

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Gentlemen's Hour

Don Winslow

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About the Book

Boone Daniels, a laid-back private investigator, gathers with his surfing buddies on Pacific Beach. There's no surf, but the Dawn Patrol are out in force regardless ... it's what they do. Having no work to do, and no real reason to go to the office, Boone stays for the second shift on the daily surfing clock - the Gentlemen's Hour; and ends up taking on a hated matrimonial case. But that soon becomes the least of his worries.

When The Sundowner, a symbolic icon of the San Diego surf scene, sees a murderous dispute between a young surfer and a member of the territorial Rockpile Crew, the painful truth that violence is seeping into the surf community can no longer be ignored. So when asked to help on the defence by current love interest Petra Hall, Boone knows there will be outrage from both the community, and the rest of Dawn Patrol.

As the two cases overlap in unexpected ways, an isolated Boone finds himself struggling to stay afloat as the water gets deeper ... and more deadly.

About the Author

Don Winslow has worked as a movie theatre manager, a production assistant, and as a private investigator. In addition to being a novelist he now works as an independent consultant in issues involving litigation arising from criminal behaviour. His novels include *The Death and Life of Bobby Z*, *California Fire and Life*, *The Power of the Dog*, *The Winter of Frankie Machine* and *The Dawn Patrol*.

ALSO BY DON WINSLOW

The Dawn Patrol

The Winter of Frankie Machine

The Power of the Dog

California Fire and Life

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

While Drowning in the Desert

Isle of Joy

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**
**THE GENTLEMEN'S
HOUR**



arrow books

“But I don’t need that much
Sugar in my cup,
No, I don’t need that much . . .”

*- Nick Hernandez,
Common Sense,
‘Sugar In My Cup’*

1

Kansas.

See 'flatter than.'

Like the ocean this August morning in Pacific Beach,
San Diego, California.

Aka Kansas.

As the Dawn Patrol gives way to the Gentlemen's Hour.

2

Earth, air, fire and water.

The four elements, right?

Let's let air go for a minute - except in LA, it's pretty much a given. Fire's not the topic either - for now, anyway.

Leaving earth and water.

They have more in common than you'd think.

For example, they can both look static on the surface, but there's always something going on underneath. Like water, earth is always moving. You can't necessarily see it, you might not feel it, but it's happening anyway. Beneath our feet, tectonic plates are shifting, faults are widening, quakes are tuning up to rock and roll.

So that dirt we're standing on, so-called 'solid ground?'

It's moving beneath us.

Taking us for a ride.

Face it - whether we know it or not, we're all always surfing.

3

Boone Daniels lies face up on his board like it's an inflatable mattress in a swimming pool.

He's half-asleep. The sun that warms his closed eyes is already burning off the marine layer relatively early in the morning. He's out there as usual with the Dawn Patrol - Dave the Love God, High Tide, Johnny Banzai, Hang Twelve - even though there's no surf to speak of and nothing to do except talk story. The only regular not present for duty is Sunny Day who's in Oz on the Women's Professional Surfing Tour and also making a video for Quicksilver.

It's boring - the torpid dog days of late-summer, when Pacific Beach is overrun with tourists, when most of the locies have basically sung 'See you in September,' and the ocean itself can't work up the energy to produce a wave.

"Kansas," Hang Twelve complains.

Hang Twelve, thusly glossed because he has a dozen toes - fortunately six on each foot - is the junior member of the Dawn Patrol, a lost pup that Boone took under his arm when the kid was about thirteen. White as a Republican National Committee meeting, he sports Rastafarian dreadlocks and a red retro-beatnik goatee, and despite or perhaps because of his parents' many acid trips, he's an *idiot-savant* with a computer.

"Have you ever been to Kansas?" Johnny Banzai asks, sounding a little aggro. He doubts that Hang has ever been east of Interstate 5.

"No," Hang answers. He's never been east of Interstate 5.

"Then how do you know?" Johnny presses, in full-on interrogator mode now. "For all you know, Kansas could be covered with mountain ranges. Like the Alps."

