

"[Streatfeild] is an excellent storyteller.... This book is a great read." —*The Seattle Times*

COCAINE

AN UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY

DOMINIC STREATFEILD

PICADOR

THE STORY OF COCAINE ISN'T JUST ABOUT CRIME.

It's about psychoanalysis, about empire building, about exploitation, about emancipation, about money, and, ultimately, about power. To tell the story of the twentieth century without reference to this drug and its contribution is to miss a vital and fascinating strand of social history. Streatfeild examines the story of cocaine from its first medical uses to the worldwide chaos it causes today. His research takes him from the arcane reaches of the British Library to the isolation cells of America's most secure prisons, from the crack houses of New York to the jungles of Bolivia and Colombia.

"[Streatfeild's] smartly woven narrative winningly expands the narcotic's résumé beyond overdose horror stories." —*GQ*

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—*Publishers Weekly*

"The author digs deep into the history of the drug...Streatfeild's research is nothing to snort at."
—*The Kansas City Star*

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NOTE: *This is supposed to be a true story. If it's not, it's my fault. Where possible, true names of interviewees and sources are given. In some cases, however, names have been deleted or altered so as to conceal identities and/or locations. Unless attributed, views expressed in the book are my own.*

Introduction

It's going on 4.30 p.m. and the alkaloid has just begun to bite. I am swinging gently from side to side in a hammock, watching a livid orange sun sink into the hills of La Bella Durmiente, headphones on, plugged into a bit of music, thinking about nothing in particular. And suddenly I know—it's working.

Now, I know what you're thinking: 'cocaine' because this is a book about cocaine, right? You're not wrong: it is a book about cocaine. And, if you were to take a sample of my blood, it would test positive. But the thing is, I don't use cocaine. So what's going on?

The first thing you have to understand is that here in the Andes people don't shove cocaine up their noses like smug advertising executives before dabbing up the excess with a finger and rubbing it onto their gums. They don't do it in the toilet. In fact, they don't use cocaine at all. Not really. If you want to get to the cocaine in the Andes, you chew it. And that's what I am doing—or trying to do.

After the best part of a month tooling about South America on the cocaine trail I am in Tingo Maria, Peru, looking for quality product, and I've come to the conclusion that either I am doing something seriously wrong or there is nothing in this chewing thing at all. Could 40 centuries of South American Indians really be wrong? It's possible. All these thoughts go around in my mind as I lie in my hammock, listening to this bit of music, swinging gently from left to right, watching the sun go down.

Then I realise that the tip of my tongue has gone numb. Not numb like after an injection at the dentist (although this would be entirely appropriate) but numb like I've eaten too many peppermints. Tingly. Although I haven't eaten, I'm not hungry. I haven't drunk anything and it's hot, but I'm not thirsty either.

It suddenly occurs to me that sitting here in my hammock is an extremely pleasant way to spend the afternoon. Despite the fact that a

dust storm of mosquitoes has mangled my legs and that the *palmito* salad I ate for dinner last passed through my system like an Exocet, compelling me to spend a large percentage of the day perched on the lavatory, I actually feel pretty good. I don't laugh until I feel sick, or talk as if there's no tomorrow, or get up and dance, or fall asleep, or get the urge to reveal to my mates that the real meaning of life is the colour green. None of that. I just lie here.

So here I am lying in my hammock, swinging gently from side to side, and it hits me that this piece of music I'm listening to has exactly the same harmonies as *Rain*, which happens to be the Beatles' greatest-ever B-side. And I'm swinging and swinging and my tongue is feeling numb and my throat is beginning to head that way too and it hits me: I feel all right. Now I *know* that it's the cocaine coming through. Because the thing is this: hammocks are great. But not that great.

It is wholly appropriate that I should finally get the hang of chewing coca here in the Upper Huallaga Valley just north of Huánuco, Peru. Because it was here, tens of thousands of years ago, that cocaine was invented—not by man but by nature. It was here that the pre-Incan tribes discovered it and where it has been grown ever since. It was here that Peru's plantations fuelled the cocaine industry in the late nineteenth century, and then the illicit resurgent industry in the late twentieth century. Huánuco is the heart of Peru's cocaine identity. And thus it's here that I have come, after two years in libraries and prison cells and army bases and more libraries and doctors' surgeries and politicians' offices—and still more libraries—on a hare-brained pilgrimage to seek out the cause of cocaine. And it is here that in my dumb gringo way I have finally got the message.

