

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 34: The World of Patrick O'Brian with Ian Bradley and Mike Shank

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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Thank you so, so much for your patience during the latest *Love What You Love* hiatus. I hope you really enjoyed delving into the back catalog while we've been gone. I'm doing a lot better now, and really ready to bring you some more incredible guests.

Speaking of which, let's meet this week's guests. If you've seen the incredible movie *Master and Commander* with Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany, you might know that they're based on the books of Patrick O'Brian. Ian Bradley and Mike Shank, fans of the book series for many years, were so enamored of the world they started the popular podcast *The Lubber's Hole*, all about the world of Patrick O'Brian's richly realized Aubrey-Maturin series.

In this episode, we talk about their opinions on the movie, life-changing book suggestions, Irishmen who may not be Irishmen, spending lockdown in your garden shed, the best book of the 20 to start with, and so much more. So find out why Ian and Mike love the world of Patrick O'Brian, and why you might learn to love it too.

Julie: Hello, Ian and Mike! Thank you so much for joining me today!

Ian: Thank you for having us. It's great to be here.

Mike: Absolutely!

Julie: Yeah, I'm so excited to talk to you guys because you have a podcast... And I'm going to have you explain the name of the podcast a little bit later. But you have a podcast that is all about the works of Patrick O'Brian and, you know, naval fiction, and the world around Patrick O'Brian. Maybe to start, for folks who don't know who he is or what this genre of literature is, can you guys talk about who Patrick O'Brian is? I know that he's got almost... There's 20.5 books. So maybe you could talk about Patrick O'Brian and his world.

Ian: Well, let me tell you about O'Brian and Mike will probably have a great take on what he means to readers, because I think one of the things we've learned as we've done the show is, you know, just what range of loyalty, and interest, and passion the author generates in people.

So, Patrick O'Brian was active, I guess, as a novelist between the 1940s, and I think he passed away in the year 2000. He became famous for the naval fiction novels that he wrote about these two characters, Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, so the books are often referred to as the Aubrey-Maturin novels. He wrote other novels as well, and a biography, and a bunch of other things, but these are the works that he's really famous for.

He was, by his own claim, Irish, but actually English. He spent most of his working life living in the south of France. He was a strange guy. We can talk more about him as a character if you'd like. But having this life of really deep scholarship, and erudition, and

thoughtfulness, he came out with these novels; the first one at the very end of the 1960s, and the last one in the final year or two of his life in the late '90s.

And they actually, surprisingly, found audiences all around the world, especially in North America, but obviously, him being British, with British readers as well. Widely translated and widely followed, I think, in several different waves of O'Brian mania, if you like, in the years since the novels first came out.

Julie: Ian told us about O'Brian and his background, but why are readers so passionate about Patrick O'Brian's works?

Mike: For me, it's because there's just so much to like. It's kind of like the Marine general who said, "I have bad news, we're surrounded. The good news is you can shoot in any direction." This is a novel that you've got this fighting sea captain, Jack Aubrey, who is brilliant at sea, and just an absolute lubber on land. He's just somebody that his life goes all to pieces on land. You've got Stephen Maturin, who is this small, shy guy who is a naturalist, a doctor of natural philosophy, and he's also a naval surgeon, he's also an intelligence officer, and secret agent, if you will. And these guys have this friendship, this incredible... I don't know if bromance is the right word. I know it's certainly not... It would never have crossed Patrick O'Brian's lips, but this, as you say, 20.5 books of this relationship.

But unlike, I think, many folks would think of historical fiction, naval history, there's a lot of time on land here. Some of the female characters in these books are some of the most complex, and beautiful, and wonderful, I think, in literature. And you almost can't even imagine how much O'Brian dives into the natural world, the naval world, the world of that time. And he does it in a way that, for me, it's certainly, absolutely spot-on authentic for that time in the 1800s. And it also has a bit of a 1960s, 1970s sensibility in terms of looking at the world, which doesn't break through to be an anachronism, but breaks through to say, "Wow. What a phenomenal exposition of the human condition." We learn all about ourselves and the world in O'Brian's novels.

Julie: I have to admit something here, and you can probably guess because I started listening to your podcast, that I'm a big Patrick O'Brian fan too.

Mike: Oh good! [laughs]

Julie: Yeah. And I've always said that his characterizations are, like, crystalline. I can't think of a more perfect set of characterizations than for Aubrey and Maturin. And I also think that he, like, had a TARDIS, because the feel of authenticity for the era is just... It's stunning. Have you guys looked into how he... I mean, it must have been an enormous amount of research, but barring having a TARDIS, how did he do that?

