

The Adventures of Captain Alatriste

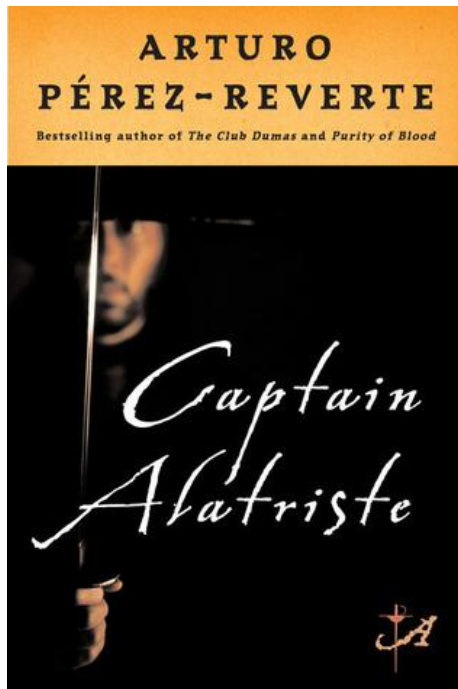
By Arturo Perez-Reverte

Translated from Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden

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Reviewed by Rob Morgan

The Cartagena-born writer and former war correspondent Arturo Perez-Reverte is without doubt moving speedily ahead of the field to become one of Europe's finest contemporary novelists, and a novelist with diverse and complex interests both in contemporary fiction and in history. Of his crime and mystery novels, his first *'The Flanders Panel'* was a best seller throughout the Spanish speaking world, and won the coveted French *'Grand Prix Annuel de Litterature Policiere'*. Of course, that prestigious award is rarely mentioned outside France, so many English speaking readers may be forgiven for missing it. Until now that is, for Perez-Reverte travels as well as a good *fino*, and Sayers Peden's translations are as boldly faithful as any can be.



His hero, Captain Diego Alatriste y Tenorio, is a cult figure among Spanish readers, and his exploits have inspired web-sites, board games, at least one feature film starring Vigo Mortensen, and a host of regular events across Spain. After reading this, the first translated from half a dozen titles on his precariously gallant adventures, I can understand why this author is described as being at the heart of the attempt to reverse Spain's collective loss of historical memory, which followed the Civil War.

Lover of wine and *Senoritas*, tavern brawler, and an occasional hired assassin, Captain Diego is a veteran of Spain's bloody and futile Eighty Years War against the Dutch. He's down on his luck, and living as a 'hired blade' in the back streets of teeming, corrupt and melancholic Madrid in the late 1620's. Diego survives in a Spain ruled by the utterly useless King Philip IV, one of the seventeenth century's most inept and decadent monarchs, which frankly is saying something! He lives by his skill in swordsmanship alone, accepting dubious commissions, usually outside the law. Keeping just one step ahead of Madrid's High Constable, for most of the time, and doing his best to avoid closer inspection of his blade and soul by the Holy Inquisition.

In this, the first of the 'Alatriste' titles, Diego is offered a commission at midnight, a nobleman pays him to frighten off two English travellers; this deal is swiftly followed by a clerical command to kill both Englishmen for rather a lot of money. Or else face the wrath of the Inquisition. The two gentlemen concerned in the matter are in fact, Charles, Prince of Wales, the future Charles I, and his close friend the Duke of Buckingham. Their survival, due entirely to Captain Alatriste's elaborate code of swordsman's honour, leads to a chain of events which

conclude with Charles providing Diego with a promissory note which will almost certainly lead the Captain to a greater involvement with matters in England!

The dust jacket of the book says '*If you like the novels of Dumas, you will love Alatriste.*' Oh, no! The convoluted, flatulent, verbose outpourings of Dumas *pere*, tossed in the fussy, post-chivalric articulation of d'Artagnan and his fellow Musketeers don't find any expression in the fast, vicious style of Captain Diego. He'd have slit his man with his trusty *Vizcaina* blade before the first 'pon my soul' was uttered.

This is an excellent, truly European novel. The second Alatriste title '*Purity of Blood*' has just been translated, with a third '*The Vengeance of Alquezar*' on the shelves, and all good reading, with shall we say more than a few wargaming opportunities hidden in the pages. A book 'not to be missed' by all lovers of great and spirited adventure.

More wine *Amigo!*, and bring me my trusty sword!

