

Living Great Lakes

by Jerry Dennis

About the Book

The Living Great Lakes is the most complete book ever written about the history, nature, and science of these remarkable lakes at the heart of North America. From the geological forces that formed them to the industrial atrocities that nearly destroyed them, to the greatest environmental success stories of our time, the lakes are portrayed in all their complexity. The book, however, is much more than just history. It is also the story of the lakes as told by biologists, fishermen, sailors, and others whom the author grew to know while traveling with them on boats and hiking with them on beaches and islands.

The book is also the story of a personal journey. It is the narrative of a six-week voyage through the lakes and beyond as a crewmember on a tall masted schooner, and a memoir of a lifetime spent on and near the lakes. Through storms and fog, on remote shores and city waterfronts, the author explores the five Great Lakes in all seasons and moods and discovers that they and their connecting waters -- including the Erie Canal, the Hudson River, and the East Coast from New York to Maine -- offer a surprising and bountiful view of America. The result is a meditation on nature and our place in the world, a discussion and cautionary tale about the future of water resources, and a celebration of a place that is both fragile and robust, diverse, rich in history and wildlife, often misunderstood, and worthy of our attention.

Praise for the Book

"Jerry Dennis has written a masterwork. *The Living Great Lakes* is passionate, poetic, and meticulously researched. Its voice beckons like a trusted friend: look, discover, enjoy. Dennis's intelligent writing brims with humanity. To say this is a book about the Great Lakes is like saying *Moby-Dick* is about whales. This is history at its best and adventure richly described. A magical book, hugely enjoyable and entertaining."

—Doug Stanton, author of *In Harm's Way*

"Jerry Dennis is a master of conveying appreciation of nature, a love for the outdoors, and the glory that is northern Michigan. He makes it clear on almost every page that he is in the first rank of America's nature/travel/fishing authors."

—*The Flint Journal* (Michigan)

Courtesy of Thomas Dunne Books

About the Author

Title: Jerry Dennis

Known As: Dennis, Jerry C.; Dennis, Jerry
American Writer (1954 -)

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Personal Information

Born October 12, 1954, in Flint, MI; married; children: two sons. **Education:** University of Louisville, B.A., 1981. **Addresses:** Home: Traverse City, MI. Agent: Michael Congdon, Don Congdon Associates, 156 5th Ave., Ste. 625, New York, NY 10010. **E-mail:** jcdennis@charter.net.

Career

Full-time writer, 1986--.

Awards

Author of the year, Michigan Library Association and Center for the Book, 1999; alumnus of the year, University of Louisville, School of Arts and Sciences, 2003, for literary achievements; Olson nature writing award, Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Ashland College, 2004, for *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas*; Great Lakes culture award, Michigan State University, 2004, for *The Living Great Lakes*.

Works

- *Canoeing Michigan Rivers: A Comprehensive Guide to 45 Rivers*, maps and photographs by Craig Date, Friede (Davison, MI), 1986, revised edition, 2001.
- *The Best Bicycle Tours of Eastern Canada: Twelve Breathtaking Tours through Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Québec, and Ontario*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 1992.
- *It's Raining Frogs and Fishes: Four Seasons of Natural Phenomena and Oddities of the Sky*, drawings by Glenn Wolff, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1992.
- *A Place on the Water: An Angler's Reflections on Home*, illustrations by Glenn Wolff, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1993.

- *The Bird in the Waterfall: A Natural History of Oceans, Rivers, and Lakes*, drawings by Glenn Wolff, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1996.
- *The River Home: An Angler's Explorations*, illustrations by Glenn Wolff, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1998.
- *From a Wooden Canoe: Reflections on Canoeing, Camping, and Classic Equipment*, illustrations by Glenn Wolff, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Leelanau: A Portrait of Place in Photographs and Text*, photographs by Ken Scott, Petunia Press (Charlevoix, MI), 2000.
- *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas*, Thomas Dunne Books (New York, NY), 2003.

Contributor to anthologies. Contributor to periodicals, including *Smithsonian*, *Audubon*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Field and Stream*, *Wildlife Conservation*, *Orion*, *Sports Afield*, *American Way*, and the *New York Times*.

Sidelights

Jerry Dennis is a writer who focuses primarily on nature and its impact on human culture, especially in and around the Great Lakes region of North America. Born in Flint, Michigan, in 1954, Dennis earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Louisville in 1981. By 1986 he was writing full time. His writing has been featured in various anthologies, and he contributes to a number of periodicals, including *Smithsonian*, *Audubon*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Field and Stream*, *Wildlife Conservation*, *Orion*, *Sports Afield*, *American Way*, and the *New York Times*. Dennis has received a range of awards and honors throughout his career, including being named author of the year in 1999 by the Michigan Library Association and Center for the Book and University of Louisville, School of Arts and Sciences alumnus of the year in 2003.