Ian: I think lots of people speculate and nobody knows for sure. I'm sure he was deeply into lots of written sources from the late 18th- early 19th-century. I'm sure he read Steel's Navy List, which was the official, kind of, journal of the Royal Navy at the time. We can tell that he's gone into archives because there are dispatches and letters from fictionalized versions of real battles where he, perfectly authentically and respectfully, lifts the real text of what one captain wrote to another. He must have read Jane Austen and almost been able to recite Jane Austen verbatim.

One of the games we sometimes play when we find a really great word in the books... My favorite one is 'prating', a word that means 'talking ad nauseam'. There's a tool

called Google Ngram that lets you look at the historical usage of words. And the really killer Patrick O'Brian words are words that have peak usage in that 1810-1820 era.

So, how he's done it, he's got this ear for vocabulary. It's fascinating and it's rich. It's actually really hard to mimic. It's very easy to, kind of, try and speak Patrick O'Brianese, but you end up sounding like a pantomime pirate. He's got this ear for it and it's just great.

Julie: I came to the books after seeing the movie. How did you guys come to the books? Were you reading them as young people? Did you come to them right after the movie? What is the genesis of your start with Patrick O'Brian?

Ian: Well, two of us differently, and lots of people have their ways into the books in a similar way. I got in there in my 20s, I guess, having read the *Hornblower* books in my teens, the C. S. Forester books, which are great, but they're a league or two below O'Brian in terms of the richness and the characterization. And I cast around for other books and didn't really like some of the other authors that I found. And one day by accident, I think it must've been in an airport, I picked up *Master and Commander* and got hooked. And then ended up reading, and re-reading, and then one day whilst on a business trip with a colleague I happened to mention that I really like these books. And that gets you into the second half of the story.

Mike: Right. So, this young English guy in his 20s, years later, would mention them to this old fogie from the US in his 50s. So, I started and I was *slayed*. I just fell in love with these books, and I knew nothing... I guess, this is another thing I really love about them: I know nothing about nautical terms. I'm not much of a history buff, per se. I admire it, but I can't remember it.

And I found that they were phenomenal books without regard to... you didn't have to know what all the rigging was. You could, and it's like so much of O'Brian, you could. So, I started reading them. Right as I got started I had a pretty important cancer diagnosis, and quite honestly, at the time, thought that I was in a race to find out whether I could finish the series or not.

Julie: Oh my gosh.

Mike: So, they were inextricably tied to this incredible time in my life when my particular friend Ian Bradley was, you know, this great, supportive guy who had introduced me, by the way, also to *The West Wing*. So, the American guy has to learn about *The West Wing* from Ian Bradley.

Julie: [laughs]

Mike: And I ran through them. Life has, obviously, turned out differently than what everybody first thought, and I've loved them ever since. And just to give your listeners... I'm a huge *Harry Potter* fan.

Julie: Nice. Yeah, I was too.

Ian: I think it's a really good point that they appeal to readers who have also liked fantasy because he's such a great world builder. So, people who've read Potter, or who've read sci-fi, Asimov, or Neil Gaiman, or those kinds of authors, I think there's a strong strand of that. In fact, lots of the fanfiction that gets written by fans who've picked up the fan fiction thing in Patrick O'Brian have extended them into fantasy. There's a fanfic set on frigates crossing the universe, in space.

Julie: Oh really? I've got to find that.

Ian: Right! And I think that's very telling.

Mike: Yeah, there are some great reviews written by fabulous sci-fi writers who go, "Oh my gosh. O'Brian is as good as any of us because he makes his world this really, fully-realized world-building that all of us aspire to but many of us can't get." And because of that... There's some people that get caught up on, "I have to look at this map of the rigging." Well, none of us know how a phaser works, or how a photon engine works, but that doesn't get in the way of the story. O'Brian's the same way.

The other piece, like you were talking about, is crystalline characterization. For me, it's not just the main characters. It's every character. You have these short-order, secondary characters, you have characters like Dil in the *HMS Surprise* that will never leave you for the rest of your life. And they're just amazing, even if they might be one chapter or a few chapters in this 21-book canon.

Ian: I think that's one of the reasons why people pick the books up and re-read. I guess I must've re-read about five or six times by now. I think you pick them up to re-read because you want to spend time in the company of people. And I guess, you can turn that into the reason why we got our podcast going, that I was thinking, "Lockdown. It's time for a re-read. I want to be in the company of this great cast of characters," and I also wanted to be in the company of my friend Mike. And I thought, "This is an opportunity here."

Julie: So the genesis was, Ian was doing a re-read, wanted to connect with Mike, and kind of bored in lockdown, maybe?

Ian: Yeah, pretty much.

Julie: So, explain... Well, two things. One, explain the name of your podcast, because not everybody's going to get it. [laughs]

Mike: Too true!

