Clarion Review

Sports & Recreation

Sailing with Rhyme and Reason
Robert E. Jack
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Four Stars (out of Five)

An old nautical joke notes that the two happiest days of a man's life are the day he buys his boat and the day he sells it. In his delightful, insightful, and adventurous memoir, *Sailing with Rhyme and Reason*, Robert E. Jack explains the days between the purchase and the sale of the boat.

Jack slowly closes out his days as a lawyer and, armed with childhood memories, sets out to sail south along the eastern coast of Mexico. The first trip ends badly, but his "sailing-skills challenged" second wife surprises him by insisting they buy a bigger boat. Their next sailings fare far worse: the gods of the Gulf of Mexico attack them with rain, shifting currents, and gusty winds approaching gale force. Everything on the boat that could break does so: sails, halyard, bilge pumps, and finally the main mast. After repairs, they continue south into Belize with a final destination of the Rio Dolce in Guatemala.

While fellow mariners offer solace and company, Jack begins to realize that the government officials of Central American nations are disguised as private entrepreneurs. Officials in Belize demand a thousand-dollar payment for a replacement marine toilet, and the government of Guatemala ignores the bandits who prey on visiting yachts, causing rumors to circulate that armed guards would be needed to sail up the Rio Dolce. The rumors are unfounded. Jack explains the resolution: "There had been some acts of piracy, but it hurt businesses, and everyone knew who the bad guys were. So, the people whose businesses were being hurt formed a vigilante group, killed the pirates, and to prevent retribution, killed the families of the pirates as well." Jack is obviously not on a Disney cruise.

In a brisk and entertaining narrative, Jack's memoir is a cautionary tale to those dreamers who imagine life on a yacht to be the romantic fiction of sailing magazines. Not only must one be a competent sailor able to jury-rig equipment with whatever is available, but he or she must also have the inner conviction that it might actually be necessary to kill—or threaten to

kill—someone. On one occasion, Jack needs supplies to be ferried from a marina to his disabled boat. He hires a man who tries to bribe him into exorbitant payments by cutting the motor and pretending engine trouble. Jack summons his former navy personality from Vietnam: “The third time the outboard stopped, instead [of] pulling out money, I edged forward in my seat toward the driver, laid my hand with the knife on top of the carry-on and while staring into his face told the man, ‘We no longer have outboard motor problems.’” Such local dealings are called “discussions.”

A few minor faults include several typos and the use of copious endnotes for cultural and maritime terms. A glossary or the use of sidebars might have assisted the uninitiated reader more easily. The font style and size on the only map are difficult to read. Overall, however, this memoir will be a delight to mariners, who will knowingly nod in assent with Jack’s wisdom, and a call to self-examination to those who might imitate him. Readers without the drive to join the sailing life can participate vicariously as they relax comfortably in an armchair.

Thomas H. Brennan