

In Plain Sight

A novel explores the mysterious failure of a nearby ship to come to the Titanic's aid.

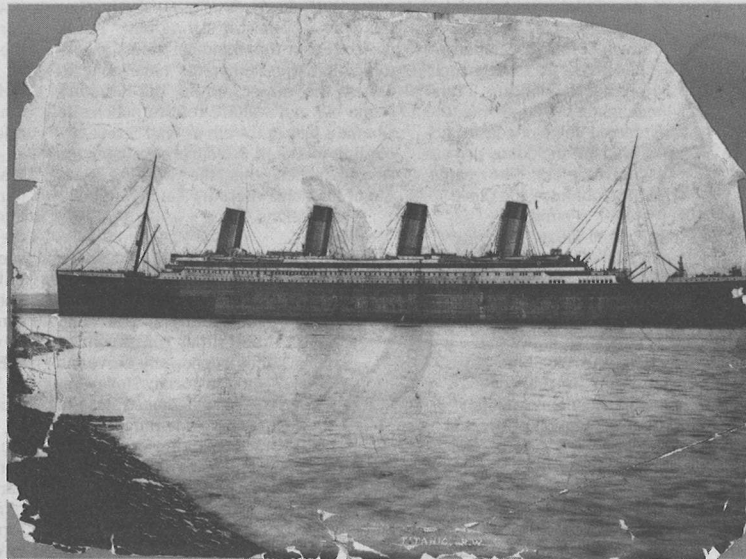
By GARY KRIST

"TONIGHT'S WATCH WILL be an easy one for you, with nothing much to do." So says the captain of the S.S. Californian to his second officer near the beginning of David Dyer's moody and engrossing new novel. But how wrong he is. The first four hours of April 15, 1912 — the "midnight watch" of Dyer's title — will turn out to be the most troubling of their lives. Even as the captain speaks those words, one of the iconic disasters of modern history is unfolding within sight of the Californian's foredeck: The R.M.S. Titanic is sinking, just miles from a ship that could possibly rescue all her

THE MIDNIGHT WATCH

A Novel of the Titanic
and the Californian
By David Dyer

323 pp. St. Martin's Press. \$26.99.



The Titanic shortly before leaving on her maiden voyage in 1912.

passengers and crew, and yet the Californian does nothing.

Unlikely as it may seem, this incident is not something Dyer has invented. In the vast literature of commentary about the real Titanic disaster, no puzzle is more baffling than that of the Californian's inaction on that cold and calm night. Over the space of an hour or so, at least three of the Californian's crew saw the distant ship fire off a series of white rockets — a widely recognized distress signal. And yet Capt. Stanley Lord, despite being told of the rockets, never gave an order to steam closer to investigate, or even to wake the wireless operator so he could radio a query. Instead, the captain merely went back to sleep in the ship's chartroom, while Second Officer Herbert Stone fretted ineffectually above decks and over 1,500 people died in the frigid North Atlantic waters just a short cruise away.

In "The Midnight Watch," Dyer — a self-professed Titanic obsessive — tries to imagine his way to a satisfactory explanation for this behavior, something that official inquiries on both sides of the Atlantic failed to provide. Judging by my spot checks against the online Encyclopedia Titanica (yes, such a thing exists, and it is voluminous), he has been thoroughly faithful to the facts, often lifting quotations and other details directly from the historical record. Nearly all his characters are documented figures who speak and act in the novel much as they apparently did in real life. The principal exception is John Steadman, a fictional reporter for an actual newspaper, The Boston Ameri-

can, who becomes consumed by the Californian episode and spends years trying to unlock its secrets. Novelists typically object when reviewers identify individual characters too closely with their creator; but Steadman, whose chapters are the only ones told in the first person, is clearly the author's surrogate, his proxy for a tireless investigation into how such negligence could possibly have occurred.

John Steadman is The Boston American's so-called body man, the staff journalist responsible for investigating the personal lives of victims of high-profile disasters. Having earned praise for his sensitive portrayals of the young women who died in the infamous 1911 Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, he now hopes to repeat the favor for the casualties from this latest tragedy. Acting on a report that the Californian is heading to Boston with a cargo of recovered corpses from the Titanic, he sets out to rendezvous with the ship before it berths at the East Boston piers. But although Steadman quickly learns that there are no bodies aboard (the Californian briefly searched for victims after the sinking but found none), he becomes intrigued by Captain Lord's impatient and evasive answers to questions about the Californian's role in the drama. "There was a story on this ship," the reporter tells himself. "I could smell it."

Steadman pursues that story through the rest of the novel, following its trail from Boston to Washington, D.C., to Liverpool and beyond, refusing to let it go, even after losing his job for neglecting to provide the kind of colorful, sensational coverage his editor demands. But

What prevented the Californian's crew from aiding a ship in obvious trouble?

Steadman is preoccupied with a subtler question — what was it that prevented Lord and his crew from going to the aid of a ship that was obviously in trouble? The captain himself provides little insight, arrogantly maintaining (against all logic and evidence to the contrary) that the ship he saw on the horizon that night was not the Titanic, and that the rockets later reported to him were not distress signals. But the more forthcoming account given by Second Officer Stone — a shy and tentative man with a "delicate sensitivity" — is hardly more enlightening. Unlike Lord, who is clearly stonewalling, the second officer seems legitimately incapable of articulating why they both failed to grasp the import of those fireworks. "I just thought they were white rockets," Stone testifies at one point. "That is all."

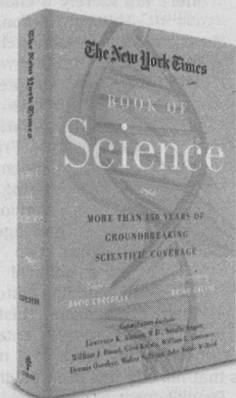
Dyer does eventually suggest a kind of explanation for what happened aboard the Californian that night, though it may not satisfy readers looking for a clear-cut solution. Ultimately, the amorphous character of the midnight watch itself may provide the only interpretation that makes any rough sense. The midnight-till-4 shift, as one character describes it, is "a time of loneliness, demons and trances." Call it the peacetime equivalent of the fog of war. In history, as in fiction, some matters — even after all the knowable facts have emerged — seem destined to remain mysterious. □

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