

Interview with Dennis Powers

Author of Treasure Ship: The Legend and Legacy of the S.S. Brother Jonathan

Reader Views talks with Dennis Powers, author of the historical nonfiction book **Treasure Ship: The Legend and Legacy of the S.S. Brother Jonathan**. Dennis is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us today Dennis. We are excited to hear about your book **Treasure Ship: The Legend and Legacy of the S.S. Brother Jonathan**. Would you start by giving us a brief overview of what your book is about?

Dennis: *Treasure Ship* continues the theme of true courage and the sea. When the *Brother Jonathan* struck an uncharted reef over 140 years ago off Northern California, the disaster caused the greatest loss of life then of any West Coast maritime disaster.

(Note: The name *Brother Jonathan* was well-known at the time, as this was the Revolutionary War character that later became today's Uncle Sam.)

With impending death, for example, one newspaper editor calmly wrote his will and a love letter, both of which were found later. Carrying gold worth \$50 million in value, salvors and even governments tried to find the ship that sank so close to shore—but for 125 years this ghost ship remained hidden. An intrepid band of venturers finally discovered the ship and its gold, but also found controversy, litigation, and lawyers in the process. The U.S. Supreme Court had to make the final call.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your incredible chronicle of the historic **S.S. Brother Jonathan**?

Dennis: While working on my book, *The Raging Sea*, I read the 1993 front-page article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, entitled, “1865 Ship Discovered: Gold, Booze, and Camels on Board.” I said to myself, “That’s my type of story,” and filed it as the first clipping in my research file. Over time, I followed the developments of this amazing odyssey in the hunt for the lost gold and knew that this would be the next book to write about.

Juanita: **Treasure Ship**'s combination of historical facts with in-the-moment adventure is garnering rave reviews in the industry. Would you comment on your compelling writing style and the unique perspective of your book?

Dennis: I've written a number of books, including being on a national book tour, and have “paid my dues” in always looking at the next project to write a better book. I truly enjoy writing and this is a

continual process in learning ones craft. I attend writers' conferences and give workshops; I love reviewing history and it's predictions for the future. This particular book allowed me to look closely into sailing on the seas over a century ago and the life of treasure seekers today.

Juanita: Dennis, there are three distinct parts to this remarkable story. What are the three stories within this story, and how do you weave a coherent timeline in "Treasure Ship"?

Dennis: The actual events and chronological timetable broke down into three parts: the final voyage; finding the *Jonathan*, and "lawyers and treasure." Over time, the search for the missing ship continued unabated with the allure of sunken treasure; once the vessel was discovered, anyone with a connection to the *Jonathan*—whether a descendant or a state government—wanted to own part of the gold.

Juanita: What type of ship was the *S.S. Brother Jonathan*? How many ships like this one were operating in 1865?

Dennis: The ship was a sidewheel steamer that was over a half-city block long. These sidewheelers, otherwise known as paddleships, were the largest wooden ships built. Powered primarily by steam-driven paddle wheels over three-stories high on each side at midship, the vessels had three masts, the largest of which soared nine stories into the sky—in case an engine malfunctioned. Sidewheel steamers were prevalent during these times, of which the *Jonathan* was not only durable but also luxurious for its time.

Juanita: Where was *S.S. Brother Jonathan* going? What treasures was it carrying?

Dennis: Although the ship had once been owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt for the Pacific route during California Gold Rush days, it now operated on the West Coast out of San Francisco. The *Jonathan* on this voyage was heading north to Portland and Vancouver with strongboxes of gold coins, a huge safe of gold, and what the passengers carried themselves, valued at \$50 million dollars today. However, the salvors didn't find all of the gold, and the safe with a couple crates of gold are still down on the bottom.

Juanita: Dennis, how many people survived the shipwreck? What type of information did you find regarding the survivors? What stood out for you regarding their stories?

Dennis: Only nineteen people out of 244 passengers and crew survived in what still is one of the worst maritime disasters on the West Coast. Their improbable survival in an overloaded surfboat during monstrous seas was one of the heroic stories in the book. I was able to gain very good information about this from the various newspaper accounts published in 1865 and on as to the survivors' stories. Even now, I find the specifics of their passage to be captivating. Their descriptions of what it was like to be on the ship, then trying to survive in high seas, was amazing.

Juanita: Why did it take so many years to find the shipwreck?

Dennis: For all those years, searchers worked on the assumption that the ship had broken up on the uncharted reef that it had first struck. Although the *Jonathan* disappeared from view, trapped air and the strong underwater currents carried it for two miles from the reef before the ship actually struck bottom. For over 125 years salvors searched the seas and came up empty handed.

Interestingly enough, fishermen thought the area was great for fishing, although hard on their equipment: Snagged and lost over time, the salvage divers later discovered huge fishing nets surrealistically draped over the *Jonathan*.

Juanita: Significant to this historical story was the ensuing court battle over the ships treasure, which led to a crucial precedent that still governs all treasure hunters. Would you explain?

Dennis: Among the court disputes was a long battle between the salvors and the State of California over who owned the ship and its treasure. California had passed a law holding that any historical ship sunk within its three-mile limit (measured from the farthest reef) was its property. Although the state never searched for the ship or knew the location, California wanted title so bad that it (through its State Lands Commission) sued for ownership under its laws in a series of legal battles that took four years. The U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled that federal law governed—not a variety of state laws—and interpreted long-standing maritime law in favor of the salvors. This decision still is a landmark verdict for treasure hunters.

