



Atlantic: Great Sea Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic Storms & a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories

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"Variably genial, cautionary, lyrical, admonitory, terrifying, horrifying and inspiring...A lifetime of thought, travel, reading, imagination and memory inform this affecting account." —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

Blending history and anecdote, geography and reminiscence, science and exposition, *New York Times* bestselling author Simon Winchester tells the breathtaking saga of the Atlantic Ocean. A gifted storyteller and consummate historian, Winchester sets the great blue sea's epic narrative against the backdrop of mankind's intellectual evolution, telling not only the story of an ocean, but the story of civilization. Fans of Winchester's *Krakatoa*, *The Man Who Loved China*, and *The Professor and the Madman* will love this masterful, penetrating, and resonant tale of humanity finding its way across the ocean of history.

Atlantic: Great Sea Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic Storms & a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories Details

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From Reader Review Atlantic: Great Sea Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic Storms & a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories for online ebook

Jaqui says

This book. Wow. I learned so, so much. Some of the things...mind-blowing. Mental paradigm altering. Reading this changed me and my perception of the world.

Winchester covers the length and breadth of Atlantic affairs, from tectonic movements to the history of shipping containers, from murex dyes to Monet. Instead of delving into specific topics deeply, Winchester skims and skips like a stone over waves, touching briefly on a vast array of interesting subjects. Just enough to really whet the appetite for more information. I now have a ton of new topics to explore and read about. I sense an avalanche of material approaching my to-read list. Thanks, I guess, Mr. Winchester.

While this lack of depth could be frustrating for some, I enjoyed it. Little nibbles of cool information, doled out in a lovely, lyrical prose that reads almost like you're having a meandering, lazy conversation with the author. And, in a way, it conveys what is Winchester's real message with this book: no matter how much you learn, how far and how deep you research, you or I or mankind in its entirety, can never truly know the ocean.

HIGHLY recommended.

Will Byrnes says

Using as his central pillar a Shakespearean monologue from *As You Like It* that lists the seven stages of a man's life, Simon Winchester offers us the life of an ocean.

He covers a very wide swath in his examination of that very un-pacific Atlantic. Beginning with big-picture geology, he looks at the infant Atlantic and gives a preview of what the world will look like when the Atlantic is no more. There is plenty here about tectonics, volcanism and the mighty forces of a planet that is constantly changing. But his primary focus is on the relationship of people to the Atlantic.

He looks at a host of firsts across many disciplines, the first to cross the ocean, the first paintings centered on the ocean, the first poems, stories, etc. He tells how Islamic control of both ends of the Mediterranean contributed to European expansion across the less contested Atlantic, round about 1492. Much attention is paid to the Atlantic as an arena for battle, from the earliest seagoing battles to contemporary submarine warfare, with a surprising entry here on the importance of chestnuts to munitions manufacture, and of how technical expertise re weapons production influenced the creation of a state decades later. He looks at how trade became a basis for 11th and 12century globalization, traces the development of commercial oceanic trade, and brings it all up to date with a look at current Atlantic traffic, both asea and aloft. He offers a look at some of the ecological implications of that commerce, and notes new technologies that hopefully will mitigate, somewhat, the harm that commerce causes. He also looks at the impact of overfishing.

Atlantic is not a fast read. I suppose that is because of the huge quantity of facts presented. But it is well worth the time.

Some might argue that Winchester has over-reached, that such a globe-girdling tale cannot truly be distilled into a meager 459 pages. (the page count in my pre-release copy may not match the final number) Perhaps the subject is too large for a single volume. But do not be dissuaded by this. Winchester has put together a vast array of fascinating material, diving deep to find bits information that will surprise and please. Winchester's *Atlantic* covers many aspects of the great ocean, which seems fitting when one considers the reach of the ocean itself. I had the pleasure recently of being at a lake in Montana that spreads its waters in three directions, one of which is towards the Atlantic. How remarkable the reach of this vast body of water. What a titanic (couldn't resist) achievement that Winchester has offered us all an opportunity to recognize just how important this body of water is to humanity, to our survival, to our history, to our politics, to our culture, to our art, to our very identity and to our future. The Atlantic Ocean only has another 170 million years before it succumbs to the demands of geology and perishes. So there is not a minute to spare. Swim out to your store and pick up a copy while there is still time.

