

The Stoner Book Club

William Kangas

When my second life started as a substitute teacher specializing in secondary English, I was eager to take any opportunity to make a connection with the class, even if it was only for a moment. Usually, a class ended with my reminding them about homework as they raced for the door—and the final bell felt like that buzzer that sounds when time runs out in a game show.

But one day I found myself smack dab in the middle of homecoming week on the day in which the theme was “the eighties.” As a product of that time, I nodded in appreciation while I walked through the halls as students born decades later carefully replicated the look of the era, no doubt with help from their parents.

Students with leg warmers, designer jeans, and a few Members Only jackets passed by as I looked for my room number. Eighties movie posters were on the walls next to homemade printouts with the words “RADICAL!” and “TUBULER!” scattered about.

The class had been reading S. E. Hinton’s “Outsiders,” and our discussion was about different divisions among students. In the book, the upper-class “socs” and the lower-class “greasers” were considered enemies in the early sixties.

When it came time for discussion, a student asked me how it was when I was in high school in the eighties.

“Well, we didn’t have ‘greasers,’ but we had a similar group called ‘stoners,’” I said to a smattering of chuckles.

“What did *they* do?” a student asked.

For me? Everything.

■

As a newly christened teenager in 1985, riding the bus to and from school wasn’t routine, it was an adventure. Each morning I mentally prepared myself with a healthy dose of MTV.

I hopped on one leg trying to get my jeans on as Billy Idol sang “Danc-

ing With Myself.” I didn’t bother looking down as I pulled Apple Jacks to my mouth with a spoon and stared as The Eurythmics announced “Sweet Dreams are Made of This” and when the bus doors opened I could hear A Flock of Seagulls warn me with “I Ran So Far Away” on the radio. To me, synthesizers and digital soundwaves were the present and only future for music. Sure, I was aware of the hippies in the sixties and the messy seventies after that, but I saw the clips and album covers—those musicians just seemed sweaty, dirty, and sloppy. To me, David Bowie wasn’t this strange man from outer space; he had a fashionable tie and stylish haircut. To me, the eighties seemed like a *correction*.

Thankfully, bus driver Margarete “Wheelie” McNeilly always tuned the radio to *Today’s Top Hits on 94.9*, hoping it would sedate us through seven stoplights, over two railroad tracks (be quiet), and by the mysterious factory with that weird smell. The smell would prompt a guessing game between younger students in an effort to gross each other out.

The top five most common guesses were:

1. Slaughterhouse
2. Fertilizer Factory
3. Crematorium
4. Sewage Plant
5. Classmate Mike “Melonhead” Neuman’s Pants

I was now beyond those discussions. As a teenager, it was time to think about what I wanted to do in life. I was a ferocious reader, and I also truly thought I had music figured out. I knew what it sounded like “When Doves Cry” and watched zombies dance with Michael Jackson. The constant sound of fingers striking the keys of synthesizers felt like the robots had truly taken over. I was drowning in synthesizers and didn’t know it . . .

The bus came to a jerking halt as the front of school came into view; dangerously overloaded backpacks lurched forward and smashed into each other because students had already stood up to form a line. The brakes hissed, as tremendous gassy pressure assaulted the sidewalk and the doors opened. It was as if the burden of carrying so many was finally over.

PShShSShhhtttt.

We didn’t just get off the bus, we were *released*.

As usual, Harry Farnum was waiting for me by my locker with a smile. Every day he couldn’t wait to give me a hard time. So it was a shock to both of us that I decided to make a stand and punched him in the beak. As a

result, I found myself in detention for the first time in my life, and little did I know it was here of all places where my world would change at the hands of adolescent delinquents.

They were called “stoners” and they were permanent residents of detention. They had denim jackets and an endless supply of concert T-shirts. They could care less about school and yet always seemed older and street wise. Trouble followed them everywhere. If anything bad happened they would get the blame. Some of them even had facial hair, which only added to their mythos.

They dared me to say something as they watched me grab a desk and sit. They knew I didn’t belong there. They passed around a crumpled paperback book. The cover was black and had a picture of a man who had the longest hair I had ever seen holding a guitar as if it were a machine gun.