Juanita: Would you describe the life of a treasure hunter?

Dennis: These adventurers are motivated by the quest, and they aren't interested in working in an eight-to-five, white-collar job. The search, "adrenalin" rush when there, and their dreams are the driving force. At the same time, however, they have to raise moneys for their ventures, be business-like, deal with attorneys, and earn a livelihood to pay their bills just like the rest of us. It is when they are close to that abandoned gold mine or near that sunken ship that life has its fulfillment. There is a bit of the treasure hunter in all of us, and it is this connection that we share from the stories of their adventures.

Juanita: Along side the court battle over ownership, another battle broke out over the authenticity of the gold bars that still is unsettled in the minds of treasure hunters today. Would you elaborate and add your thoughts?

Dennis: A fisherman—as the story goes—netted valuable gold bars before the ship was even discovered. A "leading" madam of San Francisco owned the bullion, and she was on board the *Jonathan* with her "seven soiled doves." She presumably died when the ship went down, but reports even surfaced later that she had somehow lived. A rare public controversy between the leading numismatic experts of this country erupted over the authenticity of these extremely valuable gold bars, that only the very wealthy had the money to own. The twists and turns of these arguments, including "The Great Debate" at a numismatic conference, headlined the ship again and its stories. My research indicates that the gold bullion was from the *Jonathan*.

Juanita: Dennis, you had an incredible task of compiling an overwhelming amount of data surrounding this story that spans almost 150 years. Would you tell us about the research process and how long it took?

Dennis: Once I became so interested in the story, I interviewed the major personnel involved in the *Jonathan*'s successful discovery, researched important historical accounts, and uncovered important, non-public documents in the National Archives, including from the regional archives in Seattle, Washington, and San Bruno, California. I spent several years committed to the research of

this particular project before undertaking its writing. Reading these old documents—and then discussing them with the present day salvagers—was important to the book and personally rewarding.

Juanita: Did you feel like you were on a type of treasure hunt yourself?

Dennis: Yes, the successful discovery of the entire *Jonathan* story was a treasure hunt in itself. As with the readers, I also found myself vicariously living the adventures of the salvors and divers for all those years as they searched for the sunken gold in the deep—and then discovered it. As another part of the story then took a strange twist, I understood their feelings and responses to what had taken place.

Juanita: What part of this story fascinates you the most?

Dennis: It is difficult to say what part fascinates me the most. From the dignity of those facing death to the courage of the divers trying to find the ship, the story kept taking a strange or unanticipated turn. I am still amazed by the divers who plummeted into the depths in their hunt for the missing gold—and the risks were more than the sea's darkness, icy cold temperature, and intense pressure. A large ling cod attacked and began swallowing one of the divers, who had to cut himself free. A twenty-foot octopus swam after a mini-sub used in the recovery. And the stories continued.

Juanita: Dennis, why do you feel it is important to recover stories such as this from the history books and archives, and re-live them so many years later?

Dennis: Understanding history gives us a window into the future, and the old adage of “What we don't know is what we haven't read” underscores this knowledge. What still amazes me is that regardless of time, people have the same motivations, whether it is to experience a grand adventure, saving another in peril, or finding a treasure. Given this common denominator, the past and present merge with the future and we gain understanding—as well as hopefully enjoying a good tale along the way.

Juanita: What can we learn from the people involved in this story?

Dennis: The person responsible for the discovery of the *Jonathan*, Don Knight, was a high-school teacher. Over 100 people invested in the project and they were not wealthy individuals. The salvors had a dream of finding treasure, were forced to fend off legal strikes, and yet they prevailed. These were common folks—like all of us—who reached uncommon levels of success. Once the gold was found, however, greed took its course as people began to fight on all levels to claim that they owned the treasure.

Juanita: Dennis, you switched careers about 15 years ago and started writing books, and now have six published in the nonfiction genre. What compelled you to begin a writing career, and why do you enjoy writing nonfiction?

Dennis: Since I was a young boy growing up, I have always loved reading books of all types and writing. I have written newspaper and magazine articles ranging from single life and legal matters

to cooking, office romances, and overseas travel. I write fiction and short stories, and my poetry has been published. I love the process. I actually switched careers to teach so that I would have more time for my reading, writing, and researching. Nonfiction is interesting to me, because I learn about lives, living, and different eras in the process.

Juanita: Do you have a particular interest in ships, shipwrecks and the sea?

Dennis: Yes, I have had this interest in the sea dating back to my youth when I waterskied off the New Jersey coast and sailed in regattas. After my education, I bodysurfed from the California coast to Hawaii. Whether fishing for salmon, white-water kayaking, or wilderness hiking, my interests are with the outdoors.

Juanita: Do you have plans for future books?

Dennis: I have several other projects underway, including another book that will be released in August 2007. Entitled *Sentinel of the Seas*, this book is about the most dangerous, expensive, and remote lighthouse built in this country. This project goes into what life was like in the old days when lighthouses, shipping, and ships ruled the day.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Dennis: My website, dennispowersbooks.com, has more information, and I also post at times on Amazon.com with its Author Connect program.

Juanita: Dennis, thank you for talking with us today. *Treasure Ship* sounds fascinating, and we encourage readers to look for your book at local and online bookstores, as well as *Sentinel of the Seas*, later this year. Lastly, do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share with your readers today?

Dennis: As a final word, I would like to thank Reader Views and all of the folks who have been interested in my books and in the stories that are told. I enjoy my contacts with my readers as we share in common these tales of the sea—and the quest by the people who are involved.