=====EXTRA STUFF

11/25/13 – My GR pal, Cathy D sent along this link to a fascinating article that concerns the Big A. Seems a large object dropped in on us at what is now the Chesapeake Bay and scientists recently found an explanation for some heretofore inexplicable inland water that was unusually salty.

Trevor says

I can't be objective about this guy. I listened to this as a talking book - and I just love this guy's voice. I could listen to him reading the telephone directory and still be fascinated. This is a 'let me tell you everything I know about the Atlantic' kind of book. He tries to give it a structure, but really, this is just someone very intelligent talking about something they are very interested in.

The stuff towards the end about the damage we are doing to the ocean - particularly the fish that once were there - is very disturbing. One of my favourite polymaths - and there is no higher praise than that.

Matt says

People have critiqued the sprawling nature of this book, but such a nature seems fitting for a book on something as large (geographically, historically, geologically) as the Atlantic Ocean. Besides, overall he groups his material into considering the Atlantic from various angles: geological, exploration history, commercial history, military history, and environmental impact. I listened to this book as an audiobook, and it was simply a pleasure to have Winchester in my car for several weeks, telling me what he knows about the Atlantic.

One of the lasting impressions this book made upon me is his discussion of the geological span of the Atlantic, namely that even though it began a long time ago and will last long into the future, the Atlantic is temporal and short-lived in comparison to the planet. And thus humans are just a blip in the history of the Atlantic Ocean, which is itself just one chapter in the history of the Earth. Such a perspective properly situates the human race, as well as casts a dramatic lens on the impact we are having on the ocean (overfishing, global warming & rising sea levels, water-borne pollution, etc.). Still, the Atlantic and the Earth will carry on long after humans; but the return to homeostasis of the planet may eliminate humans in the process. I think Winchester was just trying to be judicious about the evidence for global warming, but at

points he comes across as skeptical about what is a well-established scientific fact.

This is a fascinating, intricate book, and highly-recommended!

Emily says

I'm not sure why I thought I would like this book, given that I haven't liked Winchester's other work. I suppose it's because I've liked other book on maritime themes (e.g. The Outlaw Sea). By the time I made it through the opening anecdote about a transatlantic sea voyage and a drawn-out comparison to flying, and got to his plan to structure the book around the Seven Ages of Man from "As You Like It," I had already totally lost patience.

Jack Erickson says

Reading Simon Winchester Simon Winchester is like sitting down at a banquet with an historian, a geologist, a linguist, a meteorologist, a geographer, a novelist, and a world traveler. You're going to hear incredible stories about world events and adventures that will remain with you as long as you live.

Winchester was an Oxford-educated geologist before he became a journalist and prolific author of books about fascinating topics: the history of the first geological map; an Oxford scholar who wrote a multi-volume history of science in China; the professor who wrote the Oxford English Dictionary; the cataclysmic 1883 Krakatoa volcano eruption; and the 1960 San Francisco earthquake.

No topic is too large or all encompassing for Winchester. Who else would have the courage and energy to write a book about -- the Atlantic Ocean? A history that starts in Cambrian times, 500 million years ago, to the break up of the mega-continental Pangea 200 million years ago when a span of water we know as the Atlantic began expanding between what became the American and European continents.

Any history book is about people who explore or make discoveries. In Atlantic Atlantic: Great Sea Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic Storms & a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories, Winchester writes about Leif Eriksson, John Cabot, Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, Ponce de Leon, Rudyard Kipling, Guglielmo Marconi, Samuel Morse, and Thomas Edison.

But Winchester isn't focused only on the famous names of the past; he shares anecdotes about little-known or long-forgotten heroes such as Angus Campbell Macintyre whose memorial he found on the Skeleton Coast off Namibia. Winchester dedicated his book to Scotsman Macintyre who died trying to rescue sailors on the shipwrecked SS Dunedin Star in 1942.

Fittingly, Winchester ends his book by telling us when the Atlantic Ocean will be no more. He says in 170 million years, tectonic forces will push the southern tip of South America and connect to Antarctica then head northward and collide with the tip of the Malay peninsula near Singapore.

