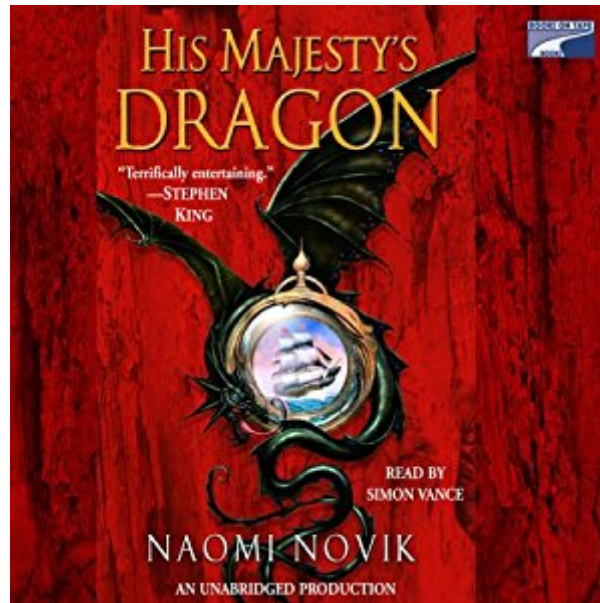


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His Majesty's Dragon: Temeraire, Book 1



Synopsis

Aerial combat brings a thrilling new dimension to the Napoleonic Wars as valiant warriors rise to Britain's 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 Captain Will Laurence from his seafaring life into an uncertain future and 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 France's own dragon-borne forces rally to breach British soil in Bonaparte's boldest gambit, Laurence and Temeraire must soar into a baptism of fire.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"I understand you're a huge fan of Patrick O'Brian's books about the British Navy, and that you're desperately looking for something to replace them," said the shrewd, well-meaning editor who sent me an advance copy of Naomi Novik's first novel. "Give this one a few pages: I was instantly hooked, even though I've never been a reader of fantasy." Neither have I - at least since I was 16 and discovered the dangers and delights of mysteries and thrillers. But this gent does put out some fine crime stuff, so I put "His Majesty's Dragon" on my to-be-read shelf. And guess what: I too was immediately hooked by the writing, the research and the sheer courage of the whole enterprise. First of all, fantasy isn't the right category for this - although I can understand the publisher's desire to use that to tap into the Harry Potter explosion. Alternative history is better: I remember vividly Harry Turtledove's "The Guns of the South" about what might have happened at Gettysburg if the

Confederate Army had automatic rifles. Novik's imagination is wider and deeper: she has added to Nelson's Navy a squad of dragons who can attack from above and bring down fire and poison on Napoleon's fleet as it tries to conquer England. It's not just a mechanical gimmick, either: the dragons are intelligent creatures, loyal to their human trainers, vastly touching in their desires to prove themselves and be approved of by people and fellow dragons. When a young British sea captain, Will Laurence of the *Reliant*, captures a French frigate carrying a dragon's egg about to hatch a few months before the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, he makes a friend for life in the form of a startlingly beautiful and highly intelligent jet black creature he names *Temeraire* after a ship captured from the French. Only gradually do we realize how unusual *Temeraire* is: bred by China's best as a gift for the Emperor Bonaparte, he could be the key to Napoleon's success or failure. Laurence also changes the course of his own life in a way O'Brian's Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin could understand: Laurence's family is shattered by his giving up the Navy for the Aerial Corps, a largely secretive world where smart young women like Catherine Harcourt are in charge of female dragons, and jealousy rankles on every level. Along the way, we learn about training dragons and aviators; keeping the creatures' huge appetites sated and treating their battle wounds; how communications are achieved with high winds blowing words away. It's a totally amazing performance - the first of three books to be published one a month through June, already a huge hit in hardcover in England where Novik is starting a new cycle. May her prodigious energy and imagination hold up. I know of one ghostly literary presence looking down with a hopeful smile.

I should preface this with the warning that I'm going to gush -- frankly, I haven't been this madly fond of a book in the longest time (hm, when did Connie Willis last publish something?), and I'm at the stage where I want the whole world to know how great this book is. I bought it Wednesday afternoon, read 200 pages of it that night, then went out the next day and all I kept thinking about was going home and finishing it, which I did, staying up very late (past my bedtime) and finding the ending very bittersweet. Bittersweet because the conclusion happily justifies all the promise of the beginning chapters, and yet I'm sad because I'm through with the book and will have to wait weeks (till April 25) for the sequel. I know that's nothing compared to the wait with most fantasy trilogies, the gap between books is usually at least a year, but I want the sequel right NOW in my hot little hands. The novel takes place in England during the Napoleonic Wars, only with the added twist of dragons (which must be admitted, improve every scenario). In this alternate universe, dragons are tamed by most nations of the world as a fighting force, bonding to a handler at hatching, and trained in the Aerial Corps in the pursuit of warfare. So when Will Laurence, a British Naval captain

