

**‘The Sun over Breda’**  
**By Arturo Perez Reverte**  
**Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 273pp ISBN 978-0-297-84864-6.Pub.2007**  
**Reviewed by Rob Morgan**

This is in fact the fourth book in this excellent, lively renaissance series to reach an English translation. The first ‘*Captain Alatriste*’ introducing a positively un-d’Artagnan like hero, drunkard, assassin, consorter with whores and hunted debtor, a down on his luck veteran of the wars in the Low Countries. It was intriguing.

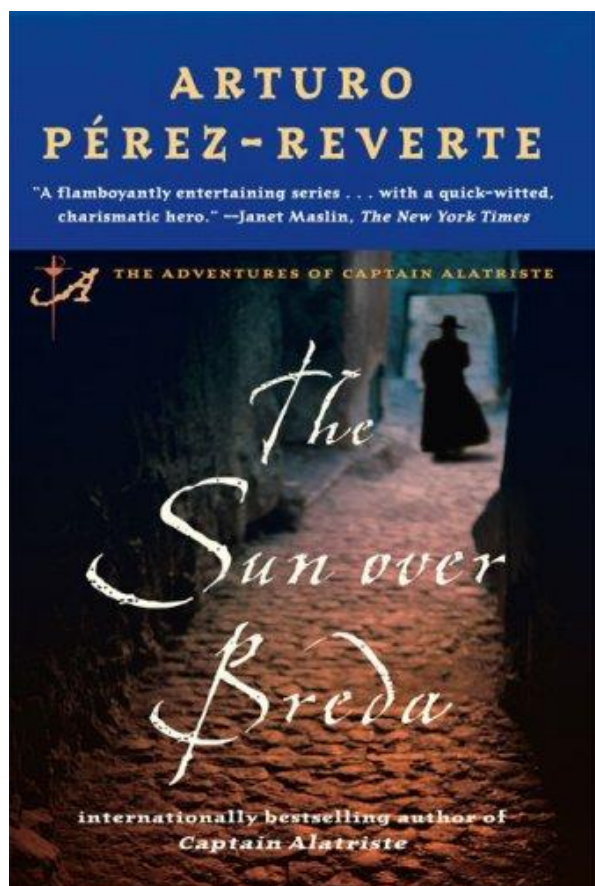
The second book, ‘*Purity of Blood*’, Holy Inquisition haunted, and morally inclined in an incestuous, breathless way was less so, as it was almost certainly written for internal consumption by a concerned Spanish audience. Concerned that is with that ‘new’ and rigorous interpretation of centuries of pre-Civil War Spanish history which has slowly emerged since Franco’s death. However ‘*The Sun over Breda*’ is much more to the point, your mercies, if you’ll pardon the obvious pun!

Of course Diego Velasquez’ painting ‘*The Surrender of Breda*’ is without doubt one of the best known art works of the Thirty Years War era, and it forms the historic backdrop of this tale, which is fiction based on sound historical military facts. I always thought the vast painting was posed in a stilted, courtier-burdened way, which forgot the actualities of a gruelling ten month siege, and the savagery and bitterness with which the entire Eighty Years War was fought. The fall of Breda’s fortress city was I suspect not met solely with the acquiescent Dutch bow and magnanimous Spanish nod, the painter shows!



Throughout the book, Perez Reverte, the author, hints at Don Diego Alatriste’s presence in the great picture, and at his role in the greater affairs of Spanish Imperial history, but this is at heart a book of consistent action. In fact, I can think of few novels of real soldierly inclination written in this period. Here’s no Dumas toying with La Rochelle and siege as casual background to a complex love and spy plot, this is war to the knife. An action novel of great strength.

The siege of Breda lasted from August 1624 to June 1625 and resulted in the loss of the key Dutch fortress city, which was defended by Justin of Nassau, to the mercenary armies of the Spanish General Spinola, in a campaign which involved soldiers from most of Europe west of Muscovy! Reverte takes the reader from the seizure by deception of the outer defences of Oudkerk, through what I should undoubtedly call the entire gamut of 17<sup>th</sup> century warfare and its activities. From the trenches, saps and mines encircling Breda, the night ambushes, and the vicious minutiae of combat which is unspared in prose, to the death-cold Winter fighting at the 'Ruyter Mill' along the dyke road to Breda.



Reverte's Alatriste makes Cornwell's Richard Sharpe seem like a package tourist aimlessly wandering around the Costa's on a Summer's evening. He surges on to a tumultuous climax with the destruction of Alatriste's Cartagena *Tercio* in historically factual Dutch and English dawn attacks on a Spanish Redoubt, which results in the loss of its priceless Royal standard. This is vivid writing, and echoes Reverte's origins as Spain's leading war correspondent. He even finds space to include an unusual duel of honour between five of the Dutch defenders and five Spaniards, fought with swords and pistols in open ground between the two armies. The Dutch officers lose, naturally, this is after all a Spanish novel of the new times, and the author trots on with his unique attempt at restoration of faith in the matter of Spain

in arms, indeed there's one magnificent, utterly memorable quote...

"For it is all too true that though our poor Spain has never known justice, or good government, or honest public servants, and has been granted kings barely worthy of wearing the crown, she has also never... lacked for subjects willing to overlook poverty, indifference and injustice, willing to clench their teeth, unsheathe steel and fight for honour."

*Plus ca change?*

The novel makes excellent reading, and I highly recommend it, not merely for its rarity in accurately covering events in a renaissance war which changed Europe's face for ever, but because it is a 'rattlin' good yarn' remarkably well told and remarkably well translated.

The book ends in true cliff hanging style, with Captain Alatrisme and the survivors of his *Tercio*, Colonel dead and colours lost, surging from their broken redoubt swords in hand, shouting for Spain and Spinola, but not for their King, the utterly unloved Philip III.

Will Don Diego Alatrisme survive?  
I hope so!