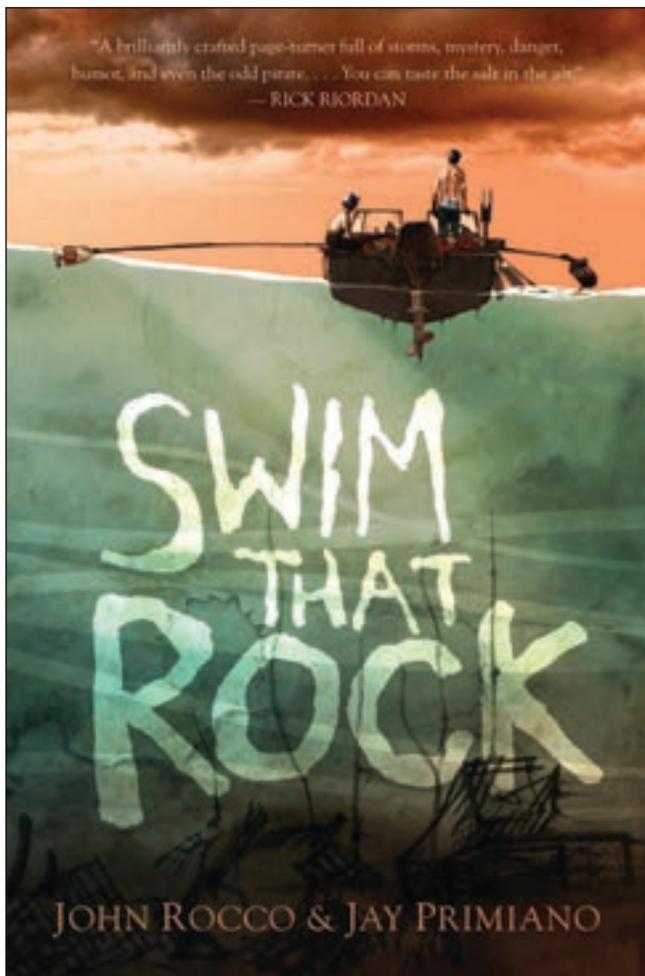


# SWIM THAT ROCK

JOHN ROCCO  
& JAY PRIMIANO



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## About the book

When his dad goes missing, fourteen-year-old Jake refuses to think he may have lost his father forever. But suddenly, nothing in Jake's future seems certain, and his family's diner may be repossessed by loan sharks. In Narragansett Bay, scabbling out a living as a quahogger isn't easy, but with the help of some local clammers, Jake is determined to work hard and earn enough money to ensure his family's security and save the diner in time. Told with cinematic suspense and a true compassion for the characters, *Swim That Rock* is a fast-paced coming-of-age story that beautifully and evocatively captures the essence of coastal Rhode Island life, the struggles of blue-collar family dynamics, and the dreams of one boy to come into his own.

### Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help your students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.



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## Discussion Questions

1. Right from the start, readers of *Swim That Rock* are pitched into the middle of the action: a hurricane is brewing, a body is missing, a knife is in hand. How do the authors sustain that sense of immediacy throughout the novel? Why do you think they chose to write in the present tense and use a first-person narrator?
2. According to Captain, the “Law of Finds” justifies his taking engines off boats during a hurricane. Why does Jake decide “this is wicked wrong” (page 11)? What do you think?
3. According to Jake, the Department of Environmental Management, or the clam cops, “mainly make life difficult for fishermen” (page 12). Do they have another purpose as well? What service do they provide to nonfishermen?
4. Why is Jake convinced that his father is alive, even though everyone else, including his mother, believes he is dead?
5. Seeing his mother struggling with her grief, Jake “can feel the small tug at the bottom of my stomach, telling me to put my arms around her” (page 36). But he ignores the impulse. Why won’t Jake comfort his mother?
6. Why does Jake’s mom want to move to Arizona? Why is Jake determined not to go?
7. “When you have the rake in your hands,” Gene tells Jake (page 61), “you may be in a boat, but you have to feel your way down to the end of that pole. . . . That’s where a quahogger’s head needs to be.” Take another look at the rake and pole pictured in the book. How do you think you would be able to follow Gene’s advice?
8. Some of Jake’s classmates call him Unco, short for uncoordinated. Why does he think he deserves this nickname? Do you? Why or why not?
9. The Riptide is more than just a diner. Why do the fisherman in town gather there? For Darcy, what makes it a “safe haven” (page 33)?
10. Before Barrington Beach opened to clammers, wholesalers were paying around twenty-two cents apiece for quahogs. Afterward, they are offering only a dime. Why has the price dropped so drastically? What has happened to the supply of quahogs? What do you think has happened to the demand for them?

11. Rhode Island is a small state, but its social divisions can run deep. Why do most quahoggers have little respect for wealthy boat owners? Are their feelings justified? Why or why not?
12. Discuss the significance of the title. Although other quahoggers tell their young pickers to prove themselves through dangerous stunts in the water, Gene doesn't. "You've already got your own rock to swim," he tells Jake (page 72). What is Jake's rock? How does he swim it?
13. This novel's authors are multitalented. John Rocco is also an illustrator. Jay Primiano is also a poet. Where in the story do you see signs of an artist's eye and poet's turn of phrase?
14. Fishermen thrive on competition, but loyalty is also honored in Jake's world. Why does Russell, the quahog buyer, pay more than the going rate for Jake's catch? What does Vito mean when he says, "I'm all for community, just like Jake here" (page 284)?
15. "I don't want to be a fisherman," says Jake, surprising himself (page 227). Why do you think Jake doesn't want to be a fisherman? Did his revelation come as a surprise to you, too? Why or why not?
16. "You and your mom and the memory of your dad . . . that's my family," Gene tells Jake (page 290). How have they become a family? What sort of future do you think they'll have together?

