

3 books on the dangers of the sea today

BY KEN RINGLE
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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. 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.

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 Seattle-based fishing trawler Alaska Ranger, that was losing the rudder and ultimately sinking at 4:30 a.m. 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 Los Angeles author **Kalee Thompson's** heroic tale in "**Deadliest Sea**" (*Morrow*, 320 pp., \$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.

Errol Flynn would have loved to play **Max Hardberger** in a movie version of "**Seized**" (*Broadway*, 304 pp., \$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. Hardberger, an airplane pilot, lawyer, teacher and adventurer as well as a ship captain, tells a great story.

Hugh Rowland's dangerous water is frozen, and by most counts

his book "**On Thin Ice**" (*Hyperion*, 256 pp. \$24.99) should be as insubstantial as a snowball on a summer day. It's really one of those annoying cases of print television — a sort of typed-up version of the History Channel reality series "Ice Road Truckers," about macho freight-hauling above the Arctic Circle. Rowland's writing partner, **Michael Lent**, however, crafts reasonably good prose, and the whole ice-road trucking thing is so, well, *far out*. Apparently, gold and diamond mines and oil enterprises need supplies they can only get via winter roads scratched onto frozen lakes, ponds and sections of ocean up where the sun hardly shines. Even tropical souls will be morbidly curious about Rowland's description of driving in 68 degrees below zero, when steel axles can grow brittle and snap like icicles. Or the way ice truckers ride a wave of flexing ice that can explode if the driver coming the other way pushes his wave too fast. Thus Rowland's is less a sea story than a kind of drag race with doom. But reading about it might cool you off on the beach this summer.

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