


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Savages

Don Winslow

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About the Book

Part-time environmentalist and philanthropist Ben and his ex-mercenary buddy Chon run a Laguna Beach-based marijuana operation, reaping significant profits from their loyal clientele. In the past when their turf was challenged, Chon took care of eliminating the threat. But now they may have come up against something that they can't handle—the Mexican Baja Cartel wants in, sending them the message that a “no” is unacceptable. When they refuse to back down, the cartel escalates its threat, kidnapping Ophelia, the boys' playmate and confidante. O's abduction sets off a dizzying array of ingenious negotiations and gripping plot twists that will captivate readers eager to learn the costs of freedom and the price of one amazing high.

Savages is an ingenious combination of adrenaline-fuelled suspense and true-crime reportage by a master thriller writer at the very top of his game.

About the Author

Don Winslow, a former private investigator and consultant, is the author of twelve novels, including *The Dawn Patrol*, *The Winter of Frankie Machine*, *The Power of the Dog*, *California Fire and Life*, and *The Death and Life of Bobby Z*. He lives in Southern California.

ALSO BY DON WINSLOW

The Gentlemen's Hour

The Dawn Patrol

The Winter of Frankie Machine

The Power of the Dog

California Fire and Life

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

Isle of Joy

While Drowning in the Desert

A Long Walk up the Water Slide

Way Down on the High Lonely

The Trail to Buddha's Mirror

A Cool Breeze on the Underground

don
winslow
savages



arrow books

To Thom Walla.
On or off the ice.

*“Going back to California,
So many good things around.
Don’t want to leave California,
The sun seems to never go down.”*

—JOHN MAYALL, “CALIFORNIA”

FUCK YOU.

PRETTY MUCH CHON'S attitude these days.

Ophelia says that Chon doesn't have attitude, he has "baditude."

"It's part of his charm," O says.

Chon responds that it's a *muy* messed-up daddy who names his daughter after some crazy chick who drowns herself. That is some very twisted wish fulfillment.

It wasn't her dad, O informs him, it was her mom. Chuck was 404 when she was born, so Paqu had it her own way and tagged the baby girl "Ophelia." O's mother, Paqu, isn't Indian or anything, "Paqu" is just what O calls her.

"It's an acronym," she explains.

P.A.Q.U.

Passive Aggressive Queen of the Universe.

"Did your mother hate you?" Chon asked her this one time.

"She didn't hate me," O answered. "She hated *having* me because she got all fat and stuff—which for Paqu was five LBs. She popped me and bought a treadmill on the way home from the hospital."

Yah, yah, yah, because Paqu is totally SOC R&B.

South Orange County Rich and Beautiful.

Blonde hair, blue eyes, chiseled nose, and BRMCB—Best Rack Money Can Buy (you have real boobs in the 949 you're, like, Amish)—the extra Lincoln wasn't going to sit well or long on *her* hips. Paqu got back to the three-million-dollar shack on Emerald Bay, strapped little Ophelia into one of those baby packs, and hit the treadmill.

Walked two thousand miles and went nowhere.

"The symbolism is cutting, no?" O asked when wrapping the story up. She figures it's where she got her taste for machinery. "Like, it had to be this powerful subliminal influence, right? I mean I'm this baby and there's this steady rhythmic humming sound and buzzers and flashing lights and shit? Come *on*."

Soon as she was old enough to know that Ophelia was Hamlet's bipolar little squeeze with borderline issues who went for a one-way swim, she insisted that her friends start calling her just "O." They were cooperative, but there are some risks to glossing yourself "O," especially when you have a rep for glass-shattering climaxes. She was upstairs at a party one time with this guy? And she started singing her happy song? And they could hear her downstairs over the music and everything. The techno was pounding but O was coming in like five octaves on top of it. Her friends laughed. They'd been to sleepovers when O had busted out the industrial-strength lots-o-moving-parts rabbit, so they knew the chorus.

"Is it live?" her bud Ashley asked. "Or is it Memorex?"

O wasn't embarrassed or anything. Came back downstairs all loose and happy and shit, shrugged, "What can I say? I like coming."

So her friends know her as "O," but her girls tag her "Multiple O." Could have been worse, could have been "Big O," except she's such a small girl. Five five and skinny. Not bulimic or anorexic like three-quarters of the chicks in Laguna, she just has a metabolism like a jet engine. Burns fuel like crazy. This girl can eat and this girl doesn't like to throw up.

"I'm pixielike," she'll tell you. "Gamine."

Yeah, not quite.

