



Looking for a Ship

John McPhee

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On one of the last American merchant ships, second mate Andy Chase and author board the S.S. Stella Lykes, captained by Paul McHenry Washburn. The 42-day journey down the Pacific coast of South America stops for freight at Cartagena, Balboa, Lima, and Guayaquil — notorious for pirates. The crew exchange tales of disaster, stupidity, greed, generosity, and courage.

Looking for a Ship Details

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From Reader Review Looking for a Ship for online ebook

Moira says

It is the rarest of pleasures - almost extinct, it seems, these days - to read nonfiction into which the writer inserts himself not one single bit. McPhee is a master of it, and his books feel true to life as I understand it. That is, people are stupid and heroic, profound and blinkered, and the narrative of any given day outstrips most adventure novels. Here, the U.S. Merchant Marine is examined through the lens of one ship and her extraordinary captain.

I dare you to read this and not at least briefly consider running away to sea.

Frank Ryerson says

McPhee is able to enter the lives of others and open them up to us brilliantly. I read this book after reading an excerpt in The New Yorker, and loved the chance it gave me to feel and see what it would be like to have a life on the sea, knowing I would never likely have a life on the sea. I still think about one captain's remark that he hated when he hear a TV weatherman say that "the storm moved safely out to sea." Nothing safe for those folks out on the sea! A good lesson in perspective.

Riley Feldmann says

You and I are a lot alike: We both put on our pants one leg at a time, both admittedly like a little bit of creamer in our coffee, and both of us didn't know the Merchant Marine was an organization with a history beyond the two world wars. Now, thanks to John McPhee's *Looking for a Ship*, you and I are a little bit less alike.

McPhee is a renowned novelist known for taking the mundane and making it the most interesting thing in the world. He's done this with oranges, canoeing, and in *Looking for a Ship* he does it with the American Merchant Marine. His method involves physically involving himself with the people, places, and things associated with his subject matter, and so he finds himself tagging along with mariners as they hop from port to port looking for job opportunities in a shrinking industry. Where there were once thousands of ships, there are now a few hundred. Where American shipping once reigned supreme sail vessels flying Panamanian or Liberian flags. Merchant mariners are a dying breed, but it is this feeling of coming extinction that lends weight to McPhee's storytelling.

During his time aboard the Stella Lykes, McPhee witnesses both the high and low of an overseas voyage on an undermanned and overfilled vessel for the men charged with getting goods from port A to port B, no matter the conditions. The crews are often overworked, overwhelmed, and overqualified for what they're doing, but they've known no other life, nor do they desire to move on to other pastures. There's something alluring for these men about being on the high seas no matter the inherent dangers or the taxes on time and family necessitated by a life at sea. These men are a dying breed, but they're a proud bunch, and that shines through in everything McPhee tells.

The story of the Merchant Marine is ever more prescient in my life as I work in the world of imports and exports. Every day I deal with shipping lines from across the globe, but it is a rare day that I stumble across

an American-owned ship doing business for those sending products from the Midwest to international markets. I'd always wondered why such cases were so rare, and now I've got at least a bit of an answer. Much like other industries driven to the edge thanks to a global competition, the Merchant Marine struggles to keep pace with the price-slashing of rivals. A sailor makes a decent wage if they belong to a U.S. union, and that inherently hampers that sailor from finding employment. To find the Merchant Marine in such a sorry shape is depressing, especially as it belongs alongside those legacy industries of 19th and 20th Century America in coal mining, farming, and oil drilling.

McPhee takes imperfect humans and presents them the way they are without prejudice or judgement. He is an active observer in his tale, but he often injects himself to widen the perspective of what his subjects are dealing with. We learn alongside him as he learns the intricacies of sailing, all while getting to know a crew of men with so many varied paths.

The Merchant Marine is a venerable institution, a fact highlighted throughout *Looking for a Ship*. How long it will survive in a world that has passed it by remains to be seen, but it was an honor and a pleasure to view even a small corner of its history through McPhee's eyes. I couldn't have asked for a better messenger on a more fascinating topic.

