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Book Review: *In Search of The Woman Who Sailed the World* by Danielle Clode. Gay Lynch.

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***In Search of The Woman Who Sailed the World* by Danielle Clode (Picador, 2020)
Reviewed by Gay Lynch**

Edith Coleman was overlooked, likely downright cheated, Danielle Clode suggests in *The Wasp and the Orchid*, which was shortlisted for the 2019 Australian Biography Award. *In Search of the Woman Who Sailed the World*, the story of Jeanne Barret, is even better, sexier, tighter, utterly entrancing, and of obvious international significance; reading this book requires an atlas in easy reach, so that you can sweep in and out of the Loire Valley – Burgundy, Brittany, Nantes, Paris – Batavia, Montevideo, Mauritius, Rio de Janeiro and Tahiti. This is a narrative enlivened by active and often lyrical prose. Strong, hardworking and of peasant stock, Jeanne Barret, lover, mother, naturalist’s assistant, is respected by all, dresses like a man, carries a brace of pistols in her belt, and was the “first woman known to have circumnavigated the world” (89, 141, 189).

“I hate frayed ends,” Clode says, braiding nature, history, science, self and technology in a rags-to-riches story about a curious, methodical girl who just got on with life (93). The book’s quest to accrue and analyse enough elusive, deliberately and accidentally hidden detail from French records, to materialise Barret, is admirably realised and secured by evidence and logical deduction. Such work requires patience, a meticulous reading eye, and intelligent speculation. It must be driven by humble questions that allow nothing to be overlooked or overstated. Clode investigates journals, oral stories, published fiction and official reports, leaving no room for affirmation bias: “sometimes I worry that I rely too much on published records” (213).

I cannot tell you one way or the other what happened...I know what I think, but others will not agree. I can only show you what was said, and what was not and what was crossed out or erased. (217)

Biologist, historian, writer Clode, once again demonstrates the connectedness of

everything – animals, land, people, plants, sea, sky – at a time when, more than ever, we should be acutely aware of it. Exquisite nature writing brings us close to everyday natural beauty and dramas that we ignore at our peril:

On the day that Notre Dame burned down, the last female Yangtze turtle died with barely a murmur to note the extinction of yet another species. (58)

...in the quiet of the night...the distant echo of whale song, the crackling pops of pistol prawns, and the disconcerting sound of teeth grinding against the hull as if they might eventually chew their way into the ship itself. (179)

The book's vivid historical pictures of delicious food are entrancing – eels sizzling in butter (75), fresh oysters cooked on driftwood fires (215) – as is the lyrical poetry of place, the lust to collect, and famous French men (Louis Bougainville, Yves de Kerguelen-Trémarec) who might have been our forefathers had they been more interested. Clode highlights some French values, downplayed by English history, and rationalises others.

A Polynesian mariner leaps aboard the ship on which Barret is employed. Who can resist Ahutoru's magnetism and *joie de vivre*, his insatiable appetite for knowledge of his own shaping? Clode acknowledges him "invisible and unknowable" but shows us what she finds, skewering the "ironclad determinism of the European imagination" and expanding our notions about Pacific history:

...great maritime empire, whose navigational and shipbuilding achievements predated and exceeded those of the Vikings, the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch by centuries, if not millennia. (73, 189)

It seemed that no-one bothered to ask them what they knew or how they travelled. It was as if it was beyond their imagination that people could travel so far, across such vast oceans, in such small vessels. (73, 145)

An Australian sensibility often breaks through the narrative creating irony and humour:

They grinned...They hovered just beyond musket range, shouting and rattling their spears, flashing their bare arses in a universal gesture of contempt. (209)

Clode and Barret are not the irritating constructions of children you will find in many first novels and memoirs; these girls know how to keep out of the way, seem invisible, further their own projects born of curiosity, and they work (90). Only child Clode, born into an eccentric family, crawled along the deck in rough seas, saved her own life on a drifting boat, was muscular and rhythmic enough to work a winch handle, and autodidact enough to read and draw and analyse, while working as part of a crew. The profound effect of a few years on the sea changed the future lives – the brilliant and ordinary parts – for Barret and Clode.

More salacious and cliched stories are unravelled – slavery, rape and pillage, reproductive issues – knotted again using strong feminist, humanitarian and scientific principles, and retied to their historical period.

Never will I want to take my tender tummy aboard a sailing boat, or get into “*conchologie*”, but Clode’s curiosity and sense of wonder, her passion for timber boats and the natural world, nevertheless, enchanted me (84). Barret was successful on her own terms, but without Clode and her team of translators, colleagues, friends showing the same indefatigable spirit, she might have disappeared forever, notwithstanding *Baretia bonafidia*, *eumonia/astata*, plants named after her, into the tapestry of French provincial life (87-89, 255).

Works Cited

Clode, Danielle. *The Wasp and the Orchid*. Picador, 2018.

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