

Barbarian Days by William Finnegan

Random Notes (DJE)

From a review on Amazon by Michael T: *Best book on surfing I have read. Yes, he does veer from surfing to explore other aspects of his life, but it all weaves together so seamlessly that it holds the reader's interest throughout. As a contemporary of Finnegan, I found the descriptions of beach life and surfing from his childhood and early adolescence very nostalgic. I felt envy at the experiences he had exploring now famous waves around the world when they were still mostly unknown. This is a masterful piece of writing. His descriptions of the experience of riding a wave are unparalleled in my experience. The personal dimension he brings to the tale, both the people he meets and the conflicts he goes through, brings the story to life. This is a page-turner. I was sad to come to the end.*

P.18 Surfing always had this horizon, this fear-line, that made it different from other things, certainly from other sports I knew. Everything out there was disturbingly interlaced with everything else. Waves were the playing field. They were the goal. They were the object of your deepest desire and adoration. At the same time, they were your adversary, your nemesis, even your enemy.

P. 40 I felt myself floating between two worlds. There was the ocean, effectively infinite, falling away forever to horizon. I was a sunburnt pagan now. I felt privy to mysteries. The other world was land: everything that was not surfing. Books, girls, school, my family, friends who did not surf.

P. 90 The Vietnam War was wrong, rotten to the core. But the military, the government, the police, big business were all congealing in my view into a single oppressive mass – the System, the Man. Surfing became an excellent refuge from the conflict – all-consuming, physically exhausting, joy-drenched reason to live. It's vaguely outlaw usefulness, it's disengagement from productive labor, neatly expressed one's dissatisfaction.

P. 96 What could rightly have worried my dad about me and surfing was the special brand of monomania, antisocial and ill balanced, that a serious commitment to surfing nearly always brought with it. The newly emerging ideal was solitude, purity, perfect waves far from civilization, Robinson Crusoe, endless summer. This was a track that led away from citizenship, in

the ancient sense of the word, towards a scratched out frontier where we would live as latter day barbarians. This was not the daydream of the happy idler. It went deeper than that. Chasing waves in a dedicated way was both profoundly egocentric and selfless, dynamic and ascetic, radical and it's rejection of the values of duty and conventional treatment.

Imagine going back to the days of the Chumash Indians, or the Spanish missions, if you could just take a modern surfboard with you. Malibu had been breaking exactly like this, unriden for centuries, eons.

P. 100 I had two English teachers, Mr. Jay and Mrs. Ball and changed my life course by introducing me to the difficult pleasures of Melville, Shakespeare, Elliot, Hemingway, Saul Bellow, Dylan Thomas and most devastatingly James Joyce.

P. 121 Hard core surf films are essentially meaningless to anyone who doesn't surf. An old ramshackle movie house in Lahaina, the Queen Theater, played them occasionally, always to sold-out, stoned-out crowds.

P. 123. People who try to start surfing at an advanced age, meaning over 14, had, in my opinion, almost no chance of becoming proficient, and usually suffered pain and sorrow before they quit.

P. 157 Guam was Milspeak (military speak), I was told – short for “give up and masturbate.” Heroin addiction seem to be the leading form of entertainment, followed by shopping, fighting, robbery, television, arson, and strip joints.

P. 160. It felt like we had been knocking around the South Pacific for half our lives. We traveled by local bus and truck and ferry, by canoe and freighter and open boat, by small plane and yacht and taxi, on horseback. We walked. We hitchhiked. We paddled. We swim. We walked some more.

P. 165. Seen from a certain angle, everything in Samoa – the ocean, forest, the people – had a certain kind of noble glow. This glow had nothing to do with picture perfect beaches or grass shacks, those worn out ideas of paradise, nor with my old storybook dreams – my Umi and his brothers' days were long behind me... What enchanted me was simply that people were still living so close to the land and sea and so communally. To my western eyes, they were paragons of graceful competence and imagined wholeness.

P. 170. Willard Bascom wrote, in *Waves and Beaches*, "this zone where waves give up their energy and where systemic water motions give way to violent turbulence is the surf. It is the most exciting part of the ocean."

P. 176. Being rich white Americans in dirt for places where many people, especially the young, yearned openly for the life, the comforts, the very opportunities that we, at least for the seemingly endless moment, had turned our backs on – well, it would simply never be OK. In an inescapable way, we sucked and we knew it, and humility was called for.

