

The Sea in Me Blood



I found out my [pirate name](#): Calico Bess Kidd. I installed a [Multi-Lingual Pirate Insult Generator](#) on my laptop, you poxy bilge rat. I listened to Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* (and, incidentally, it is a glorious thing to be a Pirate King). I didn't make it to a Long John Silver's fish-and-chips franchise to get my swag, a free pirate hat, and doubloon-discounted Treasure Chest Family Meal, and perhaps that's for the best. I'm not sure I'm itching for a Boatload of Seafood prepared by a subsidiary of Yum! Brands, Inc. I did eat Cap'n Crunch for breakfast, though. Sink me, but it were scurvy grub.

That was my day. What did you do on September 19, International Talk Like a Pirate Day?



illustration: John McCoy

Holidays have to start somewhere. This one began in 1995, when Mark Summers and John Bauer, two bored guys from Oregon, decided to talk like pirates for one day out of the year, just for the bleedin' 'ell of it. Last year Dave Barry wrote a column about them two landlubbers and this September 19, Talk Like a Pirate Day was as big as a whale's backside. Maybe you heard about it on [N-P-Arrr](#), when Barry told *All Things Considered* host Robert Siegel that if more people talked like pirates, history would have turned out differently. What if Bill Clinton, a fancy-dressed freebooter if there ever was one, had told the American people, "I did not have sex with that woman, me hearties"?

Exactly when did pirates get to be so funny? There still *are* pirates, of course. The International Chamber of Commerce posts a [weekly piracy report](#), where you can read that this month in Indonesia "pirates with guns and knives are targeting and attacking ships." But the "pirates" of Talk Like a Pirate Day are the seafaring thieves of the eighteenth-century Atlantic. They used guns and knives, too. And cannons and cutlasses. These are the funny guys.

Historians haven't always known what to make of eighteenth-century Atlantic pirates—petty criminals? oppressed proletarians? homosexual revolutionaries? proto-capitalists?—but everyone agrees that they were fairly vicious. As Summers and Bauer admit on [talklikeapirate.com](#), "Even the most casual exploration of the history of pirates (and believe us, casual is an accurate description of our research) leaves you hip deep in blood and barbarity." Why, bless me watery soul, are pirates now so silly that the word "avast" makes people sputter?

Historian Marcus Rediker argues that pirates have always been funny: "The pirate's life is so deadly that humor is an essential part of what they do. They tell jokes, they make jests, they perform plays. They're hilarious." People are obsessed with pirates, Rediker says, because, while pirates may be "the common enemy of mankind," they're also "the freest people on earth," which makes pirate humor particularly cutting. Because they stand—or sail—apart from the culture, pirates are well suited to make mockery of it. Pirates may have always been funny, but their contemporaries usually found them more terrible than witty. Either way, they found them fascinating.

Tales of piratical adventures have always been big sellers, at least since the 1724 publication of *A General History of the Robberies and Murder of the Most Notorious Pyrates*, controversially attributed to Daniel Defoe, and full of the hair-raising adventures of Blackbeard and Captain Kidd and many more. Victorians loved pirate yarns, too. Hence the *Pirates of Penzance* (1879), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), and a library of peg-legged Victorian children's literature, dime novels, and penny dreadfuls. But these pirates, however courageous, were bloodthirsty villains, not blathering idiots. The same bold but terrible pirates swashbuckled across much of Hollywood's last century, from *Captain Blood* (1935), with Errol Flynn, to *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), with Johnny Depp.

In the nineteen-fifties, when Baby Boomers were watching, pirates became ridiculous. Buccaneer Yosemite Sam was a particularly deranged seadog thwarted by a particularly rascally rabbit in a series of cartoons released as an audio recording by Capital Records in 1954, *Bugs Bunny and the Pirate*. In 1951 Charles Laughton played a clownish Captain Kidd in *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd*, and two years later the voice artist and movement model Hans Conried portrayed Captain Hook in the animated film, *Peter Pan*. (After Hook, Conried took on the role of Thomas Jefferson in Disney's *Ben and Me*.) These pirates were funny just because they were pirates. Eye patches, hooks for hands, and bluster, lots of it. Fifties pirates—smelly, swarthy, heavily accented, stupid—worked like an ethnic joke, with the important distinction that there were no eighteenth-century buccaneers left to take offense.

Pirates also made useful Cold War villains. Slightly foreign, very devious and well armed but, in the end, harmless. Phew, one less enemy to worry about. International Talk Like a Pirate Day, falling just eight days after the anniversary of the World Trade Center bombings, makes a good post-9/11 holiday for much the same reason. Pirates are still funny and possibly even funnier today, simply because it's safe to mock them. But skip the parrots and the peg legs: now it's all about swaggering speech in the absence of even the threat of terrifying violence. Hoist sail with the [English-to-Pirate translator](#), me hearties, and plunder the [Gangsta-to-Pirate dictionary](#), but there's no need to light yer cannon. In the end, Jim lad, pirates be all talk. *The author would like to thank Laura Wasowicz, Larry Voyer, Mark Summers, John Bauer, and Marcus Rediker for sharing their thoughts on all things piratical. Readers might be especially interested in Voyer's collection of [pirate literature](#).*

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