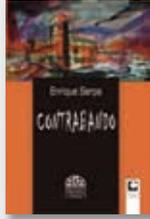


## East Books

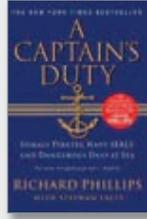
by Claudia Astarita

Anyone who lives at sea has to be prepared to accept its rules and share its secrets (good and bad). The sea has always inspired great adventures and often spawned dreams and desires that cannot hope to be fulfilled on dry land, yet it is also often associated with danger, uncertainty, the unknown, violence and crime. Only those who accept its vices and virtues can truly love the sea.



**CONTRABANDO**  
Enrique Serpa,  
La Habana,  
Cuba 1938

Danger gives meaning to life, which is why it must be lived audaciously, boldly and passionately. This is the idea proposed in Enrique Serpa's novel *Contrabando*. By thrusting us aboard the schooner *La Buena Ventura*, owned by the 'Admiral' and governed by the intrepid skipper Shark, Serpa gradually introduces us to the secrets of the sea: the powerful belief in superstition and the biting cynicism with which smugglers face danger, whatever shape it takes. Rightly hailed as Latin America's best novelist by Ernest Hemingway, Serpa's pages recreate the seedy atmospheres of the early years of the Cuban Republic, of a Havana teeming with fishermen, destitute children and ruthless fortune hunters at a time when alcohol, drugs and prostitution were, for many, the only way to make a living. The author skilfully uses the interior monolog to help characters express their thoughts and feelings, and spices his narrative with plenty of rough popular language to help make his reconstruction gripping and realistic, without ever letting the reader forget the untamed beauty of Cuba's surrounding sea.



**A CAPTAIN'S DUTY**  
Richard Phillips,  
Hyperion Books,  
2011, p. 304

Richard Phillips' compelling novel leaves little room for the imagination – since it's essentially a true story. It's his own story. That of a tough, straightforward and sometimes stubborn captain who never wavers in the face of danger or unexpected disaster, as he is perfectly aware that this is what is expected of a 'true' seaman. *A Captain's Duty* relives the sensations and emotions aboard the United States' merchant marine ship *Maersk Alabama* when it was attacked by a band of Somali pirates on 8 April 2009, as it was sailing 200 miles off the Horn of Africa. Phillips describes how fear and shock affect human behavior, what makes people under attack fight back even when they know they aren't equipped to defend themselves, and above all what was going through the mind of an old-school captain when he willingly offered himself up as hostage in order to save his crew. Phillips' account of his five days in the hands of the pirates, from the time he was taken to when he was finally saved, is a page-turner, and the often gruesome details of the danger, brutality and executions he witnessed are not easily forgotten.



**LA ÚLTIMA ESCALA DEL TRAMP STEAMER**  
Alvaro Mutis,  
La Otra Orilla, 1990,  
p. 114

Passion, obsession, melancholy and desperate resignation: these are the intense feelings that thrust the main characters of Mutis' riveting story together. Jon Iturri, the captain of the tramp steamer *Halcyon*; its owner, the beautiful Warda, and the narrator, who unwittingly relives the evolution of a doomed love affair as if he were somehow removed from it. And perhaps the *Halcyon* itself deserves to join the character list, the small mercantile ship and dilapidated WWII relic that keeps wandering from port to port without a real destination, never balking in front of any obstacle, always reflecting the emotions of three people who have unwittingly entrusted it with their destinies. This story of coincidences, plot twists, erotic relationships and obsessions, all of which take place aboard the *Halcyon*, is reconstructed through the mutual encounters that have taken place during the protagonists' lives. Despite its deceptively rundown appearance, the *Halcyon's* decay is an obvious metaphor for life's hardships. And its sinking also marks the end of an affair and a friendship that, at first sight, seemed eternal. English translation in the collection of Mutis Álvaro's stories *The Adventures and Misadventures of Magroll*, New York Review Books Classics, 2002, 768 pp.