This gamine has Technicolor tats down her left arm from her neck to her shoulder—silver dolphins dancing in the water with golden sea nymphs, big blue breaking waves, bright green underwater vines twisting around it

all. Her formerly blonde hair is now blonde and *blue* with
vermilion streaks and she has a stud in her right nostril.
Which is to say—

Fuck you, Paqu.

BEAUTIFUL DAY IN Laguna.

Aren't they all, though?

What Chon thinks as he looks out at another sunny day.
One after the other after the other after the—

Other.

He thinks about Sartre.

Ben's condo is plunked on a bluff that juts out over Table Rock Beach, and a prettier place you've never seen, which it better be given the zeros that Ben plunked down for it. Table Rock is a big boulder that sits about fifty yards—depending on the tide—into the ocean and resembles, okay, a table. You don't have to be a Mensa member to figure that out.

The living room in which he sits is all floor-to-ceiling tinted windows so you can drink in every drop of the gorgeous view—oceans and cliffs and Catalina on the horizon—but Chon's eyes are glued to the laptop screen.

O walks in, looks at him, and asks, "Internet porn?"

"I'm addicted."

"Everyone's addicted to Internet porn," she says. Including herself—she likes it a lot. Likes to log on, type in "squirters," and check out the clips. "It's cliché for a guy. Can't you be addicted to something else?"

"Like?"

"I dunno," she answers. "Heroin. Go for the retro thing."

"HIV?"

"You could get clean needles." She thinks it might be cool to have a junkie lover. When you're done fucking him and don't want to deal with him you just prop him on the

floor in the corner. And there's the whole tragically hip thing. Until that got boring and then she could do the intervention drama and then go visit him at rehab on weekends and when he got out they could go to meetings together. Be all serious and spiritual and shit until *that* got boring. Then do something else.

Mountain biking, maybe.

Anyway, Chon's thin enough to be a junkie, all tall, angular, muscled—looks like something put together from junkyard metal. Sharp edges. Her friend Ash says you could cut yourself fucking Chon, and the cunt probably knows.

"I texted you," O says.

"I didn't check."

He's still eyeing the screen. Must be hot hot hot, she thinks. About twenty seconds later he asks, "What did you text?"

"That I was coming over."

"Oh."

She doesn't even remember when John became Chon and she's known him practically all his life, since like preschool. He had baditude even then. Teachers hated Chon. *Ha-a-a-a-ated* him. He dropped out two months before high school graduation. It's not that Chon is stupid—he's off-the-charts smart; it's just his baditude.

O reaches for the bong on the glass coffee table. "Mind if I smoke up?"

"Step lightly," he warns her.

"Yeah?"

He shrugs. "It's *your* afternoon."

She grabs the Zippo and lights up. Takes a moderate hit, feels the smoke go into her lungs, spread across her belly, then fill her head. Chonny wasn't lying—it is *powerful* hydro—as one would expect from Ben & Chonny's, who produce the best hydro this side of ...

Nowhere.

They just produce the best hydro, period.

O is instantly wreck-ed.

Lies faceup on the sofa and lets the high wash over and through her. *Amaaaaazing* dope, amazing grace, it makes her skin tingle. Gets her horny. Big wow, *air* gets O horny. She unsnaps her jeans, slides her fingers down, and starts strumming her tune.

Classic Chon, O thinks—although she's almost beyond thought, what with the super-dope and her bud blossoming—he'd rather sit there and stare at pixilated sex than boff a real woman lying within arm's reach, humping her hand.

"Come do me," she hears herself say.

Chon gets up from his chair, slowly, like it's a chore. Stands over her and watches for a few seconds. O would grab him and pull him down but one hand is busy (buzzy?) and it seems like too far a reach. *Finally* he unzips and yeah, she thinks, you too-cool-for-school, detached zen master Ash fucker, you're diamond hard.

He starts off all cool and controlled, deliberate like his dick is a pool cue and he's lining up his shots, but after a while he starts anger-fucking her, *bam bam bam*, like he's shooting her. Drives her small shoulders into the arm of the sofa.

Trying to fuck the war out of himself, hips thrusting like he can fuck the images off, like the bad pictures will come out with his jizz (wargasm?), but it won't happen it won't happen it won't happen it won't happen even though she does her part arches her own hips and bucks like she's trying to throw him out of the fern grotto this machine invader cutting down her rain forest her slick moist jungle.

As she goes—

Oh, oh, oh.

Oh, oh, *ohhhhh* ...

O!

