

Linda Greenlaw

Swordboat captain, best-selling author, islander, guardian
Discussed: jail, George Clooney, and catching 300-pound fish

At the Porthole Restaurant on Custom House Wharf in Portland, Captain Linda Greenlaw clasps her hands on top of a table. She looks still, but excitement is radiating from her, the taught energy of a line that's hooked a fish. "I'm going to the International Seafood Show in Boston on Sunday and I'll be wearing my badge that says *Hannah Boden*—people are gonna get it."

What they're going to get, is that Captain Greenlaw is back on her boat. Greenlaw has never owned the 100-foot fishing vessel *Hannah Boden*—the boat made famous by Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*—but only because she never wanted to. *Hannah Boden* is more like a long-lost lover than a wife. All she has invested "is a pair of boots."

This fall, after years of separation, they'll be reunited for sword season. While *Hannah Boden* has been crabbing, Linda Greenlaw has been lobstering as well fishing for two seasons on the Discovery Channel series, *Swords: Life on the Line*. Since she last set foot on the *Hannah Boden*, she has also written seven books, three of which—*The Hungry Ocean*, *The Lobster Chronicles*, and *All Fishermen Are Liars*—became *New York Times* bestsellers. Greenlaw also became the legal guardian of the now-17-year-old girl named Sarai who began working on Greenlaw's lobster boat when she was 14. "It feels like a long time—in a good way," says Greenlaw, smiling across the table at Sarai, "but we can't tell you about that story because it spoils the next one."

That story, about life on Isle Au Haut with Sarai, will be Greenlaw's ninth book. Her eighth, *Seaworthy: A Swordboat Captain Returns to the Sea*, hits shelves June 1.

Maine: *Where did you grow up and where do you live now?*

Linda Greenlaw: All my school years my dad worked at Bath Iron Works. His family is from Isle Au Haut, and we were raised between Isle Au Haut and Topsham. In the summers on Isle Au Haut we had no plumbing and no electricity—it was an outhouse and kerosene lanterns. I live there now. This winter there were only about forty people on the island, and we're basically related to half of them. It's a rugged existence. What I like about it is the same thing I don't: The solitude. I love the solitude when it comes to writing, because I welcome any distraction. I don't like to write. So if someone mentions they're going somewhere I jump up and say, "I'm in! I can put this away!" Having nobody around when I'm trying to crank a book out is best for me.

M: *Your seem to take a lot of pride in Maine.*

LG: My family is really proud to be from Maine. With my sister's business, Sea Bags, she's been diligent about keeping everything in Maine. She could ship the bags to China, but she's committed to this state and I'm the same way. The two present owners of the *Hannah Boden* are both from Maine. Jon Williams is from Westport, and Angelo Ciocca is the owner and president of Nova Seafoods. I'm going to work with them to try

to fish the boat out of here. It would be nice to have a fleet back in Portland on a working waterfront. One swordboat has been sitting here through winter, but hasn't been fishing.

M: *Do you consider "fisherman" your primary identity?*

LG: It's weird. When I introduce myself to a stranger, I always introduce myself as a fisherman. My heart says I'm a fisherman, but my checkbook says I'm a writer. I think of swordfishing captains as a very elite group. I always did, even when there were thirty or forty guys. Now it's a handful of people. But I was always just another fisherman. I would talk to guys on the radio for years before meeting them. We were in Puerto Rico and this captain, Larry Horn, a real Southerner, comes over to the boat. I introduce myself as Linda and he can't believe it. He says, "No, where's Linda that runs this f**ing boat?!" And my crew says, "That's her!" He says, "Huh, the little girl with the big boat." I'm 5'2". All the years of talking on the radio he imagined—well, I don't even want to think about what he imagined. But it's like when I go to a book signing, I always get, "We thought you'd be a lot bigger." People sound disappointed and I feel like I have to come up with something to say to restore their perception of my stature!

M: *You made the news in fall 2008 when you were arrested for illegally fishing Canadian waters with your vessel the Seahawk, during the taping of the second season of Swords. How did it happen and did you feel that it had to be addressed in Seaworthy?*

In Sebastian Junger's book, *The Perfect Storm*, the author introduces Linda Greenlaw as "one of the best sea captains, period, on the East Coast." At the time, Greenlaw was the only female swordboat captain. Thirteen years later, she is still the only woman in the wheelhouse.





