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Abstract

If you seek a conclusive answer to the question that seems to anchor Chas Smith's *Cocaine + Surfing: A Sordid History of Surfing's Greatest Love Affair*, "Did surfing and cocaine start together in Peru and never leave each other's embrace?," you will be disappointed. In his preface, Smith discusses the death of Andy Irons, the three-time world surfing champion from Hawaii who died November 2, 2010, alone in a Dallas hotel room of cardiac arrest brought on by cocaine abuse. Irons was thirty-two years old. According to Smith, no one in the cosseted surfing world was surprised: "Drugs and surfing, especially cocaine, felt synonymous with professional surfing those eight-odd years ago" (15). Chapter 1, ironically titled "The Call to Adventure!," places Smith, our first-person narrator, on a hero's journey. [*excerpt*]

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If you seek a conclusive answer to the question that seems to anchor Chas Smith's *Cocaine + Surfing: A Sordid History of Surfing's Greatest Love Affair*, "Did surfing and cocaine start together in Peru and never leave each other's embrace?," you will be disappointed. In his preface, Smith discusses the death of Andy Irons, the three-time world surfing champion from Hawaii who died November 2, 2010, alone in a Dallas hotel room of cardiac arrest brought on by cocaine abuse. Irons was thirty-two years old. According to Smith, no one in the cosseted surfing world was surprised: "Drugs and surfing, especially cocaine, felt synonymous with professional surfing those eight-odd years ago" (15). Chapter 1, ironically titled "The Call to Adventure!," places Smith, our first-person narrator, on a hero's journey. Smith is driving his Volkswagen Jetta Wagon, a family vehicle that provides enough space in the back for two guests, both professional surfers and both cranked on cocaine. As the pair engage in rambunctious backseat behavior, kicking and wrestling like teenagers, Smith refers to the surfers not by name but by their corporate sponsorships: Volcom and Reef. His passengers signify both surfing's outlaw past and its commercial present. For Smith, surfing is not what it used to be: "Across the surf industry bros are getting let go and executives with gilded resumes from Disney and the NFL swoop in to take their spots and make things right, but things only get more conservative" (18). As a "surf journalist," Smith must accept this shift in culture, albeit reluctantly. "I am a surf journalist," Smith writes. "And it wasn't supposed to be this way. I was supposed to wave goodbye to this shallow end of the swimming pool years ago. I was supposed to be a Pulitzer Prize-winning war reporter by now, spilling valuable words on the plight of Syrian refugees while dodging bullets" (20-21). Instead, he avoids getting kicked in the head by Volcom and Reef, and he rejects Reef's offer of a cocaine bump. Rather than investigate the connection between cocaine, surfing, and Peru, Smith's true purpose is to investigate what happened to him and to the outlaw sport that pulled him away from Coos Bay, Oregon, in search of large waves and carefree days. Smith's real question is, "How in bloody hell did I become and why am I still a surf journalist?" Cocaine and surfing only serve as a lively hook for publishers. Try as he might, Smith wants cocaine and surfing to come together, but this book is really about him, and the highs and the lows of a sport he loves.

This premise separates Smith—by a great distance—from William Finnegan's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*, but it makes *Cocaine + Surfing* a page-turning hoot. Smith's book is about not accomplishing what you set

out to do and has more in common with, say, Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* than Finnegan's elegant exploration of the surfing life. Both Bourdain and Smith confront failures with existential acceptance, and each presents his adventures in self-deprecating, self-loathing, and highly energized writing styles.

Like Bourdain, Smith is at peace with his own reckless life choices. As the quixotic hero of his own mock journey, Smith moves from person to person, place to place in an effort to locate what surfing and drugs have in common, and why he desires to stay connected with a culture that, when he was a teenager, offered him freedom yet has become a commodified lifestyle ripe with tee-shirts containing phrases that suggest freedom, sandals with bottle-openers embedded in the bottoms, and surfboards of varying designs, lengths, and colors devised to extract dollars without providing a sensible ride. When Smith finds himself standing in front of Huntington Beach's International Surfing Museum staring at a grainy black-and-white picture of some "South American mestizo-looking thing, grinning broadly, riding what appears to be a strange surfboard" with a caption that reads "Surfing and Peru. 4,000 years" he makes an unmistakable connection (37). He turns to Matt Warshaw, the surf historian, to help him make sense of his discovery. Often called the caretaker of surfing history, Warshaw, who lives in Seattle, far removed from surfing's dreamy waters, confirms that surfing and cocaine could have been born together in Peru long before surfing's romantic beginnings in Hawaii. Emboldened, Smith pursues the truth about surfing as Bourdain did about kitchens: "And I am the one destined to write it and if I write it right it will make surfing great again because surfers everywhere will have to admit exactly what they are. They are not soulful dancers or athletes or sportsmen or watermen. They are addicts. We are addicts" (47). Lacking Warshaw's scholarly bona fides, Smith accepts his position as a surf journalist, and he sets off to free surfing from its staid commercial conservatism, a goal he repeats again and again in this short memoir of writing failure.

