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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ HISTORICAL

The Only Life That Mattered: The Short and Merry Lives of Anne Bonny Mary Read and Calico Jack Rackham

James L. Nelson
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A colorful embroidery upon the true story of three early-eighteenth-century buccaneers, this swashbuckling novel boasts an irresistible historical background-a dandified pirate captain and two cross-dressing women who joined him for two years of Caribbean marauding before they were brought to bay.

Anne Bonny, teen-aged daughter of a wealthy colonial planter, impulsively married a fortune-hunting seaman, was disinherited, torched her fathers house, and ran away to Port Royal, Jamaica, a notorious pirate haven. There this born hellion met the renowned corsair “Calico Jack” Rackham, soon abandoned her husband and, disguised as a man, sailed with her new paramour on his next voyage.

If this chronicle were not well-established fact, the next development would tax readers ability to suspend disbelief. For aboard one of their prizes was a sailor who elected to sign on with her captors: Michael Reed, who was really *Mary* Read, the true heroine of the book and its most fascinating character. Raised as a boy (for reasons of inheritance) she had already served in the British Navy and Army, where she confessed her secret to a fellow soldier and married him. After he died, she again put on mens clothes and went to sea-only to fall into the hands of the pirates, where, before long, she revealed herself, and the three of them sailed into history.

Theres adventure galore: sea battles and tavern skullduggery, clever ruses and narrow escapes, and several final dramatic twists-also true-best left for readers to discover. A few sex scenes are a tad more explicit than parents might like, which is a pity, since this tale would appeal to youngsters who have outgrown “Treasure Island.” From an adult point of view, the sexual ambiguity of the women-especially Read-might have been more deeply explored, not in any titillating modern sense but in context of their own era. Also, the portrayal of Calico Jack as a cowardly drunkard makes him a fine if slightly overdrawn villain, but turns Anne Bonny into a thrill-seeking poor little rich girl who never *quite* gets around to renouncing him until her magnificent parting shot: “If you had fought like a man, you need not die like a dog.”

The author, once a professional sailor on replicas of old brigs and frigates, has written more than a dozen books with maritime themes, including his “Revolution at Sea” series, featuring American sea captain Isaac Biddlecomb. He also presents educational performances about pirates, in the character of Black Jim. In this volume, he doesnt match the meticulous flair for detail and atmosphere that make Patrick OBrians books come so alive, but this astonishing story fairly begs for a novel-and while this one doesnt do full justice to its potential, it will satisfy anyone with a taste for seafaring adventure.

PEYTON MOSS (August 18, 2009)

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