



# The Journeyer

*Gary Jennings*

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## **The Journeyer** Gary Jennings

Marco Polo was nicknamed "Marco of the millions" because his Venetian countrymen took the grandiose stories of his travels to be exaggerated, if not outright lies. As he lay dying, his priest, family, and friends offered him a last chance to confess his mendacity, and Marco, it is said, replied "I have not told the half of what I saw and did."

Now Gary Jennings has imagined the half that Marco left unsaid as even more elaborate and adventurous than the tall tales thought to be lies. From the palazzi and back streets of medieval Venice to the sumptuous court of Kublai Khan, from the perfumed sexuality of the Levant to the dangers and rigors of travel along the Silk Road, Marco meets all manner of people, survives all manner of danger, and, insatiably curious, becomes an almost compulsive collector of customs, languages and women.

In more than two decades of travel, Marco was variously a merchant, a warrior, a lover, a spy, even a tax collector - but always a journeyer, unflagging in his appetite for new experiences, regretting only what he missed. Here - recreated and reimagined with all the splendor, the love of adventure, the zest for the rare and curious that are Jennings's hallmarks - is the epic account, at once magnificent and delightful, of the greatest real-life adventurer in human history.

## **The Journeyer Details**

Date : Published June 27th 2006 by Forge Books (first published 1984)

ISBN : 9780765349644

Author : Gary Jennings

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# From Reader Review The Journeyer for online ebook

## Kerriwyn says

This is the last book of Gary Jennings I've to read. Actually, that's not true, he wrote some book about a hot-air balloon, but I don't like those things at all so I won't be reading that.

If you like Jennings, this is classic. It's the story of Marco Polo. Full of interesting etymological "facts" and lots of sexual perversion. (Hey, you know it's true, lol)

Nothing beats a **good** piece of historical fiction! It's so escapist, yet, when written well, it's so very informative. One of the reasons I "know so much" is because I'm a fan of this genre. So, if you've enjoyed Jennings in the past, or just like period piece fiction, I suggest picking up The Journeyer. It's a big one too! ;)

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## Bettie? says

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*Legendary trader and explorer Marco Polo was nicknamed "Marco of the millions" because his Venetian countrymen took the grandiose stories of his travels to be exaggerated, if not outright lies. As he lay dying, his priest, family, and friends offered him a last chance to confess his mendacity, and Marco, it is said, replied, "I have not told the half of what I saw and did."*

*Now Gary Jennings has imagined the half left unsaid as even more elaborate and adventurous than Polo's tall tales. From the palazzi and back streets of medieval Venice to the sumptuous court of Kublai Khan, Marco meets all manner of people, survives all manner of danger, and becomes an almost compulsive collector of customs, languages, and women.*

Utter crap. Coarse rubbish.

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## Barry Behrstock says

this is my favorite read of all time. Takes about 100 pages to get going, but by the ending after a 1000 pages you wish there could be another 1000. His research into his subject matter, Marco Polo, has proven to be unbelievably accurate. The Great Khans earthquake detection machine was fully describe while I was at the national museum in Ulambator Mongolia. Aztec is his other great book and fully explains how Cortez and 60 soldiers could conquer a nation.

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## Greg says

I just read Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities" which is a short book about an encounter between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. That book reminded me that I'd read Jennings' "The Journeyer" several decades ago: in "Journeyer" there is an encounter between Polo and Khan. (I must note in all fairness that the publication of "Invisible Cities" predates the publication of "The Journeyer" by about a decade, but still, there is nothing new under the sun. Now, "The Journeyer" is okay, but as I recall, my expectations were absolutely off the charts, as I had just read Jennings' remarkable "Aztec", a far better book. And comparatively speaking, "Journeyer" sort of rambles while "Aztec" is more focused, centralized, and more exciting.

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## Tlaloc says

Ranks alongside 'Aztec' as Gary Jennings' greatest work. Much like *Aztec*, it is a first person narrative, this time concerning Marco Polo and his journey from Italy to the court of the Yuan emperor Khubilai via the middle east, Persia, Nepal and finally China (and, later on, several other places).

Definitely one of the best historical books I have ever written, can't recommend it highly enough...

