

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003)**

Peter Weir

OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir went on to make several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), both also Oscar winners. Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* contains characters and events based on Patrick O'Brian's series of novels (1969-2004) about two friends—a Royal Navy captain and a military doctor—during the Napoleonic wars. The film's story takes place almost entirely aboard the British HMS *Surprise*, on a mission to destroy the French ship *Acheron*. The film presents the experiences of Captain Jack Aubrey and Dr. Stephen Maturin as well as several officers and members of the ship's crew. Like O'Brian's novels, the film draws on real people and events but ultimately focuses on exclusively fictional characters.

Background Peter Weir was recruited to direct *Master and Commander* by producer Tom Rothman at 20th Century Fox. Weir, in turn, brought in cinematographer Russell Boyd, who had shot most of Weir's Australian films. Boyd won an Academy Award for *Master and Commander*, as did sound designer Richard King, who had worked extensively with Weir to create naturalistic sounds. The film was shot in several locations, including the Galápagos Islands and a tank in Mexico that James Cameron had used to shoot *Titanic* (1997). *Master and Commander* starred Weir's fellow Australian Russell Crowe, as well as Paul Bettany.

CHARACTERS

Jack Aubrey – captain of the ship
Stephen Maturin – ship's doctor and Aubrey's friend
Tom Pullings – 1st lieutenant
William Mowett – 2nd lieutenant
Blakeney – midshipman (a boy)
Calamy – midshipman
Hollom – midshipman
Mr. Allen – master
Mr. Higgins – doctor's assistant
Joseph Nagle – carpenter's mate
William Warley – crew member and Nagle's friend

SYNOPSIS

In the south Atlantic amid the Napoleonic wars in 1805, Captain Jack Aubrey of the Royal Navy commands the HMS *Surprise*, which has been pursuing the French ship *Acheron*. On a foggy day, the *Acheron* sneaks up on the *Surprise* and attacks. The *Surprise* sustains substantial damage and several casualties, but it manages to get away. Although everyone assumes that they will go back to England to regroup, Aubrey announces an intention to continue pursuing the *Acheron*. The crew, who clearly respect Aubrey a great deal, successfully repair the ship and prepare for another round of battle.

Various challenges and dramas unfold as they pursue the *Acheron*. Young Midshipman Blakeney recovers from having his arm amputated. Crewmen Nagle and Warley, close friends, bring Aubrey a model of the *Acheron* based on Warley's memory of having seen the ship being built. During a severe storm, Warley is sent up the rigging to help Midshipman Hollom, who is stuck. Warley frees Hollom but is himself hurled into the sea to his death. Hollom is unpopular with the crew, who come to believe superstitiously that he might be the source of their bad luck. Nagle incurs a flogging by failing to salute Hollom one day. Hollom, after speaking with a sympathetic Aubrey about his difficulty assuming a leadership role, commits suicide.

After chasing the *Acheron* around Cape Horn, the *Surprise* arrives at the Galapagos Islands. Aubrey promises the ship's doctor, Stephen—his close friend and also a naturalist—that they can spend a few days there in order for Stephen to examine the local flora and fauna. But Aubrey breaks this promise when they learn that the *Acheron* is close by. Some days later, though, Stephen is accidentally shot by a man trying to shoot a bird flying near the ship. Aubrey has a change of heart, ordering that they go ashore at the Galapagos Islands and remain there for several days. A convalescing Stephen is able to collect some specimens. Soon, though, the *Acheron* reappears. They engage in battle again, and this time the *Surprise* is victorious.

SCENES

An enemy ship? – In 1805 off the coast of Brazil, Captain Jack Aubrey of the Royal Navy has been ordered to use his ship, the HMS *Surprise*, to capture the French ship *Acheron*. Looking out into the fog, midshipman Hollom thinks he sees a ship. He is unsure, but fellow midshipman Calamy orders everyone to “beat to quarters”: the men prepare for battle.

Surprising the *Surprise* – Aubrey comes on deck and does not see any other ship. He does not chastise Hollom, but he tells everyone to stand down. But the *Surprise* is suddenly hit by cannon fire. They engage in a battle with the *Acheron*. The battle severely damages the *Surprise*, but they do manage to evade capture.