The words *Hammer of the Gods* were spread triumphantly over the top—more of a headline than a book title. The book cover promised to tell you a story about a band so dangerous they raised hell on earth, did not compromise, and got away with it. It was a handbook for “stoners,” and they were about to give it to me.

“Hey, you look like you like to read,” one of them said. His nickname was “Smokey,” or it could have been his real name because I never heard anyone call him anything else, not even the principal.

“You should read this,” Smokey said as he tossed the book, and it smacked on my desk in front of me.

“Don’t let your parents know you’re reading it,” he warned. “There is some gross stuff in there.”

Smokey turned his back to join the others and laughed. It was more of a dare than a real recommendation.

When I got home, I closed my door, took the book out of my backpack, and just let it sit on my bed. Should I really read this? Curiosity got the best of me, and as I started reading about a band called Led Zeppelin, it was as if I were reading about some ancient tale of gods, myths, and tragedy. Each story trumped the next in terms of hyperbole. Each chapter helped create the band’s own mysticism. The author, Stephen Davis, wasn’t just a writer—he was a bard.

Then it hit me.

What I was reading was real. *This probably happened.*

It was the way Davis wrote it. It wasn’t a boring historical textbook. You could smell the sweat, choke on the smoke, and feel the tension of a band in their creative peak. Of course, the “stoners” back at my junior high school

liked this book because it contained the blueprint for how to revel in being a free spirit.

Hired by *Rolling Stone*, Davis traveled with the band in 1975 for about two weeks, collecting stories and doing research. What was interesting to me was that it was an unauthorized biography, which meant there was no public relations spin or content control by the band or their management before publication.

Then the revelation hit me: Davis was paid to chronicle the exploits of this band. It was his job to write *Hammer of the Gods*. Surely, I could do this as an adult. It was the real stories that were the most interesting to me anyway.

But why did he choose this old band as his subject matter? Surely there was something better. Then I remembered my sister had borrowed a cassette tape of one of their albums. I scrambled to find it as if my life depended on it.

I grabbed the tape, slammed it into my boom box, and hit play.

The first song was called “Black Dog.”

*Hey, hey, mama said the way you move,
Gonna make you sweat, gonna make you groove*

That haunting voice paused, and then hell broke loose. Guitar and bass so low, like quicksand. It sounded *diabolical*. Surely only witches danced to something like this.

*Ah, ah, child way you shake that thing,
Gonna make you burn, gonna make you sting*

My eardrums were being attacked. This didn’t have the icy-cold precision of eighties synth. It was reckless. Relentless war drums hammer at me, with a back-and-forth that was hypnotic. This wasn’t just pleasing to the ear, it was seductive.

Just like the book, the band’s music seemed to legitimize their personality. It was an extension of their story and was so compelling that it required explanation or further exploration. The book wasn’t just reference material; it was a companion to a greater understanding and led to appreciation.

To me, the author had presented this band so well it was as if the music was a soundtrack for it. He captured the essence, and so it became clear that if I were to be a rock journalist, or any type of writer, a secret is to not only report, but *reveal*, my subjects.

This connection between author and reader, and this personal style was going to be my new creed. As it turns out, I would practice this mantra as a feature-writing journalist during my career and now try to teach this important lesson to students. Write with competence and be comprehensive—but always be compelling. Readers like to read stories that have authenticity.

I returned to school the next day and gave the book back, with a knowing nod, to Smokey and the stoners. As I left detention that day, I felt as if I had aged years.

■

Fast forward to present day, to the student who asked me what these “stoners” did.

I paused for dramatic effect.

“They introduced me to a genre of literature that inspired me to become a journalist, writer, and now teacher.”

I told them my first inspiration and understanding of who I was, what I liked, and who I wanted to be came at the hands of a group of students who were troublemakers and outcasts: the “greasers” of the eighties.

My answer surprised them. It was the first time I could feel all of them looking at me and it felt good, even if it was only for a few seconds.

There it was—that connection.

The bell rang, but it was too late this time. No game show buzzer for me. I got what I wanted. As I left the classroom I saw a notice on a bulletin board for an after school book club meeting in the library.

It was then that I realized my first true book club was back in detention with Smokey, an outcast that gave me a book about a band that seemed to be the antithesis of the clean, processed eighties. I smiled and shook my head.

The final bell that day never sounded so good.

DOI 10.1215/15314200-10296145