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## Maeceon says

The adventures of Marco Polo. I was probably 16 when I read this book. I read it because my mom had just finished it. This book will make you laugh out loud- when you least expect it, and make you slam it shut while being on the verge of tears. You will carry some of the characters with you for the rest of your life: Nostril, Aziz, and The Fondler. You can never forget their stories. Some scenes are so graphically horrible it's as if you've seen them and not read them. One of the most emotional books you will ever read that will challenge your knowledge of history and the world all the way through.

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## Algernon says

[9/10]

*"Come hither, great princes! Come hither, emperors and kings, dukes and marquises, knights and burgesses! Come hither, you people of all degrees, who wish to see the many faces of mankind and to know the diversities of the whole world! Take up this book and read it, or have it read to you. For herein you will find all the greatest wonders and most marvellous curiosities ..."*

I haven't read the original account of the travels of Marco Polo from Venice to the far side of the world. I have chosen instead to travel under the guidance of Gary Jennings, who entered on my favorite authors list with the sprawling epics of Aztec culture and of circus life in the late 19 century (Aztec and Spangle). I was rewarded with the spiced up, picaresque, X-rated version of the said travels - a fictionalized account that at first glance seems too incredible and adventurous to be based on historical facts. Nevertheless, checking a

few internet sources (as unreliable in their turn as they may be) reveals that the key elements of the journey are accurate and supported by evidence. Beside the 'stylish prose, lively wit and adventurous bawdy spirit', as described on the back cover of the massive volume, what is typical for a Gary Jennings historical epic is his passion for the subject and the thoroughness of his research. He actually spent years retracing the steps of the Polo expeditions, travelling the Silk Road in the Venetians footsteps, learning the local customs, the dialects, the beliefs and (arguably) their sexual peculiarities.

*Nicolo: "Adventure is no more than discomfort and annoyance recollected in the safety of reminiscence. Believe me, an experienced traveler makes plans and takes pains 'not' to have such adventures. The most succesful journey is a dull journey."*

*Marco: "Oh! I was rather looking forward to - well, hazards overcome ... hidden things discovered ... enemies bested ... maidens rescued ..."*

The framing device of the story has an elderly Marco writing a second account of his travels, one that includes all the censored bits and the ones deemed too incredible and exotic for the official version. By mixing the unreliabilty of memory with more than a bit of middle-age wish fulfillment regarding women conquests and with a vivid imagination, Marco becomes the larger than life hero of his own adventure, an almost mythical embodiment of what a critic named a "Rabelaisian lust for life" and of the eternal siren call of the unknown, of the ever receding line of the horizon.

*Yes, I meant to go again sometime. But when I was freed from Genoa and returned to Venice, the family business demanded my attention, and so I hesitated to depart. And then I met Donata, and she became my wife. So I hesitated again a while, and then there was a daughter. Naturally that gave me cause to hesitate, and there came a second daughter, and then there were three. So, for one reason and another, I kept on hesitating, and suddenly one day I was old.*

The family man revisits the places of his wild youth through the pages of the manuscript. Even by his own account, Marco Polo is not a cautious and lawful citizen of the Merchant Republic. His departure at a very young age in the company of his father Nicolo and his uncle Mafio, comes after a sexual debacle with an older woman and after being arrested for a public assassination. From a very precocious age Marco shows a restlessness and a recklessness to jump into the fire and then think about how to get out. A libertine and a rogue, a boastful Latino who claims to have killed a wild boar with only a knife, to have invented a military use for Ming fireworks and then to have won a war single-handedly, to have bedded beautiful women from the Persian harems to the Mongol yourts, to the hidden temples of India, Marco will in the end prefer to be remembered for his curiosity:

*If a man is to have a fault, it should be a passionate one, like insatiable curiosity. It would be a pity to be damned for something paltry.*

If I were to attempt a resume of the adventures Marco experiences during his more than twenty years long journey into China, I would fill a book of my own and still wouldn't capture all the beauty of the lands and all the exotic encounters with different people and cultures. Before I let the quotes I selected speak for themselves, I would just mention that the novel is more than a travelogue, especially after the arrival at the court of Kublai Khan when Marco gets mixed up in palace politics, espionage, governorships and military conquests. Personal drama also comes into play, as Marco's personality develops from a self-centered youth to a considerate lover, later family man. There are side quests involving his uncle Mafio struggling with homosexuality, comic relief from a sidekick inspired by the Arabian Nights, death and loss before the journey's end.