Cocaine is a sensational drug. There is no more efficient product for delivering pleasure for your cash than cocaine: not fast cars, not expensive clothes, not speedboats. Nothing will make you feel as good. The moment you shove it up your nose it races into your bloodstream, heads directly into the pleasure centre of your brain, kicks down the door, jams your Fun Throttle forwards into 'way too fast' and dumps the clutch. Cocaine doesn't bother about looking, smelling or tasting good. It doesn't have flashy packaging. It doesn't need to.

Real cocaine—by which I mean pure cocaine, not the crap you pick up on the street from a friend of a friend called Malcolm, that's seen more cuts than a budget Japanese feature and leaves you squatting on the lavatory for a week because, ha-ha, one of the cuts was *manitol*—*real*

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cocaine is in a different league. Put it this way: this is the drug that, when offered to animals, they will take—to the exclusion of all else including sex, water and food—until they drop dead. No other drug on earth has this effect. It is not possible to buy more fun than cocaine. It is just not possible. William Burroughs called it ‘the most exhilarating drug I have ever taken’, and, bearing in mind that he spent his entire life taking exhilarating drugs, we should perhaps take his word for it. Cocaine is at the top of the fun pyramid; science has not yet bettered it, and probably never will. And that’s the problem: because cocaine is so much fun that users are willing to pay preposterous prices for it. One way or another, most of them do.

While the price of cocaine is high for consumers, it is considerably higher for producers. Here in South America the dangers of the drug are a lot more scary than the occasional perforated nasal septum. The unfeasible amounts of hard currency generated by the drug ricochet around this continent creating casualties wherever they go. In the last 25 years alone, cocaine-generated cash has been responsible for coups d’etat in Bolivia and Honduras; has infiltrated the governments of the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, Haiti, Cuba, and every single Latin American country without exception; has helped to fund a guerrilla war in Nicaragua (creating one of the most embarrassing scandals in the CIA’s history); and has prompted the US invasion of Panama. In the late 1980s, traffickers in Peru and Bolivia were so wealthy that they offered to pay off their countries’ national debts; meanwhile Colombia’s traffickers were so powerful that they declared war on their own country—and brought it to its knees. At the time of writing, the cocaine industry is creating riots in Peru, policemen are being kidnapped and tortured to death because of it in Bolivia and, if I was a betting man, I would put money on the cocaine industry cranking Colombia’s ongoing civil war to its highest levels for the last thirty-six years within the next six months. At this very moment the governments of Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela are stationing troops on their Colombian borders to handle the expected influx of refugees.

All this trouble, just because of cocaine? The drug you take on special occasions, in the lavatory with your mates, when out clubbing? The drug you take because it’s a laugh? Crazy, isn’t it?

As I lie in my hammock I wonder, what’s going on? How can it possibly have come to this? As luck would have it, these are the exact same questions I *didn’t* ask myself that day nearly two years earlier when my agent called me out of the blue and asked if I was serious about writing a

book on cocaine—and if so, how serious? I had thought about it. The story had obvious appeal: guns, violence, coups, criminals, tons of money, and the glamour and mystique of cocaine itself.

‘Pretty serious,’ I told him. And I was. I was about to become unemployed again. A couple of weeks later the publisher had insisted we have a glass of champagne to celebrate. We chinked glasses and grinned at each other: it was going to be a great book. He was excited. I was excited. We were both excited. Despite the fact that the sum total of my knowledge of cocaine was a Channel 4 documentary I had researched two years previously, which had never actually got filmed, and a single reading of Charles Nichol’s *The Fruit Palace*, which had succeeded in scaring the pants off me, everything had seemed straightforward. No problem.

And so, as I had headed into the British Library on that first day with a fresh publishing contract, a virgin A4 notepad, a pile of pencils and eighteen months ahead of me to excavate everything there was to know about cocaine, I had no clue what I was getting into. When I figured I would have a quick dig into the history before getting to the guns, the money and the false-bottomed suitcases, I was kidding myself. And as I sat in seat 2308, ploughing my way through every book I could find on the subject, the minutes groaning by on the British Library clock (a clock slower than any other in the known universe), it gradually dawned on me that I might just have bitten off more than I could chew. Because the story of cocaine telescopes horribly.

The more I dug, the deeper the problem became and the more digging was required. Because, I discovered, if you want to know about cocaine and where it all started—I mean, if you *really* want to know—you have to go back a long way. Way back before the drug lords and the cartels, before Bush and Panama and the War on Drugs, Noriega, Reagan and the Contra scandal, crack and John Belushi. Before meaningless surveys told you that 99 per cent of all banknotes in circulation carried traces of cocaine, before the yuppie coke boom of the early 1980s, before the wild freebasing of the 1970s. Way back. Before everything. You have to go back to where it all began. You have to go back to one innocuous-looking plant. To coca.