David says

This is a very enjoyable book; it covers many aspects of the Atlantic Ocean. The book describes its

formation and its ultimate end, exploration, the use of the ocean for commerce, for food, for battles, and the inspiration the ocean has for literature, art and music. And of course, the book contains some stories of shipwrecks and of the ecological damage that people have inflicted on the ocean.

Unlike some of the other reviews, I found this book to be an easy read. Winchester writes in a delightful, literary, almost poetic style. The physical book itself is quite attractive; the newly designed attractive typeface took me by surprise. (Some more editing is needed--there are quite a few typos.) There are plenty of small, black-and-white illustrations that add to the stories.

Alan says

In short...a great opportunity wasted. Winchester set out to accomplish the bold task of describing the natural and human history of the Atlantic Ocean...probably an impossible task for anyone.

Winchester does an admirable job of describing the geologic past and future of this ocean basin, but in between it seemed like he was unable to develop a meaningful train of thought. And even worse, he couldn't keep himself out of the narrative. It's almost like he didn't think anyone would believe him unless he inserted his own autobiographical experiences on and around the Atlantic into the book.

If you decide to read this book you will see that it takes him about 50pp to get the thing rolling...that's how much preface and prologue it's got. Plus, the writing got in the way of the telling for me. It seemed to me that he wrote this book because he loves his own words, not because he had a compelling tale to tell. The prose is too flowery and made the reading onerous after a short time. I actually had to set the book aside multiple times, and I actually read about 4 other books while continuing to try to plow through this one.

Don't get me wrong...there is some interesting stuff here, but, at the same time there is WAY too much personal conjecture and even out and out errors, especially in his science.

I really wanted to like it, but I just couldn't. 2 stars. I recommend avoidance...

Jason says

This “biography” of the Atlantic ocean is not a straightforward, objective history, not even trying to be. The tone of the book was a bit surprising: how dreamy and abstract Winchester’s attitude towards the Atlantic is! He opens with a journey he once took from England to Montreal by ship, and as he recalls what it felt like traversing the Atlantic for the first time, we can almost see Winchester getting all misty-eyed. He heightens his prose. He reaches for the paint brush. He waxes poetic. The Atlantic ocean breathes, Winchester informs us. It has moods. The Pacific is primarily blue, and fringed with palm trees and coral reefs, but the Atlantic is something else entirely, a “gray and heaving sea...storm-bound and heavy.” He goes on like that for a while. His metaphorical musings on the Atlantic are actually magnificent, and deeply evocative, and they alert us immediately to Winchester’s real purpose in this book, which is not to explore an actual, real Atlantic ocean at all, but rather to create a myth of the Atlantic, a concept. This book is an attempt to capture the MEANING of the Atlantic. If the calm Mediterranean was a symbol of the Ancient world, then the Atlantic is the symbol of the modern age. We are living in a pan-Atlantic civilization, he argues, consisting of the world's most influential countries over the last thousand years, and it behooves us therefore to come to terms with what the Atlantic ocean really means, since it's at the center of our modern existence.

Following from this rather subjective purpose, Winchester has chosen a rather subjective form for his narrative. For this book, he clearly draws from the Herodotus school of history writing, which is fine, because if you can't gain inspiration from the Father of History, who can you gain it from? Thus, in his grappling with this massive subject, Winchester, like Herodotus before him, freely intermingles historical record, personal anecdote, literary reference, scientific treatise, and everything in between, whatever spirit moves him, showing no qualms whatever in using a personal experience, a conversation he once had with a friend, say, as a doorway into a broader subject. He attacks the ocean from many sides, dividing his book along thematic lines (which only vaguely intersect with chronological lines), and the effect of all this is to make this book into a highly personal journey through Winchester's ideas about the ocean, the Atlantic tapestry he perceives as holding the modern world together. He tries in vain to make the whole thing coalesce, and very often the threads of this tapestry are weak and stretched far beyond endurance, but hey - Herodotus never found The Key to All Mythologies regarding the Greco-Persian Wars, so why should we fault Winchester for not finding it for the Atlantic? The Atlantic clearly has no single meaning, no unifying identity or character, no matter how hard the writer wishes it so, and his purpose, then, may have been doomed from the start. Still, what he does achieve is to present enough interesting facts and stories about the world, some, I would argue, relating to the Atlantic only tangentially, to make this "biography" of the ocean well worth a read. It's scattershot and hit-or-miss, but on the whole, he hits more often than he misses.

