



The Mutiny of the Elsinore

Jack London , A. Grove Day (Foreword by)

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Life has lost its savor for Mr. Pathurst. New York, fame, women, and the arts have all become tedious. Searching for excitement, he books passage on a cargo vessel sailing from Baltimore to Seattle on a route that travels around the treacherous Cape Horn. Pathurst encounters more than he ever expected in rough seas, turbulent storms, and a mutinous crew. His epic struggles aboard the sailing ship *Elsinore* have given him a new love for life, but will he survive to profit from it?

The Mutiny of the Elsinore Details

Date : Published December 1st 1987 by Mutual Publishing (first published 1914)

ISBN : 9780935180404

Author : Jack London , A. Grove Day (Foreword by)

Format : Paperback 378 pages

Genre : Classics, Adventure, Novels, Fiction, Literature, American, Audiobook, 20th Century

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From Reader Review The Mutiny of the Elsinore for online ebook

David Angel says

This book was ok. There's a lot of just sailing around without much happening. I did have trouble with the narrator's racism though. He frequently talks about the master race, the slave race, and the superiority of "blondes." I realize that maybe those were just the beliefs of the character and not the author, but it was off-putting and got a bit tiresome. I've definitely enjoyed other Jack London books more than this one.

Mike Robbins says

I first read this book as a young man, and loved it. Coming back to it after nearly 40 years, I still do. But it does raise questions about Jack London and what was going on in his head when he wrote it.

Published in 1914, only two years before his death, *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* isn't the most famous of London's books and it's not seen as his best. But there's still a lot to enjoy. The book's plot (without spoilers) is as follows: It is March 1913 and a successful but world-weary young playwright, John Pathurst, seeks refreshment and inspiration by going round the Horn as a passenger on a windjammer from Baltimore to Seattle. He knows the *Elsinore* may take months over the voyage, but that's fine. He has paid highly for his passage, and is accompanied by his manservant; he intends to be comfortable. But the rounding of the Horn is drawn-out and dangerous, and the ship is nearly lost. Moreover the regime aboard the *Elsinore* is harsh, and the crew are a bunch of no-good lowlifes who will eventually mutiny against it. Pathurst's luxury passage will turn into a nightmare.

The long voyage south-east towards West Africa and then south-west to the tip of Argentina is used to build up character and tension, so that by the time the *Elsinore* gets stuck in westerlies off the Horn, you know there's a disaster waiting to happen. It helps that London does a fair job of evoking what life in a windjammer must have been like. He can do this because this book was drawn, at least in part, from life. In March 1911 London and his second wife, Charmian Kitteredge London, took ship in Baltimore on a windjammer, the *Dirigo*, bound westward on the same route.

The windjammers came into service in the last quarter of the 19th century. They were the last of the age of sail; iron- or steel-hulled, they were designed to carry bulk cargoes that were not time-sensitive and could be carried more cheaply than by steam, by using the prevailing winds. The *Dirigo* was one of the finest, built in Maine in 1894 to an English design. London and Kitteredge boarded it in Baltimore very much as Pathurst does in the book, and Kitteredge later described the voyage in a memoir of London that she published a few years after his death. The *Elsinore* is clearly the *Dirigo* and the novel includes a number of incidents that are in Kitteredge's account. Most are trivial (London/Pathurst's fox terrier, Possum; an attack of hives; the chickens in the hut amidships). One or two are major. For example, in the novel, the captain dies on passage off the Horn. On the Londons' real voyage he did fall sick there, and died shortly after the ship reached Seattle.

The captain and mate in the book also seem to match those of the *Dirigo*. The captain, according to Charmian Kitteredge, was: "The fast disappearing type of lean New England aristocrat, who always presented himself on deck immaculately attired... The calm kingliness of his character was in cool contrast to that of the Mate, Fred Mortimer, hot-hearted, determined, all-around efficient driver of a crew that was

composed, with a few exceptions well along in years, of landlubbers and weaklings.” London takes these two officers and exaggerates their characteristics, and those of the crew too. The latter board in Baltimore: “...for’ard of the amidship house I encountered a few laggards who had not yet gone into the forecastle. These were the worse for liquor, and a more wretched, miserable, disgusting group of men I had never seen in any slum. Their clothes were rags. Their faces were bloated, bloody, and dirty. I won’t say they were villainous. They were merely filthy and vile. They were vile of appearance, of speech, and action.” And later: “I...wondered where such a mass of human wreckage could have been obtained. There was something wrong with all of them. Their bodies were twisted, their faces distorted, and almost without exception they were under-sized.”

