High: Confessions of an International Drug Smuggler

by Brian O?Dea



About the Book

In the early 1980s, Brian O?Dea was operating a $100 million a year, 120-man drug smuggling business, and had developed a terrifying cocaine addiction. Under increasing threat from the DEA in 1986 for importing seventy-five tons of marijuana into the United States, he quit the trade --- and the drugs --- and began working with recovering addicts in Santa Barbara. Despite his life change, the authorities caught up with him years later and O?Dea was arrested, tried, and sentenced to ten years at Terminal Island Federal Penitentiary in Los Angeles Harbor. A born storyteller, O?Dea candidly recounts his incredible experiences from the streets of Bogotá with a false-bottomed suitcase lined with cocaine, to the engine compartment of an old DC-6 whose engines were failing over the Caribbean, to the cell blocks overcrowded with small-time dealers who had fallen victim to the justice system?s perverse bureaucracy of drug sentencing. Weaving together extracts from his prison diary with the vivid recounting of his outlaw years and the dawning recognition of those things in his life that were worth living for, **High** tells the remarkable story of a remarkable man in the late-1980s drug business and why he walked away.

Discussion Guide

1. In the prologue O?Dea tells the story of his first day at a Catholic boy?s school. How do you think this event affects this little boy? Does keeping this secret set the tone for his later life? What effect did growing up in the Catholic Church have on O?Dea? As O?Dea describes the DEA coming to his house and ultimately his surroundings at Terminal Island, how did you feel about that eleven-year-old boy?

2. O?Dea describes his recreational, experimental drug use as a teenager in Newfoundland. Is this experimentation

typical? Does he take bigger risks than others? Is this different from teenagers experimenting with alcohol and cigarettes, or the same?

3. As Brian realizes he can pay for his own drugs by selling them to his friends, we see his entrepreneurial spirit develop. Is he similar or different from his father, who owns a brewery, or the same? Is he similar or different from the Kennedy family during prohibition in the U.S., or the same?

4. Brian is in prison in Newfoundland and his first marriage fails. When he is released from prison he instinctively jumps on a plane for Colombia. What does this say about his character? What does it say about the risks he is willing to take? At what cost for O?Dea? What character traits help him survive the risks he takes?

5. When Brian focuses his entrepreneurial skills on doing legal business --- the concert in Jamaica, the hair products, dinosaur bones --- things don't work out. Is it self-sabotage? Why is he not successful?

6. What motivated Brian to get out of the business? What motivated him to get clean and stay that way? If Brian were your son, brother, husband, or father, how would you have related to him over the years?

7. Brian has been married three times and divorced twice. Can you relate to his first and second wives and their reasons for getting out of the marriage? Would you have stayed or left? His current wife has been with him since he was nine months sober. She stayed through the indictment, the sentencing, prison, parole, and the years of reinventing a life. Why did she stay? Would you have stayed?

8. What kind of person is Brian O?Dea?

9. What do you think of the title of the book? What title would you give the book?

10. Currently in the U.S. murder is punishable by a sentence of three to six years in prison, but drug offenses are punishable by thirty to fifty years in prison. Do you agree with this? How do you feel as a taxpayer supporting the people serving these sentences?

11. Brian was able to survive prison and avoid any serious conflicts or confrontations. How?

Author Bio

Brian O?Dea is now gainfully employed as a film and television producer in Toronto, where he lives with his wife and son. He also regularly speaks about his own experiences to young people struggling with addictions. High won the 2007 Arthur Ellis Award for Best Non-Fiction Crime and it is currently being adapted into a feature film.

Visit the author?s Youtube page, www.youtube.com/scarabodea.

-Click here to read Brian O'Dea's ReadingGroupGuides.com blog entry from May 6, 2009, "Brian O'Dea: Writing as a Life Saving Device."

****Brian O'Dea is available to Video Skype to your book club, live and in HD; his handle is scarab23 on Skype. Skype him today and make an appointment to have Brian read live and answer questions in real time for your club.**

Critical Praise

"Now-reformed smuggler O'Dea pulls back the curtain on the machinations and motivations of a hugely successful, outrageously addicted 1980s drug trafficker whose redemption came too late to save him from prison... O'Dea maintains a sense of numbing repetition that resonates with the addiction narrative and keeps the drug cowboy tales grounded. Throughout his life's many ups and downs, however, O?Dea remains a charming, relatable narrator you can?t help but root for."

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