Casualties – The crew works to bail the water out of the ship. Aubrey visits the doctor, Stephen Maturin, who says that nine people were killed and twenty-seven wounded in the battle. Aubrey greets Blakeney, a midshipman about thirteen years old, who is lying on a stretcher with a wounded arm. Aubrey tells Stephen about the way the *Acheron* sneaked up on them in the fog.



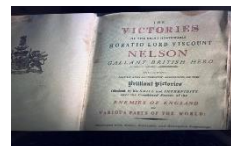
Plans – Aubrey looks at a map of the coast of Brazil. He, Stephen, and the other officers discuss what to do next. The officers assume that they will return home to repair the ship, but Aubrey says that they can repair the ship at sea and then continue to pursue the *Acheron* as ordered.



Repairs – Stephen amputates Blakeney's arm. He tells Blakeney he has never seen a braver patient. Meanwhile, the men repair the ship. William Mowett, 2nd lieutenant, observes to midshipman Calamy that Aubrey has been with this ship for decades, pointing out a spot where Aubrey carved his initials in the ship with the date 1785. One of the crewmen observes to another one that Stephen is very knowledgeable about plants and beasts as well as human bodies.



Consolations – Aubrey visits Blakeney in the infirmary. He brings him a book about the naval battles fought by Lord Nelson. He tells Blakeney that he knew Lord Nelson, having served in a battle with him in Egypt. Blakeney thanks him.



Aubrey and Stephen play classical music together, Aubrey on the violin and Stephen on the cello.

An advantage – Repairs on the ship continue successfully. Two young men, identified as Joseph Nagle and William Warley, come to Aubrey's quarters holding a model of a ship. Nagle explains that Warley happened to see the *Acheron* being built some years previously and was able to make this model in order to help the officers figure out how to defeat the *Acheron*. Aubrey smiles and thanks them. He discusses the model with 1st Lieutenant Pullings and with sailing master Mr. Allen.



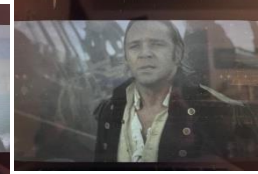
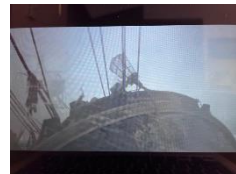
Celebrations and tension – The officers dine and drink together. Calamy asks Aubrey about what Lord Nelson was like. Aubrey recounts a couple of anecdotes, speaking very highly of Lord Nelson. Meanwhile, the crewmen sing and dance on deck. Midshipman Hollom begins to sing along, but the crewmen stop singing when he does and stare at him. He stops singing, and they start up again. Aubrey and Stephen, who have come on deck just in time to witness this tension, frown.



A second chance – The *Acheron* again comes within sight of the *Surprise*. In the dark, the men of the *Surprise* make one of their lifeboats into a decoy ship, complete with a lantern. They turn all their own lights out and sail away. Later, in the distance, they see the *Acheron* shooting cannon fire at the decoy ship.



Storm – The next day, the *Surprise* approaches the *Acheron*, hoping that the wind and tides will now favor their attack against that ship in ways that they previously did not. However, they must first battle a storm. The storm is quite strong, but one of the crewmen says to another, "Captain knows the ship, he knows what she can take." The *Acheron* continues heading south; the men of the *Surprise* realize that the French plan to go around Cape Horn. Despite some concern, they decide to follow them.



A fatal accident – In the storm, Mr. Allen asks William Warley to go up in the rigging to help Hollom, who is caught there. Warley does so, and Hollom is brought to safety. But Warley, still caught in the rigging himself, is hurled into the sea when the mast breaks. Aubrey and Nagle try desperately to find a flotation device or otherwise help Warley. But someone else observes that the mast, still attached to the boat by rigging even though it is in the ocean, is now acting like an anchor and will have to be cut loose from the ship. Visibly distressed and looking at Warley in the distant waters, Aubrey and Nagle cut the rigging.