Ryan Williams says

McPhee is ideal for readers who have outgrown Hunter S. Thompson and seen through Tom Wolfe. *Annals of the Former World* might be the book that won McPhee a Pulitzer, but I still think this is his best book. Informative, succinct, and written in McPhee's unflashy, elegant style, it places you straight in the head and nervous system of a merchant seaman and imparts a dazzling amount of history in a short space without any apparent effort. Its success at walking in another man's shoes and seeing through another man's eyes should be the envy of many novelists.

Eric_W says

This is McPhee's report of his voyage on a freighter, the *Stella Lykes*. Another thing I really want to do before I croak. He travels for 42 days, through the Panama Canal and down the coast of South America delivering containers. They are attacked by pirates, navigate around storms, and discuss the decline of the American Merchant Marine. My father actually took a trip on one of the *Lykes* container ship and was stuck for several weeks on the west side of the Panama Canal during our invasion of Panama. Highly recommended for nautical buffs.

Trish says

John McPhee's first published book came out in 1965, twenty-five years before this one was published in 1990. McPhee was pretty sure of his effect on readers by then, and he seemed to relax into this description of following a friend in the Merchant Marine find a ship, allowing it the tone and apparent effortlessness of an overlong magazine article. Within he quotes mariners constantly making comment on how the field of ocean shipping is changing. Twenty-five years on some factors have indeed changed, but his work winking out the feel of a life on board has not changed. Some of this chronicling, like sea stories of old, are as timeless as the sea itself.

As of 31 December 2016, the United States merchant fleet had 175 privately owned, oceangoing, self-propelled vessels of 1,000 gross register tons and above that carry cargo from port to port or more.[8] Nearly 800 American-owned ships are flagged in other nations.[9][10][Wikipedia]

The reality of living on the ocean in a ship, no matter the ship is the length of Penn Station, is brought home, McPhee says, by flipping through a stack of the quarterly *Mariner's Weather Log* in which the most devastating casualties on the seas are blandly recorded. Ships are regularly cut in half by a rogue wave, or run aground, or collided with, or face some fate never recorded when they disappear without trace. To say that some of the ships are old rust-buckets, names overpainted a dozen times as the ships change hands, their longevity a little more precarious each time, captures only a little of the danger these men face.

The ship McPhee joined was captained by an old salt Captain Washburn, in his fiftieth decade on the sea. He had a few tales to tell, and a personal history that would curl your hair. But what we learn is that an affinity for the seagoing life does not necessarily run in families. There is something about always being on the move that appeals to some folks.

Every ship is marked with 'Plimsoll marks' indicating the depth to which a ship can be safely loaded.

"These levels, worked out specifically for each ship, 'take into consideration details of length, breath, depth, structural strength and design, extent of superstructure, sheer, and round of beam,' and are collectively called the Plimsoll mark, after Samuel Plimsoll, a member of Parliament who, in the eighteen-seventies, wrote the act creating them in order to outlaw the greed-driven excessive loading that was the primary factor in the sinking of ships...load lines are set by classification societies, which are private companies that play a checking, testing, and supervisor role in ship construction—services that are optional in the sense that if you don't sign up for them no one will insure your ship."

There are well known areas of each ocean that hold special terrors for ships, mostly due to the unpredictability and viciousness of the weather. One of those places is about eight hundred miles north of Hawaii, known as the Graveyard of the Pacific. Another is the North Atlantic in winter. The lowest Plimsoll mark on a ship is 'WNA,' or the maximum depth to which the ship can be loaded in the winter North Atlantic. "The North Sea, the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Horn, and the Gulf of Alaska are the stormiest waters in the shipping world after the winter North Atlantic."

Pirates are common and expected: they often come aboard at mealtimes with manifests, walking around looking for the TVs or other easily sold items, but the ship's men "did not sign anything that said they would defend the ship with their lives." They do not feel a responsibility to solve this ubiquitous problem. A small pirogue can only take so much stuff, even if it comes thirty times to the ship, off-loading in a protected marsh nearby. The ship may carry four hundred thousand pounds of coffee and a hundred thousand pounds of shrimp, among other goods. The ordinary size of things is diminished.