She said, all you care about is finding the perfect wave, or something. I mean what will you do if you find it? Ride it five or six times and then what?"

It was a good question. We could only hope that at some point would be forced to answer it.

P. 178. Kava needs to be pounded and prepared and is usually consumed only after nightfall. A group, normally men only, sits cross-legged on mats around a great wooden bowl, known in Fiji as a tanoa. A coconut cup is passed around. In Fiji the group claps three times, hollowly, and the drinker claps once and says, "bula" (hello or life), before taking a cup, which is known as a bilo. After draining the cup the drinker claps and says, maca, which means dry or empty, and everyone claps three times together. The ceremony can go on 6 or 7 hours and innumerable bilos. Guitars get played, stories get told, hymns sung, often with a stunning soprano harmony part.

P. 203. Surfers have a perfection fetish. The perfect wave, etc. There is no such thing. Waves are not stationary objects in nature like roses or diamonds. They are quick, violent events at the end of a long chain of storm action and ocean reaction. The best days at the best breaks have a Platonic aspect – they begin to embody a model of what surfers want waves to be. But that's the end of it, that beginning.

P. 211. I was falling hard for Australia. The country had never interested me. From a distance, it had always seemed terminally bland. Up close, though, it was a nation of wisenheimers, smart mouth diggers with no respect for authority.

Australia was easily the most democratic country I had encountered. People called it the “Lucky Country. Australia is a lucky country, run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck.

P. 214. Southern California surfers were bad boys, outlaws, rebels. We were, that is to say, cool. Surfing wasn't some tamed authority approved sport. Sue seemed to be sick of Australian men. Ockers as they were called – the name came from a popular TV show – drank too much beer, loved their mates and for football first, and treated women shabbily.

P. 222. The Gold Coast was an open-air object lesson in how I was destroying my body through surfing. Looking around at Australians who spent a lot of time in tropical sun for which they were genetically unprepared, most were of Northern European ancestry, I could see my own sorry medical future. Every other surfer, even teenagers seemed to have pterygia, sun-caused cataracts, clouding their blue eyes. The scabby ears and purple noses and scarily mottled arms of the middle-aged were fair warning: basal cell carcinoma, if not squamous cell, if not melanoma, lay ahead. I had pterygia myself in both eyes. I had no interest in any of this at the time. All I wanted from my body was for it to paddle faster and serve better.

P. 228. I panicked sometimes, convinced I was wasting my youth, aimlessly wandering on the dark side of the moon while old friends, classmates, peers were building lives, careers, becoming adults back in America. I wanted to be useful, somehow to work, to write, to teach, to accomplish great things -- what happened to all of that? But, the world was incomprehensibly large and there was still so much to see.

In Australia, distances between outback towns were sometimes measured in "tinnies" – how many cans of beer it takes to traverse them.

P. 237. Bali was overrun, and the collision of mass tourism and Indonesian poverty was grotesque...

There were so many surfers in Kuta, it was like attending a world conference of the wave-obsessed. Dope-fueled surfers in Bali, together with the legions of non-surfing western backpackers, smoked daunting quantities of hash and pot.

P. 244. Frustration is a big part of surfing. It's the part we all tend to forget – stupid sessions, waves missed, waves blown, endless seeming lulls.

I was struck by how, for somebody seeing Indonesia from a train, the main business of the nation seemed to be defecation. Every stream, river, weir, rice paddy canal that the tracks crossed seems to be lined with farmers and villagers placidly squatting. It was a tour of the world's biggest, most picturesque toilet.

P. 249. I was tired and homesick and sick of traveling. I wasn't tempted to quit Asia with Brian, but I was having trouble remembering exactly why I was here. I simply couldn't picture returning to the United States. I copied a passage from Lord Jim: "We wandered in our thousands over the face of the earth, the illustrious and the obscure, earning beyond the seas our fame, our money, or only a crust of bread; but it seems to me that for each of us going home must be like going to render an account."

P. 254. In Singapore he suffered from Post-Indonesia Stress Syndrome (P.I.S.S)

Finnegan wondered if his girlfriend had any interest in his grand travel plan, or if she even knew what it was. My ambition to go, without too many shortcuts, around the world. We were standing on the sidewalk surrounded by dim shadowy mountains, outside the café where she worked. That day, I said, I was heading west to the Coast. When I came back – pause for hokey effect – it would be from the East. She cocked her head and laughed and dared me to do that.

