

James Stavridis. *The Sailor's Bookshelf: Fifty Books to Know the Sea*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, <https://www.usni.org/press/books>, 2021. 232 pp., bibliography, index. US \$26.95, hardback; ISBN 9781682476987. (E-book and audiobook available).

Of all contemporary writers publishing on maritime topics, possibly none are more qualified than Admiral James Stavridis USN (ret'd) to compile a list of books which faithfully introduce the reader to the true nature of the sea. In *The Sailor's Bookshelf: Fifty Books to Know the Sea*, Stavridis introduces the reader to what he believes are the best literary works that ought to bring a comprehensive understanding to even the most uninitiated landlubber. While the book does not focus on deep explanations or through reviews of each literary work, it does point the reader to the important connections between the books' topics and draws comparisons in an effort to help the reader understand the ocean from many perspectives.

Stavridis organizes the work into four thematic groupings: Oceans, Explorers, and Sailors in Fiction and Sailors in Nonfiction. The book does not pretend to be a meticulous dissection of the books in these categories. While Stavridis would likely excel in such an endeavour, his work here is designed to connect a broader audience with the building blocks necessary to appreciate the ever-complex ocean in a manner both approachable and digestible. While any audience could thoroughly enjoy this book, the primary targets are beachgoers, tropical cruisers, nature lovers, amateur naval historians, and sunny-day sailors. Really the book is for anyone interested in the sea who might wish to broaden their knowledge and would prefer a focussed selection of personal recommendations from an incredibly qualified source.

The topics are wide-ranging and broadly encompassing, and Stavridis touches on many areas of interest. Some of his selections are strictly practical, aimed at true sailors who wish to sharpen their craft. These include *Dutton's Nautical Navigation* (15th edition); *Naval Shiphandler's Guide*; or *Watch Officer's Guide* (16th edition). Selections like this aim to familiarize the reader with the real day-to-day operations, skills, and standards of those professionals who work on the world's oceans. Other books are surgical examinations of very specific aspects of the ocean world, such as *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*; *Deep: Freediving, Renegade Science*; *What the Ocean Tells Us About Ourselves*; and *Kon-Tiki: Six Men Cross the Pacific on a Raft*. Stavridis chooses these books because they not only speak to the diverse relationship humanity has with the ocean, but also because he believes the books cannot be outmatched in literary excellence. He is concerned not just with how well each book explains the ocean world, but the manner in which each author elucidates the subject matter. Each book, no matter how technical

or niche, is chosen because it eloquently engages the reader and facilitates a deeper understanding of our blue world.

What would be a collection of stories about the ocean without a few disaster tales? Stavridis includes several books which detail the dangers on the open ocean, including *The Outlaw Ocean: Journeys across the Last Untamed Frontier*; *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*; and *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men against the Sea*.

Stavridis also understands the important relationship that humanity has fostered with the oceans and is keen to demonstrate to the reader how important conservation and environmentalism are to protecting and preserving the health and natural beauty of the ocean. Several books have been selected because they speak to the great danger human misuse poses.

Other literary works are chosen because they accurately depict the influence the ocean has had on the fine arts. The best fiction, poetry, and short stories about the sea written by some of the most prominent authors in history make the list. Such additions as *Moby Dick*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and others will surely please any connoisseur of fine literature. Another noteworthy category is that of maritime history, of which Stavridis is a devout student. Stavridis gives his opinion of many historical works on a variety of topics, such as US naval history, the history of exploration, and even maritime racial and ethnic history.

The Sailor's Bookshelf: Fifty Books to Know the Sea is a very worthy addition to any bookshelf. Even the most ardent devotees of writing on the world's oceans will be interested in debating Stavridis's selection of choices either with themselves or with others. And few readers will fail to find a gem on the list which they have hitherto overlooked and now feel the need to track down and get busy reading.

Nevertheless, the book, while quite comprehensive in scope, does suffer from the same weaknesses that any such work is inherently prone to. In aiming to be broad, it often leaves the reader feeling unsatisfied with the level of the author's analysis. In some instances, a more complete and in-depth report from Stavridis would have been appreciated. Additionally, Stavridis has designed the book in some ways as a reference manual, which can be disruptive to the reading experience. For example, he has the tendency to re-state himself or reiterate a point he already made in an earlier synopsis of another book. If each chapter is read in a stand-alone form, this is barely noticeable, but when the book is read cover-to-cover in its entirety, the redundancy becomes more irksome.

Overall, however, this is truly a superb book that fulfills its mission with focus and nuance. As an avid sailor myself, I thoroughly enjoyed the book and have already made some new purchases. I cannot recommend this book enough

as light bedtime reading or as a fun addition to any library. The audiobook version, narrated by Robert Fass, is also very well done and available for those who may prefer it.

James Fowler
Greenville, North Carolina

Mark Stille and Jim Laurier (illustrator). *Japanese Combined Fleet 1941-42: The IJN at its zenith, Pearl Harbor to Midway*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, www.ospreypublishing.com, 2023. 80 pp., illustrations, tables, maps, reading list, index. UK £15.99, US \$23.00, CDN \$31.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-4728-5643-2. (E-book available.)

The Combined Fleet, the striking force of the Imperial Japanese Navy, almost appeared unstoppable in the early parts of the Second World War. Through a combination of guile, superior training and organization, and extreme risk-taking, Japanese naval forces bested the Americans at Pearl Harbor, secured access to the rich resources of the southern region in the Pacific, hit the northern Australian port of Darwin and bases on Ceylon, and forced the British fleet in the Indian Ocean to retire. Few other fleets in history had enjoyed such success and notoriety against the odds until their major losses and defeat at Midway. Therefore, it is fitting that the inaugural offering in Osprey's Fleet Series belongs to the remarkable run of the Japanese Combined Fleet at the height of its achievement. Naval historian and former intelligence officer Mark Stille, one of Osprey's most prolific authors, is paired again with artist and graphic designer Jim Laurier, who specializes in military aviation.

The book establishes the basic format and content for the new series with four sections focused on the fleet's purpose giving background information, the types of ships comprising the fleet and their technical attributes, operation of the fleet in terms of organization, command and control, doctrine, intelligence, and logistics, and finally a combat analysis of the fleet in battles and major engagements. A list of further reading has no fewer than seven books by Stille.

According to the first section, the Combined Fleet dated back to 1903, just two years before the Imperial Japanese Navy announced its capabilities to the world by handing the Russian fleet a crushing defeat at the battle of Tsushima in 1905. For the Japanese, this success apparently supported naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan's ideas about the concept of decisive battle to gain command of the sea. By the interwar years, the United States Navy was identified as the most likely enemy. Design and construction of Japanese warships conformed to negotiated treaties, although the Japanese regularly built above limits and eventually withdrew from the accords entirely. Despite