

## Cinnamon Diamonds

**Mark Piper**

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*This bite-sized taste of microhistory relives the invention of the doughnut.*

*Cinnamon Diamonds* is Mark Piper's brief retelling of the origin story of the doughnut. The book lends dramatic flair to the history, with moments of rich storytelling amid theatrical passages.

The story begins on a wintry evening in a Massachusetts harbor town where retired seaman Captain Hanson Gregory and his aging comrades live—though it really begins seventy years prior, on his ship *The Felix Lighter*. Onboard during a violent 1847 hurricane, Gregory came up with the idea for cutting a hole in the dough that was about to be fried for the crew. This delicious innovation forever changed the way doughnuts were made, inspiring a *Post* reporter by the name of John to interview the captain decades later.

Like the storm-tossed *Felix Lighter* itself, the plot moves swiftly, as Gregory delivers via monologue his vivid memory of making a new kind of diamond-shaped fried dough cake. The pace becomes brisk as seasickness starts to overcome the sailors, and the captain soon realizes he can punch a hole in the dough using a pepper tin for a more even simmer in the frying oil. Just as the action is coming to a head and the doughnut-toting mariner is almost killed by a falling mast, the tale-telling comes to a hasty conclusion. Sugar and cinnamon saved the day, it seems; the end. There is little sense of the larger impact that the treat will have on history, except for the captain remarking, "Everybody was delighted with how light and fluffy they were. To my knowledge they've made doughnuts like that ever since."

While the small and salty cast of characters are keenly illustrated as being "deaf as a post," having "a face like tanned leather," and "with an overbite resembling a crude can opener," Gregory's unique voice as preserved in the original article (which appears at the very end of the short story in its nostalgic newspaper form) is nowhere to be found in the retelling. Piper paints him as more thoughtful and refined, with noticeably less spunk. Instead of peppering his dialogue with bits of stream-of-consciousness and exclamation points, the Gregory of *Cinnamon Diamonds* is measured and methodical in his storytelling.

The writing becomes thick with the drama of the storm, and that will appeal to anyone fond of observing squalls from the comfort of an indoor vantage point. But descriptive clichés abound as cold air burns lungs, faces flush red, and fireplaces crackle. The prose does catch its stride with depictions of the wind and rain, enough to induce the kind of nausea the seamen must have experienced themselves. Some concluding reflections are more saccharine than the rest of the book: "He considered how doughnuts are more than a pastry. They carry with them the weight of family. And belonging."

As a bite-sized taste of historical fiction, *Cinnamon Diamonds* will appeal to anyone with an appreciation for microhistory, as well as to those who love hearing about the trials and tribulations of life at sea.

WHITNEY C. HARRIS (April 25, 2016)

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