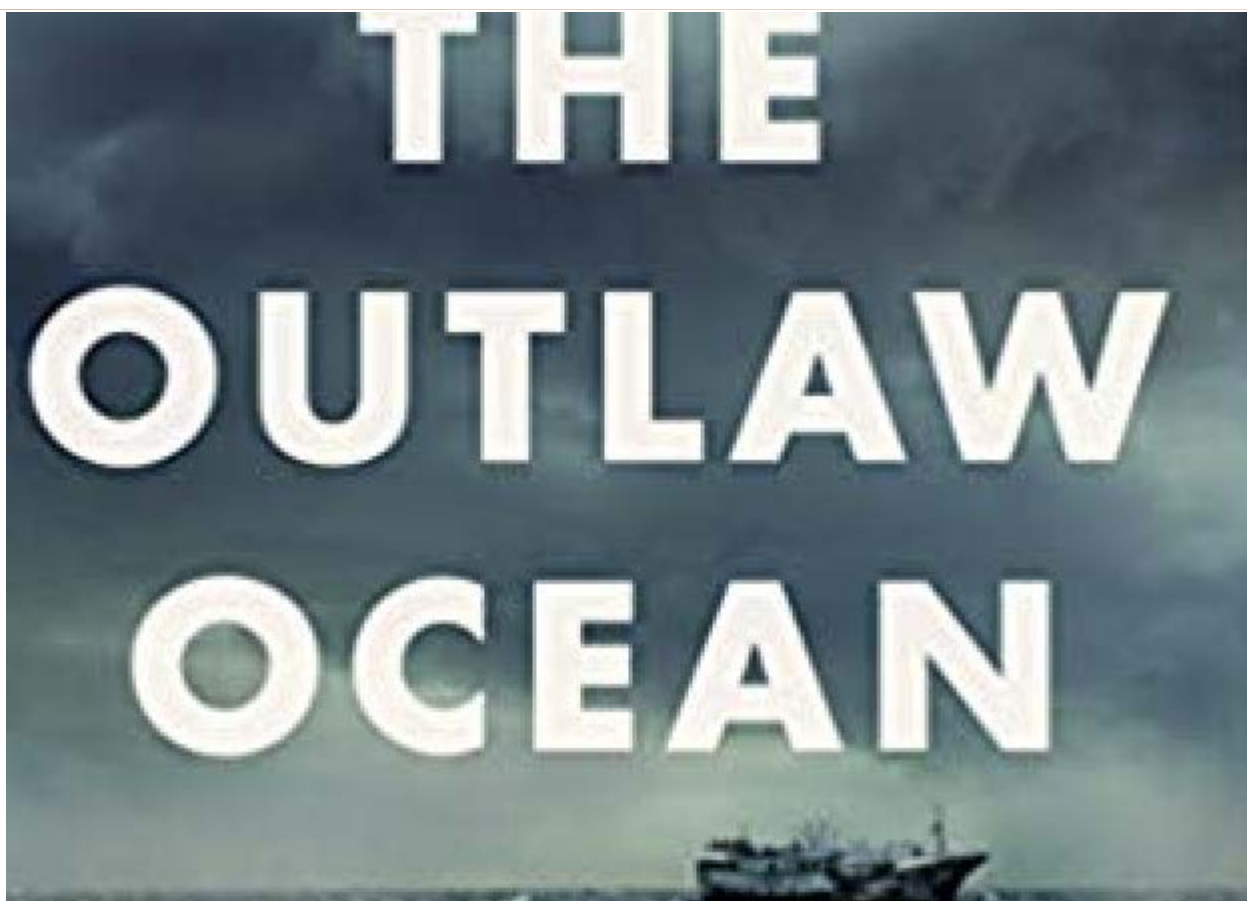


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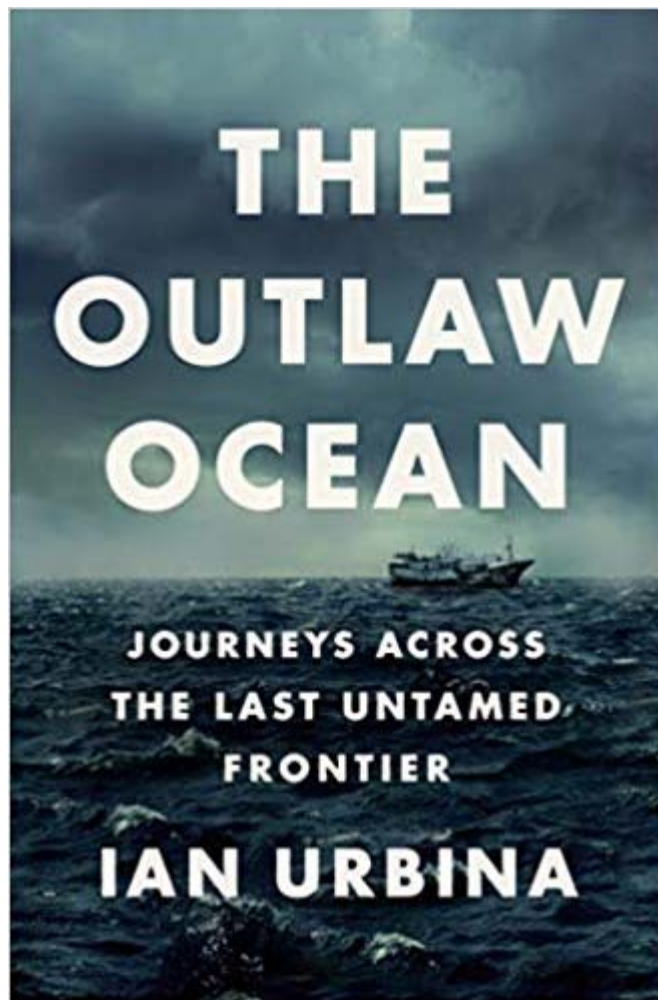
We're Gonna Need a Bigger Boat