His first chapters are really quite gripping. He tries to make us see the Atlantic through the eyes of ancient peoples. We, of course, take the ocean for granted, chewing peanuts or dozing in airplanes as we fly tediously overhead, but for thousands of years, the Atlantic was a figure of awe, terror, and wonder, an insurmountable and seemingly eternal wilderness of deadly water and bottomless depths, to be feared and avoided and paid homage to. Winchester describes the cave at the southern tip of Africa, at Pinnacle Point, the first known place in history that people ever settled by the sea. He talks of the Phoenicians and their brave forays into the ocean to catch snails that emit a purple dye, the Phoenicians thus becoming the first Ancient people to ever cross the Pillars of Hercules into the Atlantic. The mystery surrounding the search for Erik's Viking settlement in Newfoundland is told in extensive and compelling detail, and Winchester makes the case that this Viking family ought to be honoured more for being the first to cross the Atlantic (which they did 1000 years ago), and Columbus less. (It is hard to argue with that.) He then runs casually and rapidly over some of the more important explorations of the Portuguese and the Spanish at the end of the 15th century, when they first realized the Atlantic was a separate sea, most of which will be old news for anyone with a passing knowledge of that period. Winchester does, though, focus on something many may not know about, the discovery of the Gulf Stream. Once this phenomenon was discovered, Europeans had a fast, convenient way to scoot back home from the Americas, which is kind of cool.

Then, I hit a snag. Winchester chooses to spend pages and pages on the numerous achievements and blunderings of the fledgling science of oceanography, and I must admit, I'm afraid, that my eyes glazed over, though that may not be the experience for more science-focused readers. In these sections, he loses the human element. He presents a series of names and experiments and conclusions, all passing by in a whirl, and it's just too much to take in. When the sailors stepped back, as he puts it, and the scientists took center-stage, "some of the romance inevitably bled away." Winchester has stated this aptly, as if aware himself of the dry and mundane nature of these scientific advances compared to the earlier epic journeys by ship into the great unknown. Nevertheless, he pursues the subject. I found most of this section hard-going.

His next chapter explores the relationship that art and literature have had with the Atlantic over the centuries. A chapter on art? Sure! Why not? Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, he is glad to point out, may have been inspired by an English shipwreck on the coast of Bermuda! He mentions various artists and their representations of the Atlantic, emphasizing the transition in these representations from before the Enlightenment, when they were more fearful and fanciful, to afterwards, when they became more curious and realistic. In this chapter, it became especially clear to me that Winchester is at his best when he speaks of the ocean poetically, communicating what feelings it has evoked, what images and myths have arisen from it. He is less successful when he lists paintings and buildings and operas that, over history, have had something

to do with the Atlantic. In the section where he describes for pages and pages the various architectural styles that we find in several cities along both sides of the Atlantic coast, as if these architectures were all inspired by some unifying Atlantic character, I almost gave up on the book. I am glad I didn't, but it was a tough go for a while. Compare these dry lists to this wonderful anecdote Winchester sticks in about a man he once met, an Argentine Navy man, who took pleasure at the sinking of a British boat during the Falklands War. Years later, when Winchester met this man again, the man regretted his earlier jubilation, since no Navy man should ever glory at the death of another sailor. To die alone at sea, the man told Winchester, is horrible. The man said, "There is a Brotherhood of the sea." What a lovely moment! I often found these sorts of quiet, affecting scenes a relief from all the daunting lists of scientific experiments and paintings and architectural styles Winchester occasionally supplies us with. These quieter moments of character are sprinkled throughout the text, and I liked them.