Beside mercantile concerns, the later chapters are dealing more with religious identity, sexual identity, governance, violence. To be honest, I had quite a few issues and grumbles with the text, some of them major turn-offs that made me put the book aside for weeks and read something else. One of these things is the affectation of using archaic spelling for words that have entered common English vocabulary a long time ago. (for example zafran for saffran, but there are other examples on every single page of the novel). Other readers might be turned off by the explicit, frequent and detailed accounts of bedroom sports, another Jennings quirk that I noticed in his previous two novels. Most of all I was bothered by the condescending, dismissive and frankly vicious attacks on Buddhism, Hinduism, Islamism and Confucianism, coupled with too glowing remarks about Mongol martial prowess. I would like to think that the chapters reviling the lamaseries, the stupas, the mosques and the squalor of most of the lands Marco visited has its source somewhere in the original manuscript, and is not reflective of the personal attitudes of Jennings.

Without further ado, here are some samples from the text. I hope they are enough to get you interested:

*If I sound unloving of camels, it is because I am. I think I have straddled or perched upon every sort of transport animal there is in the world, and I would prefer any other to a camel.*

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*"The wise man shall pass into strange countries, and good and evil shall he try in all things."*  
(Ecclesiasticus?)

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*"A companion is the best provision for the road."* (Arab proverb)

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*The overland journeyer knows the same sensation that a man feels when he is stark naked - a fine sense of unfettered freedom, but also a sense of being vulnerable, unprotected and, compared to the world about him, very small.*

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*I learned there that the Farsi word meaning garden, pairi-daeza, became our Bible's word Paradise.*

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*That is why we Zardushi (Zoroastrians) have for centuries been persecuted and derided and dispersed and driven into exile. By Muslims and Jews and Christians alike. A people who pride themselves on possessing the only true religion must pretend that it came to them through some exclusive revelation. They do not like to be reminded that it merely derives from some other people's original.*

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*A good horse and a wide plain to you, until we meet again!* (Mongol greeting)

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*Meanwhile, the Mongol folk, who do not care much about face, are smearing molasses on the faces of their kitchen gods. They have the quaint belief that the idol they keep over the kitchen hearth, the house god Nagatai, ascends to Heaven at this time to report their year's behavior to the great god Tengri. So they feed molasses to Nagatai in the quaint belief that thus his lips are sealed, and he cannot tattle anything detrimental.*

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*You must not look at everything with a tradesman's eye, always asking yourself, 'What is this good for? What is it worth?' Leave that grubby philosophy to the tradesmen who never step beyond their shop doors. You have ventured out to the farthest edge of the world. It would be a pity if you take home only profit, and not at least a little poetry.* (Nicolo Polo)

*... it was the variances, not the similarities, that made the place lovely in my eyes. So is Venice still lovely and dear to me, but it would cease to be if it were not unique. In my opinion, a world of cities and places and views all alike would be the dulllest world imaginable, and I feel much the same way about the world's*

peoples. If all of them - white and peach and brown and black and whatever other colors exist - were stirred together into a bland tan, every other of their jagged and craggy differences would flatten down into featurelessness.

I kept my favorite for last, an epitaph of sorts for a life spent in interesting times:

*I let no chance go by untaken. I never hesitated to follow where my curiosity beckoned. I willingly went where there was danger in beauty and beauty in danger. I had experiences in plenty. Many were enjoyable, some were instructive, a few I would rather have missed. But I had them, and I have them still in memory. If, as soon as tomorrow, I go to my grave, it will be no black and silent hole. I can paint the darkness with vivid colors, and fill it with music both martial and languorous, with the flicker of swords and the flutter of kisses, with flavors and excitements and sensations, with the fragrance of a field of clover that has been warmed in the sun and then washed by a gentle rain, the sweetest-scented thing God ever put on this earth. Yes, I can enliven eternity. Others may have to endure it; I can enjoy it.*

TL:DR - one word review : **Arcistupendonazzisimo!**

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### **Nichol Albertson says**

I LOVE this book. It has scarred me for life. That's a sign of a great book. Some of the images and scenes from this book have stayed with me, years after the reading. It was so good, I didn't want to put it down, and when I was done reading it, I felt a remorse that it was over.

