

The Fo'c'sle Door

Les Cribb

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This rollicking novel is inhabited by unforgettable characters and told in the style of Dickens and Stevenson.

In the eighteenth century, the coast of Cornwall, England, was notorious for being a haunt and haven for smugglers, buccaneers, thieves, scavengers, and similar scalawags. Les Cribb has brought this lawless land back to life.

Cribb, a native Englishman and long-time resident of Canada, has reached back in time and memory to infuse energy and charm into what is, at times, a Dickensian or Stevensonian story. His witty tale is populated by characters with names like Miss Prudence, Tubby, Sailmaker, Captain Whitestone of the “Customs and Revenue Service,” and numerous other effervescent and colorful characters, not each of whom, as is said of one man, “take pains to pronounce his aitches.”

The Fo'c'sle Door is a rollicking novel filled with inhabitants of the remote and rocky Cornish coast of the early 1790s. The first fifty and last ninety pages, however, are set in the early twenty-first century. Cribb sandwiches his otherwise classic tale between two halves of a lesser novella involving modern Canadians and Englishmen, some of whom may have led previous lives in Ryeport, the town where the smuggling story is set. There are some very good lines of dialogue here, notably this one by “The Sexton,” who stares down a bully at a bar by telling him, “In case you are unaware, a sexton is paid to put people in their graves. Sometimes, I work for free.”

That Ryeport is now a Disneyfied “theme park” town akin to a second-rate Pirates of the Caribbean ride is a story in itself, but one that perhaps would be better told in another book. The modern start and finish is not a bad story, but it does weaken the more engaging eighteenth-century tale. While the final chapters do relate to events in the main tale, they diminish rather than enhance the charm, wonder, and mystery of what is an otherwise marvelous and lively narrative.

Cribb writes very well, with a style reminiscent of historical novelists of a bygone era. His prose is at times evocative of the works of Raphael Sabatini (of *Captain Blood* fame), and it is seasoned with touches of Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy. There are characters described as the “lecherous ones” or as having a “wicked need,” as well as brave and tortured souls and “dead blokes” involved in a grand, sweeping story described by one of the key players as “a murder, compounded by a smuggling investigation, and with Customs officers swarming all over.”

In that story, with the modern bits stripped away, lies the true treasure of *The Fo'c'sle Door*.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (September 23, 2013)

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