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Ahoy, mateys!

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Ahoy, mateys!

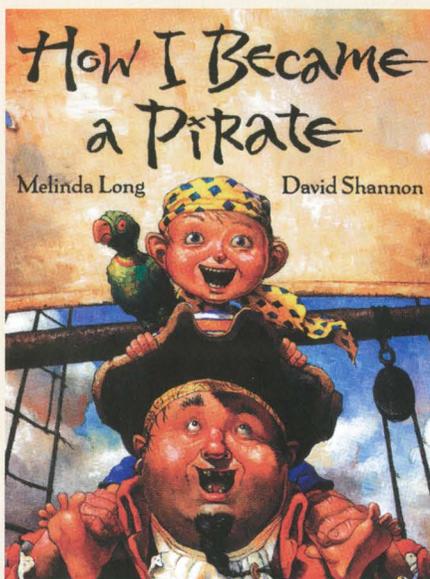
Children's book rides crest of pirate mania onto best-seller charts

Melinda Brown Long says the secret to the success of her latest children's book, *How I Became a Pirate*, is the same as the secret to good comedy: It's all in the timing.

Long, a 1982 Furman graduate who says she's been fascinated by pirates since childhood, chose to explore the topic through the tale of young Jeremy Jacob and his encounter with a horde of not so bright but oh so earnest pirates. Jeremy thrills to their

swashbuckling, free-spirited, no-rules lifestyle — until he realizes what he's missing back home.

The book, cunningly illustrated by Caldecott Honor-winner David Shannon, was published by Harcourt, Inc., on September 1



Melinda Long

— which is where the timing comes in.

First, one of the summer's hit movies was *Pirates of the Caribbean*, a rollicking story of hijinks on the high seas that starred heartthrobs Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom. Then, with the help of a boost from syndicated columnist Dave Barry, "Talk Like a Pirate Day" on September 19 (same date every year, me hearties) drew widespread attention, including a feature on National Public Radio. And just one day earlier, on September 18, the seventh incarnation of "Survivor" premiered on CBS with a pirate theme — even though Rupert, the cast member who most looked the part, eventually walked the plank.

The result of this harmonic convergence of pirate mania and the release of Long's book? Through Christmas, *How I Became a Pirate* had spent 11 weeks in the Top 10 on the children's books best-seller list of the *New York Times*, alongside

books by such notables as Lewis Carroll, J.K. Rowling, Dr. Seuss and Madonna.

"Suddenly, pirates are hot," Long says with a trace of wonder. "And it's great that we happened to publish at the same time."

For Long, an eighth-grade language arts teacher at Tanglewood Middle School in Greenville, *Pirate* is her most successful book to date. Having previously produced *When Papa Snores* (2000, Simon & Schuster) and *Hickup Snickup* (2001, Simon & Schuster), she seems to have the children's book formula down pat.

She traces the start of her writing career to a rainy day when she was 6 years old — and a moment of inspiration on her mother's part. After hearing quite enough of Melinda's complaints about being bored, crafty Mom grabbed a typewriter, placed her daughter in front of it, handed her a pile of rubber stamps with animal characters on them

and said, "Here. Write a story about these things."

Which the youngster proceeded to do. And she's been writing ever since.

When she started writing seriously, Long says, "I tried everything — short stories, poems, romances, you name it. But I kept coming back to children's books." She says she always had a knack for making up stories, and her interest was further piqued at Furman in a children's literature course taught by Nelly Hecker, who now chairs the education department. "She was a great teacher who made those stories come alive," says Long.

Long actually signed with an agent in 1986, but it wasn't until 1997 that *When Papa Snores* sold. *Hickup Snickup* and *Pirate* followed in short order.

Once a publisher buys a children's book, Long says, it can take three years or more for it to be published. "You've got production work, and the rough sketches of the art work, and constant revisions, both to the text and the art," she says. "It can take a while, but it's really fun to watch each book progress and come together."

Seeing how the illustrator, whom the publisher chooses, interprets her words is also a treat, she says: "It's amazing how sometimes the artist almost reads my mind and produces an illustration that exactly matches the way I envisioned the scene."

While she has ideas for more children's books targeted to the preschool and early elementary years, Long also aspires to write for a slightly older crowd. She is working on a historical novel, designed for middle and high school students and based on old family tales, about a Southern girl's experiences at the onset of World War II.

"I'm hoping to have a chance to work on it during the summer," she says.

— Jim Stewart

■ **MARRIAGE:** David Allan Baillie and Jenny Lalatiana Rakotoharisololo, June 19 in Antananarivo, Madagascar, and July 5 in Gaffney, S.C. David is director of athletics at Asbury College in Wilmore, Ky. ■ **BIRTH:** Steven and Kay Adams, a son, Thomas James, August 21, San Ramon, Calif.

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Next reunion in 2007

Tim Gaffney of Birmingham, Mich., has been promoted to vice president of the Eastern region for Automotive Marketing Consultants, Inc. (AMCI). He is also a race-car driver for Team Lexus in the Grand Am

Cup. ■ **Ken Watson** of Kennesaw, Ga., is a senior software developer with Universal Tax Systems, a tax software company. ■ **Michael Wollinger** has been elected senior vice president at First Citizen Bank in Hendersonville, N.C. ■ **BIRTH:** Gary and Kelly Fryda '88 Lee, a son, Jacob James,

January 10, 2003, Kennesaw, Ga. Gary is chief executive officer of the Atlanta-based FlexLight Networks.

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Next reunion in 2008

Vern Bahm is an operations research analyst in the U.S. Army and is stationed at Fort