



Something in the Blood

Phillip Messinger

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A doctor and a ship's captain have their expertise tested in the tense, storm-set novella *Something in the Blood*.

Phillip Messinger's novella *Something in the Blood* is a compressed adventure story set in the stormy Pacific.

Chris entered the merchant navy as a young man, driven by “something he needed more than wanted, something to do with purpose, of direction, of being an integral part of something bigger.” He settled into life on the seas well, learning the rhythms and demands of a discipline that required his constant movement. Now well into his career, he appreciates the shifting scenery—as well as the occasional adrenaline boost of high stakes challenges, like falling cranes and transporting toxic chemicals.

Then, on a trip between Hawaii and the US mainland, a *Excelsior* crew member begins vomiting up blood. With no doctor on board, everyone on the ship goes into emergency mode. Chris, their captain, draws on all of his resources and training to evade disaster. They radio for assistance from nearby ships and the Coast Guard, rallying to catch supplies tossed down from the air; they communicate with Jonathan, a doctor aboard the assisting *Arcturus*, to get his ailing coworker the help he needs. But Chris's hope of receiving sufficient outside aid is complicated by an impending storm.

The dialogue has an exciting, cinematic flavor, as representatives of various ships trade quick thoughts on how to best confront their challenges; these conversations keep authenticity in mind, though their constant exchanges of call signs are somewhat wearying. Also authentic is the book's representation of ship procedures and seaman knowledge across multiple disciplines, which leads to the fast but smooth delivery of the information necessary to understand the nuances of every decision that Chris's team makes.

Though Chris is a sympathetic lead on his own merit—if one prone to stereotypical and problematic seaman behaviors, like exoticizing Asian women while spending time in port—the narrative undermines his able characterization by reaching outside of the specifics of his story to demand broad sympathy from its audience on topics like how he struggled to discern his career path. In his down time, he is shown musing his way through ordinary concerns about the directions of his life; such moments dilute the more solid sense of him that's present when he's in motion and responding to emergencies.

While Chris and Jonathan's musings on the excitement and risks of their past romantic interactions impede the story's momentum near its end, it nonetheless works its way toward a satisfyingly peppy resolution—both for the imperiled patient, and for the men who worked to save him. The threat of the hurricane comes to seem somewhat of a red herring, but the momentary excitement it initiates does push the book's heroes toward needed personal resolutions.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (August 18, 2021)

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