

Imagine 14th century poet, Dante Alighieri, setting out on his journey to Hell without the company of the revered ancient Roman poet, Virgil, to guide his safe descent. Now eliminate his de facto inspiration for undertaking the epic odyssey, Beatrice, the physical embodiment of divine Beauty herself. Would Dante dare to go it alone, sans Virgil, sans Beatrice? *Smoke Ring Day* (evocative tip of the cap to Neil Young, *On the Way Home*) is Andrew Fisher's debut novel of teenager Arnie Brucher embarking on just such a treacherous solo campaign, serving as his own journeyman apprentice in joining the frail ends of his fragmenting (and fermenting) life before being seduced and finally overtaken by the cultural upheaval affectionately known to its generation as "the 60's." This first installment of an anticipated trilogy authentically tells the intimate story of this New Rochelle east coaster who takes the long road home facing west.

The richly textured saga reflects a painter's dynamic struggle with opposing tensions. The world of Arnie's familiar but emotionally distant nuclear family (mother, father, two brothers, and maid) is pitted against that of his small tight-knit school band of loyal non-complacents. The world of his traditional everything-in-its-place fast-track-to-success Jewish achievement culture is pitted against that of a rising, youth-driven let-the-chips-fall *carpe diem* resistance culture. Time and again, in small but significant ways, Fisher allows us to experience the internalization of Arnie's mostly hostile world through his adolescent eyes.

Arnie sets off on the road of male self-discovery by adopting the unflappable style and tone of the iconic master-of-cool, Humphrey Bogart. But it doesn't take long before he realizes that his own alternating sense of doom and salvation is better suited to the cracks-and-fissures of the more vulnerable and flawed Montgomery Clift. Pretty good insight for a kid from the burbs. The author's voice is deceptively simple with warmth and humor that linger.

The novel begins with a well-structured scene of an early signature event, a tennis finals match against Arnie's boyhood best friend/arch enemy Rick Seidman. It offers a glimpse of his give-no-quarter win-at-all-cost war-to-the-death outward persona and, more subtly, the inner control he must exercise to quiet the twin demons of fear (of losing) and panic (that no one will love me if I lose) that roil beneath the surface. It soon becomes apparent that Arnie's real opponent is not Rick but his father, Milt, who peppers his son from the grandstand like an abusive courtside coach who feels the match slipping away, "cross court him, Arn," you've got to "cross court him." Arnie loses the die-hard match, unable to overcome a series of unforced errors. His eventual acceptance of defeat signals a seismic shift into a new landscape where "winning isn't everything. F*ck winning!"

Secret late night poker games give rise to regular trips to the race track and covert missions to the club scene in Greenwich Village where, word is, the free-love hippie chicks just want to get laid. Unable to score, Arnie and company instead discover the volcanic eruption of a new kind of music that has the transcendent power of stopping their world dead in its tracks, as when the car radio DJ inside his Falcon introduces the new Beatles song, "A Day in the Life." The song's musical orgasmic ending segues into a reverential group silence. This cavalcade of crystallizing experiences plays out against the backdrop of the bloody and dishonest Vietnam War.

Fisher insightfully offers alternating male then female-centric perspectives of the budding relationship between Arnie and his first girlfriend, Marla. It's easy to visualize the look on Arnie's face when Marla confesses her love for the first time; one part pride, two parts terror. He also learns that it's his "unpredictability" Marla finds most attractive, an unpredictability that points to a deep well of unresolved emotion. Their exchanges accurately capture the halting vitality of two young innocents staring at a love between them.

A telling incident that occurs in the former Soviet Union harkens back to an earlier school conflict when Arnie managed to save the day after the "greasers" challenged the "Jews" to a cafeteria showdown. Clearly overmatched against the "greasers," Arnie brokers an alliance with the "little brothers" and enlists the aid of their muscle, resulting in a high noon standoff that preserves the fragile peace.

The incident in the former Soviet Union reflects a similar but more sophisticated effort by Arnie to escape harm. Traveling with his parents on vacation, Arnie gets separated in a crowd while exiting the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow. He becomes spatially disoriented in a maze of underground concrete and begins to panic. Unable to find anyone who speaks English, Arnie hears the voice of a man off to one side offering his help. The stranger volunteers to escort him back to the Peking Hotel where the Bruchers are staying.

