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My Year Before the Mast

Annette Brock Davis, Annette Brock Davis

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In 1933, a young Canadian woman rejected the expectations of society and her upper-class family and became a crew member aboard one of the last great four-masted sailing vessels that still plied the ocean.

It was not an easy task. Young Annette had to fight pressures from her family, rejection from schools of navigation, and doubts from ship owners. When she finally found a berth as an apprentice seaman, she faced hostility from officers and crew, who grumbled that she should be home "raising babies." In the end, however, Annette won their respect, taking in sails, standing night watches, hauling and coiling ropes all the tasks the men were doing, with no concession to a girl’s lesser strength.

My Year Before the Mast tells the story of Annette Brock Davis’s life on the sea as the first female crew member of a commercial sailing line. Her courage and determination to break into a closed male world are central to this book, but we cannot ignore the fact that, while this is a book about a woman’s struggle, it is also a book about the sea. Davis brings to life an era long gone, and introduces an incredible cast of characters the crew, officers, and passengers, each with his own foibles, humour, generosity, and flashes of meanness. But through it all, Annette emerges as the most remarkable character of them all.

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