Long before the mutiny of the title, life on the *Elsinore* becomes a struggle of two worlds – the gracious, comfortable world of the officers and crew in the poop, dining pleasantly every night, the Mate, Pike, playing classical gramophone records with enthusiasm; and the forecastle, full of degenerate wretches that Pike controls with an iron fist and great savagery. Bit by bit the *Elsinore* seems to appear a microcosm of a divided, unfair society. Is this what Jack London was trying to say in this book?

Maybe, but there’s something not quite right here. Pathurst is the narrator, and his sense of superiority expresses itself in a belief that the Captain and the Mate are superior beings, and the crew scum. His class is thus destined to dominate. Moreover a number of the crew meet with nasty ends even before the mutiny. During it, two die quite horribly, torn apart by giant albatrosses: “A great screeching and squawking arose from the winged things of prey as they strove for the living meat. And yet, somehow, I was not very profoundly shocked. These were the men whom I had seen eviscerate [a] shark and toss it overboard, and shout with joy as they watched it devoured alive by its brethren. They had played a violent, cruel game with the things of life, and the things of life now played upon them the same violent, cruel game.”

Oh dear. Men born to rule over their inferiors, and nature red in tooth and claw. It’s the narrator’s voice, but London seems to use it with great enthusiasm (with references to the captain as a Samurai warrior, and occasional references to Nietzsche). It’s just a little too genuine, and Pathhurst’s views are not discredited by the way the book ends. Jack London was a socialist all his life, but was there also a whiff of fascism about him?

George Orwell thought so. Writing in 1940 about an earlier London book, *The Iron Heel*, he commented that London was “temperamentally ...very different from the majority of Marxists. With his love of violence and physical strength, his belief in ‘natural aristocracy’, his animal-worship and exaltation of the primitive, he had in him what one might fairly call a Fascist strain.” In *The Mutiny of the Elsinore*, I think I see this; it’s also evident in his earlier and greater book, *The Sea Wolf*. However, Orwell didn’t go so far as to say that London actually was a fascist. Rather, he thought these traits made London better able to understand the nature of the ruling class, and that far from espousing fascism, he understood its dangers before it existed (*The Iron Heel*, published in 1908, describes a fascistic dystopia). It is more likely that London is using Pathurst to warn how the ruling class really think. Still, the earliest Nazis were pretty good at appealing to a certain type of person on the left as well as the right. Reading *The Mutiny of the Elsinore*, you do wonder whether, had London lived into the Fascist era, he might have been swept up in it all.

That apart, *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* is quite a book. Some have accused London of being long-winded, but he isn’t here. To be sure, he takes time to ramp up the tension before the mutiny, but that works. The description of the ship as it fights to round the Horn is also excellent, bringing forth a picture of a great steel ship, its sides streaked with rust, burdened by a cargo of thousands of tons of coal, wallowing in the huge seas as the sun comes and goes behind fast-moving, hostile clouds. The crew are also well-drawn. Now and then they do get close to caricature, but most work well. In particular, there is a frail man with a twisted

spine who radiates malevolence; he is also very well-read, and it is easy to see where that malevolence comes from as he compares Pathurst's lot with his own. Several of the crew are clearly "bad lots" and there is a reign of terror in the forecastle, from which the officers mostly dissociate themselves. By the time the ship reaches the Le Maire (or Lemaire) Strait at the southern extremity of Argentina, several of the crew have gone mad, or killed themselves or someone else.

Perhaps London exaggerates somewhat (he's writing a novel, after all). But life on a windjammer was indeed hard. To compete with steam, they sailed on small margins; the crew were paid little, the food was bad and the ships were sometimes worked with too few men. London is not exaggerating about the difficulty of rounding the Horn, either. Now and then a skipper just gave up, turned round and sailed east around the world instead.

