

# **The Hungry Ocean: A Swordboat Captain's Journey Short Guide**

## **The Hungry Ocean: A Swordboat Captain's Journey by Linda Greenlaw**

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# Characters

Linda Greenlaw is captain of the Hannah Boden, a one-hundred-foot-long swordfishing boat. She describes herself as a woman, a fisherman, "a thirty-seven-year-old tomboy" who, after a wonderful childhood, "took seriously the assertions of my parents that I could do whatever I liked with my life, become anything I wanted!" Being a professional fisherman is not what they had in mind, but her success in her chosen profession is legendary. Greenlaw says she has never experienced a problem because of her sex and is surprised others would wonder about gender as a potential issue.

She speculates that perhaps she has been "too busy working to worry about what others might think." Fishing is a childhood love, reinforced by her first experience with professional fishing during her college years.

At first she was assigned cooking chores, which she hated. When the deck was a hand short, she got the opportunity to fish, learning the skills necessary to catch swordfish from the deck up. After receiving a degree in English and government from Colby College, Greenlaw chose to continue fishing rather than attend law school. Seventeen years later, she is ready to use her writing skills to describe the life she leads as a swordfish captain.

Greenlaw's ability to find fish, insuring her own and her crew's livelihood, seems almost magical. In reality, she uses every bit of knowledge gained in her years aboard ship, combined with all the information she can gather from the instruments aboard the Hannah Boden, to find that place in the ocean which seems most likely to produce a catch. She understands the currents, water temperatures, moon phases, weather reports, and conversations among the other captains. She uses all this information to find the forty miles of ocean she feels is likely to produce fish. Because the crew recognizes this ability, she is able to maintain focus and discipline among her five crewmembers. They nickname her "Ma," granting her status as the head of the family aboard the ship, the decision-maker, and the person responsible for all their lives.

The crew consists of five men ranging in age from nineteen to forty. Greenlaw says she chose this trip to write about because each of these crew members is interesting enough for a story of his own. They hail from as far south as Grenada to as far north as Newfoundland, with diverse backgrounds to match. Each man has talents and abilities that give him a special place on the ship.

Peter is able to make up the leaders quickly and precisely. He and Charlie repair and recoil the leaders as they come back on board, ready to reattach for the next set.

Ringo is a talented cook, preparing good meals for the crew. As the fish come aboard, he guts them, getting them ready to be iced down. Kenny is responsible for the buoys and the engine room, as well as for putting the fish into the bins on ice to preserve them. Greenlaw drives the boat, maintaining the correct pressure on the line as she reels it in, removes leaders with no fish on them and attaches them to the clothesline to



send them back to Peter and Charlie. Each member of the crew must be ready to step in and help if another member needs help.

Each must be there to do his part of the job.

Bob Brown, the owner of the boat, is an ex-fisherman and knows what must be done to have a successful trip. He takes a chance on Greenlaw, making her captain of her first boat. She rewards him by working tirelessly to live up to the standards he has set. He checks on the progress of the trip each evening by radio, giving Greenlaw and the crew a feeling that they have a permanent attachment to the land, even when all they can see is ocean. Though he is no longer fishing, Brown maintains a presence aboard the Hannah Boden through the training he has given Greenlaw.



## Social Concerns

Linda Greenlaw is the only woman swordboat captain in the world. She had been captain of her vessel for thirteen years when Sebastian Junger described her competence and skill as a captain in *The Perfect Storm*, bringing her widespread attention. Following the publication of *The Perfect Storm*, Greenlaw was inundated with questions regarding life on a swordfish boat.

She ultimately recounted one such trip in her book, *The Hungry Ocean*. Using and understanding the navigation and weather equipment, as well as plotting course and distance by hand, Greenlaw explains that she is able to decipher and use the information her electronic gear was designed to produce. Combining this data with information from captains already fishing she is able to be more precise about where fishing might be successful. The safety of the ship is also dependent upon the technology aboard.

Greenlaw tells us that at sea anything within six miles of the ship is watched carefully.

She says, "At sea an approaching target at a distance of six miles on the radar screen, *The Hungry Ocean: A Swordboat Captain's Journey* moving at a speed of ten knots, represents a possible threat to safety and, is closely watched to insure clear passage. Here in the city, vehicles ride on one another's bumpers at breakneck speeds and no one gives it a second thought." For the duration of the trip the crew will have no communication with the rest of humanity except for short conversations on the radio. Cell phones are out of range. The ship becomes a tiny island, dependent upon the skill of the captain to maintain its safety and productivity.

The isolation of the crew and vessel makes the crew's respect for the captain all-important. The captain earns that respect by careful preparation of the ship before it sails, as well as by decisions made during the voyage. There must be enough food for six people for thirty or more days. There must be enough bait, line, and tackle to fish for two weeks. There must be enough spare parts to allow repairs to the ship and equipment as needed at sea. When the captain has made sure all the physical needs are met, she must then take care of the emotional ones. She is the arbitrator and psychologist, the head of the family, the "one on the pointy end."