"I know there's no surf in Kansas," Hang Twelve says stubbornly, because he's almost certain there's no ocean in Kansas, unless maybe it's the Atlantic, in which case there's probably no surf either.

"There's no surf in San Dog," Boone offers. "Not today, anyway."

Dave, lying on his stomach, lifts his head off the board and pukes into the water. Again. Boone and Dave have been boys since elementary school, so Boone has seen Dave hung over many, many times, but not quite like this.

Last night was 'Mai Tai Tuesday' at The Sundowner.

"You gonna live?" Boone asks him.

"Not enthusiastically," Dave answers.

"I'll kill you if you want," High Tide offers, propping up his big head on one big fist. The origin of the 375-pound Samoan's nickname is obvious – he gets into the ocean, the water level rises; he gets out, it falls. Simple displacement physics. "Something to do, anyway."

Johnny Banzai is all over it. "How? How should we kill Dave?"

As a homicide detective for the San Diego Police Department, killing Dave is right in Johnny's wheelhouse. It's refreshing to put his mind to a murder that *isn't* going to happen, as opposed to the three all-too-real killings he has on his desk right now, including one he doesn't even want to think about. It's been a hot, tetchy summer in San Diego – tempers have flared and lives have been extinguished. A vicious drug war for control of the Baja Cartel has spilled across the border into San Diego, and bodies are turning up all over the place.

"Drowning him would be easiest," Boone suggests.

"Hello?" Tide says. "He's a *lifeguard*?"

Dave the Love God *is* a lifeguard, only slightly more famous for the lives he's saved than the women he's slept with on his one-man crusade to boost San Diego's tourist industry. Right now, though, he's belly down on his board, moaning.

"Are you kidding?" Boone asks. "*Look* at him."

"Drowning is too blatantly ironic," Johnny says. "I mean, the headline *Legendary Lifeguard Drowns In Flat Sea*? It doesn't work for me."

"Do you have your gun?" Tide asks.

"In the *water*?"

"If you were my friend," Dave groans, "you'd paddle in, get your pistol from your car, and shoot me."

"Do you know the paperwork involved in discharging your firearm?" Johnny asks.

"What's in a Mai Tai anyway?" Boone wonders out loud. He was also at Mai Tai Tuesday, his office being next-door to The Sundowner and he being sort of an unofficial bouncer for the joint. But he left after having only a couple and went back to his office, upstairs from the Pacific Surf Shop, to see if there were any e-mails from Sunny or any offers for work. Zippo on both, Sunny being really busy and the private investigation field being really not.

Boone's not so bummed about the work, but he does miss Sunny. Even though they have long been 'exes,' they're still good friends, and he misses her presence.

They all shut up for a second as they feel a wave building up behind them. They wait, feel the slight surge, but then the wave gives up like a guy who's late for work, just can't get out of bed, and decides to call in sick.

Later.

"Could we get back to killing Dave?" Tide asks.

"Yes, please," Dave says.

Boone drops out of the conversation.

Literally.

Tired of making talk, he rolls off his board into the water and lets himself sink. It feels good, but then again, Boone is probably more comfortable in the water than on land. A prenatal surfer in his mother's womb, the ocean is his church, and he's a daily communicant. Working just enough to (barely) support his surfing jones, his office is a block from the beach. His home is even closer - he lives in a cottage on a pier over the water, so the smell, sound and rhythm of the ocean are constants in his life.

Now he holds his breath and looks up through the water at the relentlessly blue summer sky and pale yellow sun, distorted by refraction. He feels the ocean gently pulse around him, listens to the muted sound of the water running over the bottom, a scant ten feet or so below, and contemplates the state of his existence.

No serious career, no serious money (okay, no money at all), no serious relationship.

He and Sunny had split up even before she got her big break and went off on the pro tour, and although there is that thing with Petra, who knows where that's going? If anywhere. They've been 'seeing' each other casually since last spring but haven't closed the deal and he's not sure he even wants to because he has a feeling that Petra Hall would not be into the friends-with-privileges thing, and that if they did sleep together, he *would* instantly have a serious relationship.

Which he's not sure he wants.