“There are a lot of similarities between swordfishing and living on an island, but between writing and fishing, the only thing they have in common is that they’re both hard work.” —Linda Greenlaw

LG: I was happy to have an opportunity to write about it—it was devastating at the time. I was fishing with Discovery and I would’ve been happy if it aired, but it wasn’t aired for contractual reasons with the boat owner.

I was inadvertently hauling in Canadian water. The tough call was to my mother: “Don’t be alarmed, but I’m under arrest and the boat’s been seized. I’m going to Newfoundland. I’m going to jail.” Because it’s a two-day steam from where I was arrested to where I went to jail, the owners of the boat had bail money in place for the boat and for me, so I was released in Newfoundland.

I’m certainly not the only person that’s ever been fishing on the wrong side of the line. With our sophisticated electronic charts

the 200-mile limit around Canada should be clear, but really it’s an imaginary line—you can’t see it when you drive over it—and I was on deck working. The judge believed me, but I didn’t have anything to say other than it wasn’t intentional. No one has ever been acquitted on those charges. The judge decided I was not duly diligent. I was caught, I went to court, I was found guilty, and I paid a \$38,000 fine. It was an expensive bump in the road.

M: *How has swordfishing changed over the course of your career?*

LG: One of the biggest changes in the last fifteen years is that the fleet has really diminished. Ten years ago, there might be thirty or forty boats swordfishing east of the

Grand Banks. Last year there were six. I always felt that the fish were very healthy, but there was a lot of opposition to that thought. Now, jumping back in after having left for ten years, the news is all good. The North Atlantic swordfish stock has been totally rebuilt, it’s a sustainable fishery. And I’ve seen the size of the fish change: They’re bigger. Last season we had a 171-pound average fish. That’s gigantic. I never saw anything like that in the 19 years I fished before. We’re also using circle hooks. That’s one of the regulations that changed. It’s mandated now. Fish can’t get gut-hooked, which kills them, because they don’t ingest the hook. You can’t catch as many small fish and 90 percent of the ones you do catch are alive—not so when I was fishing before. If you catch a juvenile fish, you pop the hook out and you throw it

back—safe release. It’s good for the industry and it’s huge for the fishery. It’s also become more politically correct to go swordfishing, which makes me feel better. I can do what I love without being looked at as an outlaw. I never thought I was one.

M: *What makes you so good at catching fish? Does the boat matter?*

LG: Some people talk about this “fish sense,” like an extra sense—they can smell the fish. I don’t believe that I have a whole lot of innate ability for catching fish. My fishing has been very scientific. I ran the *Hannah Boden* for six years and I was always very proud to run that boat. *Hannah Boden* is top-of-the-line, class the whole way, head and shoulders above many boats in the fleet. So it’s really going to be a huge asset, it’s more capable. And I’ll be able to attract different crew members because it’s a better boat. Everybody wants to go on the boat where they have a chance to catch more fish.

M: *Why did you leave the Hannah Boden?*

LG: The owner of the boat at the time rigged it over for red crabs because there was more money in crabs then. I ran the boat red-crabbing for a year and I just didn’t enjoy it. It required me to have a bigger crew and hauling traps is just not as interesting as fishing hooks. You know, a hundred fathoms of water is right there, it’s been right there for the last billion years, it’s going to be there tomorrow. But fishing hooks is different. It’s a lot more involved, it’s a lot more interesting, it’s a lot more exciting catching a fish that’s alive—big—and can be one-on-one at some points.

