America’s fascination with pirate movies is as old as movies themselves. The very first pirate movie was a sixteen-minute short film made in New York in 1908 called *The Pirate’s Gold*. In those days, movies were entirely in black and white, and there was no sound. In order to have a soundtrack, a musician performed while the movie was shown. There were captions to tell the audience what the characters were saying.

Nearly twenty more pirate movies were made before 1935’s *Captain Blood* ushered in an entirely new era of screen pirates. While still in black and white, it had an impressive soundtrack that was nominated for an Academy Award. At two hours, its running time was the same length as a modern movie. It starred Errol Flynn as the pirate Captain Blood of the title, and the success of the movie made him a star. It also meant that thousands of kids across America would run around bouncing on their beds waving imaginary swords! A few years later, Flynn starred in another pirate movie, *The Sea Hawk*, which was also very popular.

In the 1940s, many pirate movies were based on books of classic adventure. There were several remakes of *Treasure Island*, a book by Robert Louis Stevenson, as well as movies more loosely based on works by Jules Verne and others. These movies were intended for an adult audience and usually had a romantic plot as well as an adventure plot. Some of them, like *Frenchman’s Creek*, were based on new bestselling books and starred the most popular female stars in Hollywood.

Over the next thirty years, more than twenty more pirate movies were made in the United States. However, by the 1960s they had taken a different tone. While the first pirate movies were action/adventure movies for all ages, later pirate movies became children’s movies. There were cartoon versions and spinoffs featuring various characters from children’s books like *Pippi Longstocking* and *The Adventures of Davy Crockett*. Some were comedies that made fun of the original genre. Many of them were poorly produced and were not very popular.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of the comic pirate movie was 1987’s *The Princess Bride*. In the movie, a young man becomes the Dread Pirate Roberts when he’s captured at sea. Eventually he returns to save the girl he loves from marrying the villain. However, the entire story is very tongue-in-cheek, with even the action sequences played for laughs. Though *The Princess Bride* was both funny and popular, it seemed to mark the end of the pirate movie as an adventure story.

In the late 80s and 90s, there were another half dozen or so pirate movies that were intended for children, including *Muppets Treasure Island* and the animated *Treasure Planet*. One of the few attempts to make a more mature pirate movie was Steven Spielberg’s *Hook*. It suffered bad reviews and failed to attract viewers in the theater, despite starring Robin Williams. It seemed that the pirate movie as an adventure story for all ages was done.

All of that changed in 2003 with the release of *Pirates of the Caribbean: the Curse of the Black Pearl*. Not only was it a box office blockbuster, but it earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor for Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow. While the movie is undeniably funny, it is a classic adventure story for all ages rather than being purely a comedy or children’s movie. In fact, some parents thought it was too scary for young children. The spooky parts were decidedly not played for laughs, and the action was quite intense. While the plot was very conventional, featuring the well-worn plot of a young man who must rescue the girl he loves, it was so well done that it resulted in both good reviews and tremendous popularity.

Since then, there have been three sequels and a smattering of other pirate films, most of them remakes of earlier adventures. Americans are in love with the pirate movie again, and we will have to wait and see what the next great pirate story will be!