A relationship with Petra 'Pete' Hall is heavy-duty reef break, nothing to be trifled with. Pete is gorgeous, smart, funny and has the heart of a lion, but she's also a career-

driven lawyer who loves to argue, ferociously ambitious, and she doesn't surf.

And maybe it's too much, on the end of what's been a heavy year.

There was the whole Tammy Roddick case that brought Petra into Boone's life, and blew up into a massive child prostitution ring that almost *cost* Boone his life; there was Dave blowing the whistle on local gangster Red Eddie's smuggling op; the big swell that rolled in and changed all their lives; and Sunny riding her big wave, making the cover of all the surf mags, and leaving.

Now Sunny was off riding her comet, and Dave was in limbo waiting to see if he'd ever have to testify in Eddie's constantly delayed trial, and Boone was treading water on the edge of a relationship with Pete.

"Is he coming up?" Hang asks the others, starting to get concerned. Boone's been down there a long time.

"I don't care," Dave mumbles. I'm the one who's supposed to die, he thinks, not Boone. Boone's not hung over, Boone didn't down double-digit Mai Tais - whatever the hell they're made from - last night. Boone doesn't deserve the dignified relief of death. But Dave's lifeguard instincts take over and he looks over the edge of his board to see Boone's face underwater. "He's fine."

"Yeah," Hang says, "but how long can he hold his breath?"

"A long time," Johnny says.

They've actually had breath-holding contests, which Boone invariably won. Johnny has a dark suspicion that Boone is actually some kind of mutant, like his parents were really space aliens from an amphibian planet. Holding your breath is important to a serious surfer, because you might get held under a big wave and then you'd better be able to go without air for a couple of minutes because

you're not going to have a choice. So surfers train for that eventuality, which, in reality, is an inevitability. It's going to happen.

Johnny looks down into the water and waves.

Boone waves back.

"He's good," Johnny says.

Which leads to a not very animated discussion of whether it's possible for a person to intentionally drown himself, or whether the body would just take over and force you to breathe. On a cooler day, with more active surf, this is the sort of topic that would have engendered ferocious debate, but with the sun stinking hot and the surf a no-show, the argument falls as flat as the sea.

August blows.

When Boone finally pops back up, Johnny asks, "Did you figure out the meaning of life?"

"Sort of," Boone says, climbing back on his board.

"We're dying to hear," Dave mutters.

"The meaning of life," Boone says, "is to stay underwater for as long as possible."

"That wouldn't be the *meaning* of life," Johnny observes, "that would be the *secret* of life."

"Okay," Boone says.

Secret, meaning, secret meaning, whatever.

The secret meaning of life might be just as simple as the Dawn Patrol itself. Spending time with good, old friends. Doing something you love with people you love in a place you love, even when there's no surf.

A few minutes later they give up and paddle in. The Dawn Patrol – that early-morning, pre-work surf session – is over. They have places to go to: Johnny's coming off the night shift but needs to get home because his doctor wife is on days, Hang has to open Pacific Surf, Tide is due at his

gig as a supervisor in the Public Works Department, responsible for storm drains even when there are no storms to drain. Dave needs to man the lifeguard tower to protect swimmers from surf that doesn't exist.

The Dawn Patrol – Boone's best friends in the world.

He doesn't go in with them, though.

Having no work at the moment, there's no point in going into the office to see if the red ink has gotten any redder.

So he stays out there for the Gentlemen's Hour.

4

The Gentlemen's Hour is an old surfing institution.

The second shift on the daily surfing clock, the Gentlemen's Hour follows the Dawn Patrol in the rotation, as the hard-charging younger guys from the early-morning session go to their j-o-b-s, leaving the beach to the older *veteranos* – the retirees, doctors, lawyers and successful entrepreneurs who have the 9-to-5 in the rear-view mirror.

Now, young guys can stay for the Gentlemen's Hour, but they'd better know and observe the unwritten rules:

1. Never jump in on an old guy's ride.
2. Never hot-dog by doing stuff your younger body can do that their older ones can't.
3. Never offer your opinion about anything.
4. Never, *ever* say anything like, 'You already told us that story.'

