

Max and the Spice Thieves: Secrets of the Twilight Djinn

John Peragine

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In John Peragine's boisterous middle grade fantasy, a boy undertakes an odyssey to reunite with his family.

Thirteen-year-old Max's father is missing, and his mother has just been abducted, so he joins Captain Cinn and his pirate crew to work as a cabin boy, and to seek answers with their help. Armed with his rare history book, *The Secrets of the Twilight Djinn*, Max and Cinn gather motley helpers as they cross challenging terrain. Friendships form while Max learns the truth about his parents, outrunning the Twilight Army and evil djinns that threaten them all.

The book's disparate fantasy elements draw from myths, medieval guilds, and an old world spice trade, resulting in characters who sometimes clash, including a witch and her harpies, a sultan, a northern queen, and shape-shifting snow bears. The islands they inhabit are a busy amalgam with painful back stories that unfold through detailed conversations.

Amid themes of regal power and those who fight it, seafaring scenes set on Captain Cinn's *Saucy Pig* steal the show, as does the book's witty banter, and everyone's penchant for improvising bumbling, thrilling escape plans that deepen their ties to each other. Throughout, culinary delights underscore how "bland food is a crime"; they are a fun background element.

When Max discovers untamed magic within himself, his sudden power helps to steer him closer to his goals. His gradual change from a sheltered farm boy to a brave pirate-in-training comes via brisk episodes that raise enough intriguing questions to spur the next installment of the series.

With its focus on ragtag, skilled fighters and renegade sentiments, *Max and the Spice Thieves* is an entertaining island adventure.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2021)

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