

Teachers' Notes for *Scrimshaw*

Written by Nazam Anhar

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NAZAM ANHAR was born in Sydney, Australia. His parents came to Australia from Lebanon. Nazam was captivated by seafaring and exploration from a young age and enjoyed adventure books such as *Treasure Island*, *Captain Kidd's Cat* and *Robinson Crusoe*. As an adult he developed his interest in these areas by reading the works of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad.

Nazam studied archaeology at the University of Sydney and became interested in the history of seafaring and related ideas such as the exploration of new lands, meeting with new people, and developments in science.

Nazam believes that fiction can be an important way of introducing the study of history to young people. He thinks that an engaging story can provide young readers with an enjoyable way of learning about different historical eras, their peoples and their ways of life. He hopes that after reading *Scrimshaw*, young people may be motivated to do independent research on aspects of the historical period that have captured their interest.

Scrimshaw, an adventurous tale of seafaring and piracy in the late eighteenth century, is Nazam's second book. His first book, *Milad: The Voyage to Ophir*, also deals with seafaring but is set during the period of the Phoenician Empire, another era of particular interest to Nazam.

Synopsis

Nathan is a young scholar who craves adventure, so he is thrilled when his father, a botanist and surgeon, suggests that he accompany him on a scientific sailing trip bound for the Amazon. They set sail from Liverpool in England but after passing the islands of the Azores, their ship the *Pioneer* encounters the feared pirate ship the *Seahawk*, lead by the notorious Captain Graham. Once an British naval captain, Graham is now a ferocious pirate. The captain of the *Pioneer* foolishly engages in battle and the *Pioneer* is all but destroyed by the *Seahawk*. The captain is killed by the pirates and the sailors are offered the chance to join the pirate crew or be left adrift on the ocean without supplies. All but one of the sailors refuse to join the crew, but Nathan is taken against his will to train as a navigator on the *Seahawk*.

On board the *Seahawk* Nathan comes to know Captain Graham quite well and sympathises with his tale of injustice at the hands of the navy. Nathan also befriends two crew members, a young boy called Josh and an old whaler called Harry Skelton. Harry is a mysterious old man who carves scrimshaw (whale teeth and bone) and tells Nathan tall tales.

The crew soon becomes dissatisfied with the captain's strict rules and Nathan fears Captain Graham will be overthrown by Denning, his ruthless and bloodthirsty first mate. Soon the *Seahawk* encounters a British merchant ship and engages it in battle. The *Seahawk* is winning until Nathan bravely jams a piece of wood in the rudder so it cannot be steered. The merchant ship escapes and Nathan is accused of sabotage. The captain wants to imprison him but the other sailors want him to be hanged. Denning uses the issue to challenge the captain to a vote for leadership. The vote is very close but Captain Graham manages to retain his leadership by a small majority. Nathan is not hanged and is instead imprisoned below decks.

While imprisoned Nathan desperately thinks of ways to escape and spies a way when he finds an old sail-maker's needle. Nathan painstakingly tries to free himself from his chains. It is a race against time as the *Seahawk* heads for the Cape Verde islands, the secret harbour of the pirates where Nathan plans to escape. The next election, however, is looming and if Denning becomes captain he will have Nathan hung. Just in time Nathan is able to escape from his chains, but he is caught by Harry Skelton as he is trying to escape overboard. Harry wants to escape with Nathan and together they row a small boat to the island of São Nicolau.

Nathan and Harry make their way over the island and are pursued and shot at by Denning and his men. Skelton is shot and injured trying to save a piece of scrimshaw and they shelter in a cave for the night. Skelton is dying and gives Nathan the piece of scrimshaw, fervently insisting that Nathan take it to his brother in the port of Mindelo on the island of São Vicente. He also promises Nathan that his brother will help him return to England. Now alone, Nathan makes his way to the coast trying to avoid the pirates. After a fierce skirmish he narrowly escapes the island on Harry's hidden boat.

On his way to Mindelo Nathan is running low on supplies so stops on the island of Santa Luzia and spends two stormy nights in an abandoned hut pondering the importance and secrets of the piece of scrimshaw. When he again sets sail for Mindelo he is pursued by the pirates. He makes the port and hurries to find the tavern called the Whaler's Paradise, owned by Harry's brother. He finds the tavern but soon makes his escape as he discovers that Harry's brother is a dangerous and violent man who is dealing in stolen goods.

