

Master and Commander (2003)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hr 18 min.

Our content rating (1-10): Violence 7; Language 2;
Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (0-5): 4

Be strong and of good courage, do not fear or be in dread of them: for it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

Deuteronomy 31:6

Director Peter Weir, who also co-wrote (with John Collee) the screenplay, has given us one of the finest depictions of life aboard a 19th century British naval vessel that we are ever likely to see. Based on the first and the tenth novel set during the Napoleonic era by Patrick O'Brian, the action ranges far and wide, from the coast of Brazil, around stormy Cape Horn, to the vicinity of the Galapagos Islands. Led by Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe), dubbed (in an earlier novel) "Lucky Jack," the men adore their leader. Paul Bettany is Aubrey's best friend and ship surgeon Dr. Stephen Maturin. Although the two are polar opposites in many ways, Aubrey being an action-oriented natural born leader and Maturin an introspective scientist wishing that his friend would light in one spot long enough so that he can study local plant and animal life, the two have bonded together, their relationship well symbolized by their late night concerts, Jack sawing away at the violin and Stephen the cello.

In pursuit of the French warship the Acheron, Captain Aubrey is under orders to "sink her, burn her or take her as a prize." Easier said than done, his own 27-gun H.M.S. Surprise being both slower and out-gunned by the larger French vessel.

When the enemy suddenly appears out of a fog, the Surprise is heavily damaged, with many of the crew dead or badly injured. By all rights Aubrey should head for port and repairs, but decides instead to make repairs at sea and keep sailing in the wake of the Acheron and a hoped for second engagement. During this pursuit his friendship becomes strained, the doctor fearing that Aubrey's pride, rather than sound military sense, is driving him on at great risk to crew and ship.

The many details of life, 197 men crammed into the cramped nooks and crannies of a ship a little under 200 feet in length, are well depicted. From their daily scrubbing of the decks to the drills of the gun crews, the sewing of sails and clothes, the occasional singing and dancing, and the serving of meals—the crew crowded around a table, while above, the officers dining in more style while listening to Aubrey admiringly describe the man he served under, and admires most, Lord Horatio Nelson.

Thus Peter Weir's film almost takes us into the past, enabling us to enjoy some of its splendor and to recoil at the brutality of close quarter fighting at sea. Dr. Maturin has little place in his rationally conceived universe for a personal God, nor, apparently, does Aubrey, who as Captain must consign to the sea the bodies of more of his men than he would like. The purpose of his mission leaves little room for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. He neither asks nor gives quarter while the fighting lasts, but afterward shows concern for both his men and his enemies. Although not emphasized as much as in the novel, Aubrey is a stickler for putting his gun crews through their drills so that they will be ready for action. The Royal navy superiors are very stingy in their issuance of powder and shot, so the Captain uses his own money to buy extra supplies for his cannons.

This is a film that must be seen on a large screen for the fullest appreciation of its grandeur and the careful workmanship of the filmmakers.