

S T U D Y G U I D E

F I L M
EDUCATION



RUSSELL CROWE

MASTER AND COMMANDER
THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

Synopsis

Academy Award®-winner Russell Crowe teams with four-time Oscar®-nominated director Peter Weir in the motion picture spectacle and event of the year: *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*.

Set on the adventurous high seas, Russell Crowe is 'Lucky' Jack Aubrey, a bold and determined sea captain who sets off on a mission across two oceans that could decide the fate of a nation or destroy him and his loyal crew. Brilliant performances, flawless filmmaking and breathtaking visual effects bring to life this epic tale of leadership and courage in a powerful and emotional cinematic experience.

Director: Peter Weir

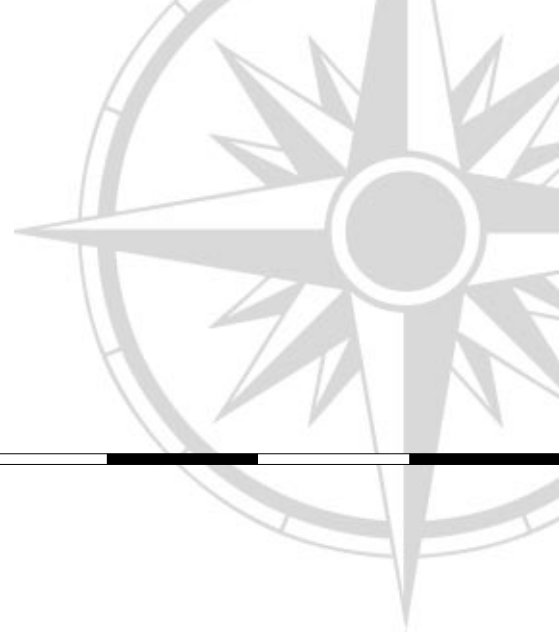
UK Release Date: November 28 2003

Certificate: TBC

Running Time: 2hrs 15mins

www.masterandcommandermovie.co.uk

HISTORY NOW AND THEN



*W*hen Patrick O'Brian began to write the stories of Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin he was looking for a time in history that might have reflected some of the concerns of his own time - and he was also looking for a story which would make a 'ripping yarn'. One other thing he would have had to think about was historical accuracy. Is this the same for historians and historical novelists now? Are the periods and subjects that they study simply chosen 'at will' because they are interested in them, or do they have a relevance, an 'echo' of what is happening in world today?

What about your history studies? Why do you think you are studying the periods in history that you are?

*I want people
to feel that this is as
close as you can get
to the impossible
but exciting idea
of travelling
back to the past.*

Peter Weir



Research

- 1 Look at some of the historical novels that are popular at the moment: the Sharpe series, Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey series for example. Both of these series are set in the Napoleonic period. How does the period that they deal with relate to us now? Why should these have been chosen and not others? Why do we relate to them? In the past couple of years, C S Forrester's Hornblower novels have been turned into a television series. What does our choice about the past tell us about now?
- 2 Why do you think that the filmmakers of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* chose to make the film at this time? What values does it show? What are the attractions of the Napoleonic naval novels?



POPULAR FILM

POPULAR HISTORY

THE INGREDIENTS OF A POPULAR MOVIE

- Using your own knowledge of films and cinema going, make a list of the things that make a film popular and pool your ideas.
- When you have seen the film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, make a list of the ingredients of the story.
- What is in the story that will appeal to audiences? Also, what is it about the way that the story is shown on screen that will appeal to audiences?

Study both lists. Note any items common to both lists. Having compared the two lists, consider the following:

- What do you think are the qualities that could make *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* a box-office success?
- A film such as *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* will cost many millions of dollars to make. Because it needs to make its money back, how do you think that this could affect the way in which the novel has been adapted. What might be missed out and why?

POPULAR HISTORY

Visit a bookshop and look in the history section.

- What are the main historical periods covered by the books on sale?
- Are there any particular people who are dealt with by some of the books?
- What type of people are they?
- What other aspects of history are covered by the books on sale?
- What does the range of books in the history section tell us about what is popular in history for the average book buyer?



