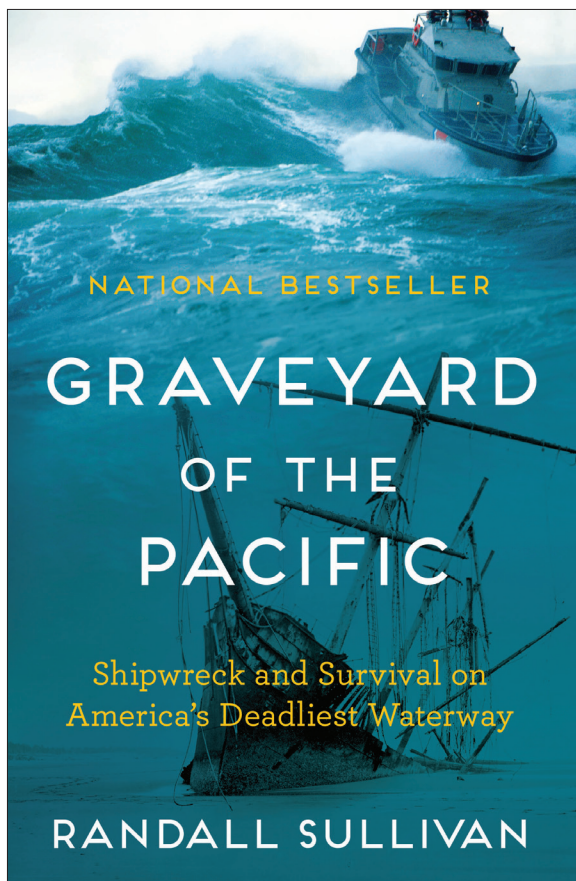




GRAVEYARD OF THE PACIFIC: SHIPWRECK AND SURVIVAL ON AMERICA'S DEADLIEST WATERWAY

By Randall Sullivan, Grove Press, 2023

Reviewed by Raymond Phipps, Maritime
Archaeologist, Federal Emergency
Management Agency

One of the deadliest waterways in the United States lies in Oregon, where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean. This section is both turbulent and treacherous, known for frigid temperatures and unforgiving seas. Officially, it is called the Columbia Bar, but to many it is nicknamed “Graveyard of the Pacific.” American journalist and screenwriter Randall Sullivan recounts an attempt to navigate it in a two-person kayak with a friend.

Woven into this recounting of their voyage is a history of the Columbia Bar. Sullivan gives a detailed account of the prehistoric formation of the Columbia River, which has caused this stretch of water to be so turbulent. He details the history of the numerous shipwrecks, estimated to be around two thousand, which have occurred in this waterway, along with the untold number of drownings. In addition to the history of the river and Sullivan’s attempt to cross the bar, the book also tells the story of the childhood relationship between Sullivan and his fellow kayaker, who both grew up with abusive fathers.

This combination of adventure seeking, maritime history, and childhood chronicle means that readers may experience the book differently, depending on their reasons for reading it. With that understood, the title is objectively misleading as this book is more of a memoir than a historical accounting of the shipwrecks at the Columbia River Bar. Nonetheless, it is an engaging read. Sullivan is a long-time journalist and writer who has authored several books as well as writing for *Rolling Stone* and other magazines.

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From the perspective of a maritime archaeologist or a maritime historian, this book has some value as background reading for specific sites. Sullivan describes a multitude of famous wrecks and their histories and wrecking events. These include *Peter Iredale* (1906), *Triumph* (1961), and *F/V Sea King* (1991). Photographs are provided of *Peter Iredale*, which ran aground in 1906, and modern photographs of the vessel show the level of deterioration. In addition, Sullivan writes about the construction of jetties on the bar to serve as breakwaters against waves, an industrial reaction to make this dangerous stretch of water more navigable. The book lacks in-text citations, footnotes, or a bibliography, but the author does list his general historical sources—such as newspapers describing wrecking events and coast guard reports—at the back of the book, which might be useful to academics studying events that have occurred in this region.

This book is well suited for the general reader looking for nonfiction maritime adventure. Sullivan immerses the reader in his journey across the Columbia Bar. Readers more interested in the maritime aspects of the story may find chapters that discuss Sullivan's childhood and the abuse he endured to be out of place, especially when considering the book's title.

Overall, this book is well written and, for its historical aspects, well researched. It is first and foremost a nonfiction maritime adventure book that will keep readers engaged. The details of wrecking events in the Columbia Bar are intriguing and may lead readers to further research on specific shipwrecks they may find of interest. For this reader, Sullivan's book was an easy read and piqued an interest in the two thousand shipwrecks that occurred in this area between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. For those living in this region who have a specific interest in the Columbia Bar shipwrecks or in similar waterway phenomena, this book offers a highly readable personal account of an experience navigating this waterway.

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