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SKIPJACK

THE STORY OF AMERICA'S LAST SAILING OYSTERMEN

Christopher White

With only the wind to guide them, a few historic wooden sailboats called “skipjacks” break through the winter ice to dredge for oysters. The captains trim their sails, come about, and take another “lick at the reef.” It could be the 1890s, but this evocative scene is a familiar view along the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States, known worldwide for its oysters, crabs, and striped bass. Called watermen, the captains of this fleet are the last commercial fishermen in North America to harness the wind. After 500 years, the Age of Sail has come down to a handful of boats sequestered on two islands in the Maryland half of the Bay.

SKIPJACK: The Story of America's Last Sailing Oystermen (St. Martin's Press; November 2009; \$25.95) is a compelling portrait of this vanishing American tradition and rural village life, as seen through the eyes of several lively and maverick characters -- unforgettable men and women -- who make their living harvesting oysters from the Chesapeake Bay.

Part maritime adventure, part environmental saga, **SKIPJACK** grew out of a lifetime fascination with Chesapeake watermen. Christopher White spent his boyhood exploring the waters and wetlands of the Bay, dreaming of becoming a marine biologist. This passion led to his

writing of *Chesapeake Bay: Nature of the Estuary*, the definitive field guide to the area.

Subsequently, as a journalist, White began talking to oystermen to take the pulse of the seafood industry and the oyster fleet—both in dire straits.

This led to **SKIPJACK**, for which White lived and worked among the skipjack captains and their families for two years on their picturesque islands, on which man and nature have lived in step for centuries. All this, however, is in jeopardy. With nearly one billion dollars in annual harvests, the Chesapeake is the nation's most productive estuary but is threatened by overfishing, disease, and mismanagement. Like the canary in the mineshaft, the decline of the skipjack is a barometer of the health of our coastal fisheries and small-town life across America.

SKIPJACK spends a pivotal year with three of the best skipjack captains

- Wade Murphy, third-generation captain of the swift *Rebecca Ruark*,
- Stanley Larrimore (*Lady Katie*), longtime rival of the Murphys at the skipjack races,
- and Art Daniels (*City of Crisfield*), the patriarch of four generations of sailors,

as they battle nature and each other to help control the fate of their island villages and oyster fleet. Setting aside their rivalries halfway through the season, the captains rally to combat the state officials who have mismanaged the harvest, by allowing modern gear (and by giving sportfishing precedence over oystermen). With so many obstacles, it is not certain whether these three captains—and the rest of the fleet—will survive the season. The future of the North American sailing culture depends on their success.

“Skipjack is a compelling story about how the wisdom of the past can help us protect the future of our fisheries,” says Trevor Corson, author of *The Secret Life of Lobsters*. “If you savor seafood, White’s chronicle... is a tale you need to hear.”

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