Compare your list with the previous list you have drawn up for what makes a good film. One key thing to bear in mind is that when we go to see a film such as *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* we are not going to the cinema for a lesson in history. As we have said before, we are going to see a 'good yarn'. However, because the story is set in a specific historical time, the filmmaker, in this case Peter Weir, has some responsibilities to try to portray that period in as much accurate detail as possible.

Task

What are the particular questions that you would want to ask about *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* relating to historical source material?

THE PERIOD OF THE FILM

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World is set during the Napoleonic Wars, when Britain was at war with, amongst others, France. The film is set in 1805 (although the novel is set later in 1812). The origins of this war are to be found in the previous century.



On 14 July 1789, angry at their poverty and at the wealth and ineffectuality of the ruling classes, masses of French Revolutionaries stormed the Bastille in Paris and France was declared a republic. Three years later the king, Louis XVI was put on trial and executed. In 1792, disturbed by what they saw as a dangerous precedent and an unsettling force in Europe, Austria and Prussia formed a Coalition against the new Republic and mobilised their troops. They were joined the next year by Britain, Spain and Holland. This started a war that was to last twenty-two years.

It's an incredible adventure, with great acting as well as an examination of a total life at sea. Peter's unique vision, combined with an incredible cast, breathtaking images and exciting battle sequences - I feel it will be a stunning experience in cinema.

Alan Curtiss,
First Assistant Director

Throughout the next two decades, both Britain with its Coalition allies and the French allied forces all experienced both victory and defeat. But these years also saw the steady rise of one man: Napoleon Bonaparte. From early success commanding the French army in Italy and in Egypt, Napoleon arrived unexpectedly in Paris in 1799 and forced a coup d'état, making himself one of three consuls who were to govern France. In just a few months he became First Consul, and sole ruler of France, with ambitions to conquer and rule all Europe. Over the next fifteen years, he was to invade Spain, Russia, Austria and Portugal and even attempt to invade Britain, being defeated famously at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

In these years, the size of the British Navy and the skill and experience of its sailors was crucial in turning the tide from the French victories on land to the eventual defeat of the Napoleonic regime. British commanders, particularly Admiral Horatio Nelson, used unconventional tactics to defeat the French and their allies, as may be seen from the Battle of the Nile and later in the crucial victory at Trafalgar. The urgent need for sailors to man these warships also exacerbated the tension between Britain and apparently neutral America. Ships were so significant a part of a countries' power, both naval and economic, that control of the seas became perhaps the most important factor for all sides in the Napoleonic Wars.

For more background on the period, visit www.filmeducation.org and click on the *Master and Commander* button.

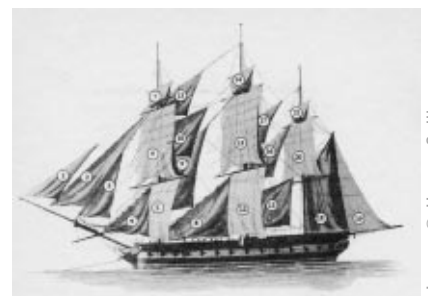


Image © Harper Collins

HISTORICAL STUDIES

*B*elow is the film synopsis of the story of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. Read it carefully and then answer the tasks that follow.



Academy Award®-winner Russell Crowe teams with four-time Oscar®-nominated director Peter Weir in the motion picture spectacle and event of the year: **MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD**.

Set on the adventurous high seas, Russell Crowe is 'Lucky' Jack Aubrey, a bold and determined sea captain who sets off on a mission across two oceans that could decide the fate of a nation or destroy him and his loyal crew. Brilliant performances, flawless filmmaking and breathtaking visual effects bring to life this epic tale of leadership and courage in a powerful and emotional cinematic experience.

Task

- 1 What are the key areas of the story that are stressed in the synopsis? How important are the characters of the story compared to the time in which it is set? How important is the historical period in the synopsis?