WHEN SHE WAKES up—

—sort of—

Chon is sitting at the dining room table, still staring at the lap-pie, but now he's cleaning a gun broken down into intricate pieces on a beach towel. Because Ben would fucking *freak* if Chon got oil on the table or the carpet. Ben is fussy about his things. Chon says he's like a woman but Ben has a different take. Each nice thing represents a risk—growing and moving hydro.

Even though Ben hasn't been here in months, Chon and O are still careful with his stuff.

O hopes the gun parts don't mean Chon's getting ready to go back to I-Rock-and-Roll, as he calls it. He's been back twice since getting out of the military, on the payroll of one of those sketchy private security companies. Returns with, as he says, his soul empty and his bank account full.

Which is why he goes in the first place.

You sell the skills you have.

Chon got his GED, joined the navy, and busted his way into SEAL school. Sixty miles south of here, on Silver Strand, they used the ocean to torture him. Made him lie faceup in a winter sea as freezing waves pounded him (waterboarding was just part of the drill, my friends, SOP). Put heavy logs on his shoulder and made him run up sand dunes and thigh-deep in the ocean. Had him dive underwater and hold his breath until he thought his lungs would blow his insides out. Did everything they could think of to make him ring the bell and quit—what they didn't get was that Chon *liked* the pain. When they finally woke up to

that twisted fact, they taught him to do everything that a seriously crazy, crazily athletic man could do in H₂O.

Then they sent him to Stanland.

Afghanistan.

Where ...

You got sand, you got snow, you ain't got no ocean.

The Taliban don't surf.

Neither does Chon, he hates that faux-cool shit, he always liked being the one straight guy in Laguna who *didn't* surf, he just found it funny that they spent six figures training him to be Aquaman and then shipped him to a place where there's no water.

Oh well, you take your wars where you can find them.

Chon stayed in for two enlistments and then checked out. Came back to Laguna to ...

To ...

Uhhnn ...

To ...

Nothing.

There was nothing for Chon *to* do. Nothing he wanted, anyway. He could have gone the lifeguard route, but he didn't feel like sitting on a high chair watching tourists work on their melanoma. A retired navy captain gave him a gig selling yachts but Chon couldn't sell and hated boats, so that didn't work out. So when the corporate recruiter looked him up, Chon was available.

To go to I-Rock-and-Roll.

Nasty *nasty* shit in those pre-Surge days, what with kidnappings, beheadings, IEDs severing sticks and blowing off melons. It was Chon's job to keep any of that shit from happening to the paying customers, and if the best defense is a good offense, well ...

It was what it was.

And with the right blend of hydro, speed, Vike, and Oxy it was actually a pretty cool video game—IraqBox—and you

could rack up some serious points in the middle of the Shia/Sunni/AQ-in-Mesopotamia cluster-fuck if you weren't too particular about the particulars.

O has diagnosed Chon with PTLOSD.

Post-Traumatic Lack Of Stress Disorder. He says he has no nightmares, nerves, flashbacks, hallucinations, or guilt.

"I wasn't stressed," Chon insisted, "and there was no trauma."

"Must have been the dope," O opined.

Dope is good, Chon agreed.

Dope is supposed to be bad, but in a *bad world* it's *good*, if you catch the reverse moral polarity of it. Chon refers to drugs as a "rational response to insanity," and his chronic use of the chronic is a chronic response to *chronic* insanity.

It creates balance, Chon believes. In a fucked-up world, you have to be fucked up, or you'll fall ...

off ...

the ...

end—

O PULLS HER jeans up, walks over to the table, and looks at the gun, still in pieces on the beach towel. The metal parts are pretty in their engineered precision.

As previously noted, O likes power tools.

Except when Chon is cleaning one with professional concentration even though he's looking at a computer screen.

She looks over his shoulder to see what's so good.

Expects to see someone giving head, someone getting it, because there is no give without the get, no get without the give when it comes to head.

Not so fast.

Because what she sees is this clip:

A camera slowly pans across what looks like the interior of a warehouse at a line of nine severed heads set on the floor. The faces—all male, all with unkempt black hair—bear expressions of shock, sorrow, grief, and even resignation. Then the camera tilts up to the wall, where the trunks of the decapitated bodies hang neatly from hooks, as if the heads had placed them in a locker room before going to work.

There is no sound on the clip, no narration, just the faint sound of the camera and whoever is wielding it.

For some reason, the silence is as brutal as the images.

O fights back the vomit she feels bubbling up in her belly. Again, as previously noted, this is not a girl who likes to yank. When she gets some air back, she looks at the gun, looks at the screen, and asks, "Are you going back to Iraq?"

Chon shakes his head.

No, he tells her, not Iraq.
San Diego.