In 'The Outlaw Ocean,' a Reporter Tracks Down Malfeasance on the High Seas

August 28, 2019 · Michael Giltz

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Urbina rightly made waves (sue me) with a series of investigative pieces about the “outlaw ocean.” Writing for the New York Times in 2015, Urbina brought to attention lawlessness on the high seas that made “Deadwood” sound like a family-friendly vacation spot.

Urbina has shaped those wide-ranging articles into his latest book, appropriately named *The Outlaw Ocean*. Leonardo DiCaprio has already optioned it as a potential film project.



And no wonder. The stories collected here range all over the globe and include misery, piracy, murder, enslavement and the constant threat of death—a reality for anyone on a boat on the high seas, whether or not someone else is trying to ram into your ship or not.

Urbina begins in the Antarctic, where the Sea Shepherd organization is tracking down ships named by Interpol as the worst violators of fishing laws. We quickly learn that “laws” of any sort in international waters are both half-assed (at best) and—for a thousand different reasons—virtually never enforced. That doesn’t stop Sea Shepherd from attempting a citizen’s arrest of one notorious bad actor.

Urbina is just getting going. He then heads to Palau, a tiny country with just one patrol boat guarding an area the size of France. Palau is attempting to protect both its tourism industry and its rights by going after the numerous poachers that invade its waters.

And on he goes. Urbina takes a side trip to check out the quixotic country of Sealand, also known as an abandoned anti-aircraft platform “seized” by an eccentric Brit named Paddy Roy Bates. At first, it was the home of a pirate radio station. Then Bates declared Sealand an independent country, one that issues passports and still exists to this day.

That’s it for fun and games, with Urbina taking off again to examine the virtual enslavement of men enticed into working on a fishing vessel. And no, slavery is not too harsh a term for people literally trapped on vessels for

years at a time. A rogue ship that provides abortions to women in international waters, mercenaries who help others “reclaim” ships when people dispute their ownership, corrupt ports, hired guns that provide Blackwater-style protection for container ships under constant threat of piracy— the tales are truly endless.



Ian Urbina.

Like a good storyteller, Urbina circles back to Antarctica at the end, giving these disparate stories an overriding arc. Now, he watches Sea Shepherd play a dangerous game of tag with Japanese harpoon ships hunting down minke whales. (They claim to be doing scientific surveys.)

Urbina’s writing is informed, engaging and self-deprecating. Often risking his life, he’s painfully aware he’s choosing to place himself in these positions while many of the people he is reporting on have no say in the matter. Each chapter is involving in its own right, much as I remember them being when these stories first appeared over a series of months in the New York Times.

Yet *The Outlaw Ocean* simply doesn’t work as a book read in one fell swoop. Indeed, I started to break up the chapters with other reading when I realized a concentrated burst of attention was doing it no favors. The

simple truth is that many of these stories end up describing people in one boat trying to chase down people in another boat. Read months apart, the stories stand on their own. Read all at once, they become repetitious, despite Urbina changing the focus again and again to cover an impressively wide range of subjects.

It’s an important topic, Urbina covers it well and you’ll rightly feel guilty for eating any seafood you didn’t catch yourself. But for real drama and a satisfying work of art, we may have to wait for DiCaprio’s film.

(Knopf, August 20, 2019)

Tags: Ian Urbina, *The Outlaw Ocean*

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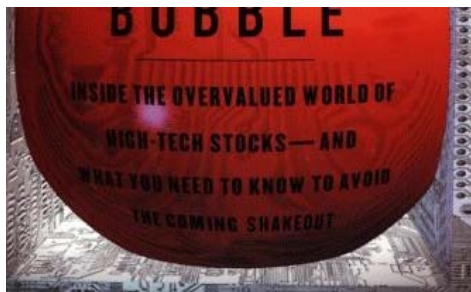
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Michael Giltz

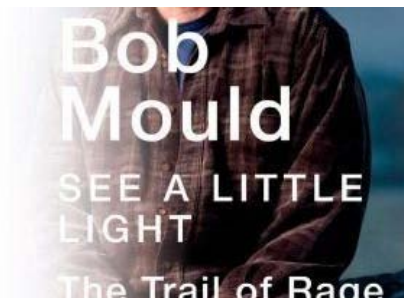
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the

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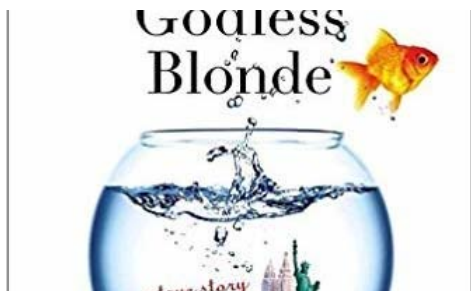
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