

The Scrimshaw Ring

William Jaspersohn

Vernon Thornblad, Illustrator

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Based on an encounter that took place off the coast of Rhode Island in the early 1700s, this picture book reads like a tale passed down from grandparent to grandchild over generations. The author's rambling prose captures the tone of nostalgic description and odd detail that characterizes oral folklore.

Young William, "a fanciful boy," dreams of battling pirates with his homemade wooden sword. The glamour of his fantasies dissipates when actual pirates stage a mutiny off the coast near his home. The men come ashore to murder their captain and bury their dead. Home alone, William watches as they invade his family's barnyard and steal their livestock. Discovered by a scavenging pirate, William fears for his life, but the man is kind and gives him a scrimshaw ring from his finger.

This tale is an excellent addition to the Family Heritage Series from the Vermont Folklife Center. The author has written more than twenty children's books, including *How the Forest Grew*, a Boston Globe/Horn Book Award winner, and *The Ballpark*, a New York Times Best Book and American Book Award nominee. Here, Jaspersohn brings history to life for the young reader by offering a personal glimpse into the past through the eyes of an ordinary American. William is so typical—he plays, he makes up stories, he spies on the strange men in his backyard—that children will easily identify with his situation. For readers who are prompted to wonder about their own family histories, the publisher appends tips to help children identify family heirlooms and collect stories about them from older relatives.

The accompanying illustrations, painted in vibrant oils, add realism and gritty detail to the story. The illustrator, a painter and graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, has also designed Bendos[®], an award-winning line of bendable, posable action figures. Children interested in pirates will find plenty to absorb within these pages, most of which depict the men fighting at sea and looting on land with cutlasses in hand. Although never pictured, violence is implied, so this book is best suited to those with the maturity to place it in its historical context.

Suspenseful and dramatic, this historical fiction offering is a great way to engage a child's interest in pirates or early American History. The Family Heritage tie-in makes it an excellent book for intergenerational gift giving.

CAROLYN BAILEY (November / December 2002)

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