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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ JUVENILE FICTION

Jim Morgan and the Pirates of the Black Skull

James Matlack Raney
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Age-appropriate descriptions of pirate battles spark the imagination in this gripping and enchanting adventure story full of magic, mystery, swashbuckling action, and suspense.

Jim Morgan and his band of orphans test their faith in themselves and one another when they leave the streets of London in search of the Morgan family fortune and end up battling bloodthirsty pirates and magical creatures on the high seas in this enthralling adventure.

Jim, an orphan hiding out from a greedy aunt who has taken over his dead father's house, makes his new home in a lighthouse in London. Living with him are his friends: four other orphans (the three Ratt brothers and a girl named Lacey) and a retired pirate named MacGuffy. When Jim receives word that his aunt is to be arrested for her crimes against the Morgan family, he returns to Morgan Manor only to discover that his life is still very much in danger. It's a battle of wits, sheer power, and sorcery as Jim and his gang fight for their lives against villainous pirates.

James Matlack Raney immediately and masterfully conjures up a world of magic and mystery for children with a colorful cover revealing Jim and his crew aboard a ship, sailing into the horizon. In the background looms a large sea serpent. The spooky font of the chapter titles further sets the scene for a spellbinding pirate adventure, as the descriptive and foreboding prologue introduces the legend of the Pirates of the Black Skull: "On dark nights, when the wind grows cold and the rain falls hard in London, the old pirates at the Inn of the Wet Rock spin tales as black as the weather…There is one story darker than all the rest."

The narrative flow, with cliffhanging chapter endings, continues to accelerate with each plot twist. Age-appropriate imagery is vivid enough to spark the imagination without being too gory, as with the descriptions of the pirates who attempt to kill Jim before he goes into hiding: "To a man, each had pistols shoved into cracked leather belts and naked knives at the ready, dried blood from their latest dark deeds still fresh on the blades."

Raney offers a natural exposition of the characters in the telling of this story, the second in the Jim Morgan series. Rich characterization is conveyed through the children's interactions with one another, as when Lacey decides to read her book while the Ratt brothers are arguing. Dialogue contains salty, rough, but readable pirate language. Here, MacGuffy offers words of comfort in response to Jim's dream about a crimson storm: "Well, twas only a dream, my boy. Mayhaps brought about by me stern lesson on sailin', now that I be thinkin' about it."

While the book offers alluring action scenes, Raney's themes of friendship and loyalty also shine through in numerous emotional and compelling moments. For example, Jim's guilt surfaces when Lacey questions him about his mother's locket: "Jim wished his hammock and blanket would just swallow him whole and spare him the merciless needling that pricked his insides. He sat up in his hammock and glared hotly at Lacey."

Jim Morgan and the Pirates of the Black Skull is a gripping and enchanting children's adventure story full of magic, mystery, swashbuckling action, and suspense.

MAYA FLEISCHMANN (December 20, 2013)

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