

## Reflection

My mom and my son have watched all the Pirates of the Caribbean movies together and they love them. My mom has a crush on Johnny Depp, and loves his Captain Jack Sparrow. And why not? Those dreadlocks, the eyeliner, the wobbly grin, the quest? He's cute!

I don't share their obsession, but I can understand the appeal. Pirates are inherently fascinating.

In the global tribe of computer nerds I have belonged to for 20-odd years, there is a long-running controversy as to who would win in a fight: pirates or ninjas.

It's actually about who is cooler, of course.

Some of their contrasting characteristics, according to one web site:

Pirates	Ninjas
Obnoxious and stink horribly	Can live in your house secretly for days
Put daggers in their teeth	Catch bullets in their teeth
Say "Arrrrrrrrrgghh"	Kill themselves if they make a noise

Pirates, like many outlaws, appeal to the trickster within us. We admire their mischief, their disregard for convention and authority.

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Why bathe?

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We imagine ourselves similarly free from society's conformity, adventuring on the high seas, in search of treasure.

But I want to take a little mental voyage with you.

Imagine Jack Sparrow, or if you don't have that picture in your mind, then Errol Flynn or a similarly romantic swashbuckler

Now replace his dreadlocks with a dark afro

Imagine that 4 times a day he kneels toward Mecca

His skin is brown

Instead of a sailing ship, he travels on a high-speed motor boat

And instead of a cutlass, he carries a kalashnikov automatic rifle or a shoulder mounted grenade launcher

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Picture this pirate and his crew boarding a yacht piloted by adventurous Europeans and kidnapping them for ransom -- or seizing an oil tanker or a container ship off

Northeast Africa bound for western ports.

OK, is there anyone who looks like Keira Knightley in your image now?

At what point did the imagery start to lose its charm in that retelling? Did it become scary? Did you wonder how these pirates can be stopped? Did the victims become more heroic than the pirates?

I learned recently that Somali pirates, are sometimes admired in their communities -- financing local economies and functioning as local authorities in a country with no functioning government.

Some see themselves as a sort of Coast Guard, saving now-unprotected coastlines from exploitation by foreign fishing fleets and toxic waste dumpers, or at least imposing a tax for the privilege.

And there is some truth in this story. The UN says \$300M of seafood is stolen by foreign fishers from Somalia's coast each year.

By one report, 70% of the local population "strongly supported the piracy as a form of national defense of the country's territorial waters."

What fascinates me about our fascination with pirates is how we draw the lines between who is "us" and who is "other."

When I think only of their brutal acts, I can't find any common ground. But when I think of a young man in a society that provides no prospects, who sees his brothers acquire wealth and social status through piracy and sees them attacked by warships flying the same flags as some of the trawlers stealing the coastal treasure of his homeland, the leap of imagination is not so great.

A political party called the Pirate Party was founded in Sweden in 2006 to reform patent and copyright laws and defend privacy laws. And it has spawned an international movement of Pirate Parties.

But pirates as we usually think of them aren't working to uphold a noble ideal.

Whether in olden days or modern times the choice to be a pirate strikes me as one made out of desperation at the lack of alternatives, not from romantic inclinations.

So yes, let's have fun with the fantasy of free spirits courting danger and adventure on the high seas -- and while we do so, let's imagine how we might work toward a world where those who see piracy as their best option have a peaceful alternative.

May we sail together on calm waters ... me hearties!