



FROM GUNS AND NEEDLES TO RECOVERY AND REDEMPTION

Patrick O'Neil is the author of the memoir *Gun, Needle, Spoon*. For the past 17 years he has worked in the recovery community as a recovering addict/alcoholic, a drug and alcohol counselor, a college instructor, and a narrative therapist.

Jello Biafra said in an interview, "...we hate hard drugs," and yet, you were a road manager for the Dead Kennedys. How did you hide your heroin use from the band?

I'd shoot on a daily basis, but not a huge amount, just enough to keep me well. I'd get loaded elsewhere when the band weren't around. Years later, in County Jail, East Bay Ray came to visit me and he said, "I never knew you had a problem." A lot of people were lost in the early punk scene to drugs so that could be where Biafra was coming from.

Your acerbic observations in 'Gun, Needle, Spoon' are often very funny. Was that intentional?

I use a lot of humor to self-depreciate, to lower the tension level. Even at the worst moments of my life I found the humor in it all. I remember panhandling, for drug money, with a gas can and this guy took me to a gas station, and he made me fill it up. Now I had a gallon of gas but no car! I couldn't say, "No, no. I don't want the gas." Situations like that. That's funny!

You have a gift for writing sharp, engaging dialogue. Did this start with prose or screenwriting?

I wrote some bad film scripts in art school. My dialogue was kinda stiff so I started an exercise: walking out every day, in Hollywood, and memorizing conversations. I'd write them down and play with the dialogue: making it funny, pathetic or sad. I did that for about a year and had a totally different ear for dialogue after that.

You wrote about 'Romancing that first hit on a joint.' Was that your first 'this is it' moment?

I was always romancing these 'great times.' People use that word 'partying,' but it's not always a party. I remember being up all night on cocaine, staring out of the slits in the window thinking the cops were coming, and then doing *more* coke! But heroin was the 'Aha' moment. Heroin did exactly what I wanted it to. Then I went to New York, to escape the San Francisco dope scene, but everywhere you go is where *you* are. I chipped dope and drank myself to death thinking I was clean. We like to call that 'Keith Richards clean.'

You wrote about witnessing your mother's attempted suicide, twice. Do you see a connection between those childhood events and your substance abuse/eating disorder?

Absolutely, it was prime time: eleven or twelve years old and it was a defining moment. I felt I was unloved, as if my mother didn't want to be alive, that she would rather be dead than be my mother. I had an undiagnosed learning disorder; I was dyslexic; *and* I was bulimic—binging and purging. Then the drugs kicked in—pot, acid. My Dad got a professorship at Harvard and didn't want to be married anymore—he just left. Then the bottom fell out of my life. So I retreated into art. I was the youngest nationally published cartoonist in America; I was on the Dinah Shore show. But all that phased out after punk rock and drugs.

Did armed robbery become an addiction in and of itself?

There was an intense sense of 'I'm that guy and the rules don't apply to me.' And there's the rush, the fear, that feeling of time standing still.

Did you feel, increasingly, that your luck was running out?

Yes. There was a time when we were checking out a multiplex and there were a ton of undercover cops in the parking lot. A guy with an ear piece walking around...stuff like that. We got the hell out of there—fast. Whether it was real or not, I just had those insights. I also dreamt of cops shooting me. I would wake up at night, gasping for air—covered in sweat. I knew they were coming, but it was paying for my drug habit. I just didn't see any way out.

You tell your girlfriend that you will 'live forever.' Did you really believe that you would never die from an overdose?

I OD'ed maybe seven, nine times and that is how I lived my life: "I am not going to die from this. It's not going to happen." If the emergency workers showed up—after they'd pumped me full of Narcan—I would come to and they'd say, "You just OD'ed" and I'd say, "No I didn't!" And I'd be lying there with IVs in me and my chest hurting from the CPR. I definitely had a feeling of invincibility.

At what point did you experience that pivotal moment? Where you realized that you were 'done'?

That would have to be in jail. The state of California was trying to give me twenty-five to life which really meant *life*. I thought to myself, *do I really want to spend the rest of my life in prison? I don't even want to spend another minute in here.* That was an absolute moment. I questioned my whole existence. I was looking back at eighteen years of doing the same thing and *this* was the result. I realized that if I got out that day I would have nowhere to go. My family didn't want me. I had no money. I'd burned all my bridges. That was definitely my bottom, the lowest I could go.

You wrote: "Incarceration is the biggest waste of time, the most depressingly violent environment." How did you adjust to that environment?

A lot of old-school guys told me that if you stay out of the mix, incarceration is a lot less of a problem. If you're not into gambling, drugs or a part of the gangs you can just do your time. There's nothing they want from you. So I joined this writing group. I just wrote—all the time. One day I read a story out loud and it was a total ice breaker. That's when I first got that feeling: *Oh, yeah. Writing's cool.*

You were going through a rough time one day but then, you received some unexpected news. Could you talk about that?

I walked out of the rehab (my workplace, in Los Angeles) to where my car was. And there was no car—nothing. It had been towed. I was so pissed—fuming. I walked to the bus and then the rain came pouring down. I got on the bus and it was totally crowded. The air conditioning was on so I was freezing, my clothes were all wet, and then...my cell rang. A number I didn't recognize—Sacramento. I almost didn't answer it. A voice on the other end said, "Hello, is Mr. O'Neil there?" "Yeah!" "I'm calling from Governor Brown's office. We're calling to tell you that we are going to give you your pardon." My eyes welled up. I looked across the aisle and there was this badass, tough, *cholo* dude looking at me and I thought, *I'm going to cry in front of this guy, but it doesn't matter.* I just told them that this was the best news I'd had all day. I hung up and...nothing mattered. It didn't matter that the car had been towed. Everything that felt really traumatic, huge and horrible ten minutes before that phone call just, disappeared. It was the culmination of everything. Doing the right thing. It was pretty amazing. It was like: *The government thinks I'm doing okay; the same government that wanted to put me away for life.* Gifts of recovery, man. Gifts of recovery.

Patrick has taught writing workshops in numerous correctional facilities and lives with his wife Jennifer and two rather large Maine Coons in Downtown Los Angeles. For more information visit: patrick-oneil.com.

Steve Jones is an author, screenwriter, and playwright. He's the co-author of the addiction/recovery memoir 'Smile Now, Cry Later' published by Seven Stories Press, New York. (www.stevejoneswriter.com.)

"Gun, Needle, Spoon is a great read. O'Neil speaks the truth plainly. Real, honest, pure, natural good writing with no self-pity and at the same time no bragging. A page-turner. Wish I could write music like O'Neil writes prose."
—Klaus Flouride, Dead Kennedys

**GUN
NEEDLE
SPOON**
a memoir

PATRICK O'NEIL