Thankfully, Winchester next gets into history, where the book really comes alive. He offers a fascinating historical overview of how the Mediterranean was replaced by the Atlantic as the center of the Western world in the 15th century. The Muslims had blockaded both ends of the inner sea, blocking all routes to Asia, so the European powers all turned West, for plunder, for trade, and for knowledge. This serves as the introduction to an extremely compelling set of chapters largely about war on the high seas, starting with a narrative about 16th-17th century Atlantic piracy and the slave trade. These pirate and slave stories are horrifying, full of cruelty and drama and incomprehensible violence (real-life pirates, it turns out, were much more violent than their literary counterparts. Forget walking the plank: these guys sometimes pulled your entrails out, nailed them to the floor, and made you walk away as they unfurled from your body.) Winchester tells these stories as if he were there, and as if they disgust him. Again, I applauded the personal nature of this book, as he inserted his views and feelings whenever he could. Oceanic war tactics, he then explains, evolved to quash both the pirates and the slave traders, but of course these tactics could then be used against anybody, any enemy nation. Winchester discusses the switch from sea battles within sight of land to battles in the deep of the sea, a very different sort of battle that changed the world utterly. Sea conflict could now take place anywhere in the ocean, and became progressively more ferocious. Eventually, over the centuries, sailing ships were replaced by castles of steel and iron, and ocean warfare became as bloody and shocking and inhuman (and un-romantic) as it ever had been on land. He talks of submarine warfare in the two World Wars, the sinking of the Lusitania, the debate (which seems hopelessly quaint today) over the "rules" of ocean warfare (like a gentleman's agreement). He discusses the Battle of the Atlantic, the 6-year ocean battle between the Allied submarines and ships, and the Nazi U-Boats, about which Winchester says, "More sailors died in the ocean during those 6 years than in all the ocean conflicts since the Romans sent out their invading expeditions 2000 years ago." A bracing thought. The truth is, these chapters about pirates, slaves, soldiers, and warfare were, by quite a margin, the most involving of the book. Perhaps this says more about me than it does about the book. Or perhaps not.

Winchester then moves onto politics, and here is where it becomes very clear that a lot of the connections he makes between history and the Atlantic ocean are tenuous, arbitrary or superficial. He argues that parliamentary democracy is "an Atlantic creation," because it was created in nations that touch the Atlantic. My reaction was to ask, "So?" This began to feel like a fun game to pass the time, like pointing out white Volkswagen Beetles on a long road trip. "What else can we credit the Atlantic for?" the book seems to ask. (At one point, Winchester suggests a link between the Atlantic and the formation of the State of Israel - don't ask.)

And then came the dry stuff again. The structure Winchester chose for his book obligated him, I suppose, to go from pirates and slave traders to pages and pages of the technical methods, approaches, and tools used by the Basques to capture codfish. Sigh.

The next chapter deals with our pollution of the ocean, which is clearly something that stirs Winchester's blood (as it should ours), along with the horrible ramifications of overfishing. One of the more powerful images in the book, and also more disturbing, is of the fish factory boats trawling along the bottom of the

ocean, smoothly scooping the cod (and their eggs) off the bottom by the thousands of tons. There is something about the mechanical efficiency, the bloodless determination, of that act that just seems so...unfair. To the fish. Winchester captures that. The discussion around the decimation of the cod fishing industry in Newfoundland is enthralling, and in fact the whole section on fish depletion in the Atlantic is probably the most passionate section of the book. It may be where Winchester's heart truly lies. The final chapter continues the discussion of ocean sustainability by bringing in the topic of climate change, and the rising of the ocean levels. He discusses the measures being taken by New York, London, and the Netherlands, lest the ocean levels begin to threaten their existence. (I love his solution to the recent spat of fatal hurricanes hitting coastal communities around the planet - "stop living in villages by the ocean!") The entire last two chapters, about pollution, overfishing, oil spills, and climate change, are powerfully written, emotionally-laden, and important. I appreciated them very much.

His epilogue is about the likely future of the Atlantic ocean, and describes the continents moving about the Earth and colliding with one another in various possible configurations like bumper cars. Eventually, he intones dramatically, the Atlantic ocean will cease to be. It had a birth, it had a life, and in about 190 million years, it will have a death. A large part of the weakness of this book, I think, can be ascertained by this epilogue. He speaks of its birth and lifespan and death as if we should be sentimental about it, about the future demise of the Atlantic ocean. We have been taking it for granted, he has argued, by polluting it, by overfishing it, by killing its life. And he is right that those are unfortunate things. But that is damage being done to the whole of planet Earth, not just to the Atlantic specifically. The problem is, I just didn't care about the Atlantic specifically. I don't think you will either. Despite Winchester's best efforts throughout the book, I fail to see the Atlantic as a single, bounded entity, with an essential identity and a set of characteristics and specific, localized history, a thing we should cherish and, when it's gone, mourn. Things happen around it, things happen in it, things happen to it, but if the only thing all these events have in common is a connection with the Atlantic ocean, then they have nothing in common. It's just a bunch of water! Am I a philistine? Maybe. But I don't think so. Even "the Atlantic" is an arbitrary, man-made invention, a part of the world ocean that we decided, for our own trivial convenience, to give a separate name to. I remain unconvinced that it has its own separate identity, a continuity of selfhood, that we should examine as its own precious thing. That was clearly Winchester's purpose, and on that score, the book is a failure.