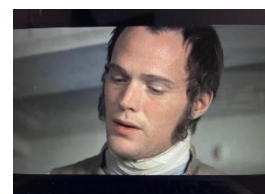


Grieving – Hollom, below decks, rests his head against the wall. Nagle drinks and looks through Warley's trunk, crying. Aubrey and Stephen talk. Stephen remarks that he always struggles when men die under his knife or after he tries to treat them. He says he always tries to remind himself that the enemy killed them, not he himself. Aubrey says that the crew will take Warley's death badly because he was well liked. Stephen gently suggests that perhaps they should have turned back weeks earlier, because chasing a larger, better-equipped ship is starting to look like pride. Aubrey retorts that he is following orders and doing his duty.



THE SCIENTIST

Promise – As the ship goes farther south, it begins to snow. The ship makes it through and then turns northward around Cape Horn. Aubrey and the officers celebrate, then Aubrey and Stephen play music together again. Aubrey promises that when they get to the Galapagos Islands, Stephen can spend some days there observing creatures and gathering specimens.



Natural history – Stephen and Blakeney look at some naturalist books together. Blakeney asks a question about one picture, which looks like it depicts a stick. Stephen explains that it is actually an insect disguising itself as a stick in order to evade predation.



Galapagos – The ship arrives at the Galapagos Islands. Stephen says that one of the birds they can see is a cormorant, but apparently an undiscovered type that is flightless. Similarly, they see iguanas swimming, even though Stephen says that all the iguanas known to science remain on land.



More consolation – Stephen frowns and reads a book on deck. Blakeney approaches him, saying he found a curious beetle walking on the deck, which he believes to be a Galapagos beetle. He gives the beetle to Stephen. Stephen thanks him.



THE CHASE CONTINUES

Change of plans – A boat approaches. It carries five men who say that their whaling ship was recently attacked by the *Acheron*. Aubrey takes them on board and gives orders for the *Surprise* to leave immediately. Stephen follows Aubrey to his quarters and asks why he is breaking his promise; Stephen tries to explain why the specimens found here could be so important to science. Aubrey says that he has no choice.



Leadership troubles – Some of the crewmen discuss their recent problems, including several days with no wind, and wonder whether someone on board ship is cursed. Nagle suggests that it is Hollom; he walks past Hollom, and instead of saluting him, he hits him with his shoulder. Aubrey orders Nagle to be clapped in irons. He talks with Hollom in his quarters. Hollom says that the men seem not to have taken to him and he does not know how to do better. Aubrey tells him that he must be firm though not a tyrant—that what the men respond to is real leadership and strength, which render discipline almost unnecessary.

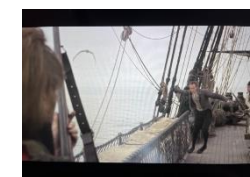


Different solutions – Stephen and Aubrey discuss the altercation between Nagle and Hollom. Stephen tells Aubrey he should dump all the ship's alcohol, pointing out that Nagle was drunk when he failed to salute Hollom. Aubrey says he cannot do that, but he says as well that he wishes he did not have to flog Nagle because Nagle already lost his friend.

Hollom's death – Nagle is flogged. Midshipman Hollom passes a group of crewmen, all of whom ostentatiously salute him. Hollom reaches a group of midshipmen and begins gasping for breath. Crewmen discuss whether Hollom might really be cursed. Hollom overhears them and cries. Hollom goes on deck, where he finds Blakeney. Hollom picks up a cannonball, thanks Blakeney for having always been kind to him, and jumps overboard. The next day, Aubrey leads a brief memorial for Hollom, and then the wind picks up.



Accident – An unusual bird flies near the ship. Stephen goes toward it eagerly. One of the men on the ship tries to shoot the bird but accidentally shoots Stephen in the side. Aubrey and Higgins, Stephen's assistant, go down to the infirmary with Stephen. Higgins is sweating but says he can manage to remove the bullet if he can just look at the doctor's books to brush up. The coxswain comes down and informs them that they are within sight of the *Acheron* again. But Aubrey orders that they instead go ashore in order to operate on Stephen there.