Julie: And then maybe talk about how your podcast is constructed.

Mike: I'll talk about the name as most people probably hear it, and then you'll tell us what it actually is. So, I happened to know what it was because of the O'Brian books, but we were quite worried that this name, *The Lubber's Hole*, oh my gosh... O'Brian also has a little potty humor going on, and we were very afraid that anything on the internet that sounds like this could be misconstrued and maybe we shouldn't name it this. But then we thought...

Ian: We rather hoped it would be misconstrued.

Mike: [laughs] Exactly! Just in O'Brian's style. It's like, "Look, this goes many ways, and here's one of them." And it really is this... Well, I'll let you talk about what the 'Lubber's Hole' itself is because you do a much better job explaining anything nautical than I could ever hope to.

Ian: So, when you're climbing the rigging on a square-rigged sailing ship, the first step that you get to is called the top. So, the mainmast has a main top, and the foremast has a foretop. And the top is kind of a platform where some of the higher-up sails are stored and where people go to keep a lookout, and where people sometimes fight from. You might send sharpshooters into the tops in action, so this can be a fairly big platform.

And I don't know if you can visualize a platform on top of a spindly stick, which is a mast. It's supported underneath by ropes that, kind of, lean outwards. They're called the futtock shrouds. And if you're a real hardcore, badass seaman, you climb into the top by going, kind of, backward, hanging on with your fingernails, over these things called the futtock shrouds.

So, if you don't want to do that, you don't have to. You can go through the hole cut in the middle of the top, which you'd climb up more centrally, naturally, how a normal human being would probably climb onto a platform. But because this hole, this passageway into the top, is seen as the way that you go if you're not a badass seaman, it's a hole for lubbers. It's the Lubber's Hole.

Julie: Is the intent of the podcast to share these books with people new to Patrick O'Brian, hence 'lubbers'? Or is it just, like, for hardcore Patrick O'Brian fans? How do you look at it?

Ian: We were pretty open. We had no idea whether we were going to get past two weeks on it, really. There was a bit of inspiration, there were a couple of podcasts I really admired. One, an actual pro, genuine, talent-based podcast called *The West Wing Weekly*, which was a serial podcast reviewing *The West Wing* episode-by-episode. And as you heard, Mike and I are both *West Wing* fans.

And actually, a friend of our family - Hello Rob if you're listening to this - co-hosts a podcast about a British comedy TV show called *Peep Show*. So, if you like *Peep Show* and you like British comedy, check out *Podcast Secrets of the Pharaohs*. And that was also a, sort of, serial chat through these different works. And I thought, "Well, you could do that, and actually with 20 books to run up, there's plenty of material in O'Brian." And I don't think we had a fixed idea.

We suspected that most of the audience might be like us, that is to say, die-hards doing a re-read. But we've got quite a few people listening along who are listening for the first time, so we have to be careful about spoilers. And also some people who are not reading, but have read the books, and just like to listen to the show as a way of dipping into, you know, a conversation about that.

The 'how' is that Mike and I... mostly Mike, I have to say to his credit, make a series of notes before we sit down. So, we identify a chunk of the text that we're going to talk through, and we use the synopsis as a backbone, and then we both write ideas for digressions, and links, and bits to dive into, of which there are many, many in these books.

And then once a week, we sit down and record, and then we do a bit of editing. Once in a while, we have a guest, and we edit the guest contribution in there as well. So, it's pretty amateur, homemade. We're trying to be less amateur and homemade. These days, we occasionally get an actual editor who knows how to actually edit.

Mike: And you've got Ian, who has many circumnavigations, and you've got Mike who's just a fanboy and an evangelist. Because, you know, I worry every night that somebody's going to bed never having read Patrick O'Brian and I want them to find this.

Julie: [laughs] Why? Tell me why.

Mike: Well, I just think... God, it just enriches your life so. Between the range of humor, which is, you know, from this portly captain in a bear suit, to all the potty mouth stuff we talked about, to... And I think we've got the two poles on the show here, as I say. Ian, who just

reeks of erudition; Mike, who had to look up to find out what that is and then say, "Yeah, yeah. That's it. It's got that," because he's really smart about a lot of different things. In this thing, there's like... Every page here has got these Easter eggs, these rabbit holes. Every little phrase that you can follow as far as you want.

So, when we first got started, Ian said... I mentioned that I was re-reading and Ian said, "I'm re-reading. We should find a podcast to listen to, but there isn't one." And I said, "That's crazy! There's got to be one!" I love googling stuff, so I found one. It's in Portuguese. [laughs] So, that didn't work for us. So Ian says, "Let's do one!" And I said, "Great! Let's do it! What is a podcast, by the way, Ian?" [laughs] He says, "Here's a few you can listen to." I said, "Oh, they're on the internet, right?" So, we've just been making this up as we go along. We hope our listeners are kind and do the same with us.

