

August 29, 2012

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Crime Thriller 'The Kings Of Cool' Is Bloody Good Fun

Posted: 06/19/2012 2:25 pm

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THE KINGS OF COOL *** out of ****

By Don Winslow

\$25.00

336 pages; Simon & Schuster

With *Savages*, author [Don Winslow](#) transformed himself from an author into a franchise. Critics and fellow writers had enjoyed his playfully funny and brutal crime novels like *The Winter Of Frankie Machine* for years.

But *Savages* pulled out all the stops. Winslow rolled the dice on every level with sexy, smart characters; short, sharp, shocked chapters; dips into the screenplay form (because everyone thinks in terms of movies now); and even goofing around with punctuation and spacing, letting a thought slide

down

a

page

until it hit the punchline.

Get it? Stephen King compared it to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (see, a movie!) and no wonder.

The story centered on two guys and a girl: Ben, Chon and Ophelia, aka O. Ben is a super-smart liberal, Chon an ex-military conservative, O a child of privilege and they're all living the high life. Literally.

Ben and Chon serve up primo marijuana in as many flavors as Ben & Jerry's, with Ben doing social work in Third World countries on the side for his karma and Chon always ready to dish out violence because turning the other cheek gets old fast in the drug trade. In *Savages*, they found themselves facing off against a Mexican cartel that not only wanted their turf but insisted the lads come work for them. It skittered to a memorable finale, and if the Oliver Stone movie is half as jazzed up on their sexy fatalism, it could be a blast and bring Winslow even more fans.

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They would do well to [start with this prequel, *The Kings Of Cool*](#), before reading *Savages* or seeing the movie. It has all the snap and savvy of *Savages* but with even more ambition and heart. Here we get the origin story of Ben and Chon and O, along with flashbacks to the '60s for the origin story of the drug trade in California. As is only hinted at in *Savages*, this involves their parents to a surprising degree.

Surfers, free love, messed up parenting, communes, therapy and more all combine to propel first the parents and then the children into drug dealing. Winslow also artfully shows how the game changes along with the drugs: the mellowness of pot slides into the trippy-ness of acid which burns into the stinging nastiness of cocaine. The money gets bigger, the stakes get higher and the violence turns from an off-screen flirtation into a live-in lover.

Savages was fun but *The Kings of Cool* has more emotional weight. Parents betray -- or, worse, simply fail -- their children. Children must decide whether their loyalty lies with biology or those they've bonded with. And the multi-generational arc of the story (we go back and forth in time throughout) shows Winslow's ambitions have risen along with his success. From watching Ben seduce a federal agent into becoming his paid informant to watching O literally seduce first one and then the other dude of her dreams, we are entranced.

Winslow even humanizes a beautiful gold-digger named Kim, showing the drive and determination it takes to leap from dismal trailer park to dissatisfied trophy wife. Winslow himself has probably just pulled off the same trick: graduating from well-reviewed writer to a name brand author who delivers the goods. Let's hope they don't share the same fate because in Winslow's world, ambition -- even ambition spiked with good intentions -- almost always proves fatal.

BOOKS I'VE READ SO FAR IN 2012

1. *The Underneath* by Kathi Appelt ***
2. *Jack Holmes and His Friend* by Edmund White ***
3. *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle **
4. *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel ***
5. *Death Walks In Eastrepp* by Francis Beeding ***
6. *Luminous Airplanes* by Paul La Farge ***/
7. *The Professionals* by Owen Laukkanen ** 1/2
8. *Unterzakhn* by Leela Corman **
9. *The Child Who* by Simon Lelic ***
10. *Hinterland* by Caroline Brothers ***
11. *The Yard* by Alex Grecian *** 1/2
12. *The Alienist* by Caleb Carr ***
13. *On The Wings Of Heroes* by Richard Peck *** 1/2
14. *A Princess Of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs *
15. *The Gods Of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs **
16. *The Warlord Of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs ** 1/2
17. *Undeclared: America's Heroic Fight For Bataan and Corregidor* by Bill Sloan ** 1/2
18. *Stoner* by John Williams ****
19. *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick DeWitt *** 1/2
20. *The 500* by Matthew Quirk **
21. *The Age Of Innocence* by Edith Wharton ****
22. *The Alienist* by Caleb Carr ***\
23. *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* by Avi **
24. *Rogue Male* by Geoffrey Household ***
25. *The Perks Of Being A Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky **
26. *Traitor's Gate* by Avi ** 1/2
27. *Cogan's Trade* by George V. Higgins ***
28. *2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson *** 1/2
29. *The Twelve Rooms Of The Nile* by Enid Shomer ** 1/2
30. *Bring Up The Bodies* by Hilary Mantel *** 1/2
31. *In One Person* by John Irving **



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[Madonna's Message For Americans: 'Don't Get Fat And Lazy'](#)



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32. A Million Heavens by John Brandon ***
33. The Case Of The Deadly Butter Chicken by Tarquin Hall ***
34. Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man by Walter Stahr *** 1/2
35. The Kings of Cool by Don Winslow ***
36. The Case of The Missing Servant by Tarquin Hall ***
37. Savages by Don Winslow ***
38. The Case Of The Man Who Died Laughing by Tarquin Hall ***
39. Alif The Unseen by G. Willow Wilson ** 1/2
40. I Am Spartacus: Making A Film, Breaking The Blacklist by Kirk Douglas ***
41. Showdown At Shepherd's Bush by David Davis ***
42. The Trillion Dollar Meltdown by Charles R. Morris ***
43. The Age Of Miracles by Karen Thompson Walker ** 1/2
44. Mrs. Robinson's Disgrace: The Private Diary Of A Victorian Lady by Kate Summerscale ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free galley and/or final copies of books to consider for review.

