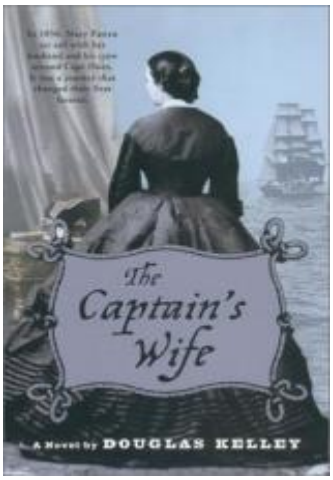
The Captain's Wife

by Douglas Kelley



About the Book

Based on the true story of Mary Patten, **The Captain's Wife** begins in July 1856 during the heyday of the great clipper ships. Mary's husband, Captain Joshua Patten, is hired to navigate Neptune's Car on a treacherous voyage from New York to San Francisco-in record time-through one of the most dangerous straits in the Western Hemisphere, Cape Horn.

Dark signs mark the trip early on. The first mate shows traces of treason that soon erupt into a plot of mutiny. Upon reaching the equator, the captain falls ill. With no other choice, Mary takes command of the ship. Her command reigns throughout not only the most treacherous passage, Cape Horn, but during the most devastating weather the region has experienced in years. Having learned to navigate on a previous voyage with her husband, she now must utilize all her skills as she demands respect from an unstable crew, nurses her husband day and night, keeps the mutinous first mate at bay, and learns that as she becomes a captain, she will also become a mother.

Doug Kelley has crafted a brilliant novel that uses the little-known facts about Mary Patten's life to tell a gripping tale of deception, danger, and treachery on the high seas. In a world of discovery when adventurous sea captains ruled the seas, Mary Patten became much more than a captain's wife.

Discussion Guide

1. Central to the story of **The Captain's Wife** is the relationship between Joshua and Mary Patten. In what ways are they similar? What are their differences? What do you think makes their relationship work?

2. Why would Mary want to go on the trip chronicled in **The Captain's Wife**?

3. Why does Wiley encourage Joshua Patten to take on Keeler as his first mate?

4. At a time in history where women were thought to be less than equal to men (nearly 70 years before the Nineteenth Amendment would give women the right to vote), Mary Patten surely must have been frustrated by the limitations imposed on her by society. Does her husband also limit, or try to limit, Mary's actions and interests?

5. From the first chapters of the novel, Mary and Joshua appear to be very much in love. Does Joshua know Mary's inner strengths or does he see her merely as a charming wife?

6. What are the reasons for Keeler's actions on board Neptune's Car? Do his motivating intentions change after he learns of Joshua's infirmity?

7. How much credit is due Joshua for quelling Keeler's attempted mutiny? Do you think the outcome would have been different had Mary and 2nd Mate Timothy Hare had to face down Keeler alone?

8. Why does the rest of the crew side with Mary over Keeler?

9. How would you define the relationship forged between Mary Patten and second mate Timothy Hare? Does this relationship change over the course of the novel, and if so, how?

10. Is Mary Patten a feminist? Why or why not?

Author Bio

A native of Fort Smith, Arkansas, Douglas Kelley now makes his home just across the Oklahoma state line. From this landlocked base, a profession as a corporate pilot facilitated his travels to research this book of the sea. **The Captain's Wife** is his first novel.

Critical Praise

"[Kelley] makes a splendid contribution to recent literature."

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