Julie: What I'm particularly loving is the interviews you have with different folks to expand the world. So, reenactors, and musicians. Maybe talk about what makes you decide to reach out to a guest to add to the podcast. What's that thought process like?

Ian: Besides the fact that we know for darn sure that we haven't got the talent between the two of us...

Mike: [laughs] Yeah, that would be the underlying motivation.

Julie: [laughs]

Ian: I think it was pretty clear, at least in my mind, that it would be a big help. Not only in relieving us from producing minutes of actual audio that actually would sound okay strung together, to rely on somebody else for that. But also that we didn't want to set ourselves up as being *the* experts. I mean, Mike teases me graciously about the fact that I get on my high horse about music from time to time. But the content is so rich that if you set yourself up to be authoritative, and to really dig into every aspect, and tell listeners the once-and-for-all truth about every single, little historical point, it would be A) impossible, and B) very dull.

So, it's nicer for us to take the persona of being exactly what we are, which is fans bumbling along and chatting about it, and ask other people to do the heavy lifting of knowing about stuff. And you know, with the internet, with the events of 2020, it turns out to be quite possible to reach out to people of all sorts and conditions who are surprisingly generous with their time, who are absolute subject-matter experts in some of the stuff that we've wanted to talk about. That's been a great joy, just finding and meeting these people, getting to hear their stories, and having their voice in the conversation that we're having along with the listeners.

Mike: One of our best interviews, which you'll never hear, I'm afraid, is we actually spoke... Ian tracked down the woman who managed... We couldn't find Patrick Tull because he's passed away. We're still working on our séance contacts, but so far, no good. But Ian found the woman who had managed his recordings. We had a great pre-chat with her, heard these phenomenal stories about Patrick Tull recording these books for Recorded Books, Inc. And then we couldn't find her again. Either she got lost in the pandemic... And we thought, "Oh my god. I wish we had recorded that day."

It's not only all these things that are related to the world, but the people that are related to the world that are so wonderful. And as you know, there are just so many people from all across the world, of all different walks of life who love this series, and know so much, that enriches it.

Julie: Do you prefer... Both of you. Do you prefer reading the books or listening to the books?

Mike: Well, you know, I'm lazy, and I just have this, you know, childish love of different accents, so I love listening. On the other hand, what I've found is that to really appreciate it, I have to read it, so I do both. And sometimes I listen along while I'm reading. You can hear Patrick Tull say, you know, "My bankers are Hoare's," and you go, "Gosh, that's a little harsh! [laughs] And then you realize, Hoare's is, like, the largest private banking institution at the time. "Oh, I get it now!" But I listened to it 20 times before I ever realized that because I had to read it to find out.

Ian: Yeah, and I'm a reader. The book we're on right now, *Treason's Harbour*, is my one and only experience with audiobooks, and I really loved that one. For me, it evokes a particular time in my life when I had a long, regular commute in the car to do, and that was a moment when I got deeply into audiobooks. I've never been particularly an audiobook person. I love my podcasts; I love audio and music. I have my tunes with me wherever I go.

Actually having a Kindle, or rather, having a Kindle app on an iPad really changed things for me because I always have these books and I can always dip into them. And now that we're producing the show, I can hop in and out of Kindle and update notes and stuff. So, I've got my paper copies all in a row on the shelf and I've got them on Kindle as well. So, I'm a reader, and I'm sure that means I'm making mistakes on pronunciation and I'm making mistakes of accent and color that Patrick Tull could probably bring to life.

Julie: For each of you, what is your favorite... I mean, it's like choosing between children, but what is your favorite of the Aubrey-Maturin books?

Mike: You know, Julie, my answer to this has always been and remains, "Whichever one I'm reading right at the moment." Because I do this... And I think we finally quit doing it on the podcast, going, "You know, I always thought this was my favorite, but now *this* is my favorite." And I'm the worst for that. I just absolutely get so sucked into what we're reading. I mean, *HMS Surprise* will always have a special place in my heart. But we're reading *Treason's Harbour* now, which I've always said, "This is my favorite." And I'm of that age now where it's great because every time I read them I read them again for the first time because my memory is so poor, so...

And we're in this scene this week where Maturin is talking to Mrs. Fielding, this recruited French agent, about dogs and about the fact that they have this incredible, mild, steady attachment to their friends in the best sort of dogs, and how rare that is in people. And I went, "Gosh, how many times have I read this before," but now I'm going, "This is Patrick O'Brian telling me his secret sauce." The steady attachment of Jack, and Stephen, and their friends. He says, "When you have this, you can look back on your life and look forward in your life and there's nothing more you could want for."

