ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

MYSTERY

High Seas: A Matter of Blood
Michele L. Hinton
iUniverse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Echoing many Shakespearean themes of dual identities, sibling rivalry and jealousy, and sweet love stories, *A Matter of Blood*, the second installment in Michele L. Hinton's *High Seas* series, picks up where the first installment, *Cabin Boy*, leaves off (the introduction features a brief summary of the earlier story). Margaret, the young widow of Alec Mitchell, who was known as the Pepper King of India, recognizes her deep feelings for Todd Withers, captain of the cargo ship Neptune's Daughter, which she, her brother, Marcus, and her stepson, Drake, are travelling on as they return to England.

Most of the people on the ship believe that Margaret is a cabin boy named "Marc." She had disguised herself as a teenage boy to protect herself and Drake when the ship they were originally sailing on, the Arrow Star, was attacked by another pirate ship. But Captain Withers knows her true identity, and he is falling in love with her, too. When they return to England, Margaret and Todd plan their life together, and they try to convince Margaret's mother that Todd is a worthy husband.

A second story line follows Alec's brother, Lawrence, who is seeking to take over his deceased brother's estate in order to gain an inheritance. Lawrence's wife, Olivia, is unhappy in their marriage, in part because of Lawrence's involvement with his mistress, Flora, and the fact that Lawrence is cold and uncaring toward her and their son, Eric.

The pace of the first third of the story is slow, as there are not many dramatic events to grip the reader. Keeping track of the characters can also be confusing at times, particularly for readers who have not read *Cabin Boy*. There are twenty-nine recurring characters from the first novel, which are helpfully listed in the front of the book, as well as other new characters. Stories intersect, with events taking place across many different locations. Occasionally, the timeline is nonlinear, tracing events back a few months earlier or a few months later. Subheads in each chapter guide the reader and indicate location and time frame, but many chapters contain up to seven shifts in setting, which complicates the narrative. Several typos and grammatical errors

also distract from the story.

Midway through the book, the drama increases, and the faster pace adds intrigue. In this mostly character-driven novel, the main characters are strongly developed and interesting, particularly Margaret, who is feisty and fearless. A more streamlined story that focused on Margaret, Todd, and Drake, and toggled between the events involving Olivia, Lawrence, Eric, and Flora, rather than on so many other peripheral characters, would be more engaging. When the story focuses on these main characters, their adventures, schemes, and romances are captivating.

Maria Siano