Page 269 working on Cape Flats in Cape Town, seeing the workings of institutionalized injustice and state terror up relatively close, was deeply affecting me – was making me impatient with, among other things, myself. There was simply no escaping politics, and I found no common political ground with any of the surfers I met there. So I chased waves alone.

P. 274. South Africa had change me, had turned me towards politics, journalism, questions of power. I vowed to take no more day jobs. I would write for a living, period.

P. 284 My ambivalence about the sport we shared appalled him (Mark Rennecker). It was heresy. Surfing to begin with, was not a "sport." It was a "path." And the more you poured into it, the more you got back from it – he himself was the exuberant proof of that.*

Page 293 Buzzy Trent, an old time big wave surfer, allegedly said, "Big waves are not measured in feet, but in increments of fear." This is a brute fact that all surfers know in their bowels, whether or not they've heard the formula. (It's also said that, big waves are not measured in feet, but in increments of bullshit.

The number of surfer ready to ride 25-foot waves is less than one in 20,000. Big wave specialists are mutants, mystics, pilgrims traveling another road from the rest of us. They seemed bionic, suspiciously immune to normal reactions (panic, flight or fight) in the face of life-threatening peril.

P. 298. Mark's disdain for marriage and children was pointed. "The rule about guys getting married: their readiness to ride big waves goes down one notch immediately. And it goes down another big notch with each kid. Most guys with three kids won't go out in waves over 4 feet!"

P. 303. My mother had her doubts about San Francisco. I once heard her call it an old folks home for young people, a quip that have some bite.

P. 310. I had heard a surfer mutter as he and his friend studied a 10-foot gun (a large surfboard) on display, "This one comes with a free pine box." The market for boards that serious was minuscule.

P. 314 Surfing pictures are not about what a ride felt like; they are about what a ride look like to others. For me, but not only for me, surfing harbors this paradox: a desire to be alone with waves fused to an equal desire to be watched, to perform.

P. 329. Surfing is such a great sport that it corrupts peoples. It's like drug addiction. You just don't want to do anything else. You don't want to go to work. If you do it's always "you really missed it" when you got off work.

P. 334. Great surfers could make you gasp with the beauty of what they did. They could make the hardest moves look easy. Casual power, the proverbial grace under pressure, these were our beau ideals.

P. 337. Surfing bigger waves felt atavistic – a compulsive return to some primal scene to prove some primal fact of manhood.

P. 345. Being out in big surf is dreamlike. Terror and ecstasy ebb and flow around the edges of things, each threatening to overwhelm the dreamer. An

unearthly beauty saturates an enormous arena of moving water, latent violence, too-real explosions, and sky. Scenes feel mythic even as they unfold. I always feel a ferocious ambivalence; I want to be nowhere else; I want to be anywhere else.

P. 358 Most of the Portuguese immigrants to Hawaii had come from, it seems, Madeira. The malasadas (Portuguese donuts) we ate as kids had come from here, as had the Portuguese sausage that I was wolfed down uncooked. Even the ukulele had come originally from Madera, where it was known as the braguinha. I could see, or I thought I could, in the faces of the Madeirans strong traces of the Pereiras and the Carvalos I had known on Oahu and Maui.

P. 379 "You surfers have no respect for your parents, no respect for your family and friends. To go out there and risk your lives in such a sea – for what? You have no respect for this village, for the generations of fishermen who have risked their lives in the sea in order to feed their families. People here have lost their lives, and lost their loved ones, in the sea. You have no respect for them!" This is my translation of the imprecations of an old woman berating four Portuguese surfers on the seawall next to the boat ramp shortly after they had attempted to paddle out on a big day

P. 388. I was getting old. I appalled myself. I missed waves I should have caught, lumbered to my feet when I should have sprung. Getting old as a surfer, I'd heard it said, was just a long, slow, humiliating process of becoming a kook again. I clung to my delusions that I could still surf decently.

P. 398. Having an audience made it worse – the humiliation of surfing so timidly. It was such a waste. Such cowardice. My self-loathing spiked insufferably. That night, back in Jardim, I lay in the dark on a lumpy cot thinking about quitting surfing. Various parts of me hurt. My left eye was weeping from too much sun and salt water. One hand throbbed from a gash received while trying to go ashore at Madonna. The other hand throbbed with urchin spines picked up in collision with the reef at Shadowlands the week before. Both feet ached with infected cuts. My lower back felt like I had spent a month digging a ditch. I was truly too old for this. I was losing my quickness, my strength, my nerve.