Because the gentlemen of the Gentlemen's Hour like to talk. Hell, half the time they don't get into the water at all, just stand around their classic woodies and talk story. Share memories of waves out of the past, waves that get bigger, thicker, meaner, sweeter, longer with time. It's only natural, it's to be expected, and Boone, even when he was an obnoxious gremmie – and there were few more obnoxious – found out that if you hung around and kept your stupid mouth shut, you could learn something from these guys, that there really was a pony under all the horseshit.

Everything you think you're seeing for the first time, these guys have already seen. There are still old boys out on the Gentlemen's Hour who invented the sport, who can tell you about paddling out into breaks that had never been ridden before, who can still give you a little vicarious glow from the Golden Age.

But some of the guys on the Gentlemen's Hour aren't old, they're just successful. They're professionals, or they own their businesses, and everything is going so well they don't have to show up anywhere except the beach.

One of these fortunates is Dan Nichols.

If you were going to make a television commercial featuring a forty-four-year-old California surfer, you'd cast Dan. Tall, rugged, with blond hair brushed straight back, tanned, brilliant white smile, green-eyed and handsome, Dan is the male version of the California Dream. Given all that, you'd also think you'd hate the dude, but you don't.

Dan's a cool guy.

Now, Dan didn't grow up anything like poor - his grandfather was in real estate and left him a tidy trust fund - but Dan took that nest egg and hatched a whole lot of chickens. What Dan did was marry his vocation and avocation, building a surf clothing line that just exploded. Started with a little warehouse in PB, and now has his own shiny big building in La Jolla. And you don't have to be in San Diego to see Nichols' 'N' logo, you can see kids wearing Dan's gear in Paris, London and probably Ouagadougou.

So Dan Nichols has many, many bucks.

And he can really surf, so he's a member-in-good-standing of the PB Gentlemen's Hour. Now he paddles out behind the barely discernible break and finds Boone sunbathing on his longboard.

"Boone, what's up?"

"Not the surf," Boone says. "Hey, Dan."

"Hey, yourself. What keeps you out past the Dawn Patrol?"

"Sloth," Boone admits. "Sloth and underemployment."

If Boone weren't *self*-employed he'd be *un*employed, and very often it amounts to the same thing anyway.

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about," Dan says.

Boone opens his eyes. Dan looks serious, which is unusual. He's normally jovial and ultra-laid-back, and why not? You would be too if you had double-digit millions in the bank. "What's up, Dan?"

"Could we paddle out a little farther?" Dan asks. "It's kind of personal."

"Yeah, sure."

He lets Dan take the lead and paddles behind him another fifty yards out, where the only eavesdroppers might be a flock of brown pelicans flying past. Brown pelicans are sort of the avian mascots of Pacific Beach. There's a statue of one by the new lifeguard building which, even now, Dave is climbing to begin another day scoping *turistas*.

Dan smiles ruefully. "This is hard . . ."

"Take your time," Boone says.

Probably Dan suspects that an employee is embezzling, or selling secrets to a competitor or something, which would seriously bum him out, because he prides himself on running a happy, loyal ship. People who go to work at Nichols tend to stay, want to spend their whole careers there. Dan has offered Boone a job any time he wants it, and there have been times when Boone's been almost tempted. If you're going to have a (shudder) 9-to-5, Nichols would be a cool place to work.

"I think Donna's cheating on me," Dan says.

"No way."

Dan shrugs. "I dunno, Boone."

He lays out the usual scenario: She's out at odd hours with murky explanations, she's spending a lot of time with girlfriends who don't seem to know anything about it; she's distant, distracted, less affectionate than she used to be.

Donna Nichols is a looker. Tall, blonde, stacked, leggy - an eleven on a California scale of ten. A definite MILF if she and Dan had children, which they don't. The two of them are like the poster couple for the SoCal Division of the Beautiful People, San Diego Chapter.

Except they're nice, Boone thinks. He doesn't know Donna, but the Nichols have always struck him as genuinely nice people - down-to-earth, amazingly unpretentious, low-key, generous, good community people. So it's a real shame that this is happening - *if* it's happening.

Which is what Dan wants Boone to find out. "Could you look into this for me, Boone?"