You can still see the Tall Ships, as they are now called; a number have survived as training ships for navies, and every now and then they foregather somewhere and are a tourist attraction. New Yorkers can see two moored at the South Street Seaport. But their time as trading ships was really over by 1939. *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* is a striking account of how it must have been. Maybe it raises doubts about how London saw his fellow-man. Maybe it doesn't. In any case, London is not the only person whose attitudes now look suspect because of events that he pre-dated, and would not have condoned. Like *The Sea-Wolf*, Jack London's *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* is a rattling good read and a vibrant picture of an era that has passed.

Karen GoatKeeper says

Mr. Pathurst is bored with life. He books passage on a sailing ship to round the Horn during the winter going from Baltimore to Seattle. The crew is not impressive, even frightening. The Captain is remote, seemingly not in charge of the ship, yet is. Captain West's daughter changes Mr. Pathurst's life.

The crew is unbelievable. The voyage itself seems improbable. Although the scenes fit, some make the men on the ship appear wantonly mean. In many ways, it is a mean story.

What is memorable in this book is the voyage itself. The descriptions of the sea, the weather, the storms and rounding the Horn on a sailing vessel are superb.

William Lockhart says

Excellent

The descriptive powers of Mr. London, the romance, the power of men and the sea, the weaknesses of men, the many philosophies and most of all, the effect that a woman can have on them. In short, a wonderful read!

Marco Beneventi says

La "Elsinore" (una nave carboniera), l'Oceano, il drammatico doppiaggio di Capo Horn e le difficili condizioni di vita della ciurma che sfoceranno in un ammutinamento fanno da corollario ai personaggi che animano questo racconto, un giovane scrittore annoiato dalla vita, Margaret West la figlia del capitano, lo stesso capitano e il suo "secondo" (un rude uomo di mare che impone la sua disciplina con violenza e brutalità).

Bisogna però fare una puntualizzazione, chi crede leggendo il titolo di trovarsi di fronte ad una lettura piena di azione e colpi di scena rimarrà spaesato e forse in parte anche deluso, questo libro infatti va al di là del suo titolo (non per nulla solo nell'ultima parte di esso viene narrato dell'ammutinamento) raccontando piuttosto in dettaglio le difficili condizioni di bordo degli "ultimi" che fanno da contraltare a quelle dei privilegiati, di chi nel "Luogo alto" (come spesso viene nominato nel racconto) ha in mano il potere e indagando le dinamiche psicologiche, che possono crearsi in quel minimondo a pelo d'acqua che può essere una nave. Una lettura piacevole anche se abbastanza ondivaga (fra momenti di calma quasi filosofica e di azione violenta e repentina), proprio come ondivago è l'Oceano. Uniche, per me, note negative sono il finale che mi è parso molto raffazzonato ed abbastanza scontato e il linguaggio davvero troppo tecnico quando si parla delle manovre e delle varie parti della nave, tolto ciò questa resta comunque una buona lettura per chi, come me, ama le avventure di mare.

Shannon says

Wow. I did not remotely understand how very racist Jack London was until I read this book. I think the concept of mutiny was interesting and the approach made sense, but the protag was so very pompous about his so-called right to rule. I am very tempted to revise this as a satire.

Lili VI says

"Ce qui est sûr, pourtant, c'est que, quand votre heure viendra, vous finirez comme moi, dans la nuit. Et votre nuit sera aussi noire que la mienne !"

David Roark says

I always enjoy Jack London's storytelling. An interesting book, that definitely picks up a lot once the mutiny begins. Exciting!

Kevin Zavala says

The Mutiny of the Elsinore is about a wealthy man by the name of Mr. Pathurst that decides to join in a journey around the Cape Horn. While Pathurst knows nothing about sailing he is quickly forced to develop his own pair of sea legs due to the fact that a mass-mutiny leaves him in charge of a crew full of drunks and thieves.

Jack London really failed on this one. The Mutiny of the Elsinore is easily one of the most disappointing books I've read in a while. The entire first part of the book is spent introducing you to a fascinating bunch of characters. However, as the story progresses London's character set up quickly falls apart. Two of the main characters, Pike and Mellaire, are never mentioned again; even though the majority of the first part of the story is about them. The story also contains a lot of loose-ends and unexplained questions. Overall the story had real potential to be a quality story but it instead lets down miserably. It seems as if London lost focus after he wrote the first half of the book. In the end, I would not recommend this book to anyone, The Sea Wolf would be the first book mentioned when speaking of Jack London.