Operation and recovery – They go ashore. Stephen says he wants to remove the bullet himself with the aid of a mirror. He does so, with Higgins's and Aubrey's help, despite the obvious pain. The men of the *Surprise* remain ashore the next day. Blakeney runs to the tent where Stephen is recovering, showing him the notes he has made on some species he has observed. Stephen gets up and leaves the tent. He goes to find Aubrey, who says they will stay a week and then go home instead of pursuing the *Acheron*.



Expedition – Stephen, Blakeney, and one other man walk around the island together, observing species, taking notes, and collecting some specimens.



Acheron - While alone on a hill on the other side of the island observing a beetle, Stephen suddenly spots the *Acheron*. He, Blakeney, and the third man release their larger specimens so that they can more quickly run back to the *Surprise*.



Specimens – The ship departs and the men prepare for battle. Blakeney and Stephen look through their remaining specimens below decks. Aubrey comes in and expresses his regret that Stephen had to leave most of his specimens behind. Stephen says he still got some good ones, including one that he shows Aubrey: the insect that disguises itself as a stick. Aubrey looks fixedly at the insect and smiles.

Ideas from nature – Aubrey tells everyone the new plan: they will disguise their ship as a whaling ship in order to take the *Acheron* by surprise. They hide the guns, repaint part of the ship, and change their clothing.



THE FINAL BATTLE

Battle – The *Surprise* pulls close to the *Acheron*. Someone from the *Acheron* shouts to them, “English whaler! This is your last warning – stop, or we will destroy your ship.” At this point Aubrey gives the signal for the men of the *Surprise* to start firing on the *Acheron*, which they do. Aubrey and some other men from the *Surprise* board the *Acheron*, where they only see men lying on the deck. But then they all get up and begin firing at the English soldiers. Both sides fight fiercely.



Surrender – The French surrender. In the *Acheron*'s infirmary, Aubrey finds a man who identifies himself as the doctor and stands over a dead man in a fancy uniform. The doctor says that before the captain died, he asked him to give Aubrey his sword. Aubrey takes the sword.



Losses – Aubrey goes back to the *Surprise*, where the bodies of many Englishmen, including Mr. Allen, Nagle, and Midshipman Calamy, are lying. Blakeney and crewmen sew up the body bags. Aubrey leads everyone in saying the Lord's Prayer and reads the names of all the deceased before their bodies are dropped into the sea. Blakeney, teary-eyed, goes to see Stephen. Stephen gives him the Galapagos beetle and suggests that he make a drawing of it.



Taking the *Acheron* – Aubrey speaks to Lt. Pullings. He tells Pullings to take command of the *Acheron* with the help of a few officers and crew from the *Surprise*, while Aubrey will lead the *Surprise* on a side trip to the Galapagos for Stephen's benefit, and both ships will meet later in Portsmouth.



One last ruse – Aubrey talks with Stephen, who observes that the wounded men on the *Acheron* will only have Higgins to treat them. Aubrey says that that is not true, as he met the doctor on the *Acheron*. Stephen counters that the *Acheron*'s doctor died months earlier of fever. Aubrey, realizing the “doctor” he met was actually the captain in disguise, looks shocked, then calls the 2nd Lieutenant and tells him to change course, follow the *Acheron* after all, and have the men beat to quarters. Aubrey and Stephen play the violin and the cello as the ship sails off.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jack Aubrey Aubrey is the captain on the HMS *Surprise*. Middle-aged, he has decades of experience with the Royal Navy, including having served under national hero Lord Nelson. Knowledgeable, brave, and kind, Aubrey is clearly respected by his men. He confides in his friend Stephen Maturin, who is willing to criticize him.

Determined Aubrey is determined to succeed in his mission—arguably too determined. After the battle with the French at the beginning of the film, the *Surprise* is damaged. But Aubrey insists that they can repair it sufficiently at sea to continue on their mission. Later, he pushes on despite bad weather, casualties, and other challenges. Stephen suggests that pride, not duty, might be driving Aubrey's decision-making.

Experienced At the time of the film, Aubrey has attained the rank of captain after many years of experience with the Royal Navy. He is clearly knowledgeable and skilled in everything pertaining to the ship: we see him steer the ship, climb the rigging with ease, correctly estimate the ship's capabilities, and of course make a plan for attacking the *Acheron* that ultimately succeeds.

