

# Gun, Needle, Spoon by Patrick O'Neil

written by Art Edwards | July 20, 2015



*Gun, Needle, Spoon* by Patrick O'Neil

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When looking at the list of things to which people become addicted, each has its own ready-made excuse. Alcohol? Everyone drinks alcohol. Pot? It's no worse than alcohol. Work? I have to provide for my family. Exercise? Staying in shape. Sex? Only natural. Pills? They're prescribed. Most of these excuses center around society's tacit approval of the activity. Even marijuana, that wicked drug that not so long ago brought us *Reefer Madness*, has recently taken the step up to by-and-large acceptance through its legalization in some states. In other words, with any of these activities, you can fool yourself for a long time.

Not so with heroin. Virtually every person sees heroin addiction as undesirable, over-the-top, a last resort. In this way, I've always thought of heroin addicts—despite the depths to which they sink to fulfill their need—as the most honest addicts. I do drugs. It's wrong, but it's reality. It's probably best to stay away from me.

Patrick O'Neil's new memoir is filled with such cold, hard looks in the mirror. For O'Neil—resident of New York, Los Angeles, and most prominently San Francisco during his two decades of addiction—shooting heroin starts as an initiation into a culture. For O'Neil, just out of art school in 1979, the drug was part and parcel with hanging out at clubs where the likes of the Dead Kennedys were beginning to shock the world. “We become friends, all of us living together in a cramped North Beach apartment—one big happy post-nuclear punk family doing drugs and staying up all night,” he writes.

The slumber party with needles continues when O'Neil finds himself in the crew of the Dead Kennedys, even as the heroin lifestyle starts to creep in. “On the nights the band plays out of town, I get paid twenty-five dollars. Which immediately goes to buying drugs, and I'm always broke. But the band has three cases of beer on their rider. And instead of eating I drink beer and scam whatever shitty bar food there is at the venue,” he tells us.

If such a life sounds precarious, the next several years are a tightrope walk of bad apartments, attempts to get money, and waiting—always waiting—for the man. The sheer illogic of the heroin addict's predicament never ceases to amaze me. He lives in the most expensive cities in the world. He is only employable at the most menial jobs and by the most gullible employers, and he has to fill himself at least once a day with the pricey elixir or fall into abject sickness. Once the sickness passes, there is still no real hope. Junkies are all but guaranteed to shoot up again, starting the cycle over.

O'Neil uncoils his downward spiral with depictions that ring with authority:

Jenny's got girl veins. Tiny, small veins that are really hard to hit. She can't do it herself. I'm much more practiced than she is, so I do it for her. Yet most times, when the needle registers, and I think I'm in the vein, halfway through pushing the dope in, her arm swells up, the dope going into the muscle instead, and I have to find another vein to use.

How exactly do these two pay rent?

It takes a while, but eventually the only real option for O'Neil involves the pistol he was forced to acquire at one point in a trade.

The digital clock on the desk in the living room reads 11:53 PM. I light a cigarette and stare at the gun. Before I can really think about it, I pull on a pair of jeans and get dressed. Digging through a pile of dirty clothes, I find a black bandanna and tie it loosely around my neck. I slip the gun into my waistband, button my overcoat, and quickly open the front door.

The rest of the tale takes us through an inevitable series of smalltime robberies, near misses with the cops, and withdrawal symptoms until O'Neil's luck runs out—and when the real struggle begins. It's baffling he made it as long as he did. Society will ignore the junkie for as long as it can, his presence an all-too-blunt admission of something we'd rather not admit.

All addiction masks pain, and the most prominent cause of pain is shame. The amount and intensity of addiction one requires bears a direct relationship to the amount and intensity of shame suffered. In this way, heroin addicts—who give up almost everything for the drug—seem to bear a great deal of pain. That's why I find *Gun, Needle, Spoon* so compelling. It dramatizes a big addiction in a way that sheds light on our little addictions. We're addicts, but not heroin addicts. If O'Neil can come back, so can we.