Stowaways and illicit drug stashes are also a constant problem for the captains are responsible for whatever comes on the ship, intentional or not. Stowaways are charged to the ship, and require lots of paperwork. One must hire guards to see they do not escape before they are safely deported. Of the drugs, perhaps only ten percent of what is shipped is being discovered. When it is discovered, a ship may be impounded and fined. The ships, the length of Rockefeller Center and piled high with containers, might carry a crew of thirty-four aging mariners. There will be no reasonable defense of the ship. It is a sitting duck.

McPhee ends with an engine failure, leaving the ship stranded on the high seas. The temperature in the engine room exceeds 110 deg F as they try to clear water from the oil lines. Water is in the oil lines because

the ship is old, and has been 'stretched:' the bow and stern are original, but an extra piece has been added to the middle which extends the amount of material the ship can haul. The engine and the rudder were made to steer a much smaller ship, but it is the crack in the side of the ship and in a fundamental oil tank that causes the water in the oil. The ship will probably be repaired, and go on plying the seas until one day it can't anymore.

Richard Bradley says

This book is 5-stars for me because it's about a great subject, things it says are familiar and true in my own personal experience, and it is an excellent piece of writing. It's a friendly narrative. It finds humor for us. This book tells the story of a way of life, in those days. Very descriptive, with a pleasant sound and the rhythm of the seas carrying it right along. There's no shying away from the one big truth that danger stalks men and ships on the open waters and in the harbors. In that one story, that's not the real name of the ship, but they really did shoot him dead and all the rest. A couple of years later, the sheriff's department Special Investigations Unit was on the local TV news talking about how Interpol had captured two suspects in Canada. I actually was there on that case that night, for the shipowner. And the narrative about stowaways. Some perish. Many are caught. That's the way this book is all throughout. Although generally less dramatic, yet no less engaging. A book of the day-to-day lives of mariners is fantastical because only a certain crazy type people are going to be doing those jobs in the first place, and on top of that, the real world of ships at sea and in harbors is insane. Crazy people in an insane world. Absolutely wonderful, to share the experience of reading their story.

Bryan says

After an ambivalent reading of John McPhee's *The Control of Nature*, I decided to dig up this review for *Looking for a Ship*, originally written for Amazon in 2010, and repost it here, probably out of guilt for not liking *The Control of Nature* more than I did. Anyway...here it is:

After leaving the Marine Corps, one choice for employment that I considered was the U.S. Merchant Marine. I realize now that I knew even less about what was involved in the Merchant Marines than I had known about the Marine Corps before enlisting--and I had been ridiculously ignorant about the Corps. My Merchant Marine career never took off though; as it turns out, a relative happened to be working for a barge company on the Mississippi at the end of my enlistment, and he got me hired on with him instead. I didn't necessarily give up the Merchant Marine idea, but I thought it prudent to see whether I would even enjoy living and working on a boat/ship prior to taking off on a trip that could last for months. Since then, I've never felt the need to leave the barge line, and after reading John McPhee's excellent account of the Merchant Marine, I feel I should count my blessings to have fallen into the job that I did.

I apologize for the biographical data, but since both my current occupation and the descriptions Mr. McPhee gives us of the Merchant Marine share some similarities (not as many as one might think), I wanted to qualify a few of my comments below. First though: *Looking for a Ship* is Mr. McPhee's account as he sails aboard the *S.S. Stella Lykes* as a Person in Addition to Crew, and of the officers and sailors he meets aboard the vessel's forty-two day run down to South America and back. Despite any preconceptions I might have had about a piece originally published in *The New Yorker*, Mr. McPhee's story is not only intelligent and engaging, but his style is salt of the earth--McPhee may not wish to become a merchant mariner, but he admires the hell out of those who are.

It's believable that Mr. McPhee could have handled any period in the Merchant Marines history as capably as he does here, but there is an extra twist in that he has captured a time when the slow dissolution of the industry lends the story a lonesome, melancholy tone. (The book was published in 1991 but surely gathered together in the late '80's as there's no mention of the Gulf War and its massive movement of equipment.) It is an interesting, indicative snapshot--people don't seem to remember, or may be too young to know, that the end of the eighties was a very difficult time all around in this country, especially for those jobs that actually produced material things. The Merchant Marine evidently suffered under the same malaise as the rest of the country, precipitously falling to less than five hundred ships, and a fantastic addition to a twentieth anniversary printing of this book (approaching 30 now) would be an afterward by Mr. McPhee, bringing his readers up to date on the state of the fleet. As it is, he leaves his readers with a bleak assessment of the future of U.S. flagged ships and their crewmen--and a cursory search over the internet seems to confirm that it hasn't changed.