My friend, Andre, told me about his divorce. “Chicks had to realize,” he said, “that when they married a surfer, they married surfing. They had to either adapt or split.”

P. 410 In New York, on the city's doorstep, the opaque screen behind which the best waves broke – I should have known it – was winter. East Coast summers are dismal for surf. Fall is hurricane season, which can bring good swells. But it was winter that hooked me into chasing waves on short notice from the city. Storms known as nor'easters charge up the coast, not infrequently producing combinations of swells and winds of shockingly high quality. You just have to know where to go when.

P. 416 Surfing had never made more sense. It traces a bright memory thread through a motley of assignments. In 2010 when I needed a morning off from debriefing police torture victims in Tijuana, I knew a wave, a glossy left, just across the border, and that was where I ran. In 2011, I was in Madagascar with a team of reptile experts who were trying to stop poachers from driving a rare Golden Shield tortoise into extinction. In a coastal town I found a board and surfed myself to exhaustion in rowdy wind-ripped waves for three days until the biologists returned.

P. 418. Surfing blew up. I'm not sure when. It was always too popular, in my narrow view. Crowds were always a problem at well-known breaks. But this was different. The number of people surfing doubled and doubled again– 5 million estimated worldwide in 2002, 20 million in 2010 -- with kids taking it up in practically every country with a coastline, even if it was only a big lake. More than that, the idea of surfing became a global marketing phenomenon.

Surfers hope bleakly that surfing will one day become, like rollerblading, uncool. Then perhaps, millions of kooks will quit and leave the waves to the die-hards.

Surfers around here – Long Island and Jersey locals – or strangely genial. I have never gotten used to this. I like the unpretentiousness, the lack of snobbery, and yet some unredeemed part of me recoils. It's easy to strike up a conversation in the lineup with a stranger here. Another transplant surfer I know calls it "urban aloha."

P. 431 With me, I am always poised to flee my desk and ditch engagements in order to throw myself into some nearby patch of ocean at the moment

when the waves and wind and tide might conspire to produce something rideable. That cracking, fugitive patch is where I come from.

P. 433 Finnegan's mother was dying... She and I had a funny moment the following summer. It was the last time she went to the beach. I mentioned that the waves, though terrible, looked rideable. The west wind was picking up a running, waist high right just off the sand. "Go surfing," my mother said. I ran out and caught a few waves. The log of the board was ideal for racing the shore break, and I flew down the beach, throwing old school moves on the ratty little waves till I crashed on the sand. I ran back out to our little encampment in the dunes. My mother's blue eyes were bright. I felt about 10 years old, showing off for my mother, and she said, grinning, "You looked just like you did when you were little."

P. 437. I caught the front edge of hurricane Irene at Montauk. East Coast surfers have a ghoulish relationship with Atlantic hurricanes. The surf was big and clean, the wind dropping. I parked a few blocks inland, tiptoed to the coast and surfed for four hours. It was almost too big, but I was alone in the water, which meant I could pick my waves carefully from the groomed, multitudinous sets. They were dark and throaty and ridiculously good. There were police lights flashing, red and blue, in the gloom on the shore. I didn't know if the cops were waiting for me, but, to be safe, I stayed out till dark and then paddled two jetties north and slipped ashore.

P. 442. If I'm not on the road or surfing locally, I try to swim a mile a day now in a basement pool on West End Avenue. This humble routine, and the dry-land workout that goes with it, is my surf salvation. If I don't swim, I will become a pear-shaped pillar of suet. As I get older, the pop-up gets trickier, more effortful every year. This isn't even maintenance. It's just trying to slow the rate of decline. In a recent interview, Seinfeld compared himself to surfers: "What are they doing this for? It's just pure. You're alone. The wave is so much bigger and stronger than you. You're always outnumbered. They can always crush you. And yet you're going to accept that and turn it into a little, brief, meaningless art form."

* The idea for this book was germinated when Finnegan lived in San Francisco and surfed with Dr. Mark Rennecker. He published two articles about Rennecker in the New Yorker in 1992. Both available Free Full Text

[Playing Docs Games 1](#). August 24, 1992

[Playing Docs Games 2](#). August 31, 1992