

WEDNESDAY, JULY 21, 2010

# 3 books about dangers at sea

BY KEN RINGLE

There's a reason why so many literary building blocks of Western culture — the Biblical stories of Noah and Jonah, Homer's "Odyssey," Jason and the Golden Fleece, Sinbad's voyages in "The Arabian Nights," Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Melville's "Moby-Dick" — are sea stories. The ocean is the great dividing line, separating the security-minded land-bound from those whose imaginations reach beyond the far horizon. You don't have to go to sea to find adventure, but it's difficult to sail blue water without discovering it in some form. The most basic testing ground is the ocean storm — nature's most awe-inspiring display of divine power. Any voyage that encounters one becomes a mythic journey.

**I** As all seasoned mariners know, when things go bad at sea, they almost always go bad at night, in the worst possible place. For the fishing trawler *Alaska Ranger*, that was losing her rudder and ultimately sinking at 4:30 a.m. Easter morning, March 23, 2008, amid gale winds, snow squalls and 20-foot waves in the bone-chilling Bering Sea. More than half the 47 aboard failed to make it into a life raft. They were strung out afloat over more than a mile, some 100 miles from the nearest land. How the Coast Guard met that challenge is Kalee Thompson's heroic tale in **Deadliest Sea** (Morrow, \$25.99). It's a bit over-reported, and she spends too much verbiage on the minutiae of fish-processing and the bureaucracy of maritime regulation. But once the rescue call goes out, you are with her every minute, weighing the vulnerability of a ripped survival suit in 35-degree water, searching the storm-whipped darkness for the flickering strobe lights of near-dead survivors, and thrusting baked potatoes against the skin of the hypothermic victims as frantic medics struggle to raise their core temperature from an icy level that has stopped the heart. The measured skill and courage of our least swaggering armed service is as inspiring to read about as it is to witness. Makes you feel good about your tax dollars.

**2** Errol Flynn would have loved to play Max Hardberger in a movie version of **Seized** (Broadway, \$25), Hardberger's memoir of a career outwitting pirates in the age of the seizure writ. When shady nations or corporate charlatans use fraudulent claims to attach a vessel and try to auction it to the highest bidder, the ship owners call on Hardberger for the modern-day equivalent of the cutting-out expeditions beloved by Patrick O'Brian's intrepid hero, Jack Aubrey. Hardberger assembles a raffish polyglot crew to sneak past officials, distract guards with tight men and loose women, and steal the ship in question back to the legal safety of international waters. It's a rollicking ride and all the more so because Hardberger, an airplane pilot, lawyer, teacher and adventurer as well as a ship captain, tells a great story, writes with genuine skill and — just for good measure — hails from New Orleans, the city of pirate Jean Lafitte.