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### **Joel Judge says**

While I did enjoy the Journeyer I would have to say that it was not a great read. Sure the story of Marco Polo is a fascinating one and Mr Jennings did maintain my interest for 80% percent of the time.

What annoyed me, however, is that the story is not vastly different from Aztec. Man travels, has many weird and wonderful adventures, is witness to and indulges in some bizarre sex practices and later, reflecting upon his experiences, decides to self indulgently confess about his wanderings in a tell all book.

To put it bluntly, Jennings should have laid off the kiddie porn, incest and sexual deprivation. I'm no prude but I found it a bit tedious after a while and very formulaic given it rehashed many of the themes in Jennings earlier book Aztec. Like Aztec, the book was also about 200 pages too long. Thinking back on it, I probably would have enjoyed the book more if I had not first read Aztec. I just got the feeling in the Journeyer that Jennings thought, as he had a "winner" with Aztec and purely for marketing reasons, he simply rehashed the same old themes to maintain his winning formula. From a literary perspective I think such an approach is a bit cynical and intellectually lazy.

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### **Dan Morris says**

I love historical fiction, and the historical fiction aspect of this book was pretty much an A+ from the start.

The plot and the prose seemed pretty immature early on, but really improved, and I was retroactively convinced that the early parts of the book were immature because the narrator was still immature. This book turned into a surprisingly good story of youth and aging, along with a fantastic flurry of random historical references.

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## **Carl R. says**

Toward the end of last year, I read Laurence Bergreen's biography of Marco Polo. Subsequently, a buddy of mine not only clued me in to but provided a copy of Gary Jennings' fictionalized narrative of the Venetian's Asian wanderings in *The Journeyer*. I ran across a copy of another of Jennings' works--*Aztec Rage*--years ago in a summer cabin or some such place, got started on it, but never finished and never got back to either the book or Jennings.

There are a couple of interesting discrepancies between the biography and the novel. Apparently, one of arguments against the verisimilitude of Polo's account is that he never mentions the great wall. Bergreen defends him by saying the wall wasn't up when he was there. Jennings has Polo giving detailed accounts of how it was built and of its effectiveness (not very). My googling tells me the wall was started around 700 B.C. I don't care enough to track down the truth, but it's a head scratcher.

Bergreen and Jennings agree that Marco first entered the great Kahn's kingdom with his father and uncle, who had already concluded one extensive stay there and had contracted to return with 100 Christian priests (They fail to fulfill the contract.) to add to the emperor's heterogeneous collection of religious philosophers. Bergreen however, adds that they were also supposed to bring a vial of holy oil from Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. In this, according to him, they succeed. Jennings makes no mention of the vial, which would have fit nicely into his narrative.

The Marco of *The Journeyer* talks often of traveling the Silk Road. To Bergreen, the Silk Road didn't exist as a general term until the Renaissance, a full hundred years or more after Marco's death.

Jennings paints Polo as willingly serving the Kahn for twenty-plus years and finally going home when he'd achieved great wealth and got a little homesick. Bergreen claims That Kublai kept Marco, his father, and his uncle virtually under house--or, more properly, empire--arrest, that they had to contrive and deceive greatly and dangerously to get back to Venice. Perhaps new facts emerged since the 1984 publication of *The Journeyer*, but I find the divergences puzzling nonetheless.

The book itself seems to me more of an encyclopedia than a novel. During the course of Marco's travels from Venice to Jennings contrives a thousand situations for Marco to be instructed by various and sundry in customs and mores martial, sexual, political, culinary, financial, commercial, monetary, sexual, floral, faunal, bestial, avial, marital, theological, sexual, meteorological, cartological, ichthyological, ethnic, sexual, sartorial, architectural--among others. And did I mention sexual? It's not just a recurring theme for Jennings, it almost amounts to an obsession. Nevertheless, the range of facts and knowledge the book contains in its eight hundred pages steps beyond remarkable into stunning. You can, for example, learn how to build and sail three or four different kinds of ships. How to diagnose and cure a multitude of diseases and injuries, how to navigate by stars and/or sun on land or sea and on either side of the equator. You can learn admiration or contempt for a plethora of religions and cultures.

Jennings simply and cleverly invests the text with a veneer of authenticity and ancientness by the device of spelling--"Kithai" for "Cathay," "To-Bhot" for "Tibet," "Karwan" for "Caravan," and so on. The method orients readers geographically and culturally without yanking them into the modern world. Good job with that, but there is this still this bothersome matter of the lack novelizing or storytelling.