After escaping from the tavern, Nathan seeks refuge in an abandoned church garden and finally discovers the secret of the scrimshaw: it hides a letter that could prove the innocence of Captain Graham. He realizes Harry intended to blackmail Captain Graham and wants to ensure the captain receives the letter. Nathan returns to the harbour and is chased by Denning and his men. They close in on him but scatter when they see British marines and the warship *Perseverance*. Nathan joyfully discovers that his father is aboard this ship but is concerned because the ship's mission is to capture the *Seahawk*.

The captain of the *Perseverance* refuses to consider the information about Captain Graham that Nathan has discovered and forbids him from asking the captain to surrender. Concerned about involving his father in the battle that will ensue, Nathan defies the captain and secretly sets sail to return to the *Seahawk*. He arrives on São Nicolau and is caught by Denning and his men. A mysterious sniper shoots some of the men before Denning and Nathan have a cutlass fight to the death where Nathan is victorious. The sniper turns out to be Josh. He leads Nathan to Captain Graham's camp. Denning's men engage in a fight with Captain Graham's men but surrender when Josh reveals that Denning is dead. Nathan delivers his information to Captain Graham, who agrees to surrender if his name can be cleared.

Nathan sails back to the *Perseverance* and eventually persuades the captain to accept the surrender. Captain Graham and Josh are taken back to England where Captain Graham is absolved of his crimes. Josh finds a home with Nathan and his family and Captain Graham disappears from public life.

Writing Scrimshaw

Nazam Anhar chose the intriguing title *Scrimshaw* for his novel because it is likely to capture the interest of young readers as it is probably something that they are unfamiliar with. Scrimshaw is a form of artistic expression where artists carve pictures into whale's teeth and bones. It was a common pastime for sailors on whaling ships in the eighteenth century, when the book is set. Nazam became interested in the art of scrimshaw because of what it reveals about the interests and conditions of sailors on whaling ships from that era. The title also acts as a clue to the central mystery of the novel.

Nazam has done extensive research on this period and read many works of fiction and non-fiction to aid in the authenticity of the story and avoid the many clichés that are associated with pirate adventure stories. One inspiration was the historical writings about the voyages of

Captain Cook. The ship *Pioneer* on which Nathan first sets sail is modelled on Captain Cook's famous ship of discovery the *Endeavour*.

Nazam also researched real pirates from the era, such as Howell Davis, whose declaration of war "against all the world" appears at the beginning of the novel. Davis was a mutineer who became a pirate and led a life rebelling against the authorities and against the harsh conditions of common sailors at that time. This is echoed in *Scrimshaw* through the circumstances and actions of the pirate Captain Graham who is discriminated against due to coming from a poor background. Nazam comments that the prejudice Captain Graham encounters may make readers aware of similar situations in our own society where many people are discriminated against due to factors such as class, race, gender and religion. This discrimination can prevent them from reaching their potential in their chosen field or occupation.

Another historical detail that Nazam researched is the way pirates recruited their sailors. The way in which Nathan is forcibly recruited to the *Seahawk* reflects the real history of pirates who particularly sought men with special skills such as carpenters, musicians, navigators and surgeons. Sometimes these men were released after serving their term on the pirate ship, but often they chose to stay and become pirates themselves. When pirates were caught and brought to trial they sometimes tried to defend themselves by saying that they had been forced to join. To establish the truth of these claims the courts would ask about the behaviour of the men on board. For example whether they had joined willingly or been coerced by threats, whether they stayed apart from the rest of the crew, and whether they had willingly taken part in attacks on other ships.

Nazam's realistic depiction of the sailor's language comes from his reading of fiction from the era, as well as letters and other documents from the time such as the *General History of the Pirates* by Captain Johnson. Nazam also researched the best place to locate the pirates' secret harbour and chose the Cape Verde islands because they have a history of piracy and were described by William Dampier as being "miserably infested with pirates."

Scrimshaw also reflects Nazam's interest in the conditions faced by the sailors in this era. Particularly the way many sailors were driven to join pirate ships in an attempt to gain a greater degree of freedom and opportunity. In the late eighteenth century when *Scrimshaw* is set, the code of the pirates was often more democratic than the navy as it allowed sailors to elect their own captain, have equal treatment, and decide on the missions they would sail.

In *Scrimshaw* Nathan has a good academic education, yet is also given opportunities for adventure and discovery aboard the *Pioneer*. Nazam believes young people should balance an

academic education with practical experience of the world gained through activities such as travel and charity work. He sees the further exploration of space and the ocean depths as opportunities to extend our knowledge about the world.