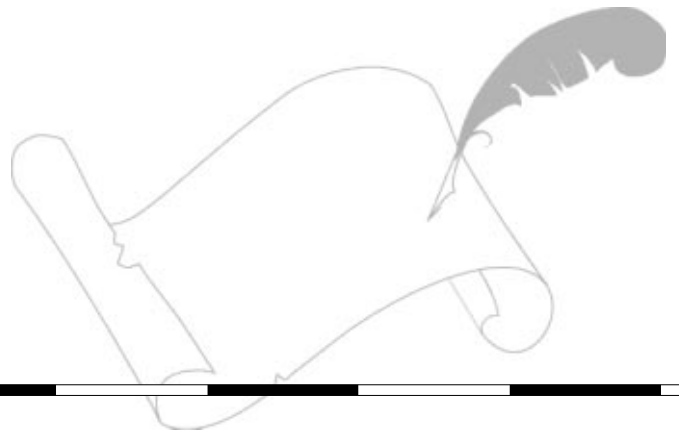
After seeing the film

- 2 Was there anything which surprised you about the film? Was there anything which annoyed you about the film? Did any of the casting surprise you? What did you think of the ending?

HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

History was once thought of as a series of great events and great people. Nowadays there are very many different ideas of what history is. However, great names in history are still important. How does a historian go about creating an idea of a person in their readers mind?

If we stay within the period of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, how would you, as a historian, be able to build up a picture of Admiral Nelson? What sources would you have at your disposal? Make a list of the possible types of sources that you could use to construct your portrait and then think about which would be the most useful and accurate. In what ways could these sources be useful to a filmmaker?



FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

An author or filmmaker might well construct characters in a similar way. In a book, a writer builds up characters through what they say, the dialogue; what they do, their actions; what they look like, description; their thoughts and feelings, for instance through interior monologue.

- Make a list of the ways a filmmaker builds up characters and pool your ideas.
- Now distinguish between what the acting and the filming contribute to the way the characters are presented.

There are typical character types in many stories, some relying on stereotypes. We have certain expectations about these types: how they will behave, what will happen to them, their role in the story - depending on whether they are active or passive, sympathetic or unsympathetic and so on.





List the typical characteristics of each of the following, giving examples of each type [from films you have seen and books you have read]:

| Active, unsympathetic male | Passive, sympathetic male | Active, sympathetic male |
|---|---|---|
| _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ | _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ | _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ |
| Examples | Examples | Examples |
| _____ _____ | _____ _____ | _____ _____ |

You will now look at four of the characters in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* and how each is portrayed within the film. Working in pairs, complete the character matrix on the following page. Then join with another pair and compare your classifications. You may have found some characters hard to classify. If this is so, in groups discuss what makes a particular character hard to classify. Now compare the characteristics of the characters in the matrix with your previous list. Are they typical heroes or victims? Do they conform to our expectations or surprise us?

In looking at the ways in which *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* compares to other films, we now need to think about the ways in which historical characters are presented to us in history books. Think back over some of the historical periods that you have studied recently. What people have been important? Have they been presented in the same ways as characters are presented in films?

CHARACTER MATRIX

| CHARACTER | CHARACTER TYPE | CLOTHING | FACIAL EXPRESSIONS GESTURES | WAY OF SPEAKING | ATTITUDES/BEHAVIOUR | COMMENTS |
|---|----------------|----------|--------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------|
|  Jack Aubrey | | | | | | |
|  Stephen Maturin | | | | | | |
|  Lt. Thomas Pullings | | | | | | |
|  Lord Blakeney | | | | | | |

ACTIONS AND MOTIVATION





JACK AUBREY - HERO

An epic story such as *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* needs an epic hero. Does Jack Aubrey fit the bill? In pairs, write down as many ideas as you can about what you think the qualities of a hero should be. When you have completed this, think about which of your ideas fit the character of Jack Aubrey. In what ways is he an epic hero? For each of the words that you think describes a hero and which apply to Jack, try to think of a moment in the film that illustrates each of the heroic qualities.