Sam Smith says

Being of its time – my own copy was published pre-1919 by, of all people, Mills & Boon – vocabulary is as non-PC as Joseph Conrad's *Narcissus*. For all its reliance on racial stereotypes however the tale is as humane as one would expect from the Jack London of *Call of the Wild*. Multi-layered characters are dissected, analysed, put back together and looked at again. Unlike his South Sea tales, where much was recounted via the downtrodden seamen themselves, this is told from the point of view of an effete passenger. His sympathies occasionally at odds with his position there are whiffs of the other Jack London here, of John Barleycorn, *The Sea Wolf*, and of his San Francisco stenographers throwing their machines from upper floor windows onto the bosses' men in the streets below. But back to the *Elsinore*, a salty rip-roaring yarn of a motley crew – imbeciles and ne'er do wells, 'lunatics and cripples' – sailing before the mast and around the Horn. Let's call the language old-fashioned; and full of sailing terminology, along with incident and seaborne conjecture. This is not a book that lends itself to easy precis: deaths are many, vengeance sought, a gun fight, and – through the passenger John Pathurst's viewpoint – we are told more than enough of the hardships ordinary seamen endured. Although this telling did lead to a strange dissonance throughout, the narrator extolling his innate superiority while the author's sympathies lied with the beaten-down seamen. Nevertheless philosophies are considered, so too subtleties of, and slight emphases of difference within characters teased out, making this a far more psychologically complex novel than a simple mutiny. As well as, given its original publisher, a love story.

Thom Swennes says

Departing from Baltimore on the sailing ship *Elsinore* was destined for Seattle. Mr. Pathurst, accompanied by his man servant boarded for this trip that would travel around the Cape of Good Hope. A cavalcade of misfit and unbalanced crew members are introduced along with a hermit captain and his attractive daughter. The expected turmoil and conflict is unleashed on board as the seas fight to send the *Elsinore* to the bottom. As can be expected, romance also plays a prominent role in this yarn of adventure on the high seas. This story is for people that have a good command of nautical jargon and maritime comprehension. I can't truthfully say that this is an example of Jack London at his best but not even the best can always hit a home run.

Shaun says

"Mutiny of the *Elsinore*"... I really like Jack London, so this was an auto-buy. I knew nothing about the plot except for what the title gave away. I have to say that I was a bit disappointed with this one. First, it took forever to actually get to the 'mutiny' part of *Mutiny of the Elsinore*, and then, well, the First and Second mate, the animosity between whom the whole book had been building, both of them just disappeared, quite literally, from the novel, and their fate was never disclosed. To me, that just came across less as a mystery and more as a gaping plot hole, as if the author forgot to tie up that loose end. The whole book ended really with a loose end, as the fate of the sailors and even the protagonist himself is left unanswered, all we get is what he THINKS will happen once they reach port. A quality I really like about London's novels is his characterization, but with this one, although early on most of the characters are described, from then on, they're only mentioned in terms of their ethnicity, the Jew, the Maltese-Cockney, the Italian, the Jap, etc.

Much of the book in fact has ethnic overtones, a sort of Arian, blonde-hair, blue-eyed status of those in command of the ship and the sub-human brown-hair, brown-eyed field slaves who crew the ship. I don't know, the racial theme didn't really offend me, it'd take a lot to do that, but I figure you could probably write an essay on the use of race in *Mutiny of the Elsinore* and what the author was suggesting. Personally, I thought it just came across as a bit weird and bigoted. I kept expecting the captain of the vessel to be a powerful character, but really the only one who turned into a strong character was the protagonist. We see his development from sort of just a well-to-do reader who has booked passage on the *Elsinore* into a leader. That was a bit unique for the Jack London novels I've read, usually the protagonist is secondary to the main character, a la Wolf Larsen. I didn't really expect the protagonist of this story to become the central character in such a way.

