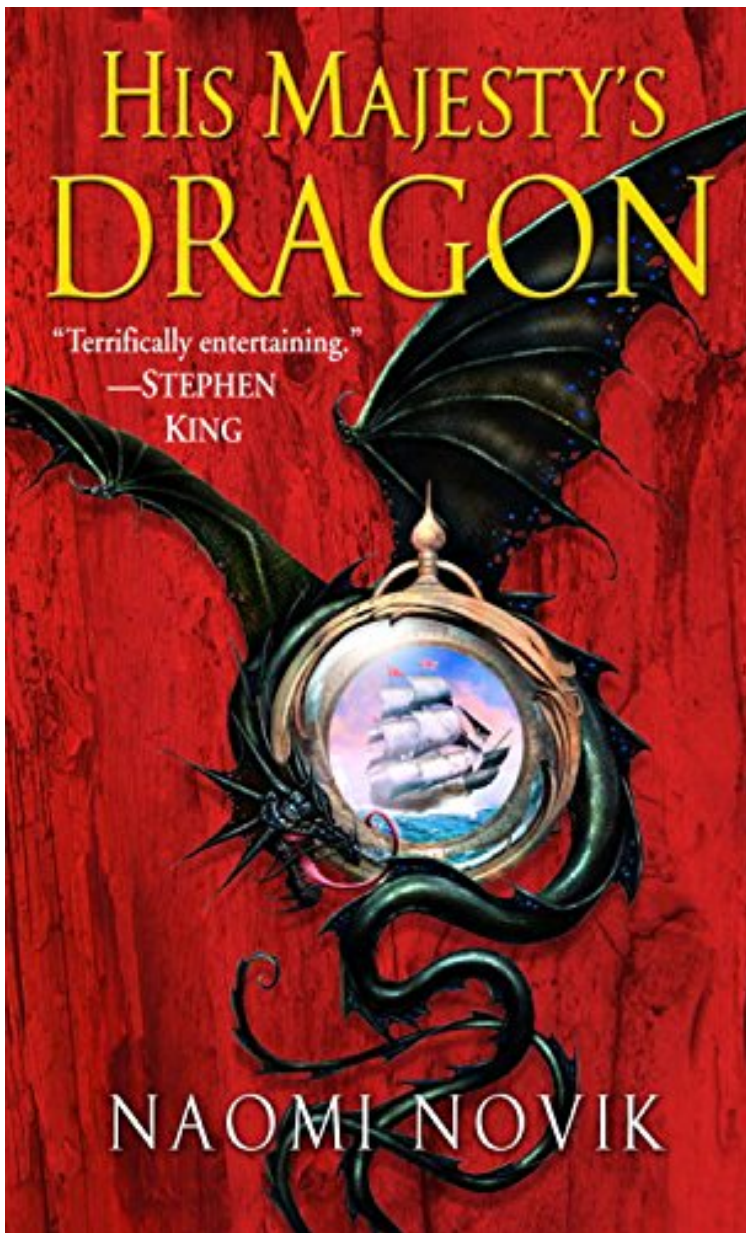


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His Majesty's Dragon: A Novel of Temeraire



Par Naomi Novik

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAerial combat brings a thrilling new dimension to the Napoleonic Wars as valiant warriors rise to Britains defense by taking to the skies . . . not aboard aircraft but atop the mighty backs of fighting dragons.When HMS Reliant captures a French frigate and seizes its precious cargo, an unhatched dragon egg, fate sweeps Capt. Will Laurence from his seafaring life into an uncertain futureand an unexpected kinship with a most extraordinary creature. Thrust into the rarified world of the Aerial Corps as master of the dragon Temeraire, he will face a crash course in the daring tactics of airborne battle. For as

Frances own dragon-borne forces rally to breach British soil in Bonapartes boldest gambit, Laurence and Temeraire must soar into their own baptism of fire. From the Paperback edition. Extrait

