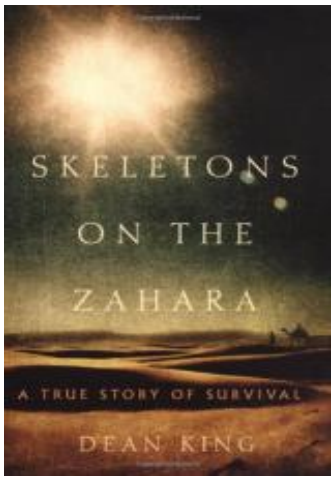
Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival

by Dean King



About the Book

On a calm May morning in 1815, Captain James Riley and the crew of the Commerce left port in Connecticut for an ordinary trading voyage. They could never have imagined what awaited them.

Their nightmare began with a dreadful shipwreck off the coast of Africa, a hair-raising confrontation with hostile native tribesmen within hours of being washed ashore, and a hellish confinement in a rickety longboat as they tried, without success, to escape the fearsome coast. Eventually captured by desert nomads and sold into slavery, Riley and his men were dragged along on an insane journey through the bone-dry heart of the Sahara-a region unknown to Westerners. Along the way the Americans would encounter everything that could possibly test them: barbarism, murder, starvation, plagues of locusts, death, sandstorms that lasted for days, dehydration, and hostile tribes that roamed the desert on armies of camels. They would discover ancient cities and secret oases. They would also discover a surprising bond between a Muslim trader and an American sea captain, men who began as strangers, were forced to become allies in order to survive, and, in the tempering heat of the desert, became friends-even as the captain hatched a daring betrayal in order to save his men.

From the cold waters of the Atlantic to the searing Saharan sands, **Skeletons on the Zahara** is a spectacular odyssey through the extremes. Destined to become a classic among adventure narratives, Dean King's masterpiece is an unforgettable tale of survival, courage, and brotherhood.

Discussion Guide

1. Just before the crew of the Commerce was captured by desert nomads, Riley stole some water from Dick Deslisle, the only black crew member. In his notes, the author observes that, although this theft might possibly be construed as an act of racism, Riley was, for a man of the early nineteenth century, "remarkably free of bigotry." Do you agree with this assessment of Riley's character? Why or why not?

2. In North America the discourse on slavery is understandably dominated by the paradigm of white plantation owners and black slaves. Throughout history, however, slavery has existed in a number of different forms on almost every continent in the world. How did reading **Skeletons on the Zahara** broaden your understanding of the institution of slavery?

3. Sidi Hamet is one of the most complex individuals in **Skeletons on the Zahara**. Even Riley "could never fully understand his ways." To what degree was Sidi Hamet's decision to help the sailors motivated by kindness? To what degree was his decision motivated by the prospect of financial gains?

4. Dean King notes that many an outsider has been perturbed by what T. E. Lawrence called the "crazed communism" of the desert. Indeed, Riley was shocked when a horde of Sahrawis descended freely upon a camel that Sidi Hamet had slaughtered to eat. Later, however, Riley and his men benefited from the hospitality of friendly Sahrawi tribes and must have begun to realize the value of sharing resources in the harsh desert. Can you name other examples in the book of desert customs that seemed peculiar at first but later revealed their value? Have you ever found a custom strange upon first glance, recognizing its beauty only later?

5. After the shipwreck, Riley "felt a swell of regret at the unfettered pursuit of wealth" practiced in the United States. Indeed, in Riley's era, men routinely risked their lives in order to eke out a living --- and often paid the ultimate price. Can you think of any modern-day equivalents to this scenario?

6. Under U.S. law, Riley was allowed to command the crew of the Commerce as a father would his children. Do you think Riley was a good leader? Did he make any decisions that you consider misguided or questionable? Did his authority over his men ever break down? Offer examples from the text to support your answers.

7. Although it may seem somewhat difficult to believe --- especially since Riley and his men were often spat upon for being "Christian dogs" --- the Quran holds Christians and Jews in relatively high regard. Were the men of the Commerce ever treated with the respect traditionally afforded to "People of the Book"?

8. The camel is essential to the survival of the Sahrawis. It is a means of transportation, a source of meat and nutrient-rich milk, and a signifier of status. Can you think of another example in which the lives of a people are or were so dependent on a single natural resource or geographic feature? The ancient Egyptians and the Nile River is one example.

9. What do you think about Riley's sacrifice of Antonio Michel? Was it, as Dean King asserts, "best for his men, preserving for them an indisputable leader rather than an outsider, and an old man at that"? Or was it a cowardly act?

10. During World War I, soldiers in opposing trenches shared a bond forged in the fire of brutal common experience. At the same time, they felt disconnected from the people who remained at home, who they believed could never understand the horror of war. Did the Commerce crew, who shared the hardship of the desert with the Sahrawis, ever yield to the same psychology?

Author Bio

Dean King is the author of the national bestseller SKELETONS ON THE ZAHARA. He has written for many publications, including *Men's Journal, Esquire, Garden & Gun, Granta, Outside, New York Magazine*, and the *New York Times*. He lives in Richmond, Virginia.

Critical Praise

"Dean King has brought to life one of the great true-life adventure stories - a riveting tale of suffering and redemption."

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