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General

The Master Of Monterey: A Novel
Lawrence Coates
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Based on the true story of an overzealous U.S. Naval officer's premature and misguided invasion of Alta California in 1842, this historical farce is as insightful and sympathetic as it is cutting and funny. The author earned his doctorate in English at University of Utah, he teaches creative writing at Bowling Green State University, and his fiction has appeared in the The Chicago Tribune.

After three years at sea, Commodore Thomas Catesby Jones returns home to Boston where his sweetheart, Louisa Darling, has just been engaged to marry his brother. Imagining that this slave-trader's daughter is "the very incarnation of the love that would bring [him] endless joy and contentment," he immediately sets out, as commander of the U.S. Navy's Pacific fleet, to bring freedom and democracy to California in her name. As he prepares to make the long trip around Cape Horn, Jones assembles a ragtag crew of "glory-hungry warriors, would-be merchants, homesick children, [and] lovelorn men." The restless, questioning Jones sails off amid rumors that the U.S. is about to go to war with Mexico.

On board, he orders Waxdeck, a feeble Latin scholar who was sent to sea against his will, to begin an epic poem memorializing the journey of the flagship National Intention. While Waxdeck feverishly scribbles his prophetic heroic couplets, Hannibal Memory is busy undermining him with a conflicting narrative of his own. Memory, a former slave who was freed by Jones, is determined to write his own history and scrambles to author a free-verse antidote to Waxdeck's version of the future.

By the time the National Intention reaches Monterey, Jones is convinced that the rumors of war are true, and he captures the Mexican province with much incompetence and little bloodshed. With an equally sparkling and ludicrous cast of characters on shore as were at sea, the author is occasionally sidetracked by tangential story lines that, although rich and vital, ultimately don't go anywhere. He's much more successful with the major characters, all of

whom he draws into a compelling web of attractions, alliances, and conflicts with each other.

In the thirty hours or so that Jones is the Master of Monterey, each member of his deluded but relatively well-intentioned crew finds that California is hardly empty-the place is already bristling with the manifesting destinies of its current and past inhabitants. No place is empty of others' histories and desires, and it is only Mister Lurkin-a shady American trader bearing a strong resemblance to the Devil-who ever achieves his aims in California.

Coates's novel is a layered and sympathetic farce about medium-sized men with outsized dreams and an incomprehensibly large space on which to project them.

Emily Mead