A big issue with the novel... if I was his agent, I would've told London: DON'T. TRY. TO. WRITE. ROMANCE! Whether it is London or just his protagonist, the romance aspect of the story is plainly pathetic. It repeatedly boils down to, "She is a woman, and she is desirable." As a matter of fact, I really question London's sexuality. In both *Sea Wolf* and this, just the way he describes his male characters, his protagonist is so drawn to them, like how many novelists write how women are drawn to men, so London is with his protagonist to other men. In a large way, I'd say he's even less bisexual and more homosexual. The men always astonish his protagonist, while the woman is "a woman and desirable." When you think about it from this angle, it's really as if London didn't write about men loving women because he didn't know how or what that was like, so he was relegated to saying it's a woman and he likes her (for some reason). But when it comes to men, oh! he describes them as if they were gods. I don't know. Maybe it was just this novel. But I thought the same thing with *Sea Wolf*.

What else....

The actual mutiny, as I alluded to, was anti-climactic... But in a way, I found a lot of humor with how anti-climactic it was. But the big problem was that the book ended anti-climactically, not letting you know what happened with the First and Second Mate, and not letting you know the fate of the crew and the protagonist, merely what the protagonist thought would happen. To me, it just felt like London forgot he had to write the ending of the book, and just thought, well, good enough. That in the end is what hurt my rating of the book the most. It might have been intentional, to leave a mystery, a bit of an open-ending, but no, I waited too long to see what'd happen with this freaking ship to suffer an anti-climactic ending and no resolution.

A final thought: London freaking uses the word "poop" in every other paragraph. He's fascinated with the poop deck! I can't tell how many times the protagonist "went to the poop". In part, it's the name of the deck itself... Poop? Really? But... *sigh*. I just got tired of the freaking poop deck and calling it the poop. In a way, that probably docked the book another star.

So... I'll give it three stars. I liked it. But for a London novel, it was a disappointment. I expected better characterization, and the plot was just too slow to build, anti-climactic, and no resolution, along with the fact that the romance was extremely underwhelming... The book is just underwhelming, period. I don't know, maybe if he would've changed the ending and had a different love interest, if any.

John says

Speaking as a fan of Jack London, this 1914 novel is problematic on many levels. To say it has aged poorly in the past 100 years would be an understatement. London, despite his progressive leanings, unwittingly

reflects the prejudices of his age. It would be nice to believe that London was aiming for ironic satire and social commentary, but instead he hammers away, in all earnestness, on themes of social Darwinism, racial stereotypes, and the sort of ham-fisted "chivalry" which comes off as insufferably chauvinistic in 2012.

Apart from these fundamental flaws, the plot presents problems as well. The slow burn between Mr. Pike and Mr. Mellaire is built up with great care only to be abandoned abruptly; London doesn't even do us the service of revealing the mystery of the two mates' disappearance. Nor is the mystery of how the mutinous crew fed themselves ever elucidated. And, worst of all, there is no real denouement to speak of, as Pathurst (the narrator) instead conjectures briefly as to the likely future.

This is not the London work to start with, and even long-time fans may walk away disillusioned. Jack London was capable of so much more.

Mauricio Garcia says

I liked being shocked to be drawn to an antique world where men thought that wealth, white legacy and family names gave certain rights to rule over "lesser" men and women. I realized that for them, given the education that they received, the moment in history, this was an absolute truth. A truth that is being challenged by changes in the way humans interact with each other.... I hope.

I normally like Jack London's books with its crude descriptions of the wild (Sea, cold, nature, or endurance). This book I liked the narration, but for me it lacked the personal empathy with its characters and depth of the story.

Joann says

I really liked this book. I read sea stories like this one for the same reasons others read horror stories. The sea makes me shiver and be glad to be on land. I am a landlubber for certain. Jack London takes his time describing every character in this book. I can picture it all in my head from his descriptions. He weaves in another theme in this book that was unexpected for me and I can't say more or I will give too much away. One character in the book is always sighing about how things are not as "they used to be" in sailing as he looks back on his youth from the modern year of 1913! Nothing changes in that regard! As another reviewer said, you do have to wonder what is going on in London's head at the time he writes this book. After reading some biographical details about London, it made me do a lot of thinking. The main character likes to philosophize and I don't agree with a number of things he puts forth but the thinking involved is good to do while enjoying a VERY exciting story.