Having looked at the qualities of the hero, now consider the ways in which Jack interacts with other characters and discover their motivation and also their actions in order to see how each character helps to move the story along, both through their actions and their decisions.

Task

Choose three key actions for each of the main characters. For each of these actions try to say what each of them tells us about the character and then why this is important to the overall plot of the story, how it helps to move the story along.

| | WHAT THE ACTION TELLS US ABOUT THE CHARACTER | IMPORTANCE TO THE PLOT |
|---|--|------------------------|
| JACK AUBREY  | 1 _____ | _____ |
| | _____ | _____ |
| | 2 _____ | _____ |
| | _____ | _____ |
| | 3 _____ | _____ |
| | _____ | _____ |
| STEPHEN MATURIN  | 1 _____ | _____ |
| | _____ | _____ |
| | 2 _____ | _____ |
| | _____ | _____ |
| | 3 _____ | _____ |
| | _____ | _____ |



INTERACTION

Look back to your answers to the previous task. How many of the key actions of each character involved one of the other main characters?

Task

Now consider how the characters interact with each other and also how their relationship changes. Look at the relationship of each character with one of the other characters that you have studied. Does their relationship change? How would you best describe the relationship?

STORY

Words can give us different ideas, different meanings. Let us now look at one French word which has two different meanings - 'histoire'. This word can mean history but also story. Even the English word 'history' contains the word 'story'. So when we talk about the film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* are we talking about:

- a) a story?
- b) history?
- c) a historical story?
- d) a story based on history?
- e) a story set in a historical period?

What would you say are the differences between these five examples?

Task

**'Don't tell me the facts,
tell me the truth.'**

**How does this apply to the
different examples given
above? What would you
say are the differences
between facts and truth?
How important is this
distinction to historians?**

Although the film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is based on a historical novel, the filmmakers, through the use of new technology, have been able to give us a sense of what life would have been like on board a ship in 1805 – from the living conditions through to the experience of rounding Cape Horn. We could ask whether they are giving us a fiction, facts or the truth. Perhaps it is a mixture of all three!

One of the most dramatic moments in the film is when the *Surprise* rounds Cape Horn on its voyage into the Pacific Ocean. An account of 'Rounding the Horn', written by Captain William Bligh, is shown on the following page.

The 20th. March - we struck the first southern gales between Cape Virgin Mary at the eastern entrance to Magellan Straits and the Falkland Islands. It is exactly what I feared! The violent squalls caught us entirely by surprise and gave me little time to bring the ship under the mizzen main sail.

The 23rd. March. We had sighted land - the first since the Canaries! Although I knew the greatest test was yet to come I immediately ordered a sheep killed to celebrate the event.

It is the 24th. of March and I keep a constant vigil. The weather remains clear, but now in the afternoon, the sky is much streaked with high wind. I fear the worst...

...It is the next morning and I have ordered the ship to be cleaned and dried and the top hamper to be brought down in preparation for bad weather.

Midday and thick cloud ... 8pm. Now comes the fog. I am becoming watchful and time allows me to write only snatches!

Finally the wind has got up, the fog cleared and the sea starting to run

...Midday and the wind is tearing through the rigging and whipping the shrouds; we are surrounded by wind streaked foam.

The night, the 28th. of March and our ordeal has truly begun. The westerly gale is bringing strong slanting rain striking our arms and faces as if it were shot from a musket, with the seas breaking completely over the deck. I have never experienced worse conditions. It is with great difficulty that I write my log and these few words!

three days later. It is difficult to write my log as I am thrown all about the cabin ... then possibly the worst moment of all!... This morning I just managed to struggle up on deck following a futile attempt to sleep. I could hardly fail but observe the terrible conditions. A huge sea that was white, as drunken foam and boiling milk mixed together, and we were caught in its grip. I cast my gaze up searching for a break in the greyness above. Nothing!...no sun, no sky and little hope, just a grey, semi-darkness of angry clouds and an infuriated sea.