So why read it? Well, as I hope to have made clear, there is a lot of interesting stuff here. The book, in fact, is not a failure, because it does other things, at times very well. Some chapters will grab you more than others, and the whole enterprise fails to achieve the goal it reaches for so strenuously, but Winchester has a charming, intimate prose style, a way with an anecdote, and a refreshingly moral approach to history and geography, and he is worth spending a few hours with, at the very least. At worst, you might learn something.

Rabbit {Paint me like one of your 19th century gothic heroines!} says

I am noticing a pattern with his books- I am learning a lot, but when it gets dry occasionally, it really draaaaaaags on.

Chris says

I never managed to get into this book. I think the scope was too broad and the smaller sub-topics were too brief and shallow to make for an interesting read. There is no cohesion to the book and Winchester bounces around from topic to topic, interspersing them with uninteresting personal stories tangentially related to the

Atlantic. Maybe if Winchester had narrowed down his list of things to cover, and get into more depth about fewer things, it would have been more informative and entertaining.

Kevan says

This is a biography of the Atlantic ocean. It tells of the story of every major event that has ever taken place on the sea. We get to learn about the early days of exploration by ship, of development of the the slave trade, of the sinking of the Titanic, of naval warfare, of maritime trade, of the laying of the first transatlantic cable, the rise and fall of the Grand Banks fishery, the explosion at Halifax, the first days of cross-ocean flight, and dozens more amazing stories and periods of time. I would often find myself trying to memorize the many mini-stories in these pages so I could retell them later ("Do you know Chaim Weizmann, who came up with the chesnuts solution for creating acetate and ended up introducing Britain to Zionism??") This book was amazing -- I would say, though, it's about as inviting as a bodyguard. I almost gave up on this book at the 1/4 mark, its prose is so thick and daunting. But if you end up being let past the gate, the rest of the book is incredibly rewarding, brilliant, enchanting.

Deborah Ideiosepius says

This was a very enjoyable book and I am very glad that I took Will's recommendation and bought it sight unseen. I am pretty sure I will both re-read it and use it as a reference in future.

The book is kind of a biography of the Atlantic Ocean as seen by mankind. There is a brief introduction to its formation and information about its habits, tides, winds and other quirks are scattered throughout the book. The narrative is easy, familiar and personalised, I do not recall ever having read anything by this author before but his style is very readable and the book is peppered with personal experiences and recollections of his lifelong, ongoing relationship with the Atlantic Ocean.

The Atlantic is not a fast read at all it has taken me a couple of months to get through it. This is not a bad thing, it is because it is very full of information so that I have to be in the right frame of mind to sit down and read it for any length of time. The other thing is that it keeps waving enticing sidetracks of information under the reader's nose; thus it was that I found myself googling early Atlantic oriented prose, narwhals and other misc after reading for a while.

Criticisms of this book, I always have some after all; The early human civilisation and expansion to the West are well covered. However after America is firmly settled it turns into less of an 'Atlantic Ocean' book and more of an "American Atlantic' book. You get this with American authors, they get America-centric, one just grimaces and bears it but I do feel that a couple of chapters wandered off into American internal affairs too much. The other thing I didn't like was how very Atlantic-centric, it was. Perhaps not surprising given the title of the book. I am however a Pacific Ocean 'gal and I can't get on board the notion that the Atlantic is the only 'real' Ocean.

For example "... the Atlantic Ocean will still be the centre of the human word." [pgs 20-21], no dude, for people living on it, yes, however not all, or even most, people do live on the Atlantic. And another "...the sea -level problem is first and foremost an Atlantic problem..." [pg 411] What now? No, really, just... no!

Again, Americans, we just grin and bear them.

