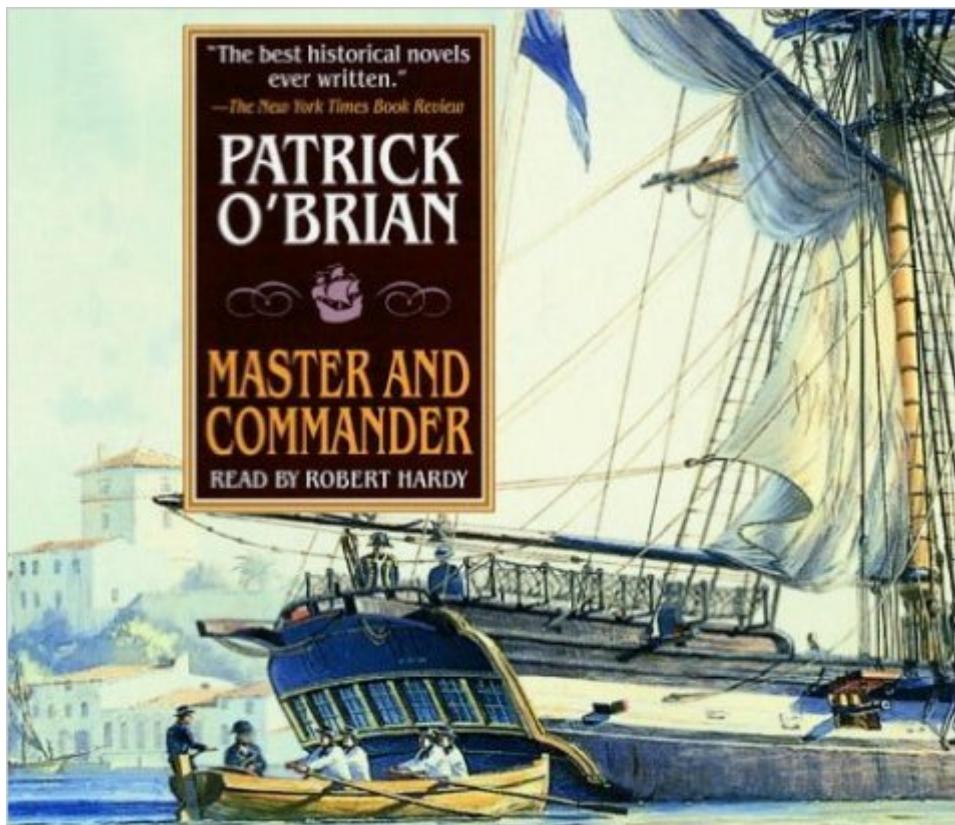


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Master And Commander (& Read By Robert Hardy)



Synopsis

The 1st installment in O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin series "The best historical novels ever written..." -The New York Times Book Review This, the first in the splendid series of Jack Aubrey novels, establishes the friendship between Captain Aubrey, Royal Navy, and Stephen Maturin, ship's surgeon and intelligence agent, against the thrilling backdrop of the Napoleonic wars. Details of life aboard a man-of-war in Nelson's navy are faultlessly rendered: the conversational idiom of the officers in the ward room and the men on the lower deck, the food, the floggings, the mysteries of the wind and the rigging, and the roar of broadsides as the great ships close in battle.

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Customer Reviews

Some critics have referred to the Aubrey/Maturin books as one long novel united not only by their historical setting but also by the central plot element of the Aubrey/Maturin friendship. Having read these fine books over a period of several years, I decided to evaluate their cumulative integrity by reading them consecutively in order of publication over a period of a few weeks. This turned out to be a rewarding enterprise. For readers unfamiliar with these books, they describe the experiences of a Royal Navy officer and his close friend and traveling companion, a naval surgeon. The experiences cover a broad swath of the Napoleonic Wars and virtually the whole globe. Rereading all the books confirmed that O'Brian is a superb writer and that his ability to evoke the past is outstanding. O'Brian has numerous gifts as a writer. He is the master of the long, careful description, and the short, telling episode. His ability to construct ingenious but creditable plots is first-rate, probably because he based much of the action of his books on actual events. For

example, some of the episodes of Jack Aubrey's career are based on the life of the famous frigate captain, Lord Cochrane. O'Brian excels also in his depiction of characters. His ability to develop psychologically creditable characters through a combination of dialogue, comments by other characters, and description is tremendous. O'Brien's interest in psychology went well beyond normal character development, some books contain excellent case studies of anxiety, depression, and mania. Reading O'Brien gives vivid view of the early 19th century. The historian Bernard Bailyn, writing of colonial America, stated once that the 18th century world was not only pre-industrial but also pre-humanitarian (paraphrase).

The first clue you have that Master and Commander is not a typical sea adventure is when a sailor is hanged in the opening pages for sexually molesting the ship's goat. This kicks off a gritty, realistic, and scrupulously-researched historical adventure that smashes C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower novels like a broadside from a seventy-gun frigate. I first heard of Patrick O'Brian when he died three years ago and was movingly eulogized in George Will's column. Now I don't normally read historical fiction, especially military historical fiction, but Will made such a strong case that I felt obliged to at least check O'Brian out. I'm glad I did; Master and Commander is a well-written, powerful book that succeeds as a character study, an obsessively-researched recreation of early 19th-century life, and as an adventure. The novel, the first in a twenty-book series, opens with Jack Aubrey, a young lieutenant commander in the Royal Navy, being granted his long-awaited promotion to the rank of captain (or officially, "master and commander") and the command of the Sophie, a modest little vessel in the Mediterranean. At a concert, Jack nearly comes to blows with the haughty intellectual Dr. Stephen Maturin, but the two quickly reconcile over breakfast and Jack, whose ship is desperately undermanned, offers the penniless Maturin a post as ship's surgeon. The two men eventually become best friends, despite their being a sort of seaborne Odd Couple. Aubrey, unlike most fictional heroes, is not a silent, craggy-jawed Adonis; he's fat, red-faced, good-humored, and a bit of a buffoon, the kind of person who laughs maniacally at his own jokes.

'Come, sir, cannot I prevail upon you to go to sea? A man-of-war is the very thing for a philosopher, above all in the Mediterranean: there are the birds, the fishes--I could promise you some monstrous strange fishes--the natural phenomena, the meteors, the chance of prize-money. For even Aristotle would have been moved by prize-money....' 'A ship must be a most instructive theatre for an inquiring mind....' 'Prodigiously instructive, I do assure you, Doctor.' -Jack Aubrey convincing Stephen Maturin to ship out with him (Patrick O'Brian, Master and Commander) Like most, I first

learned of Patrick O'Brian's excellent series of naval adventures in the pages of the New York Times Book Review. There, on January 6, 1991, Richard Snow wrote that the Aubrey and Maturin books were : "...the best historical novels ever written." This statement is not as jarring now as it was then. We've grown accustomed to seeing rows of O'Brian's books on store shelves and millions have joined what was once an exclusive cult, but at the time Snow was writing the novels were still a well-kept secret, despite the fact that O'Brian had then been writing them for over twenty years. At any rate, like any good little trend-sucking dilettante, I rushed out to find the first book in the series, Master and Commander, read it as quickly as possible, and was well and truly stumped. I liked the characters, found the detailed portrayal of life aboard ship to be extremely interesting, and enjoyed much of the humor of the book. But there was something really curious and elusive about the storytelling. In the first place, the heroes are mere observers of the climactic sea battle, having been captured earlier, which seemed especially curious for an adventure story.

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