"I don't know," Boone says.

Matrimonial cases suck.

Mega-sleazy, sheet-sniffing, low-rent depressing work that usually ends badly. And you're always left feeling like some leering, peeping-tom pervert who then gets to present the client with proof of his or her betrayal, or, on the other hand, confirmation of the paranoia and mistrust that will destroy the marriage anyway.

It's a bad deal all around.

Only creeps enjoy doing it.

Boone hates matrimonial cases, and rarely if ever takes them.

"I'd consider it a personal favor," Dan says. "I don't know where else to turn. I'm going crazy. I love her, Boone. I really love her."

Which makes it worse, of course. There are a few thousand deeply cynical relationships on the Southern Californian marital merry-go-round - men acquire trophy wives until the sell-by date does them part; women marry rich men to achieve financial independence via the alimony route; young guys wed older women for room, board and credit-card rights while they bang waitresses and models. If you absolutely, positively *have* to do 'matrimonial,' these are the cases you want, because there's very little genuine emotion involved.

But 'love?'

Ouch.

As has been overly documented, love hurts.

It's sure laying a beat-down on Dan Nichols. He looks like he might actually cry, which would violate an important addendum to the rules of the Gentlemen's Hour: There's no crying, ever. These guys are old school - they think Oprah's a mispronunciation of music they'd never listen to. It's okay to *have* feelings - like if you're looking at photos of your grandchildren - but you can never acknowledge them, and showing them is *way* over the line.

Boone says, "I'll look into it."

"Money is no object," Dan says, then adds. "Jesus, did I really say that?"

"Stress," Boone says. "Listen, this is awkward, but do you have . . . I mean, is there anyone . . . a guy . . . you suspect?"

"Nobody," Dan says. "I thought you might tail her. You know, put her under surveillance. Is that the way to go?"

"That's one way to go," Boone says. "Let's go an easier way first. I assume she has a cell phone."

"I-phone."

"I-phone, sure," Boone says. "Can you access the records without her knowing it?"

"Yeah."

"Do that," Boone says. "We'll see if any unexplained number keeps coming up."

It's kooky, but cheaters are amazingly careless about calling their lovers on the cellies, like they can't stay off them. They call them, text them, and then there's e-mail. Modern techno has made adulterers stupid. "Check her computer, too."

"Got it, that's good."

No, it's not good, Boone thinks, it reeks. But it's better than putting her under surveillance. And with any luck, the phone records and e-mails will come up clean and he can pull Dan off this nasty wave.

"I'm going out of town on business in a couple of days," Dan says. "I think that's when she . . ."

He lets it trail off.

They paddle in.

The Gentlemen's Hour is about over anyway.

5

In the middle of August, on a ferociously hot day, the man wears a seersucker suit, white shirt and tie. His one concession to the potentially harmful effects of the strong sun on his pale skin is a straw hat.

Jones just believes that is how a gentleman dresses.

He strolls the boardwalk along Pacific Beach and watches as two surfers walk in, their boards tucked under their arms alongside their hips.

But Jones' mind is not on them, it is on pleasure.

He's reveling in a memory from the previous day, of gently, slowly, and repeatedly swinging a bamboo stick into a man's shins. The man was suspended by the wrists from a ceiling pipe, and he swayed slightly with each blow.

A less subtle interrogator might have swung the stick harder, shattering bone, but Jones prides himself on his subtlety, patience and creativity. A broken shin is agonizing but hurts only once, albeit for quite some time. The repetitive taps grew increasingly painful and the anticipation of the ensuing tap was mentally excruciating.

The man, an accountant, told Jones everything that he knew after a mere twenty strokes.

The next three hundred blows were for pleasure - Jones', not the accountant's - and to express their common employer's displeasure at the state of business. Don Iglesias, patron of the Baja Cartel, does not like to lose money, especially on foolishness, and he hired Jones to find out the real cause of said loss and to punish those responsible.

It will be many months before the accountant walks without a wince. And Don Iglesias now knows that the origin of his losses is not in Tijuana, where the beating took place, but here in sunny San Diego.

Jones goes in search of an ice cream, which sounds very pleasant.