These small problems are redeemed in the last couple of chapters where ecological issues are presented, and the epilogue describing the geological future of the Atlantic is a graceful and poetic ending to a book I put down with the sense of a book well read.

Mel says

This was a very engaging read. I highly recommend to anyone with an interest in nautical history and the Atlantic Ocean. I enjoyed it immensely.

Jill Hutchinson says

This will be short and not too sweet. I have enjoyed some of Winchester's books and others have left me cold. This one left me tepid. He attempts to cover every aspect of the Atlantic Ocean....a biography of the lifeline between the Americas and Europe/Africa and there is just too damn much to tell. His description of the geological beginnings and fantastic maps of the forming of that great body of water are quite fascinating but then things start to go downhill. He adds a surfeit of personal stories/experiences that interrupt the narrative and had me skipping pages. Granted, there are some very interesting sections but there doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason as to how the author arranges his information even though he uses the Seven Stages of Man from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. It just doesn't quite jell.

Michael says

This "biography" of the Atlantic strives with impossible ambition to paint a picture of the role of the Atlantic Ocean over all of human history using Shakespeare's scheme of the Seven Ages of Man. A bit of a poetic stretch but ultimately a practical way of framing all the scientific and cultural perspectives he works to include. This is no dry linear account, but a meandering and often lyrical narrative with lots of idiosyncratic digressions energized from personal experiences from Winchester's own diverse travels and adventures. I enjoyed the experience of him reading this in audiobook format, which was rendered in a confident and energetic diction similar to the BBC standard of David Attenborough.

After a brief tour of 130 million years of geological and biological evolution, the author brings humans on the Atlantic stage with the peoples of Mediterranean civilizations mythologizing the apparently endless sea and then learning to venture beyond the Pillars of Hercules. First the Phoenicians, then the Vikings, and later the Western Europeans and their conquering and colonizing forces. The Vikings and Danes first landed and lived in America, but this knowledge was not widely disseminated. It took a decade of crossings after Columbus for the concept to sink in that the Atlantic was a finite but distinct ocean and the New World a separate continent from Asia.

As the forbidding barrier of the Atlantic was transformed into a doorway, we get the successive ages of man through exploration then competition in exploitation, ending with the prospect of exhausting its resources and destructive impacts on its ecology. Though much of this history may be known to many prospective readers, you may be charmed like me by the way he sweeps through all the transitions with interludes of fascinating detail and highlights from personal experiences. The progressive development of transportation capacity from sail to steam to air travel is a big sweep of his story. Interludes on the first scheduled mail,

passenger, and shipping services were of special interest due to being unknown to me. The evolution of naval warfare, history of airlight, and changing conceptions of the sea through literature and art were too compressed to add much to what I knew (other readers may appreciate the synthesis). The history of charting of the ocean bottom and challenges of laying the first transatlantic telegraph cables was new and interesting to me.

Due to my having lived on the Atlantic shore of New England for 35 years, all his descriptions of rocky coasts, storms and fog, and the dangerous chill waters he presents from various sites in the North Atlantic were not so compelling to me. Perhaps not for others. I actually worked out of small boats in eastern Maine for a couple of years with a failing Nori seaweed aquaculture operation, which killed much of any sense of romance about the Atlantic. Winchester's visits to various ports and island sites of more southern, warmer Atlantic regions helped revive such feelings and unfulfilled desires for travel and adventure such as one gets from travel memoirs. Digressions in Tierra del Fuego, Capetown, the Falklands, St. Helena, and Tristan da Cunha were pleasant forays for me.

The boom and bust in the evolution of whaling and fishing was well done in such a compressed format, especially the story of the cod fishery of the Grand Banks (though not new for me). Unfortunately, he has only one sentence on aquaculture, which was a big deal from the 90's where I live. That it takes 10 pounds of herring to raise one pound of salmon is a fact that disillusioned me after initial enthusiasm. In the end phases of the book pollution and global warming represent a big theme for his Seven Ages scheme, but he hardly goes beyond the most basic science. For example, he doesn't even touch on the carbon cycle or the worldwide decline of coral (in recent years linked to acidification of ocean water). He does usefully discuss how the tonnage of carbon emissions from all surface shipping is close to that of the half million of so jet flights and how energy efficiencies for these industries are now being worked on.