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Marshall Fine: Interview: Author Don Winslow and *The Kings of Cool*

The Kings of Cool picks up the story of the Savages trio -- the weed-dealing Ben, Chon and Ophelia -- a few years before *Savages*. P sequel? Not exactly -- at least writer Don Winslow doesn't look at it that way.

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Winslow brings the Southern California surfing culture to vivid life & creates memorable characters who do not always behave in a predictable fashion-definitely a talent to watch.

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Have not read a good thriller book in a long time now. This seems like a good one, will get it.

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Great. Hope you enjoy it; definitely a quick, violent, stylistically accessible but playful summer read.

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Theater: *Last Smoker In America* Huffs & Puffs But No Nicotine Fix

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THE LAST SMOKER IN AMERICA ** out of **** WESTSIDE THEATRE

A very game cast cannot overcome the inert nature of this musical satire about a society obsessed with denying drinking and smoking and playing video games and eating (and eating and eating) and all the other fun

indulgences that may not be good for you but sure make life fun. The show begins with an AA meeting of sorts where a husband (Ernie) admits his wife is still struggling with addiction to nicotine, quite the problem since even possessing a cigarette can get you tossed in the slammer. We hear an ode to the "last smoker in America." In the middle of the show, that woman, Pam (Farah Alvin) is still the defiant last smoker in America. And at the end of the show, some not so shocking revelations have been revealed and the plot has been twisted but Pam is still the last smoker in America.

Similarly, Ernie (the likable John Bolton) begins the show as an unemployed man who is a frustrated rock star penning awful songs in the basement of their home. And in the middle he's dishing out nutty tunes like "Straight White Man." At the end? He's still rocking out. Their neighbor? She's an over-zealous Christian named Phyllis (Natalie Venetia Belcon) so no points for guessing she'll turn out to be a hypocrite. And Pam and Ernie's son is consistently inconsistent since the book by Bill Russell changes its mind every five minutes about what that kid, Jimmy (Jake Boyd) should be.

It's only 90 minutes but the show feels padded since the very slight idea powering it goes nowhere and the songs (lyrics by Russell and music by Peter Melnick) can only muster up so many ways to sing the praises of tobacco.

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The set is anonymously suburban without being quite sitcom-ish or retro enough to get across any satirical ideas. But it gets the job done, though the talking smoke alarm is very tiresome as written and designed. Ditto the costumes by Michael McDonald, which have a little fun with an Osmonds sequence and Jimmy's rapper phase. Director Andy Sandberg wisely moves things along as quickly as possible, hoping the more plates he tosses in the air the less likely we'll notice there's not much on the menu.

A few songs linger in the mind, especially "You're The Only Friend I've Got," which does a nice job of illustrating all the desires of the four characters and how they're sublimated and another tune with a nice '50s pop song arrangement that -- like the opener -- shows off the cast's strong voices.

But mostly it's the actors you'll remember since they make the most of the rather thin proceedings and even in a way triumph. Alvin has a certain Frances McDormand quality that's very appealing while Bolton has an everyman charm and a wailing rock star squeal that's probably half the reason he got the part. But because they have to carry the burden of the plot, they can't have quite as much fun as the supporting actors.

Belcon has the most fun here as the nosy neighbor Phyllis. She sings in a smoothed out upper register when in cheery mode but drops down to a lower register to signal disapproval or desire and gets a laugh most every time. She's also the character with the clearest motivation: she's in love with Ernie and jealous of the life Pam has and literally wants to move in and take over. That gives her the most to work with as a character and Belcon scores as much as possible, though Phyllis's hypocrisy is so pat it's kind of a bore.

The creators probably want to pretend the teen Jimmy is trying to find himself like most teens. But in fact their book just flips through identities with an annoying randomness. In the first scene, Jimmy is a whiny kid on serious medication. In his second scene, he struts around like a rapper and insists he's black. In the third he's addicted to video games and somewhat back to his old self with the rapper thang vaguely referenced to every once in a while when it might get a cheap laugh. Later he's a zoned out medication zombie and then a transvestite because that's always good for a transgressive vibe. It's a small miracle that the very appealing Boyd makes any sense of the role at all, much less squeezes out laughs with his sharp timing (though that Osmond outfit helps). He also vocally bounces around with ease from the faux rap of "Gangsta" to the more traditional Broadway belting. (I don't know why he was on the kitchen table licking the puppy dog-shaped cookie jar at one point but it sure made me laugh.)

A flat, would-be outrageous ending doesn't help matters in the least, but that shouldn't obscure the fact that while the musical isn't worthy of them (where there's smoke, there's not always fire) they are a talented quartet.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zolof *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ****

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2

Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***

Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***

Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2

Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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06:56 AM on 08/03/2012
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On the other hand, butt out (no pun intended).
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