In 1996 Dennis published *The Bird in the Waterfall: A Natural History of Oceans, Rivers, and Lakes*. In it he gives explanations for a variety of water-related issues, including why water color changes, why lakes freeze, and why rivers meander. Reviews for the book were quite positive. Jennifer Henderson, writing in *Booklist*, found the book "poetic and personal for casual readers," as well as "informative for students." Chelsey Baker, reviewing the book in *Earth*, felt that the writing was geared "for everyone." Baker concluded that "when you have finished reading it, you will not only know more, but you may become as charmed with water as Dennis is."

He followed this with a more personal book in 1998 called *The River Home: An Angler's Explorations*. The book is a collection of five short stories and nineteen essays on how fishers are influenced by their trade, family, and their environment. Dennis highlights his travel experiences and thoughts on fishing at night, in perfect silence, and even in the nude. Reviews were mixed for the personal account. A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* noted some "salient observations about life." The same contributor, however, found many

of the stories "uninspired." In a *Booklist* review, John Rowen thought that the book's "fresh writing and marvelous insights merit special attention."

In 1999 Dennis published *From a Wooden Canoe: Reflections on Canoeing, Camping, and Classic Equipment*. The book takes a simple approach to enjoying nature without involving much modern technology, from cooking on a cast-iron skillet to paddling a wooden canoe. Reviews were mostly positive. Jeff Grossman, writing in *Library Journal*, remarked that readers "looking for a lighthearted view of the joys of 'roughing it' should enjoy" the book. Rowen, writing again in *Booklist*, thought that Dennis "writes concise, well-informed, witty prose." Rowen added that "his tone is friendly and appreciative of tradition."

Dennis published *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas* in 2003. As a crew member on the schooner *Malabar's* six-week trip around the five Great Lakes, Dennis covers the events of the trip as well as the history of these large inland lakes and their ecological and geological states. Reviews were also positive for this book. *Booklist* contributor Gilbert Taylor commented that by covering all five lakes, Dennis fills "his chronicle with a breadth that makes it a fine introduction to the lakes' ecology." A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* concluded that *The Living Great Lakes* is "an enticing homecoming party for the Great Lakes, with a welcome-back for some readers, and an invitation for others."

Dennis told *CA*: "As long as I can remember I wanted to be a writer. It's sort of mysterious because my parents were not avid readers (though they are now) and owned only a couple small shelves of books. But I received books as gifts and made liberal use of the local library, so at an early age I became thoroughly besotted with written words. By age ten or twelve I couldn't imagine a more worthy activity than writing books.

"I have had three reliable influences/inspirations: the people in my life, the books I read, and the places I go. Apparently all three are necessary. When I neglect one or more of them, my creative faucet turns off.

"One of the biggest surprises as a writer also turns out to be a powerful motivation: The act of writing is an act of discovery. I never know quite what I think or precisely how I feel about a subject until I write about it.

"My favorite of my publications is usually the most recent one, but my sentimental favorite will probably always be *A Place on the Water*, which is a collection of personal essays about growing up--and growing into--the outdoors. It was the first book in which I dared to step upon a stage and tell the stories that meant the most to me. The experience was powerful and transformative, and shaped every book that followed."

Further Reading

Books

- Dennis, Jerry, *A Place on the Water: An Angler's Reflections on Home*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1993.
- Dennis, Jerry, *The River Home: An Angler's Explorations*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1998.
- Dennis, Jerry, *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas*, Thomas Dunne Books (New York, NY), 2003.

Periodicals

- *Booklist*, September 15, 1992, Jon Kartman, review of *It's Raining Frogs and Fishes: Four Seasons of Natural Phenomena and Oddities of the Sky*, p. 108; September 1, 1993, Jon Kartman, review of *A Place on the Water*, p. 26; November 1, 1993, review of *A Place on the Water*, p. 534; September 1, 1996, Jennifer Henderson, review of *The Bird in the Waterfall: A Natural History of Oceans, Rivers, and Lakes*, p. 47; December 1, 1996, Donna Seaman, review of *The Bird in the Waterfall*, p. 630; June 1, 1998, John Rowen, review of *The River Home*, p. 1705; March 15, 1999, John Rowen, review of *From a Wooden Canoe: Reflections on Canoeing, Camping, and Classic Equipment*, p. 1283; February 15, 2003, Gilbert Taylor, review of *The Living Great Lakes*, p. 1034.
- *Books in Canada*, summer, 1992, review of *The Best Bicycle Tours of Eastern Canada: Twelve Breathtaking Tours through Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Québec, and Ontario*.
- *Canadian Geographic*, September, 2003, review of *The Living Great Lakes*, p. 98.
- *Earth*, December, 1997, Chelsey Baker, review of *The Bird in the Waterfall*, p. 60.
- *Geotimes*, May, 2005, Jack Manno, "Riding the Great Lakes," p. 44.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, January 1, 2003, review of *The Living Great Lakes*, p. 36.
- *Library Journal*, March 15, 1992, Elizabeth Skinner, review of *The Best Bicycle Tours of Eastern Canada*, p. 115; September 1, 1996, Judith Barnett, review of *The Bird in the Waterfall*, p. 205; February 15, 1999, Jeff Grossman, review of *From a Wooden Canoe*, p. 159; January, 2003, Maureen J. Delaney-Lehman, review of *The Living Great Lakes*, p. 148.
- *Nature Conservancy*, fall, 2003, Katherine Sharpe, review of *The Living Great Lakes*.
- *New York Times*, October 22, 1990, Jerry Dennis, "Touring Eastern Canada by Bicycle," p. 12.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 4, 1998, review of *The River Home*, p. 199; November 25, 2002, review of *The Living Great Lakes*, p. 50.
- *Quill & Quire* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), June, 1992, review of *The Best Bicycle Tours of Eastern Canada*, p. 30; June, 1992, review of *The Best Bicycle Tours of Eastern Canada*, p. 30.