Through the eyes of Nathan, Nazam Anhar shows the reader the realities of war and violence. Far from glorifying it Nazam thinks it is important to present it in a realistic way that may encourage readers to avoid violence where possible in favour of more peaceful solutions, such as Nathan's brave decision to return to the *Seahawk* to avoid a destructive sea battle. In *Scrimshaw* Captain Graham perpetrates terrible acts of violence in defiance of an authority which he sees as cruel and unjust. The reason he does this is that he has been treated terribly by others. In reading *Scrimshaw*, Nazam suggests that readers may consider how our actions can have far-reaching consequences, and an act of injustice against one person might end up hurting many others as is the case with Captain Graham. Nazam hopes that in the future we may be able to avoid creating the conditions that lead to such violent acts by making an effort to treat all people equally and fairly.

Throughout the novel Nathan is faced with many decisions and ethical dilemmas. Sometimes his own morals mean that he has to defy authority in order to do what he believes is right. This is an important concept to Nazam, who thinks that by keeping true to their conscience and principles, people can make the right decisions – even in situations where they might be surrounded by people who pressure them to do otherwise. Nathan shows this ability as Captain Graham comments that Nathan has “strength of character.” Nazam believes this means having the courage to stay true to your own convictions, even though it might cause difficulties or sacrifice. Part of this is to be aware of the effects which our actions might have on others and to avoid doing things that cause harm to others, especially in situations where it might offer an advantage or “easy way out” for ourselves. Nathan demonstrates this when he refuses to join the pirates, which makes his situation on board the *Seahawk* very difficult.

Discussion Points and Activities

While reading

- When Captain Bellamy gives the order to attack the *Seahawk* most of the sailors realise it is a bad idea. Why do you think they obey their captain anyway?
- Do you feel sorry for Captain Graham when Nathan learns his story?

- Nathan is surprised that Josh does not feel guilty about being a pirate. Why do you think Josh does not really consider if being a pirate is right or wrong?
- Ask students to imagine that they are one of the pirates voting for a captain. Students should pick either Captain Graham or Denning and write a list of reasons why they want them to be their captain.
- Harry Skelton risks his life to save the piece of scrimshaw. Why do you think it is so important to him? What secrets do you think it holds?
- Why do you think the captain of the *Perseverance* does not want to give Captain Graham the chance to surrender?
- At the end of the novel, what do you think Captain Graham means when he says Nathan has “strength of character?” What good qualities has Nathan demonstrated during his adventures?
- What has Nathan learnt about himself and the world on his travels?

After reading

- Ask students to draw a picture of the *Seahawk* in the harbour at São Nicolau.
- Ask students to design their own pirate flag that they think would terrify approaching ships.
- As a class come up with as many adjectives as possible to describe the pirates on board the *Seahawk*. Then ask students to invent a pirate crew member and write a detailed description of them using some of the adjectives from the list.
- As a class make a list of the difficult choices that Nathan has to make in the course of his adventures. For each choice discuss whether Nathan made the easy or hard choice and why you think he chose as he did.
- Ask students to plot Nathan’s journey from the Liverpool docks to the Cape Verde Islands on a map.
- Discuss with students the fact that this novel is written in the first person from Nathan’s point of view. Ask students to pick another main character and write a part of the story from their point of view. For example Nathan’s father’s account of the battle with the *Seahawk* and the capture of his son, or Josh’s account of the discovery of Nathan’s escape.

- Ask students to imagine that they are involved in the trial of Captain Graham when he returns to England. Divide the class in two and have a debate. One side could defend Captain Graham and argue that he should be forgiven. The other side could argue that he must be punished for his crimes. Both sides should provide reasons and evidence for their arguments.
- Using the internet students could research the different types of ships mentioned in *Scrimshaw* such as a frigate, a sloop, a schooner, etc.
- Using the internet students could research the different types of weapons mentioned in *Scrimshaw*, e.g. cannons, cutlasses, pistols, etc.
- Teachers, have a look at <http://www.talklikeapirate.com/howto.html> for the basics of pirate language. Write some pirate terms and definitions on the board and ask students to match terms and definitions. Then you could ask students to invent some pirate phrases using your word bank.
- Students could do a project on the Cape Verde Islands looking at different aspects of the islands. A good place to start could be http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ca/Cape_Verde_Islands