Decisive Aubrey's men never question him, and he is a strong leader—decisive and unapologetic in front of his men, even when privately plagued by doubts. Aubrey always does what is best for the mission, however painful it might be. For example, he orders Nagle to be flogged for failing to salute Hollom because it is a serious breach of discipline, even though he pities Nagle because Nagle's friend recently died.

Kind To all his men, but especially to the teenage midshipmen, Aubrey is consistently kind. When young Blakeney is wounded and convalescing, Aubrey visits and brings him a book. In the various battles that occur, Aubrey distributes high-authority roles equitably to the young officers. He instills confidence and often speaks in a soft, calm voice.

Stephen Maturin Stephen, the doctor on board the *Surprise*, has served alongside Aubrey for years and is his most trusted friend. He is not a soldier and is sometimes skeptical of Aubrey's decisions. He is also a naturalist and likes to use sea voyages as an opportunity to observe new species of flora and fauna.

Kind Like his friend Aubrey, Stephen is deeply kind. As a doctor, he always treats his patients with compassion and care. Again like Aubrey, he is especially kind to the youngest: after amputating Blakeney's arm, he says he has never seen a braver patient. He also teaches Blakeney how to be a naturalist.

Curious As a naturalist, Stephen approaches the world with curiosity rather than a thirst for domination. His face lights up when Aubrey says they will pass the Galápagos Islands, a known treasure trove of species. Stephen eagerly examines, draws, and writes notes about various species of plants and animals he finds there.

Skeptical Stephen is the one person who sometimes criticizes Aubrey. He accuses Aubrey of being driven by pride to follow the *Acheron* for so long. He is also skeptical of patriotism, gently scoffing at an anecdote about Lord Nelson saying he needed no cloak because fervor for England kept him warm.

Hollom Hollom is a midshipman on the *Surprise*. While the other midshipmen are in their teens, he is nearly thirty. He has failed the lieutenant's exam twice and has doubts about his own ability to lead. Although Hollom is never unkind to the men, they take a dislike to him.

Indecisive At the beginning of the film, Hollom thinks he sees the enemy ship through the thick fog, but he is not sure. Although another midshipman tells him he has to decide fast whether to order the men to prepare for battle, he hesitates. The other midshipman makes the call.

Desperate Hollom wants to do his job well. He tries to make the right decisions, and he tries to join in with the crewmen in singing a song. The men reject him, though, and then continue to dislike and disrespect him. Hollom asks Aubrey for advice but feels unable to persevere; he commits suicide.

THEMES

POLITICS

Leadership In the middle of the film, Aubrey gives a speech to Hollom about how to be a good leader. He tells Hollom that you must project strength and decisiveness, while also never becoming a tyrant. Doing so, he says, engenders true leadership based on respect rather than discipline, which becomes almost unnecessary. The film as a whole depicts Aubrey leading in precisely this way, and the results are positive. Aubrey is qualified to lead because of his intimate knowledge of the *Surprise* itself and of sea warfare in general. His men respect his expertise and trust that he will not lead them astray. Although Stephen at one point suggests that Aubrey may be letting his pride get the better of him in pursuing the *Acheron* beyond the initial battle, the film does not suggest that Aubrey's persistence is wrong: in the end, the *Surprise* successfully captures the *Acheron*. Aubrey's calculation—that they could adequately repair the ship at sea after the first battle and that they would be able to pursue the *Acheron* around Cape Horn—was correct. Aubrey's men never question him, except Stephen—and even Stephen ultimately respects Aubrey's authority.

War The entirety of *Master and Commander* takes place in a setting of war. The ship is a Royal Navy battleship, and all the characters are seamen (except for Stephen, who rarely does any fighting). These characters take war for granted. When young Blakeney is seriously wounded early in the film, Stephen says to Aubrey that he is doing everything he can, particularly because he knows Aubrey was close to Blakeney's father. Aubrey replies that Blakeney's father "knew the life" and understood that casualties come with the territory of war. This is clearly how Aubrey himself and the other men feel. Unlike Weir's earlier film *Gallipoli*—which sharply criticizes the British handling of the Great War and dramatizes a young man's fear and regret at becoming a soldier—*Master and Commander* does not depict any characters questioning war as such. War is portrayed as difficult, to be sure (Nagle deeply grieves for his dead friend, for example), but the overall tone is one of enthusiasm. War can take lives, but it also provides opportunities for brotherhood, valor, and personal growth. The cause of stopping Napoleon is universally seen as just in the film.