I struggled hand over hand along the rail and looked up. I could not believe my eyes. Someone had set an extra sail. Men were balanced on yard arms, reefing wet canvas, clutching at wet rope. I glanced up and saw a sailor miraculously hanging in the rigging...grimly clutching at swaying yards.'

Then I observed the sail and gulped. Second yard main mast, close reefed and stretched to breaking. Clutching a safety rope I leaned out over the ship's gunwale and peered into Neptune's black depths. Waves were ripping past. Bows down we were ploughing along before the wind with a reckless speed certain to destroy us all. Only the merest change in the wind direction, a sudden shift, a gust to turn us just one or two degrees either way and we were done for.

We turned side on to the raging inferno, our masts now almost horizontal - if one were able to rule a line across that raging fury of green, black and white. Then we turned full circle, anti-clockwise I think, and were lent over, our starboard keel out of the sea...Would we go under? Now I thought for the moment of truth.

Remarkably we were still afloat. The bows had swung back away from the wind, clockwise, away from danger. My arms were still locked square into the rails as she righted herself. I looked around to where terrified sailors clung to various parts of the ship as a clutch of frightened monkeys would cling to a fleeing parent.

...I have decided that it would be improper and too dangerous to continue any longer. The wind has changed yet again and in just two days we have been forced back to a position we passed some three weeks ago. Heavy winds and snow falls are so violent that I have been forced to 'lay to'. The wind is backing to the west and the sea running high.



There were midshipmen as young as twelve. They had to take the injuries, sail the ship, go into battle and fight alongside everyone else.

After seeing the film

Give examples from the film which would support the comments made in these quotations?

Children on ships were often orphans and, at sea, they were looked after, clothed, fed and had somewhere to sleep. There were no such guarantees on land.

In what ways would a description such as this help the filmmakers of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*? Once you have seen the film and experienced the rounding of Cape Horn, look back at Bligh's description and underline which parts of his description reflect what you have seen on screen.

One thing that is surprising in watching *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is the age of many of the 'sailors'. The midshipmen in particular, as junior officers, are no more than young boys. Here are two accounts which give some idea of the youthfulness of many of the crews:

'More than four-fifths of ordinary seamen, and half of able seamen, were aged under twenty-five. Only about a fifth were married. Boys of between six and eighteen were to be found aboard ship, many of them engaged simply in playing as well as learning the ropes...About half of the crew would have been 'impressed' - that is, involuntary - but only merchant seamen could be so recruited.'

'In less well-ordered ships, young midshipmen were at the mercy of 'oldsters' - men passed over for preferment who would probably have to spend the rest of their lives in their jobs. Even youngsters could be venomous. As one seaman observed: We had a midshipman on board of a wickedly mischievous disposition, whose sole delight was to insult the feelings of seamen and furnish pretexts to get them punished... He was a youth of not more than twelve or thirteen years of age; I have often seen him get on to the carriage of a gun, call a man to him, and kick him about the thighs and body, and with his feet would beat him about the head; and these, though prime seamen, at the same time dared not murmur.'

Both quotations from 'Cochrane The Life and exploits of a Fighting Captain' Robert Harvey, Robinson, 2000

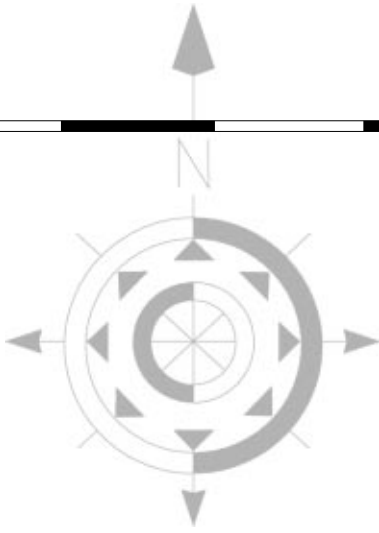
PUNISHMENT

Punishment in the Navy during this period could be severe, as we see demonstrated in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. The most brutal punishment was flogging. Here is an account of this punishment:

'The Captain gave the order 'Give him a dozen'. There was an awful stillness; I felt the flesh creep upon my bones, and I shivered and shook like a dog in a wet sack. All eyes were directed towards the prisoner, who looked over his shoulder at the preparations of the boatswain's mate to inflict the dozen: the latter drew his fingers through the tails of the cat, ultimately holding the nine ends in his left hand, as the right was raised to inflict the lash. They fell with a whizzing sound as they passed through the air, and left behind the reddened mark of sudden inflammation...