Among other things, Smith is a proud troublemaker. His website, Beach Grit, presents scathing articles that prod the World Surf League, denounce corporate surf culture shenanigans, and profiles quasi-Kardashian surfers with tabloid zeal. In another life, Smith travelled through the Middle East, working as a foreign correspondent for Vice, Paper, and Blackbook, among others, before being kidnapped by Hezbollah during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, which resulted in the publication of *Welcome to Paradise, Now Go to Hell*, his first book. Perhaps his war experiences endowed Smith with the ability to reach a wider reading audience even while exploring a niche sport like surfing and its problems with commercial commodification.

At the center of *Cocaine + Surfing*, Smith places Michael Tomson, founder of Gotcha, a fashion label that turned the surf clothing industry into a market force.

Tomson was also a talented surfer, albeit not as reknown as his brother, Shaun, the 1977 surfing world champion. Tomson pursued surfing, journalism, fashion, and cocaine with unrelenting passion. In other words, he is Smith's lynchpin between cocaine and surfing. Smith appreciates Tomson's honesty, especially after his second arrested for cocaine possession with intent to distribute: "What happened happened. So what. Sue me. It's cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars. ...I became the cathartic cleanse for [the people]because they can say, 'Look how bad Michael Tomson is.' You know what I am saying?" (134-135). Smith wants the surf industry to come clean about itself, not just the drug use but about what has "strangled the very life out of surfing" (135), manifest by a smug self-satisfaction over the corporate profit margin commercial surfing produces. Smith knows from experience that the unrestrained life, one fueled by cocaine and surfing, his old life, destroys things, like his first marriage. Now, however, he is married again, a father, and typically in bed by 10:00 p.m. What he cannot release, though, are the rogue days, when surfing was owned by rebels, outsiders who needed little more than a high-quality wave, which, as he observes, dissipates as quickly as a cocaine high, leaving no real memory just an awareness that something exciting happened and the persistent need for more.

If a cocaine high equals a surf high and if both highs dissipate so quickly one has to return to the water or the razorblade scared mirror for an immediate repeat of the experience, then it's little wonder that Smith seeks all sorts of people he hopes will confirm the linkage between cocaine and surfing, including Jim Zapala, a man with an uncanny resemblance to Jeff Bridges' Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski. Zapala worked for Michael Tomson during the high times, but he doesn't have much to offer about surfing. Caught in a time warp of his own making, Smith realizes that surf culture has a distinct continuum: Kelly Slater and "his good looks and his good, clean living," or Andy Irons, once as famous as Duke Kahanamoku, and "his good looks and his rage and his cocaine" (164). Irons died alone. Slater now promotes the Kelly Slater Wave Pool Company, which guarantees a perfect wave, the ultimate commercial surfing product. This technological development underscores Smith's essential point: "Surfing was fun, it was good, it was right because it wasn't trying to be a sport or a religion or anything other than what it was: unadulterated fun" (176). Wave machines deny that type of experience. If he had a choice, Smith would connect with his two primary literary examples of surfing and writing: Mark Twain and Jack London. Twain also had a connection to cocaine, which can be found in his 1910 essay "The Turning Point of My Life." London's "A Royal Sport," helped romanticize surfing.

Whatever else it is, *Cocaine + Surfing* is fun, albeit for a certain type of reader. Like Bourdain, Smith exposes what happens in the backroom. Rather than seeking the "perfect wave" like the two California surfers in Bruce Brown's seminal documentary *The Endless Summer* (1966), Smith wants to link cocaine and surfing forever because each once represented a wildness that has been lost in surfing's

contemporary culture of commodification. Smith has an epiphany that summarizes his quest: "The love story is just a lie. It's like Donald and Melania Trump" (190). Smith takes his readers on a lively journey to reach this conclusion; it's a ride worth taking. In the end, Smith use his Reef's Mick Fanning beer bottle-opening sandal to pop the cap off a Stella while his mind rushes with character development ideas. He decides surf journalism has a place in the world, maybe.

Smith, Chas. *Cocaine + Surfing: A Sordid History of Surfing's Greatest Love Affair*. Los Angeles: A Viero Book, 196 pp.

Jack Ryan is Vice Provost and Dean of Arts and Humanities at Gettysburg College. He is the author of *John Sayles: Filmmaker*, now in a second edition. His last essay for *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, was "World Cup Watching," No. 30 Vol. 1, which details his struggle to understand "the beautiful game" while teaching and living in Bath, England.

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