Patriotism From beginning to end, the mission is to protect England from a French invasion. A title card at the beginning of the film establishes that Napoleon is currently trying to take over the world. The HMS *Surprise*'s mission is to pursue and either capture or destroy the French ship *Acheron*—which, though on the "far side of the world" off the coast of South America, nevertheless represents part of Napoleon's project. When rallying the men for the final battle against the *Acheron*, Aubrey reminds them of this fact and says that for their purposes, "This ship is England." In other words, they should fight as fiercely as they would fight to prevent a French invasion on English soil. At various other points in the film, Aubrey and the other men speak highly of British naval hero Lord Nelson. Aubrey says that apparently Nelson himself once turned down the offer of a coat on a cold night at sea, stating that his love for England kept him warm. Stephen laughs gently at this, but everyone else seems awed. No specific reasons for English superiority are attested, but hatred of the French is taken for granted.

Seafaring Old-school seafaring is also pervasive in the film, as nearly every scene takes place on the ship. Set in 1805, the film portrays the sailing of large ships prior to the use of steam power. The film demonstrates all the hazards involved in seafaring (on top of the risks of war): lack of wind can halt the ship's progress, storms can threaten to sink the ship, working up in the rigging can result in a fatal fall, and interpersonal conflicts can be so bad that someone commits suicide. But the film also presents seafaring as exciting and fulfilling, a realm where hard work and unity of purpose can achieve great results. This is a world without women, as some of the characters note, and also predominantly a white world. But it does involve collaboration across social class: for the most part, the crewmen and officers (midshipmen, lieutenants, and captain) work well together. Several of the characters (Aubrey, Stephen, 1st Lieutenant Pullings, and some of the older crewmen) have been in the profession for many years and accrued great expertise and power along the way. The sequences on the Galápagos Islands demonstrate that seafaring also provides opportunities for geographical and naturalist discovery.

RELATIONSHIP

Friendship In a setting in which everyone is separated from his family, friendship is crucial. The friendship between Aubrey and Stephen is established early on when Aubrey tells Stephen about the *Acheron's* disastrous sneak attack. Throughout the film, the two men—whom we are told have been friends for many years—enact their friendship through leisure activities (playing violin and cello together) and through discussing difficult practical problems together. Their friendship is tested when Aubrey breaks his promise to stop the ship at the Galápagos Islands for several days so that Stephen can examine flora and fauna there. Stephen is furious, and his anger is connected to a deeper conflict: Stephen prefers discovery to warfare. Ultimately, though, the friendship survives, and Aubrey manages to get Stephen to the Galápagos later. The film also portrays a close friendship between crewmen Nagle and Warley; they are always together, and when Warley dies, Nagle is disconsolate. Midshipmen Blakeney and Calamy, too, are friends. Calamy supports Blakeney when he is wounded early in the film, and when Calamy is killed in the final battle, Blakeney grieves deeply. Other friendships develop over the course of the film, such as the one between Blakeney and Stephen based on an interest in naturalism. Blakeney and Stephen provide consolation for each other's disappointments.

Kindness For a film about warfare, *Master and Commander* depicts a very kind world. Aubrey and Stephen are both notable for their kindness to the men they command and treat, respectively. Both go out of their way to be kind to younger and more vulnerable people. Aubrey visits young Blakeney when he is wounded early in the film and brings him a book about their shared hero, Lord Nelson. Stephen, too, shows kindness to Blakeney, complimenting him on his bravery during the amputation of his arm and teaching him how to be a naturalist. Blakeney himself is remarkably kind, as well. After Aubrey has decreed that the ship must turn away from the Galápagos Islands without stopping after all, Blakeney walks up to Stephen holding a beetle that he found on deck and suspects to be a Galápagos beetle. Blakeney also joins Aubrey in showing special kindness to Midshipman Hollom, who struggles to earn the respect of the men. Before he kills himself, Hollom thanks Blakeney for his kindness. Even though Hollom is not saved, the film as a whole portrays a society in which kindness is employed as a matter of course and the results are positive.