In sum, the broad synthesis of this book is admirable in its ambition, inevitably short on substance in many areas, but likely to provide fascinating details and perspective in other areas for most readers.

Daniel says

It isn't a bad book but it too quickly skips over the subjects I was interest in goes considerably faster then I would like to the modern era. I believe my problem with this book as it needed to be twice as large or half the scope and finally its preachy global warming message in the last part was a bit annoying, I understand why it was there but a history book should be about history, your results may vary.

Now that all the bad parts out of the way the book does give a very good overview of a very large period of time and stops briefly in all eras it also is a bit of a travelog and for that aspect it is enjoyable as well. An OK but not great book

J.R. says

"One cannot but hang one's head in shame and abject frustration. We pollute the sea, we plunder the sea, we disdain the sea, we dishonor the sea that appears like a mere expanse of hammered pewter as we fly over it in our air-polluting planes--forgetting or ignoring all the while that the sea is the source of all the life on earth, the wellspring of us all."

That environmental theme pops up quite a bit in the narrative of Simon Winchester's "Atlantic: Great Sea

Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic storms, and a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories."

Winchester set out to write a book explaining all there is to know about the Atlantic, which he considers to be our most important ocean. An overwhelming task and one might doubt it's even possible. He may not have succeeded in his initial goal but he comes as close as anyone in writing a biography of our ocean. He explains how the ocean was born, how people living on its shores reacted to it and how, most importantly, it has influenced the development of the civilized world. To do this, he tells tales of man's first attempts to go out on the water, pirates, naval battles, the development of sea-going commerce and other topics. He also includes numerous anecdotes from his personal experience with the ocean. He fears for our future if we don't change and start treating our environment like a home and not a garbage pit.

I'm not opposed to space exploration. It has resulted in many benefits for mankind. Still, I wish just a portion of the money and the interest could be directed toward oceanography. This is the planet on which we live. I have no desire to go live on a barren rock where there's no other forms of life.

Margaret says

Oh, dear, Simon Winchester, I think you have to stop being my literary boyfriend now. Someone get this man an editor, quickly. I've never skipped over so many pages of a book before.

It's not that he hasn't dug up fascinating facts and interesting tidbits. It's just that it feels like he took all his notes on 3 x5 cards, then threw them in a pile on the floor and wrote the book like that. I'm reading an interesting description of St. Helena, and then there are poems? A passing mention of how the first people to lay undersea cables were woefully unprepared for the peaks and valleys of the ocean floor and then, somehow, we're talking about Benjamin Franklin. The ocean as a lover? Oy.

Michael Feaux says

As a fan of historical nautical books like *Seawolves* and *Barrow's Boys*, and of Golding's *Ends of the Earth* series, I started this book figuratively rubbing my hands in anticipation of some great sea stories and novel science facts to quote to people down the pub. But after about 70 pages I couldn't stand it anymore.

One reason was Winchester's explanation of the thematic thread of the book, a story arc following the idea of Shakespeare's seven ages of man. That it needed explanation just pointed out how weak the idea was. The Atlantic will apparently cease to be an ocean in several million years, but that doesn't mean that a once proud body of water will senesce and die, leaving people mourning its loss. Perhaps that could be appropriate for the Aral Sea, which has been shrunk by human activity within a period of human memory, but we are talking about geological time with the Atlantic. The seven ages concept is just a poor effort to turn the subject into some kind of persona and it doesn't fit.

The second reason is that there is some really sloppy writing going on. Winchester's description of prehistoric man walking down to the sea is what Berger would have called "Mystification". Winchester could have speculated about the event at a remove, but he has to take us walking alongside our neanderthal chum in a way that's just silly. Likewise we get a description of a series of "Unbearably huge" volcanic explosions several million years ago, begging the question of who was around at the time to find them so hard to bear. Then- possibly the clincher for me- is the sentence where some tectonic plates move "infinitely faster" than they had several thousand years ago. If a sixth-former had put that into an essay, I'd hope that

their teacher would have told them to take it out.

Winchester starts the book well telling about the sea that inspired him so much as a young man, and I was really willing to go on the voyage with him (so to speak, ahem) through the book, but I predicted that if he was going to mangle up scientific research and facts with such carelessly flowery writing, then I wouldn't be able to enjoy my trip.