And I thought, "This is art imitating life. This is me getting to do a podcast with Ian about the books that we love. This is fabulous." So it's like, now, all of a sudden, *this* is my absolute favorite, until we read the next one.

Julie: Right! Is it the same for you, Ian?

Ian: I'll hedge in a similar way to Mike. If people ask me, "Which one should I start with if not the first..." And there are some reasons why some people don't get along with the first

book as well as they get along with the others. "... *HMS Surprise* is absolutely the one to start with." *Treason's Harbor* is right up there, just partly because of my recollection of really enjoying it my first time experiencing it. There are some moments as well... There's a particular moment in *HMS Surprise* that Mike and I both know very well. There's a moment coming up in *Reverse of the Medal* after Jack's trial that absolutely kills me every time. So, I've got a couple of really favorite, favorite vignettes, but I think the short answer: it's a tossup between *HMS Surprise*, *Treason's Harbour*, and whichever one I'm reading at the moment.

Julie: Right. [laughs] So, why not start with the first book?

Ian: Good question. We actually... One of our first interviews when we were, kind of, scraping around for interviews, we reached out to a mutual friend, an old colleague of ours. A guy called Jeremy, whose qualification is that he's the smartest and best-read person that either of us knows. We said, "Jeremy, you've never read these but you've read every other world of literature in the human universe. Will you read this and tell us what you think?" And he read *Master and Commander*...

Julie: That's the first one.

Mike: Right. First book.

Ian: And confusingly, the title was given to the movie, but the movie has relatively little of the plot content of the actual *Master and Commander* in it. The movie, if you've loved it, is a synthesis of about two-thirds of one book, and about a tenth of *Master and Commander*, and then little snippets of lots of the other books as well.

I think the reason why *Master and Commander* doesn't quite cut it is that female characters are almost absent, and the ones that are present aren't treated very sympathetically, I don't think, from a gender politics point of view. He's trying a little bit hard to make points, his knowledge about seagoing, rigging, and terminology a little bit less lightly than he does in the later books. But I mean, it still didn't stop me. I read it in a gulp and thought, "This is great," and turned to the next one.

What do you think, Mike?

Mike: Yeah, I think you get... I think it's a great book, and I think anybody that loves the canon would never forgo Jack and Stephen meeting one another. It's such a fabulous moment. However, as Ian says, you can get really overwhelmed by the nautical terminology. You can sort of think, "Maybe this guy is, kind of... While it's a fabulous book, maybe this is going to be more the 'women have a certain defined role' and..."

It's *not* what the other books turn out to be. You go immediately to the second book, *Post Captain*, and the story continues right on, same characters, love that about it, but it's, like... You were looking through the keyhole into a world which you've now entered once you get to *Post Captain*.

And then *HMS Surprise*, he sort of says, "Okay..." For some people, *Post Captain* is very long. I wish it was twice as long, but for some people it's a little bit much. "Here's *HMS Surprise*, very neatly packaged. Everything I do well, all in one place." If you want to have a taste test, that's where you come.

Ian: I'll offer another possibility which just occurred to us a couple of weeks ago. One of the things that you notice as he's going through writing these 20 books, and as he gets more confident with really, slowly manipulating the characters and the story arcs, he

seems to run out of patience with the idea of there needing to be a novel's worth of story.

Mike: Yes!

Ian: So, what you expect is the key beats in the three-act structure: Introduction, setup, inciting event; struggle, denouement; payoff. Those things happen at odd places. So, we've just finished reading *The Ionian Mission*, which is great. It's a candidate for being right up there, and the last chapter of *Ionian Mission* has pretty much got all of the content of what you might expect a typical novelist to write about this story.

If you could read a few paragraphs of the first couple of chapters to get the idea of where the heroes are, and then read the last chapter of *Ionian Mission*... The last chapter's got everything O'Brian-esque that you would want in it. It's got its own little novel-like story structure. Its drama and all the action from the book is pretty much packed into the last chapter. So, if you want the super, super boiled-down version, I'd say read the blurb on the back of *Ionian Mission* and then read the last chapter. And if you like that, then the rest of the canon is for you.

Mike: You find out how good of a writer Patrick O'Brian is because you read the last chapter of *The Ionian Mission* and you say, "Gosh, that was great!" And then you scratch your head later and go, "But what actually happened on the Ionian mission? How did that turn out?" And that'll be an aside in a third-party conversation, you know, referenced back in a later chapter of the next book.

Julie: So, it's like just one, large novel across 20 books, basically.

Mike: It is, yeah. Absolutely is.

Julie: You mentioned the movie, Ian, and I want to get both of your opinions on the movie. As a movie, and then its fidelity to the original work.

