

# From prosthetic hooks to Jack Sparrow: A swashbuckling summer discussion

## ASU English Professor Nush Powell to host Reddit AMA on the golden age of piracy

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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Did pirates actually have hooks for hands? Was Sir Walter Raleigh a pirate? What was the most common type of pirate ship?

Those questions — and others about the Golden Age of Piracy (from 1650 to 1730) — will be answered by Professor [Manushag “Nush” Powell](#), chair of the Department of English, during a Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) discussion on June 6.

Powell, the featured expert, has written a book titled, “British Pirates in Print and Performance,” is the author of the Wondrium “The Real History of Pirates” course and has authored an essay on pirates and hook prosthetics.

Ahead of the Reddit chat, ASU News talked to Powell about her work and her fascination with pirates.

*Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.*

### **Question: How did this Reddit event come about?**

**Answer:** I’m a lurker on Reddit, and the piracy forum is pretty active. There’s always some good conversations going on. They’re doing a series of AMAs, and I was asked to do one. I was like, “Sure, that sounds like fun.”

### **Q: What topics do you expect to talk about?**

**A:** There’s a lot of truth seeking in these groups. I looked at some of the advance questions, and there was one question about what’s the most authentic pirate movie. That’s actually keeping me

up at night because I don't know. I'm always good at pointing out what's not authentic, so my answer (for that) is usually like Muppet Treasure Island (a 1996 film).

There was also a question about what I think happened to Henry Avery, who was a pirate who kind of famously pulled off a major heist and disappeared from the historical record. It's not that he died or was captured or anything. There's just no idea what happened to him. So, I suspect there will be a fair number of questions like that. And there's always questions about what people should read or study.

**Q: One of the questions submitted in advance was about the image of pirates using hooks as hands. Did that actually happen?**

**A:** No. And that's one where I've reversed myself, because I used to say I thought they probably did, and now I think they probably didn't. It does make sense, because we know that pirates did lose limbs because that was a hazard of the job. And there are hooks on these boats, so it would be an available prosthetic. But there is absolutely no evidence of anyone before well into the 19th century using a hook prosthetic at all. I think we chalk that (image) up to Captain Hook.

**Q: I'm curious. Why do pirates and the age of piracy intrigue you so much?**

**A:** In part because we have a lot of documentary evidence. For example, this is when you start seeing insurance records. This is when the Navy starts archiving their orders a little bit better. This is when we have pretty good trial and execution records. So, it's more possible to figure out what happened to people. There are answers to be found.

What I'm always interested in is sort of the tension between pirate fiction, pirate fantasies, pirates and popular media, and what we can verify actually happened.

**Q: Is there some sort of romanticism about the age of piracy that attracts people?**

**A:** Absolutely. Most pirates didn't make a lot of money. And if they did, it was usually from stealing something that was valuable so they could sell it. Like stealing one of those Spanish galleons laden with gold and silver. Now, that was very, very unusual to happen because the actual treasure ships were really well protected. Most of the time, pirates were stealing people's clothes, picking their pockets and ripping through the cargo. But the images that we like and come down to us from ballads and very early stories are full of gold and jewels and pearls from wherever.

**Q: Did the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie with Johnny Depp renew that romantic idea of piracy?**

**A:** It absolutely did. It's funny, because during a period of my life I was watching every pirate film I could possibly get my hands on, and most of them were atrociously bad. But the original "(Pirates of the) Caribbean" movie really did a lot to kind of capture that romance angle. Johnny Depp brought a charisma to the role that people were looking for. As Captain Jack Sparrow, he just wants the freedom to keep sailing forever. He wants the Black Pearl, and he wants the crew to literally sail over the edge of the world.

So, it's this really powerful rejection of everything that is dull or humdrum about everyday life, and this idea that you could just go on vacation and sail away.

## Have a question for Nush?

Those interested in joining the discussion can submit questions in advance [here](#). The discussion will begin at 10 a.m., June 6.

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



ASU Professor Manushag “Nush” Powell’s bookcase in her office is filled with pirate literature. She will be the featured expert on a Reddit AMA on the topic on June 6. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

## Text image(s)



Professor Manushag "Nush" Powell, chair of the Department of English, is ASU's resident pirate expert. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News