During the walk the man reaches out to hold Arnie's hand, a move that grows more persistent the longer they walk. Arnie assesses the situation on the fly and manages to subdue his homoerotic fears long enough to get back to the hotel without alienating his escort. These developing interpersonal skills are the very tools he'll need as the unsinkable Titanic-like vessel he thinks he's piloting begins taking on water.

The work is well crafted and entertaining in its tightly spiraled run-up to the main event; Arnie's psychological collapse. Fisher's treatment of the event (actually, a series of events over consecutive days) is perfectly pitched inside the ebb and flow of Arnie's inner reality, offering a layer of clear-sighted honesty that shines through and supersedes the otherwise devastating outcome. When Arnie finds himself a resident inside a treatment program at a private hospital in Hartford, "a fancy nuthouse," the real story begins.

Part 2 of *Smoke Ring Day* portrays the day-to-day living of the program residents and Arnie's efforts to suss things out, make new friends, rebuild his inner life and recapture and/or reinvent a sense of self and purpose. The transition for Arnie is rough but it's never without humor. The book nonchalantly dismisses many misconceptions associated with the "mentally ill" through the hands-on reporting of heretofore unknown war correspondent, Arnie Brucher, broadcasting live from the front.

It's here, at the Institute of Living (IOL), we meet a new cast of characters, each with a unique vernacular; Yip, Foxy, Freeman, Boxman, Father O'Brien, Milstein. Yip, for example, a shorter pudgier Huck Finn, introduces himself to Arnie as a "goodwill ambassador" and determines matter of factly via a

combination Sherlock Holmes-Robin Williams interrogation that Arnie is definitely a "mute," (mutant, a deviant cell), certainly not a "cretin."

Arnie meets Milstein during a game of Pass the Ash, a modified version of Truth or Dare involving the passing around of a cigarette. During the game we learn Foxy was busted by Connecticut State Troopers with seventy-five credit cards in his possession. Pressed about the number of times per day he masturbates, Foxy admits to three but Milstein jokingly claims he has proof of five on film. Everyone laughs. Then Milstein, without warning, walks to the piano and performs Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me." It's hard not to like this band of misfits.

One night at the weekly dance Arnie, a rock and roll devotee with a natural performer's voice, is poked and prodded into singing on stage. Frightened of being "up there all alone," Milstein, Foxy and Boxman agree to serve as his backup singers. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome, Arnie and the Pukes, performing their number one hit, "We Gotta Get Outta This Place!" His enthusiastic performance triggers the first of many panic attacks that recur almost daily for six long weeks before ending as suddenly as they began.

There are other notable victories and losses along the way. While doing a stint in isolation for starting a fire in a trash bin, Arnie ponders the world he'd like to join. Bobby Kennedy is dead. The Dems are infighting at their convention in Chicago. All hell is breaking loose on the streets when Arnie, after returning from the Hole, finally and unexpectedly, gets laid on the grounds at IOL. Anita tries to convince him to "Greyhound it" with her to San Francisco but Arnie instinctively knows that would be a mistake.

In time "Mr. Someone to Watch Over Me" Milstein earns his release back into the real world, enrolls in college in pursuit of an acting career and nails the lead in a production of *The Iceman Cometh*. Boxman soon follows, moving in with Milstein, also returning to college and joining the chess team. But nothing good lasts long in this true story. Boxman taps out, suicide, single shot, no one knows why, speculation he had it planned the whole time, fooled everyone, fooled himself.

Arnie works towards his own planned release and returns home to his family for the holidays, 1968. Two months later, an inwardly troubled but outwardly stable Arnie Brucher leaves New Rochelle for Columbus, Ohio, leaves his family, friends, former mutes and cretins to begin a new course of study in psychology at OSU.

Can Fisher sustain such a high bar through two more installments? There is good reason to anticipate the answer. In this first victory lap he wins his readers over with quiet confidence and clear mastery of authentic storytelling that never overreaches or strays from its mark. *Smoke Ring Day* is a "sleeper" of a novel from a mature first time author who deserves an audience.

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