Ian: Ooh. So, I don't... It's funny. Somebody asked us this on either Patreon or Twitter not long ago. And my response was, well, I think 95% of people who love the books also love the movie, and one or two reservations don't really have any great bearing on the situation. Peter Weir, and the screenwriters, and Gordon Laco, who's been a guest on the show, who was the production consultant, did an awesome job, I think, in making a Patrick O'Brian movie based on the two characters of Aubrey and Maturin.

So, it in no way has fidelity to the story of any one novel, but it has really deep fidelity, I think, to the spirit, to lots of the two characters. You don't get very much of Stephen's spying and intelligence side, but lots of the rest of it is there. And as a film version of the patina of realism that the O'Brian prose has. And the attention to detail is just beautiful, and it's beautifully shot, and the stories are told really wonderfully, and the characterization... Most of the casting is good.

Julie: Okay, when you say most, what's your quibble?

Ian: Oh, I can't remember his name. Is it Billy Boyd? The guy who plays Bonden, the coxswain?

Mike: Right.

Ian: He was in *Lord of the Rings*. He's a great actor, but I just think his physique and his physical presence, for me, isn't Bonden. But the rest of them are great. Along with jokes about sloths, it's probably *the* thing that people come back to in internet conversations about, "Who else would you have instead of...? Did you like Russell Crowe as Jack

Aubrey or not?" I thought he was great. And "Who would you have as the female characters if we could have the female characters come to life?"

Mike: Right. There are no female characters in the movie. Big loss.

Ian: Correct. There's one pretty lady in a parasol, and she has no lines. [laughs]

Mike: Right.

Ian: So, here's the thing. The one problem that I have with the film is that they haven't yet made all the other movies.

Julie: [laughs]

Mike: That's... We have good news and bad news. The good news is, there are new editions of the O'Brian novels coming out, and I think they will be marketed to a much broader audience than we have in the past. In the past, if you read the book jacket, you would not know that there were women in the novels, much less that there are phenomenal women in the novels. And now, I think maybe we'll have that change.

The bad news is, we haven't yet heard the announcement. Who's going to do this? Netflix? HBO? Amazon? Apple? Who is it out there that is going to do this full series? This is way better than *Game of Thrones* and I'm a huge George R. R. Martin fan.

Ian: Yeah. If anybody out there listening knows anybody who's at the very, very top of Sony Pictures - it's Sony who has the production rights as far as I know - then blackmail them, kidnap their kids, something. Get them to get these movies made.

Julie: So you've both mentioned a little bit, but what other kinds of things do you read? Do you have personalities where you, kind of like, dive deep into something? Or is, kind of, Patrick O'Brian the one thing that you've gone way deep into?

Mike: The thing that immediately came to my mind is how I lost my mind in sixth grade over Ian Fleming and the James Bond series, which doesn't say much for me whatsoever. To the point where my buddy Kevin and I would walk around the grade school halls and say, "How's with you, Old Bean?" [laughs] So, right. No, I don't get into these too much. Not ever. Not always. Right?

I still follow all sorts of stuff relative to Potter on Twitter, in addition to all my silly political stuff. And they just came out with the voice of Smeagol narrating *The Hobbit*, and I thought, "God! Can't wait to hear that! Give it to me!"

Ian: Was that Andy Serkis?

Mike: Yeah! Andy Serkis just came out on Recorded Books having read *The Hobbit*, and *The Hobbit* is not one that I've enjoyed listening to in the past, but this is one I cannot wait to wrap my ears around.

Julie: How about you, Ian? Is this your one obsession, or are you a serial obsessionist?

Ian: I'm not a serial obsessionist, not quite. There are some authors that I have ended up digging into. I read all the *Hornblower* books when I was in my teens, just the same as I got into thriller writers and read all the Alistair MacLeans when I was a kid. I guess the other author I'd say I've read almost everything of is Robert Harris because he's got a little bit in common with O'Brian. He's got that real eye for patina and detail in the ones about Ancient Rome. I think Robert Harris is great. And then I read lots of nonfiction,

and I read trashy thrillers. So, I'm not as... I think Mike is a proper reader and I think I'm a bit of a fake reader.

Mike: Yeah, this guy, you know, he has so much time for reading between his virtuoso cello performances, his photographing outer space objects... It's only because I know him I can say he's a *Re-nai-ssance* man, otherwise I would've said he's a *Ren-ai-ssance* man. He is just amazing.

I will say, one other series... I hesitate to put anybody in the O'Brian category, just because I think he's so singularly good. But, guilty pleasures, C.S. Harris's *Sebastian St. Cyr Mysteries*, I do love. We're back in the Regency period, and here's another person of noble birth who also, kind of... you get all sides and some secondary characters, and a nice little romance. I quite like that. I've just... by virtue of the podcast, we got introduced to Rachel McMillan, and so now I've got a whole treasure trove of things to go through. She's got some great books.