Social misfits For the most part, the miniature society that exists aboard the *Surprise* functions very well. But Midshipman Hollom does not fit in. He wants to be liked and respected by the men, but he is not. One night when the crewmen are singing a song, Hollom tries to join in, as he knows the song. But as soon as he starts singing, the crewmen stop. They stare at him, and then when he stops, they begin again. Aubrey and Stephen, who observe this, look troubled when it happens. Later, crewmen Warley dies while trying to help Hollom get down from the rigging. Warley's friend Nagle is furious about this and clearly holds it against Hollom. Eventually, some of the men of the crew begin to consider the possibility that Hollom could actually be cursed, and thus causing bad luck, such as several days' absence of wind. Nagle's failure to salute Hollom one day, followed by ostentatious salutes on the part of the rest of the crew, pushes Hollom over the edge mentally, and he commits suicide by jumping overboard with a cannonball in his hands to weigh him down. Even an informative and kind lesson on leadership from Aubrey is not enough to save Hollom from the larger problem that he simply does not fit in.

QUEST

Natural history In addition to being a doctor, Stephen is an expert in “natural history,” the 18th/19th-century term for the study of plants and animals. The film presents natural history as an alternative to warfare: while Stephen prefers the one, Aubrey specializes in the other. Blakeney, meanwhile, is learning both. While officially working as a midshipman under Aubrey’s leadership, Blakeney becomes interested in Stephen’s natural history books and subsequently joins him on the expedition to explore the flora and fauna of the Galápagos Islands. Stephen is interested in natural history for its own sake, but it turns out to be relevant to warfare as well. When Aubrey sees Stephen’s specimen of an insect that disguises itself as a stick in order to avoid predation, he immediately gets the idea to do something similar to the ship: he orders the men to disguise the ship as a whaling ship in order to sneak up on the *Acheron*. Aubrey jokes to Stephen that he would have been more interested in natural history if he had realized its usefulness for warfare. Still, the film presents Stephen’s pure interest in natural history as noble—a counterbalance to the generally positive portrayal of military prowess.

Scientific spirit / Curiosity In the early nineteenth century, scientists had to be knowledgeable in multiple fields. The film is set in 1805, which is prior to the birth of Charles Darwin. The character of Stephen Maturin is thus imagined as belonging to a very early wave of naturalists. In 1805, the Galápagos Islands had only recently been identified by Europeans as a source of scientifically significant flora and fauna. Scientists like Stephen were of necessity also explorers. In addition, many scientific books were available only in their original languages of French or German; in *Master and Commander*, Stephen is seen to be reading a book in French on natural history. It is typical of the period that Stephen is both a physician and a naturalist; scientists tended to be less specialized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than they are today. Stephen is officially employed only as a physician; it is his curiosity that drives his explorations in natural history. Like a modern scientist, though, Stephen bases his work on meticulous, systematic observation and recording of information about the species he discovers. His scientific spirit is clearly contagious: Blakeney catches Stephen’s enthusiasm for natural history and becomes as passionate about it as Stephen is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you have watched Weir’s earlier film *Gallipoli*, compare and contrast it with *Master and Commander*. If you have not seen *Gallipoli*, pick a different war film to compare and contrast with *Master and Commander*.
2. What do you think of *Master and Commander*’s portrayal of war? Is it too positive? Why or why not?
3. Does the film ultimately support Aubrey’s decision to order the flogging of Nagle for disrespecting Hollom? Do you? Why or why not?
4. What did you think of the film’s portrayal of friendship? How might you compare and contrast it with the portrayal of friendship in other films by Weir (such as *Gallipoli*, *Dead Poets Society*, or *The Year of Living Dangerously*) or in other films you have seen?
5. In the Patrick O’Brian novels on which the film is based, Stephen Maturin is not only a naturalist and doctor but also a spy for England. Some fans of the novels were disappointed to see Stephen’s espionage missing from the film. Did you find Stephen’s character to be underdrawn in the film? Does thinking of him as a spy change how you feel about him in any way?