## About John Rocco & Jay Primiano



Photo by Denise Rocco-Zilber

**JOHN ROCCO** is the author and illustrator of several books for children, including *Blackout*, a Caldecott Honor Book. He is also the illustrator of *The Flint Heart* by Katherine and John Paterson and the jacket illustrator of Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. John Rocco lives in Los Angeles.



**JAY PRIMIANO** is a poet, performer, and author. Like his co-author, John Rocco, Jay Primiano was raised on fishing boats. He started working on a commercial lobster boat at age eleven and still has a deep connection to the waters of Rhode Island, where he spends much of his free time teaching his daughters how to catch dinner. He lives in Jamestown, Rhode Island.

Learn more at <http://www.swimthatrock.blogspot.com>

## Q&A with Co-authors John Rocco and Jay Primiano

*How long have you known each other, and how did that connection serve as inspiration for *Swim That Rock*?*

**JOHN:** I met Jay when he was rebuilding his boat at my neighbor's house. I asked if I could help. I must have worked hard enough to impress Jay, because he offered me a job on his quahogging boat. I was eleven at the time.

**JAY:** We've been friends for thirty-five years. I also started working when I was eleven years old on my neighbor's lobster boat. I recall how that chance opportunity came my way when a huge winter storm brought the tides up high enough to float some wooden lobster pots onto the salt marsh at the end of the street where I lived. I hauled the pots back to my house, read the name that was burned into the wooden frames, grabbed the phone book, and called the owner. He offered me a job on the spot and said I was "an honest kid." I saw that same character in John years later when I met him.

**JOHN:** So about four years ago we decided to start writing down our stories; all the things we experienced as kids. This led to the development of *Swim That Rock*.

*What was the actual writing process like between the two of you?*

**JOHN & JAY:** We wrote everything together.

**JOHN:** It's interesting because at first it went very much the same way as when we worked on the boat. Jay would dig up all the stuff from the bottom, and my job as a picker was to sort it all out. Put all the quahogs in the right buckets and throw the rest away.

**JAY:** And that's how we started writing. I would write about four thousand words every morning and e-mail it off to John, and he would cull through it to pick out the literary pearls.

**JOHN:** Yes, we started remotely because we lived about 150 miles apart. Once we had a bunch of stories written down, we would get together somewhere for about a week and look at what we had.

**JAY:** When we weren't writing together, most of our writing took place between 5 a.m. and 7 a.m., before our wives and children woke. Interestingly, that is the same time we used to wake up to go fishing back in the 1980s. The early hours were appropriately inspirational for a couple of fishermen-turned-storytellers.

**JOHN:** Toward the end of the writing process, when we were really honing in on our story, we would get together and alternate on the keyboard. One of us would type while the other would pace the room, and together we would talk out every word.

**JAY:** Talking out the words, phrases, and use of colloquial language helped us recall some hilarious experiences that would leave us laughing until our sides hurt. We have a very unique friendship through the experience of fishing, and by sharing it through writing we have become even closer friends. We are very lucky.

*What is the significance of community and family in this novel, and was it inspired by firsthand experience?*

**JOHN:** Jay and I both grew up around fishermen. The men in this book serve as the male elders for Jake.

**JAY:** And there were the women who worked in the diner where we ate breakfast every morning. They could be very maternal, sitting in the booth with us while taking our order just to make us feel good about ourselves.

**JOHN:** When you're eleven years old and you spend ten to twelve hours a day with a bunch of fishermen, the time, work, and scars become a rite of passage. In our culture, this sort of experience began to decline during the Industrial Revolution. Before the factories sprung up, boys would go to work with their dads and learn their crafts. This no longer happens, and as a result there has been a shift in our culture.

**JAY:** In the beginning of the book, Jake starts out as a boy, and by the end he becomes a man. This can only happen with community and family. The people we knew on the water were, in many ways, much like our family.

*What are the origins of the book's title, *Swim That Rock*?*

**JOHN:** When I first started working on Jay's boat, he pulled up a giant rock in the bullrake. He handed the rock to me and told me to swim it over to Billy McCagney's boat about 200 yards away. He said that Billy was building a rock wall in front of his house and needed the rocks. It was another opportunity for Jay to challenge me.

**JAY:** Sorry about that, John. Actually, it's true, that's how we came up with the title, but it goes beyond that. It's about Jake's personal challenge in dealing with his feelings and beliefs, even when he thinks no one else believes in him. It's not unlike swimming with a big rock. I think we all have our own rock to swim.

*All fishermen have their "big fish" story. What is your proudest moment on the water?*

**JOHN:** It was two days before Christmas. I had my own boat, and I was eighteen years old. Jay was at home because he had lost his anchor, and he was generally in a bad mood. I was working in Barrington River, and I dug up the lost anchor. Later that day, I found a great clamming spot to dig. That night I wrapped his anchor in Christmas paper, brought it to his house, and told him about the spot I had found. On the day before Christmas, Jay and I went out to my spot and had an amazing haul of quahogs. We spent all the money we made that night on steak dinners and Christmas presents for our family members.

**JAY:** That may have been my best day too, because it was such a great gift! Another day of fishing that I remember was when I was with my dad, who was in his late sixties at the time, and we were fishing for striped bass. We were out in the middle of a pack of boats, and we were catching stripers like crazy. No one else around us caught anything. We caught seventeen striped bass, all more than twenty pounds! There was a two-fish limit on striped bass at the time, so we kept the two biggest fish and gave all the other fishermen two fish each. It felt great.