Julie: What has been the hardest part of putting together the podcast? Or what's the part you've just disliked the most?

Mike: For me, there's not a part I dislike. I think the hardest part has been... I think Ian and I did this for each other, just because we thought it would be fun. And we thought, you know, perhaps my mom would listen to it occasionally or something. But you know... She doesn't. [laughs] So, that would be it.

But I just... That desire... It's kind of humbling to know that, you know, a couple hundred people a day around the world are wasting an hour of their time listening to you and saying, "Gosh, I really want this to work for them. I want to give them what they want." So, I think that's part of it for me, just saying, "Are we too fast? Are we too slow? Is this deep? Do you want deeper? What else would you like to see? What do you not want to see?" That's the part I love. Otherwise, it would be all the technical stuff, but Ian does that, so that's simple for me.

Julie: And how about you, Ian?

Ian: I'd say there's nothing about it that I dislike, and maybe one of the reasons that I got enthusiastic about doing it is I thought, "Talking to Mike, chatting about books, noodling with audio stuff and interneter; those are all things that would take a few hours of a week when I should otherwise be doing proper work."

Mike: [laughs] Right. Exactly.

Ian: I don't think there's anything I dislike. There are things that are hard work. Sometimes we have to remember to keep on with the guests. Sometimes, you know, we have to push to get our notes together. Sometimes I have to push to get the editing done. But there's nothing about it that we dislike and I think that's the reason why we're 43 episodes in and our friendship is intact and our readers are still there.

Julie: Then what happens when you get to the end of the Patrick O'Brian books? Do you have thoughts for something else?

Ian: It's going to be a while. We've slowed the pace right down. We're doing one chapter per episode now, which means 10 episodes per book, and we're only eight books in, so there's another... Anyway, so the universe will have collapsed in on itself.

Mike: Right.

Julie: [laughs] Right. So, heat death of the universe comes first before the end of your podcast. Got it.

Ian: Yeah, I think so. Entropy's a bitch, isn't it? [laughs] We certainly don't have an exit strategy, do we, Mike?

Mike: Well, it's funny because we've learned so much going along, and I suspect we'll continue to learn so much more. We did *Master and Commander* in two episodes, and now I think both of us would go back and say, "Oh my gosh! We have got to do that again." And there's so much more that we're finding to dig into and so many more wonderful guests. So, I think that certainly opens up a world of possibilities. Now, whether the dear loves of our lives... They may have really good ideas about what we should do at the end of this podcast, which is to pay more attention to them.

Julie: Are there any misconceptions about Patrick O'Brian, or the series, or naval fiction in general that drive you crazy?

Ian: I think the most important pre-conception is that it's all about, you know, rigging, and cannons, and broadsides, and reefing topsails, and that's it's... You could have the preconception that it's going to be a slightly more up-itself version of the *Hornblower* books. And it's really not.

So, I think Mike said earlier on, that the really deep, and surprising, and the impassioned thing about this - if that's the right word... The thing that gets people impassioned about the books is just how deep the characters are and how important the non-naval, non-military action is to the story. So, I think that's probably the biggest misconception. I think Mike made the point before about the cover art. The Geoff Hunt paintings that are on most of the books - certainly the British editions - are beautiful. But I think the cover art gives you the impression that it's going to be all about Regency-era ropes and weapons. And it's so far from being that. That's probably the biggest misconception.

Mike: You bring up a great point, Ian. I'm going to be fascinated to see what the new cover art is, and I'm sure it will absolutely inflame the fanbase. They will go nuts because it probably won't look anything like that this time. And some people love that and are wed to it. And I mean, it's gorgeous. And I so do hope... Just reinforcing the same point, that more people will be drawn to it and realize... You know, I think I saw a colorful one of the new ones, and there's a reviewer's quote that this is "Jane Austen at Sea," and I thought, "Oh my gosh!" Some people will, hopefully, love that. I know some people will probably go, "What are you talking about?? Jane Austen at sea?!"

You know, O'Brian loves Jane Austen so much he has her brothers as characters in the novels. He has their ships... All precisely, you know, in O'Brian-esque detail, right down to where they were, when they were, perfectly timed in this thing.

Julie: Oh my goodness. You guys, you're going to have to work a little harder to convince me that O'Brian was not the Doctor.

Ian: It's pretty clear that he did a bit of regeneration like the Doctor.

Julie: Yes, exactly. He had a TARDIS. Yeah.