At the conclusion of the dozen I heard the unwilling order, 'Another boatswain's mate!' The fresh executioner pulled off his coat. The prisoner had said nothing during the first dozen, but on the first cut of his new and merciless punisher, he writhed his back in acknowledgement of the pain; the second stripe was followed by a sigh; the third by an ejaculation; and the fourth produced an expression of a hope of pardon. At the conclusion of the dozen, this was granted, and the prisoner released.'

From 'Cochrane The Life and exploits of a Fighting Captain:' Robert Harvey, Robinson, 2000



For more serious offences such as drunkenness or stealing the standard punishment was a flogging. Although floggings could only be ordered by the captain, they were a common feature of the routine: during the twenty-seven days before Trafalgar the log of the Royal Sovereign recorded twenty-five such punishments. They took place on the quarter-deck in the presence of the ship's company. The offender took off his shirt, and with hands held above his head, was secured by his wrists to the gratings. The Captain read the Articles of War and then called on the boatswain's mate, with the cat-o'-nine-tails, to do his duty. Normal punishment was anything up to four dozen lashes. Even this made the back a bloody mess; but for desertion, sedition and sodomy, two, three and sometimes five hundred lashes would be given. A man who underwent one of these cruel punishments has left his impressions of it.

'I felt an astounding sensation between the shoulders under my neck, which went to my toe-nails in one direction and my finger-nails in another, and stung me to the heart as if a knife had gone through my body...He came on a second time a few inches lower, and then I thought the former stroke sweet and agreeable compared with that one. I felt my flesh quiver in every nerve from the scalp of my head to my toe-nails. The time between each stroke seemed so long as to be agonizing, and yet the next came too soon...The pain in my lungs was more severe, I thought, than on my back. I felt as if I would burst in the internal parts of my body...I put my tongue between my teeth, held it there, and bit it almost in two pieces. What with the blood from my tongue and my lips which I had also bitten, and the blood from my lungs or some other internal part ruptured by the writhing agony, I was almost choked and became black in the face...Only fifty had been inflicted, and the time since they began was like a long period of life; I felt as if I had lived all the time of my real life in pain and torture and that the time when existence had pleasure in it was a dream long long gone by.'

'Nelson and his Captains', Ludovic Kennedy. Penguin, Classic Military History, 2001

Task

Write two letters. The first should come from the filmmakers justifying why *Master and Commander* could be seen as a 'historical' film. The second should be a historian's possibly pointing out why historical films and novels pose problems for the student of history.

- In what ways are the quotations different from each other?
- How does each describe the punishment of flogging?
- Which are primary sources and which are secondary?
- Which of the descriptions most fits with the punishment scene in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*?

The film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is based on Patrick O'Brian's first and tenth novels. Patrick O'Brian uses history as a backdrop to the events of his story. Because history has been 'filtered' in this way, how useful is the final film to the historian?

STORY/HISTORY/FILM

What are the differences between reading a novel, reading a history book and 'reading' a story from a film? For example, how do we get our information about character from a novel and how do we get this information from a film? Is character information important in a history book or does this type of writing have a different emphasis? How long does it take us, on average, to read a book compared to how long it takes us to watch a film? List as many differences as you can think of.

NOVEL

HISTORY BOOK

FILM

| | | |
|-------|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

Tasks

1 Imagine that you are a historian who has been asked to make a six-part series on a historical subject of your choice. By using a period of history that you have recently studied, think of how you would divide it up into six sections or episodes. How could you make a 'cliff-hanger' at the end of each episode which would make people want to watch the next one?

2 In doing this, how would you have to alter the 'history' to make an interesting series of programmes.

3 How could you divide *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* up into plots and sub-plots? How could you link the various plots together?