The deck of the French ship was slippery with blood, heaving in the choppy sea; a stroke might as easily bring down the man making it as the intended target. Laurence did not have time in the heat of the battle to be surprised at the degree of resistance, but even through the numbing haze of battle-fever and the confusion of swords and pistol-smoke, he marked the extreme look of anguish on the French captains face as the man shouted encouragement to his men. It was still there shortly thereafter, when they met on the deck, and the man surrendered his sword, very reluctantly: at the last moment his hand half-closed about the blade, as if he meant to draw it back. Laurence looked up to make certain the colors had been struck, then accepted the sword with a mute bow; he did not speak French himself, and a more formal exchange would have to wait for the presence of his third lieutenant, that young man being presently engaged belowdecks in securing the French guns. With the cessation of hostilities, the remaining Frenchmen were all virtually dropping where they stood; Laurence noticed that there were fewer of them than he would have expected for a frigate of thirty-six guns, and that they looked ill and hollow-cheeked. Many of them lay dead or dying upon the deck; he shook his head at the waste and eyed the French captain with disapproval: the man should never have offered battle. Aside from the plain fact that the Reliant would have had the Amity slightly outgunned and outmanned under the best of circumstances, the crew had obviously been reduced by disease or hunger. To boot, the sails above them were in a sad tangle, and that no result of the battle, but of the storm which had passed but this morning; they had barely managed to bring off a single broadside before the Reliant had closed and boarded. The captain was obviously deeply upset by the defeat, but he was not a young man to be carried away by his spirits: he ought to have done better by his men than to bring them into so hopeless an action. Mr. Riley, Laurence said, catching his second lieutenants attention, have our men carry the wounded below. He hooked the captains sword on his belt; he did not think the man deserved the compliment of having it returned to him, though ordinarily he would have done so. And pass the word for Mr. Wells. Very good, sir, Riley said, turning to issue the necessary orders. Laurence stepped to the railing to look down and see what damage the hull had taken. She looked reasonably intact, and he had ordered his own men to avoid shots below the waterline; he thought with satisfaction that there would be no difficulty in bringing her into port. His hair had slipped out of his short queue, and now fell into his eyes as he looked over. He impatiently pushed it out of the way as he turned back, leaving streaks of blood upon his forehead and the sun-bleached hair; this, with his broad shoulders and his severe look, gave him an unconsciously savage appearance as he surveyed his prize, very unlike his usual thoughtful expression. Wells climbed up from below in response to the summons and came to his side. Sir, he said, without waiting to be addressed, begging your pardon, but Lieutenant Gibbs says there is something queer in the hold. Oh? I will go and look, Laurence said. Pray tell this gentleman, he indicated the French captain, that he must give me his parole, for himself and his men, or they must be confined. The French captain did not immediately respond; he looked at his men with a miserable expression. They would of course do much better if they could be kept spread out through the lower deck, and any recapture was a practical impossibility under the circumstances; still he hesitated, drooped, and finally husked, Je me rends, with a look still more wretched. Laurence gave a short nod. He may go to his cabin, he told Wells, and turned to step down into the hold. Tom, will you come along? Very good. He descended with Riley on his heels, and found his first lieutenant waiting for him. Gibbs round face was still shining with sweat and emotion; he would be taking the prize into port, and as she was a frigate, he almost certainly would be made post, a captain himself. Laurence was only mildly pleased; though Gibbs had done his duty reasonably, the man had been imposed on him by the Admiralty and they had not become intimates. He had wanted Riley in the first lieutenants place, and if he had been given his way, Riley would now be the one getting his step. That was the nature of the service, and he did not begrudge Gibbs the good fortune; still, he did not rejoice quite so wholeheartedly as he would have to see Tom get his own ship. Very well; whats all this, then? Laurence said now; the hands were clustered about an oddly placed bulkhead towards the stern area of the hold, neglecting the work of cataloguing the captured ships stores. Sir, if you will step this way, Gibbs said. Make way there, he ordered, and the hands backed away from what Laurence now saw was a doorway set inside a wall that had been built across the back of the hold; recently, for the lumber was markedly lighter than the surrounding planks. Ducking through the low door, he found himself in a small chamber with a strange appearance. The walls had been reinforced with actual metal, which must have added a great deal of unnecessary weight to the ship, and the floor was padded with old sailcloth; in addition, there was a small coal-stove in the corner, though this was not

presently in use. The only object stored within the room was a large crate, roughly the height of a mans waist and as wide, and this was made fast to the floor and walls by means of thick hawsers attached to metal rings.

Laurence could not help feeling the liveliest curiosity, and after a moments struggle he yielded to it. Mr.

Gibbs, I think we shall have a look inside, he said, stepping out of the way. The top of the crate was thoroughly nailed down, but eventually yielded to the many willing hands; they pried it off and lifted out the top layer of packing, and many heads craned forward at the same time to see. No one spoke, and in silence

Laurence stared at the shining curve of eggshell rising out of the heaped straw; it was scarcely possible to believe. Pass the word for Mr. Pollitt, he said at last; his voice sounded only a little strained. Mr. Riley, pray be sure those lashings are quite secure. Riley did not immediately answer, too busy staring; then he jerked to attention and said, hastily, Yes, sir, and bent to check the bindings. Laurence stepped closer and gazed down at the egg. There could hardly be any doubt as to its nature, though he could not say for sure from his own

experience. The first amazement passing, he tentatively reached out and touched the surface, very cautiously: it was smooth and hard to the touch. He withdrew almost at once, not wanting to risk doing it some harm. Mr. Pollitt came down into the hold in his awkward way, clinging to the ladder edges with both hands and leaving bloody prints upon it; he was no kind of a sailor, having become a naval surgeon only at the late age of thirty, after some unspecified disappointments on land. He was nevertheless a genial man, well liked by the crew, even if his hand was not always the steadiest at the operating table. Yes, sir? he said, then saw the egg. Good Lord above. It is a dragon egg, then? Laurence said. It required an effort to restrain the triumph in his voice. Oh, yes indeed, Captain, the size alone shows that. Mr. Pollitt had wiped his hands on his apron and was already brushing more straw away from the top, trying to see the extent. My, it is quite

hardened already; I wonder what they can have been thinking, so far from land. This did not sound very promising. Hardened? Laurence said sharply. What does that mean? Why, that it will hatch soon. I will have to consult my books to be certain, but I believe that Badkes Bestiary states with authority that when the shell has fully hardened, hatching will occur within a week. What a splendid specimen, I must get my measuring cords. He bustled away, and Laurence exchanged a glance with Gibbs and Riley, moving closer so they might speak without being overheard by the lingering gawkers. At least three weeks from Madeira with a fair wind, would you say? Laurence said quietly. At best, sir, Gibbs said, nodding. I cannot imagine how they came to be here with it, Riley said. What do you mean to do, sir? His initial satisfaction turning gradually into dismay as he realized the very difficult situation, Laurence stared at the egg blankly. Even in the dim lantern light, it shone with the warm luster of marble. Oh, I am damned if I know, Tom. But I suppose I will go and return the French captain his sword; it is no wonder he fought so furiously after all.

Except of course he did know; there was only one possible solution, unpleasant as it might be to contemplate. Laurence watched broodingly while the egg was transferred, still in its crate, over to the

Reliant: the only grim man, except for the French officers. He had granted them the liberty of the quarterdeck, and they watched the slow process glumly from the rail. All around them, smiles wreathed every sailors face, private, gloating...Revue de presseTerrifically entertaining. Stephen KingFrom the

Paperback edition.