M: *How hairy is swordfishing? Do you really land a lot of sharks?*

LG: Commercial fishing tops the list of most dangerous jobs, but swordfishing is particularly dangerous because of the distance we travel. If a storm’s coming into the Gulf of Maine you go in. We can’t do that, so we end up riding the storms out. Last year for the Discovery Channel, I left Barnegat Light, New Jersey, on a boat called the *Bjorn II*. It was seven days and seven nights of steaming just to reach the fishing grounds—a week of going in a straight line. We’re too far off for a helicopter if you need a Medevac—they don’t have enough fuel to get out there. You do catch sharks, mostly blue sharks, which are a menace. There’s no market value for them. If you make a bad set and you just catch sharks, it’s a long, expensive day. We

don’t mind seeing makos because we can sell those. Everything else is released. I’ve caught a few hammerheads in my life. It’s dangerous if you’re assigned to pull them all aboard, get hooks out of them, and release them. If you’re catching a lot of them, the deck’s full of sharks squirming around and trying to bite you, but everyone knows not to stick their foot in a shark’s mouth.

M: *Has your exposure or Swords changed the hiring process for you as captain?*

LG: Yes, the hiring changes drastically for a TV series. Originally the show was being made for NBC and I’m sending them names and they’re saying, “We need more names. None of your guys are passing our background checks.” And I’m saying, “I love that guy! He’s like my best friend! I can’t go fishing by myself!” So I ended up with a made-for-TV crew, guys that are friends, but totally different than a crew I would’ve taken if I was just going to catch fish.

M: *In film adaptation of The Perfect Storm George Clooney plays William Tyne, the captain of the Hannah Boden’s sister boat, the Andrea Gail, which went down in what meteorologists called “The Perfect Storm” in 1991. There’s an implied romantic interest between you. Was there truth to that? How did you feel about the way they portrayed your life?*

LG: There wasn’t a romantic interest, but seeing as it was George Clooney, I was cool with it. When I found out he was playing the lead I begged Warner Brothers to let me play myself—seriously begged. I guess they wanted a real actress—something about selling tickets. A female swordboat captain could have been pretty bad, but Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio did a good job playing me.

And Warner Brothers did a pretty good job of portraying the industry as a whole, but they chose to portray the captain and crew of the *Andrea Gail* as making a conscious decision to steam into a storm that they knew might kill them—for a dollar bill. That’s just not what happened. Whatever did happen, happened quickly, and the boat was never found, so the book was speculation. Then the movie was Hollywood’s take on speculation. But the movie was a beautiful tribute to a way of life that I’ve enjoyed since I was 19. It also opened the eyes of the public to the lifestyle and industry—bringing a lot of positive attention to commercial fishing in the same way that *Deadliest Catch* does now. I’m really excited to be involved in *Swords* for the same reason. A housewife in

the Midwest can turn on the TV set and get really into this show, maybe never having seen the ocean, but she might say, “You know what, I want my kids to know where their food comes from. I think I’ll buy swordfish and then they’ll watch this show and get it.” That’s probably the best-case outcome, but hopefully it raises some awareness that people are a thousand miles from the dock risking their lives and their livelihoods trying to supply you with a very healthy food.

M: *After The Perfect Storm you were approached by publishers who wanted to hear your side of the story. Were they delighted when they found out this swordboat captain was an English and government major who graduated from Colby College?*

LG: I was getting calls saying, “You know, we’re intrigued with this female fisherman thing you have going on. Do you want to write a book?” And I said, “No, not so much.” They wanted a ghostwriter, but I said, “No. I can do it myself.” And they said, “Oh really? You’ve never written anything else.” But I was confident that I could do it. I am usually overconfident. That’s one of my problems—I can do anything, right?

That first book, *The Hungry Ocean*, went to number five on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The next one went to number two.

M: *What is the significance of the title?*

LG: When they erected a cenotaph, a big fisherman’s memorial in Gloucester, they asked me to speak, to do a sort of a christening. And I was really proud to do that, but then people were saying, “Well, *The Hungry Ocean* is about gobbling up boats and people.” That’s just not the way I think of it. I guess it shows you some of the richness of the English language.

The title came from a Shakespearean sonnet, and of all of my books it’s still the title that’s the most meaningful to me. *The hungry ocean*—to me it refers to the ocean’s ability to totally consume. I’ve been fishing since I was 19; I have been consumed by it and being consumed by something you love is very fulfilling. As proud as I am to be doing an interview, or to be recognized as a best-selling author, there’s nothing that makes me prouder than saying I’m a fisherman. +

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