- *Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 1999, Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, review of *From a Wooden Canoe*, p. 9.

Online

- *Ken Scott Photography Web site*, <http://www.kenscottphotography.com/> (November 27, 2007), author profile.
- *Up in Michigan Web site*, <http://upinmichigan.org/> (November 27, 2007), Jacob Powers and Megan Ward, author interview.

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Author Essay

The Great Lakes Are Not Reservoirs by Jerry Dennis

In the battle between sacred places and commerce, the sacred rarely stands a chance.

North America's Great Lakes, which have suffered plenty from commerce, were also once sacred. The Ojibwe believed that Lake Superior, with the largest surface area of any lake in the world, was ruled by Misshepezhieu, the Great Lynx. That deity was both benevolent and malicious, fitting qualities for a body of water that can change from tranquil to furious in a moment. Those moods were a fact of life - still are - for anyone who lives in the region.

The Great Lakes are like five beautiful and charismatic sisters: willful, tempestuous, frequently charming, often dangerous, and ultimately unfathomable. As the main trade route to the interior of the continent and surrounded by lands flush with resources, the Great Lakes were central in transforming the U.S. and Canada into industrial and economic giants. Yet the lakes remain among the least appreciated of our major geographic features. No longer am I surprised to meet people who don't know that the lakes are too vast to see across or that they contain most of the surface freshwater in North America. I am surprised, however, by the people who assume that all that water is there to be ransacked.

Maybe the lakes are too great for their own good. If they were contained entirely within Ontario or Michigan, they would be more ferociously defended. Instead they overlap two nations and eight states, and are constantly snarled in legislative complexities that make them vulnerable. And because they contain such an enormous volume of water -- nearly a fifth of all that's available on the surface of the earth - and are spread across a wide swath of North America many assume that they're inexhaustible. With that much water, the thinking goes, there should be plenty for everyone.

Possibly that would be true if they were just storage bins. But they are vital ecosystems supporting complex communities of animals and plants, some of them found no place else, all of them dependent upon a consistent supply of clean water. Some of those communities are human: About 40 million of us live around the lakes, drawing our drinking water from them, swimming in them, fishing from them, boating upon them. Many of our cities sacrificed their environmental health to build the two nations, and have been abandoned for their troubles. Go to Gary or East Chicago or Hamilton, Ontario to see what the steel mills have wrought. The best hopes for those and dozens of other cities are the lakes themselves. Once they were just highways for shipping and dumping grounds for waste, but the current renaissance of waterfronts in Milwaukee, Duluth, Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo, Toronto, and many others makes it clear that we've entered a new stage in our relationship. The Great Lakes are no longer merely useful. They have become indicators of the quality of our lives.

The human tendency has always been to use and use until we use things up. But finally we're realizing that some things are too important to be shoveled onto the conveyor belts of commerce until they're gone. The Great Lakes are not merely reservoirs for the storage of water, that most useful of all substances. They are unique, living systems. Go to the shores of any of them, look across those miles of blue water stretching to the horizon, smell the wind, listen to the surf, and you might understand why they were once sacred. Is it too much to ask that we treat them as if they still were?

Source

Ganter, C. J. (2008). Great lakes as sacred places: Jerry Dennis. *The Huffington Post*, May 6, 2008. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/j-carl-ganter/great-lakes-as-sacred-pla_b_100283.html

Discussion Questions

Current Events & Politics Discussion Questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not?
2. What did you know about the subject prior to reading this book? How has this book changed or enhanced your view of the subject?
3. Did the book seem adequately researched? Why or why not?
4. What did you find to be the most interesting events in this book? What, if anything, surprised you?
5. What impact do you think the central figure (or figures) portrayed in this book will have on history? Can you see this book being discussed in later years?
6. With omnipresent media influences around us all day—cable television, talk radio and blogs, as well as traditional media outlets like print and broadcast—do you look for books in this genre (currents events & politics) to deliver a different perspective to you? Did this book do that?
7. If the subject is political and is not in line with your personal political beliefs, how did you feel about reading it? Has it changed your opinion at all? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
9. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Do you want to read other works by this author? Are you inclined to read more books on the topic? Why or why not?

Source

Reading group guides: the online community for reading groups. Current events & politics discussion questions. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from http://www.readinggroupguides.com/no_guide/guide_current_politics.asp