Most of the book consists of Polo traveling from one location to another, perhaps encountering some adventure or another along the way, then undergoing tutelage on the local way of life. The journey itself is the through-line. Thus, there is little ongoing conflict or suspense. The closest we come is an intrigue in the



beginning which provides the impetus for Polo to get out of Venice our young master's ongoing cat-and-mouse game with a certain Arab counselor of Kahn's, which is an exciting and captivating series of episodes. However, that takes less than two hundred pages of the whole. It proves Jennings can write that kind of stuff, and it would have pleased me if he had included a great deal more of that kind of material in *The Journeyer*. Yet, I have now spent some weeks and a number of pages with the European perspective of the Mongol empire, have learned a good deal of history (bet you didn't know that Beijing is there because Kublai Kahn put it there and established the Forbidden City and surrounding area. See what I mean?), and am much improved for the experience. It's been an entertaining and educational ride. I'm glad I took it.

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### **Jim says**

I love to read. I am a voracious reader, yet, this book has captured my heart above all others. The story and the way Mr. Jennings was able to capture the courage and inspiration that Marco Polo had to traverse the silk trail was inspirational to me. At the tender age of 18, it inspired me to travel across our country with little to no money and discover myself. It has since helped me realize that life is the journey and when I feel stuck or unable to shed myself of unhealthy things to which I've been accustomed, I read this book again. I can not emphasize how wonderful, well written, inspirational, uplifting, sad, and rewarding this book is. Because of this book I have read every other book Jennings has written (and own first editions of all of them). Another book by Jennings similar in vein is called "Raptor" for those that enjoyed this book.

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### **Katherine says**

The first half of this book should have more accurately been titled 'Marco Polo's Porno Journey Through Asia', and although these antics worked for the character, it often felt a little bit over done and forced. The second half of the book was well articulated and presented, and the world was believable and slightly magical. Marco also became a more rounded character as he became a jaded, wearied traveller towards the end, especially when he settled down with Hui-sheng in Asia and started to interact with the cultures he was viewing more. He became even more compelling after he was forced to grow up after tragedy and realise the consequences of his actions. The best thing about this book was how Jennings researched the cultures that Polo interacted with well, and he was able to build a convincing world. Another was how Marco resigned himself to the fact that he had grown old and lost his chance to travel, but that his eternity would be filled with lots of beautiful memories, which was very moving. One critique would be that some characters were not fully developed and could have done with more fleshing out – the plethora of women Marco slept with on the journey into Asia, and Hui-sheng herself, who was a little too perfect on occasion. But if you can get past the first twenty percent of this book, I'd say it was worth the read.

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### **Angela says**

This book pulled me in two distinct and opposite directions: on the one hand, it's a fantastic and accurate (if my fact-checking is any good) account of life in Venice and the middle and far east in the 13th century. There is a lot of interesting detail about cultural traits and knowledge that we still use today. That really hooked the history buff in me. On the other hand...the extremely graphic descriptions of torture and other sundry mayhem was over the top, even for this *Game of Thrones* lover, and the descriptions of sex, including

patently odd perspectives of female anatomy, were just not sexy at all. Jennings may have provided a window into what men really think about the female body, but I'd rather not have known. Also, he portrays Marco Polo as a very ethnocentric (to put it nicely) person, which may be accurate for a 13th century Venetian, but was still offputting to this 21st century reader. The story was good, but the fact that the main character is continually traveling from place to place made it hard for Jennings to create characters that lasted throughout the story. It also became somewhat repetitive. All of that said, I did finish the book and loved the research-based history. Unfortunately, the sex and violence were so unpalatable that I will probably not read another book by this author.

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## **Heli says**

Myötähäpeää aiheuttavan poloiseen kanteen piiloutuva tiiliskiviromaani on yhtäältä viihdyttävää historiallis-eroottista hömppää, toisaalta väkivaltaista ja järkyttävää roskaa seikkailijan retkistä. Jos ajatus seesamiöljyruukkuihin säilötyistä ruumiista järkyttää, kannattaa välttää vuosikausien painajaiset ja jättää kirja lukematta. Kuitenkin jos kirja jättää näin vahvoja muistijälkiä, se ei voi olla ihan huono.

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