One small nit-pick, which will affect each reader differently, is the illumination of the personalities involved. The majority of these sketches were appropriately clever and insightful--and recognizable. But there was a moment, mid-way through the book's examination of the captain, where I was reminded of the front seat interviews of police officers on patrol during the television show *Cops*, or of the interviews with the fishing vessel captains on *The Most Dangerous Catch*. If you've never cringed at how un-self-aware some of these interviewees appear to be as they reveal their outsized egos, then you will probably not mind the same thing in print. To further cement the connection, I've worked with several un-self-aware personalities whose voice sounds remarkably similar to that of Captain Washburn, the captain of the *Stella Lykes*. Except Mr. McPhee presents Captain Washburn as an effective officer and a man the entire crew enjoyed sailing for--but, unfortunately, once I latched onto the resemblance between Captain Washburn's interview and those of *Cops*, I couldn't get it out of my head.

Honestly, this objection is less than minor. Even if a deep-sea vessel and a towboat paddling up and down a river are worlds apart, there is plenty enough similarity to know that Mr. McPhee has a sharp eye for detail and tradition--and for people. It isn't the job or the events or the situation that makes this a captivating book--as exotic as they are--nor does the author rely on these specifics to drive his story. It is, instead, like all successful dramas, entirely dependent on the ability of the author to convey the personalities of the cast. Thus, there is little need to have an overwhelming interest in the Merchant Marines to enjoy or appreciate this book. In fact, it might actually disappoint if that was what the reader was looking for, as it covers the facts in broad strokes and downplays the minutia. Rather, all that's necessary is that the reader share at least a little of the fascination Mr. McPhee has for that curious relationship between a person and their occupation, and some of the respect he has for dedication to a skill. Genuine and un-patronizing respect.

Peter says

If you have ever had a dream of living on the open ocean, this book is a good place to start. It is a first person account of life in the Merchant Marines - one of those institutions I have heard of, but have no idea what it really is. At times, the author seems to be writing almost as a stream of consciousness, skipping from topic to topic and mixing time periods. Most of the time, this style seems to work, but at several points seemed to leave me lost as to who and what the author was talking about. Overall, I would definitely recommend this book as a nice light read that made me wonder about a life on the sea.

Amar Pai says

Evocative.

Captain Paul McHenry Washburn : if he wasn't real you couldn't make him up

Ran away from home at 13

Became a hobo, rode boxcars across America (Great Depression era)

Joined a freak show (SEE the man who feels no pain when shocked)

Joined the Ringling brothers circus

Became an amateur boxer

Hopped aboard a ship, became a sailor

Went to war (WWII)

Worked his way up through the ranks, became a merchant marine captain

Became a great-great grandfather (while young enough to still be a captain; dunno if he ever retired)

McPhee is a great writer, plus the whole of this book appeared in sections in the New Yorker, so it has that extra level of polish that comes from the world's best editors

Gives such a palpable feeling of sea life... pirates, smugglers, union rules, heavy weather, rogue waves, shore leave, boat parking, sextants, shipwrecks, containers, sea legs, ports of call...

Note to self, this is yet another book that big ups Charles Darwin's writing (esp. in his youth, I guess Voyage of HMS Beagle is included). A lot of the writers I like, they like Darwin. Not just as a scientist but specifically as a writer. Got to check him out sometime. (But, how much can I read about rocks and penguins and such... maybe better just to get it from the source)

Merchant marines-- inot the life for me, but quite interesting to read about. This book came out in 1990 though, so I did find myself wondering how different it would be now given the GPS revolution, internet, things like that. Things have changed so fast. Do they have internet on ships now? He would've written a good chapter on Somalian piracy.