All captains dread "crew problems"— racial ones are especially difficult to deal with. Ringo makes Greenlaw aware of a problem carried over from the previous trip—Carl is calling Peter names, including "filthy nigger." Peter uses common sense and restraint because he is much larger and older than Carl. He does not want to hurt Carl, but warns Greenlaw that he is near breaking point. Greenlaw knows this cannot continue. First she talks to Peter, assuring him that the name calling will stop. She then talks with Carl, and is surprised to discover that he is willing to be cooperative if she asks him to, suggesting the solution to her. The immediate problem is solved but not resolved. A permanent solution will have to wait until Carl matures and learns tolerance. His suggestion gives



the appearance that he will eventually accomplish this. This trip they will not come to blows, but the problem is not permanently erased.

Greenlaw is the kind of captain who assumes responsibility for day-to-day decisions that will help the crew to maintain discipline and focus. She sets the watch schedule, making sure that each man is treated fairly. The first and last watches are the favored times, since sleep is less interrupted. The first night out Greenlaw takes the entire watch to give her crew time to recover from their time onshore. Since it takes five days to steam to the fishing waters, after the first night the crew assumes responsibility in order to give the captain time to sleep. Greenlaw apportions work based on the crew's abilities, making sure each man works where he is most efficient and able. Knowing and respecting each man's talents and abilities helps maintain a good working relationship under difficult conditions.

# Techniques

The use of backflashes, called "mugups," allows Greenlaw to describe other fishing trips, general life aboard the vessel, and other events that explain the life of a swordboat crew. The first of these describes Greenlaw's relationship to the other members of her family and events in her childhood that contributed to her decision to go to sea. She and her family lived on an island on the coast of Maine, giving her and her brother and sister access to woods and ocean.

Greenlaw developed a fascination for the sea, daydreaming about islands, fish, and ships. The mug-ups also describe other fishing trips, other crews, and events that aid in understanding life on the sea. Superstitions, medical conditions, and remedies six hundred miles from land, and childhood experiences comprise these chapters, each set between chapters about the present trip.

These give a feeling of the rhythms of a trip.

The work is interspersed with periods of rest and reflection.

Descriptions of weather conditions, how they affect the ship and crew, and the danger posed by not respecting the weather is included in a mug-up. Greenlaw's descriptions of the use of the electronic equipment aboard the Hannah Boden, and all the instincts and the folklore available to her and other captains, give a vivid picture of the chances these fishermen are taking each time they leave port. She admits that I "still watch the birds. And if I ever see one doing the backstroke, I'll know all hell is about to break loose."



# Themes

In the preface to *The Hungry Ocean* Greenlaw tells us that "people are intrigued with my life as the captain of the Hannah Boden . . . and their interest often results in questions about the day-to-day details of a typical month-long swordfishing trip to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland." She goes on to say that while fishing is a thrill, "the greatest challenges any captain faces are often keeping the crew focused, making sure the vessel remains mechanically sound, and returning safely to port." Until Sebastian Junger wrote *The Perfect Storm*, an account of the loss of the *Andrea Gail* with its crew in the "Halloween gale" of 1991, Greenlaw says that she "fished for seventeen years and nobody cared."

To survive, the crew of the *Hannah Boden* must respect one another and work together. Decisions are made, first to ensure the survival of the boat and crew, and then to ensure a good catch. The boat is a business in a dangerous occupation where life can end, leaving no trace. The story of a successful swordfish expedition depends on the decisions made by the captain and the ability of the crew to work as a team. For a month, this group of six is a family, supporting each other physically and emotionally. Respect of the crew for the captain, whose decisions mean a successful or less successful trip, takes center stage. The crew depends on the captain's skill, first to make the vessel ready for the trip and then to be sure that it returns with enough fish to pay the expenses and the crew's wages. Wages are a percentage of the money left over after expenses are deducted. The fishing season lasts only a few months; therefore, each trip is important to maintaining the crew and ship for the year.

Survival at sea hundreds of miles from land in cold, stormy weather also depends on the skill of the captain. Decisions made, such as when to slow the vessel and turn into the wind, are a matter of life and death.

The ship is necessarily on a time schedule, since the best fishing is often synchronized with the phases of the moon, but failure to recognize the approach of a dangerous storm can cost the lives of the crew. Conditions on the ship during the setting of the line and its retrieval are difficult. The crew gets very little sleep, and the captain must make decisions when she is groggy from lack of sleep.

The abilities of the crew are tested to the limit for the period of two weeks when the ship is setting the line, steaming back the forty miles to the beginning of the set, then retrieving the line and the catch. This operation takes twenty hours to complete. The other four hours are spent on watch or getting sleep for both crew and captain. The fishing must be completed as quickly as possible so that the fish can be returned to port while in peak condition. Packing the fish in ice to maintain their freshness allows the trip to continue long enough to fill the hold. A full hold means a successful trip.