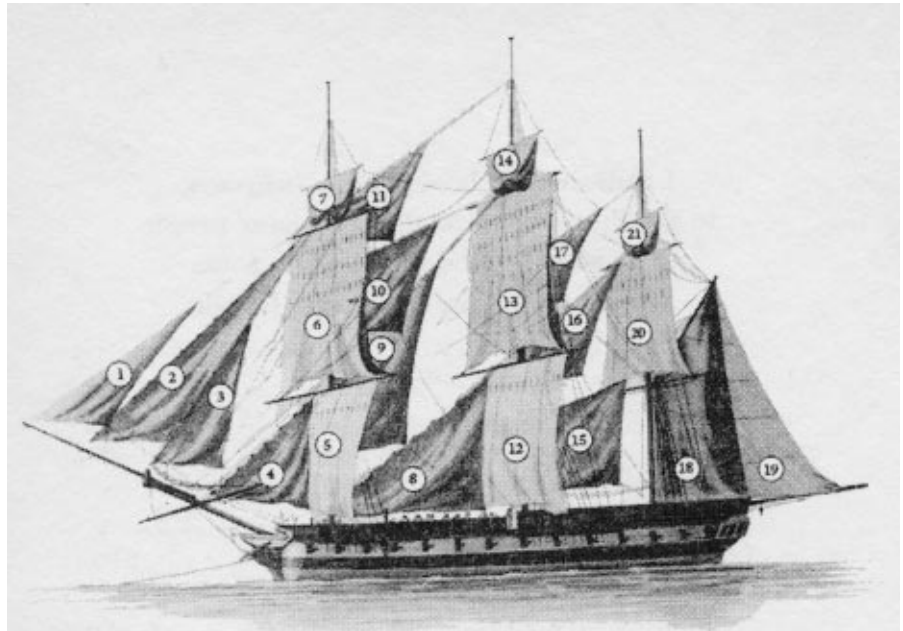
Reading a novel is a solitary experience. Our imaginations must work with the author's narrative as the story unfolds. A history book makes other demands on us. We might still need to use our imagination but the 'pleasure' that we get from a history book is different from that which we get from a novel.

At the cinema, there is always the possibility that some of the audience will read what they see in a different way from that intended by the director of an adaptation from a novel. This will be the difference between a preferred reading and a differential reading. Can you think of any examples where a person might not read what they see in the preferred way?

Do you think that in history books the same thing happens - that there can be preferred reading and a differential reading. Think about history writing in Germany and Russia in the 1930s. How might a Communist see history and a Nazi see history? How would these two views come into conflict? With *Master and Commander*, might a Frenchman or an American view the story differently to a British person?

STORIES

Master and Commander was the first Patrick O'Brian novel based on the exploits of Jack Aubrey and his friend Stephen Maturin. *The Far Side of the World* was O'Brian's tenth novel. The film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is an amalgamation of the first and the tenth. The idea of a series of novels is attractive to filmmakers (think of the James Bond films). If one film is successful then it is possible to go back and then choose another novel to film (or turn into a television series, for example).



The sails of a square-rigged ship, hung out to dry in a calm.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 Flying jib | 12 Mainsail, or course |
| 2 Jib | 13 Maintopsail |
| 3 Fore topmast staysail | 14 Main topgallant |
| 4 Fore staysail | 15 Mizzen staysail |
| 5 Foresail, or course | 16 Mizzen topmast staysail |
| 6 Fore topsail | 17 Mizzen topgallant staysail |
| 7 Fore topgallant | 18 Mizzen sail |
| 8 Mainstaysail | 19 Spanker |
| 9 Main topmast staysail | 20 Mizzen topsail |
| 10 Middle staysail | 21 Mizzen topgallant |
| 11 Main topgallant staysail | |

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F I L M
EDUCATION

Film Education is the unique link between education and the UK film industry. It facilitates the study and use of film and cinema across the curriculum, creating, developing and sustaining a literate audience through the understanding and enjoyment of film.

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