Been dreaming of being out to sea. I want to be out there in the middle of the ocean, on a huge listing ship, in stormy weather... for 5 minutes just

Tuck says

a classic of new journalism and state of usa merchant marine (its pretty much completely dead now, union busted). the ending was disappointing in its abruptness.

Kelly says

I first read an essay, The Search for Marvin Gardens, by John McPhee in a collection, and then asked about him in my essay writing class. Soon, I was on a hunt for his books - but just the right ones. Not the geology. Not collections of essays, which were easy to find but just looked... old. Yes, I judge books by their covers - but also by their tables of contents and flipping through and reading a few lines here and there - and I wasn't sold.

Finally, I wandered into a secondhand bookstore in the West Village one day on my way to meet a friend

who was moving away (for her, in a different store, I found E.B. White on the beloved city). I asked about McPhee, and soon the man was up on a ladder, handing books down to me as he removed the front row of books, revealing a row behind them on the floor-to-ceiling shelves. And there, next to the ubiquitous book of essays, was Looking for a Ship, exactly what I wanted!

It was a \$30 hardcover first-edition.

I pondered damping down my excitement, handing it back to the man, and leaving without buying anything.

I bought it and surprised Sarah with it, because she sails.

Anything is justifiable when bought for a friend.

The book proves that real people are, written well, infinitely more interesting than fictional characters. McPhee shipped out with the Stella Lykes, one of the last of the US Merchant Marine (unless they've made a comeback since this 1990 book). He is a master at bringing together big picture and minute detail to tell a riveting story. The book wanders all over the place but never loses momentum. It's a fast, funny, indignant, oddly heartbreaking read.

Kevin says

Pirates, storms, shipwrecks, oh my! The first two chapters detail just how hard it is to get a berthing on an American Merchant ship. The author and second mate Andy Chase who the author stays with as they await a ship. They wind up on the S.S. Stella Lykes and meet Captain Washburn. A lot of stories about the Merchant Marine are told, most exciting is the chapter on storms and the effects on ships. After the author gives numerous examples of the devastating effects on shipping and crews, the TV Weatherman states the "Storm has passed, and is safely at sea", not so safe for the sailors.
(view spoiler)

Rex Fuller says

“Wing-shooting Achernar, Mars, Sirius, and Venus” (navigating by sextant).

“Plimsoll marks”: TF – Tropical Fresh Water, F – Fresh Water, T – Tropical Seawater, S – Summer Temperate Seawater, W – Winter Temperate Seawater, and WNA – Winter North Atlantic. Painted on the hull of a cargo ship, they indicate the maximum safe loading depth of that particular ship, for the expected weather and sea conditions - Winter North Atlantic being hell. First mandated in Britain to control greedy overloading.

“The Bowditch,” the bible of celestial navigation, the catalogue of star positions.

“Marlinspike seamanship.” No it’s not from the fish’s nose. It’s the art of basic seamanship named from its most fundamental task: splicing rope or wire (“marling” or “marlin”) by using a steel pin.

The ship’s captain says, “You used to be able to eat on the structure of the Panama Canal and there were no mosquitoes [before ceding it to Panama],” but the Japanese banks will save it because while “we can live without it, Japan and Russia cannot.”

Loading 228 cows in Baltimore and unloading 327 head in Gdansk, after calving 107, even though one cow and seven calves were lost in a storm.

It is inane to say a hurricane turned and went “safely out to sea” where it will put ships and crews on the bottom.

The sophistication of South American pirates who take five minutes in port to empty the container with the TVs -- but that no one outsteals Boston longshoremen who consider it part of their pay.

This and much more in the life of a merchant seaman awaits in this book. As always, McPhee educates before you even realize it, you were just enjoying the stories so much.

Doug says

Clipper ships. I like clipper ships. Actually, this book has nothing to do with clipper ships, but rather is about John McPhee hanging out with the Merchant Marine on one those big tanker/shipping crate ships. Pretty interesting look at commerce and shipping and travel from a different perspective than most travel novels. The book was written in the 1980's, and I'd be very interested to see how it would be different now with the global economy that has expanded much more since then. Still, makes you think about all that stuff in the grocery stores and target and walmart how they got here.