The relationships among the crew are similar to that of a family. Each member has his place in the hierarchy and must carry his responsibilities to a successful conclusion if the unit is to prosper. This cannot be accomplished unless each member of the crew





respects the other members. When a problem arises, the captain must make decisions that help the crewmembers to remain focused on the job at hand, ensuring the survival of the ship, and the successful harvest from the sea. That the success of the trip depends on teamwork is emphasized over and over by Greenlaw's descriptions of the actual operation of the vessel. The act of setting forty miles of line, with all the necessary hooks, bait, radio buoys, and lines requires skill. The retrieval of the line with its catch requires all members of the crew to work as a unit, each man doing his part to insure the smooth operation of the ship. A tangled line can mean the difference between a successful trip and an unsuccessful one.

The relationship among the various other captains, their conferences promptly at 10 A.M. each day, and the help each is willing to give the others is an interesting side note.

Within the bounds of competition for the best places to fish, the captains are willing to aid one another with weather information, water temperatures, rate of catch, and so on. But this is a business. A captain cannot invite all the other boats to his forty-mile fishing spot and still have a successful trip; therefore, each captain feels he or she must be careful when reporting the catch in the 10 A.M. radio conferences. Responsibility to the boat's owner and the crew, and their own part of the earnings necessarily play a role in the decisions made to share information. With that in mind, each captain must weigh his words, since in case of an emergency, the other captains are his, or her, only hope of aid.

# Adaptations

Linda Greenlaw has read her book for two audiocassette adaptations, one abridged and one unabridged.



## Key Questions

The Hungry Ocean is about the ability of the captain and crew to return, alive, from a month-long fishing trip with enough fish to pay for the trip. This requires teamwork, good decisions by the captain, and the respect of the crew for the captain and vice versa. The fact that the captain is a woman can have no bearing on the trip if the trip is to be successful. Linda Greenlaw is the only female swordfish boat captain in history.

Gender discrimination does not play a part on her ship. She has the respect of her crew because she has earned it, making good decisions and finding the fish the boat is dependent upon.

1. Find other examples of women who have been successful in a field that is usually reserved for men. What characteristics do these women share with Linda Greenlaw?
2. Why do you think Linda allows her crew to call her "Ma"?
3. What character traits does Kenny have that make him a good crewmember?
4. Describe the characteristics that Linda Greenlaw has that make her a good captain. Are these character traits or do you think she developed these characteristics as a result of her career choice?
5. Why do you think Carl is so prejudiced against Peter?
6. The appendix gives an account of the financial end of the trip. From the information given, do you think the captain and crew were fairly paid for the work they did?
7. Linda Greenlaw describes her feelings and those of the crew after spending twelve days setting and retrieving the forty-mile line. She discovers at this time that Charlie is quite sick. Why did she then allow him to make the decision about whether to stop fishing and return to port or to continue fishing?

How does this compare to her decision about Uncle Patty?

8. Explain what life lesson Greenlaw learned from her experience with the family outhouse.
9. Linda Greenlaw refuses to arrive in port on Saturday night since the fish cannot be unloaded until Sunday morning. Compare this decision to the same decision she made in the Caribbean, a time when she reached dockside three hours before the time to unload.
10. Compare Linda Greenlaw as captain to Captain Ahab in Moby-Dick.

## Literary Precedents

There are stories of fishing trips in other dangerous areas. *Nights of Ice*, by Spike Walker (1997), tells eight true stories of disaster and survival of fishermen off the coast of Alaska. Considered to be the most dangerous place on earth to fish, these fishermen battle subzero temperatures, winds that go over one hundred miles per hour, huge waves, and other horrors. It is a compilation of stories of many survivors of the disasters that occur while fishing in these conditions. King crab fishing, considered the world's most dangerous profession, is described in *Working on the Edge: Surviving in the World's Most Dangerous Profession: King Crab Fishing on Alaska's High Seas* (1993), also by Spike Walker.

## Related Titles

The Hungry Ocean is Linda Greenlaw's only book. It could be considered a sequel to The Perfect Storm, however, since it was inspired by questions asked by readers of Junger's book. The Perfect Storm ends in tragedy, The Hungry Ocean, with survival.

Greenlaw's purpose in writing this book is to answer the questions often asked about what happens in the day-to-day experience of a normal fishing trip.

The Perfect Storm by Sebastian Junger chronicles the last trip to sea of the Andrea Gail, sister ship to the Hannah Boden. The Andrea Gail is lost at sea during the "Halloween gale" in 1991. Junger has used what records are available to piece together an account of the last fateful trip of the Andrea Gail. Greenlaw credits Junger's references to her, calling her "one of the best captains, period, on the entire East Coast" and with giving her the opportunity to tell her story.

She goes on to say, "fishing is just plain dangerous work, and tragedy on the ocean is often unrelated to weather. . . . I tell the true story of a real, and typical, swordfishing trip, from leaving the dock to returning."

That Greenlaw chooses to tell a story with a happy ending makes her account unusual.



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