Ian: We probably shouldn't get into it, but it's been a really interesting reminder... I think we've come into this after the first two waves of O'Brian mania. One of the reasons that the first or second wave ran itself out is that a few people realized and discovered as

the various bits of biographical work went on that O'Brian had a complicated and not always very endearing life and he might not have been the easiest person to get along with. You know, the old adage, you should never meet your heroes. And we've tried to steer clear of that.

We talk a little bit about where the books came in his career and what it might've meant for him. We talk a lot about admiring the skill, and the scholarship, and the construction of the books. But I think we're at the point now where people are ready again to think about O'Brian books without thinking, "But he told lies about his adult life, and he was evasive about where he was really from." And that's all probably true, but I don't think any of it takes away from the quality of the writing and the quality of the response that we have as readers.

Mike: And probably the help that his wife gave him in all of it.

Julie: Oh, interesting!

Mike: Her influence, I think, makes all the difference. You see it pre and post, and it's like, "Yeah." Same thing, you go to some of the Dickens museums now and you get, kind of, the fuller story of what's behind some of this and what was going on, and I love that.

Ian: Just to go back to preconceptions. Maybe an important one is that this is written for British people by a British person. And by the way, he was a bit elusive about exactly where he was from. An Irishman who'd fled to Wales, who claimed to be an Irishman, but was actually born in England, fled to Wales, and then went to live in France.

As a British reader, I had assumed that most of the listeners to the podcast would be in Britain or what you might call the former colonies, but just how popular these books are in the US is amazing. And obviously, it's the escapism, and the quality of the writing, and the richness that brings people, and that matters not, then, where you are in the world.

And O'Brian was pretty savvy about that, now that you look back and see just how much of the books are actually set in the War of 1812, rather than explicitly, directly in the Napoleonic wars. In the real timeline, he skips from 1801 to about 1810, which is all the peak Napoleonic war era stuff. He kind of blasts past that and we get into the North American station, and we get into spying on the American government, and... Yeah. Interesting stuff.

Julie: What's something that you have learned about yourself, either from identifying with a character, or just reading the books in general? What's something you've learned about yourself from reading the Patrick O'Brian canon?

Mike: There's this scene in *HMS Surprise* where I just bite my tongue until it bleeds because I think, "Wait, there might be somebody listening to this and I cannot give them a spoiler!" This is, like, one of the biggest in the world. But, where Maturin has this great relationship with kids and animals all the time, and fascinating relationships with women as well. But it just is so endearing, and there's a statement made - and I won't give the context for it - where he says, "I am of her caste," saying, 'she and I are one', 'we are the same humanity', that basic thing.

And I think that feeling here, as I say, secondary characters have such a rich life here that there is that, kind of, common humanity in all of us, in our glory, in our own ways that I just love. And you know, this kind of crotchety old guy over here writing about historical naval fiction with cannons bursting, the insights into what it must have been

like to be a woman at that time, a woman at *this* time, what orders our relationships and interactions with each other, and what we count as important. I mean, I think it causes me to always go back and reflect on that in my own life.

Ian: I think the thing that... I guess, I learn things when I notice particular episodes that really resonate with me, get a really strong emotional response. And for me, I think the things that surprise me with how positively I respond to them are the moments when somebody gets a great groundswell of recognition or acknowledgment. It's very easy to think, as we are, and as I am, an independent person finding your way in the world, you've got to be resourceful, and you've got to do it for yourself.

Actually, the support of society and your colleagues around you, the moment in *Reverse of the Medal*... I won't give too much away, but there's a moment in *Reverse of the Medal* where Jack is made to realize just how loved and respected he is in the Navy, and that gets me every single time, which probably tells me something about where I should be paying attention in my life.

Mike: Well, you're saying that, Ian, and I'm bringing tears to my eyes here. So, yeah. I hear ya.

Julie: Yeah. The incredible power of literature, you guys. I love it. Thank you both so much for taking so much time to chat with me about this. I know the listeners are going to be excited so I'll make sure to point them to all your socials, etc. But thank you so much for being on the show with me.

Mike: Good. Point them at Patrick O'Brian! [laughs] Julie, thanks so much for having us. You're really kind. And we're so glad to hear that you're a big fan of the books. I thought you were going to go the other way and say, "I've got to admit, I've never actually read them," and I was going to say, "Oh good! Because we have to bring you in." Even better that you have.

Ian: It's been lots of fun talking about this. Thank you so much for having us along. It's been really great.

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And as always, thank you so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

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Ian's favorite nonprofit:

FareShare.org.uk

Mike's favorite nonprofits:

Americares.org

[American Humane Feed the Hungry Initiative](http://AmericanHumaneFeedtheHungryInitiative)

FeedingAmerica.org

My favorite nonprofits:

[Humane Society of Silicon Valley](http://HumaneSocietyofSiliconValley)

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