experienced in battle, captures a French frigate with a dragon's egg that is very quickly going to hatch, he has no choice but to put himself and the crew up to bonding with the creature because even though England has France outgunned in the way of ships (think Admiral Nelson and the superiority of the British Navy), France is outgunning England 2-1 in the way of fighting dragons. Laurence and his dragon, Temeraire, are then thrust into the world of the Aerial Corps where things are done in a slightly different way than Laurence is used to in the Navy. Novik handles the world-building with startling grace, given that this is her first novel. One of the prime pleasures of the book is authentic feel of the world she's built -- you can tell that months of research went into correctly portraying 19th century English society, from the realities of the Navy to the manners of the drawing room. And best, none of it is done showily or in a lecturing way, it's all of it presented as naturally as possible. She doesn't let research intrude upon telling the story, and better yet, her addition of dragons into this world is so well thought-out (from their feeding, breeds, natural inclinations, personalities, levels of intelligence, size and temperment, mode of fighting and the innovative invention of aerial fighting) that it adds to the depiction of the historical period. She seamlessly grafts on her inventions to the known historical realities, and comes up with a beautifully realized fictional world that's meticulously detailed and worked out. I adore that there is so much thought given to how the dragons would fit into this society, and she succeeds in a way that few authors of speculative fiction succeed -- I really want to spend more time in her imagined universe. That's the highest compliment I can give. But, there are other pleasures as well. Temeraire and Laurence bond, and even though it is not a telepathic mind-meld (ala Anne McCaffrey), it is a deeply emotional connection. There is palpable love between man and dragon, and their relationship is the emotional thru-line for the novel. It makes me sound like a 12 year old girl to say this (which I am not), but Temeraire is such a cool dragon. I totally want one like him for my very own, because he is so intelligent and logical and witty and also nuzzles Laurence affectionately and loves him. I mean, I know, this is gushy, but you can't blame me! Novik captures the sweetness and light of their bond, enough to give balance to all the colder, plot-driven elements of the story. It's primarily an adventure, a story in wartime, an exploration of dragons in this fascinating society, but she doesn't neglect the warmer side of things. There are moments of extreme emotion, of emotional distress, mostly due to the closeness that aviators develop with their dragons, and each moment played realistically for me. I'm very particular when it comes to moments of high emotion -- each one has to be earned in character, in story, in meaning, and I hate more than anything the feeling of being manipulated to respond. Novik very definitely earns each emotion she wrung from me. I can't recommend this book enough. It has all the everything you want from good speculative fiction

(meticulous world-building, a desire to step into the universe), well-defined, charismatic, understatedly human characters you care about (though *Temeraire* is perhaps my favorite personality of all), a confident and elegantly polished prose style, emotional depths, gorgeous and inventive battle scenes (and I'm usually the type of reader to skim written battle scenes, but Novik writes so concisely about aerial battles that they are some of my favorite scenes in the book). It's a great book, extremely fun, addicting, polished, exciting -- I can't wait to read the next one, and the one after that. The last book of such promise from a new author was Susannah Clarke's "*Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*", and then I think I prefer Novik's to Clarke's. *JS&MN* is almost too ambitious for its own good, and Clarke has a lesser insight into human personality than Novik, while "*His Majesty's Dragon*" has no weaknesses. I can't perceive any faults or flaws, and recommend it whole-heartedly.

There's a reason the publishing world is buzzing over Naomi Novik: this first book is worth the hype. In "*His Majesty's Dragon*" she shows tremendous talent for worldbuilding, drawing us easily into a version of our own history in which the Napoleonic wars were augmented by an air force piloting (not only sentient but highly intelligent) living craft. Just as Susannah Clarke (in "*Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*") depicted an alternate England in which magic was real, Novik shows us an alternate England (and China, and France) where there be dragons, and the results are dazzling. What I like best in this book is the way the main characters develop over time. *Temeraire*, the dragon whose egg is discovered in the early pages of chapter one, is a compelling protagonist -- as is Will Laurence, the Naval captain who becomes responsible for him and who sacrifices his naval career to join the mysterious Air Force. Laurence changes dramatically over the course of the book, but he does so in a subtle and organic way. This book made me laugh, made me think, and once or twice made me a little bit sniffly, too. I can't wait to read books two and three. Don't miss this one -- it's a pleasure.

I can't give a bad review to any story handled with such competence, but I can't give a good review to the same story if the characters are this one-dimensional and naive. The historical context & research coupled with the dragons themselves carry the book. Ms Novik is a talented writer in terms of structure and pace, but the human characters are shallow afterthoughts compared to their dragon counterparts. I would suggest this for younger readers looking for a straightforward story with happy endings and predictable plot lines.

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