

## When New-Wave Drug Dealers Run Afoul of an Old-Wave Cartel

“Don Winslow is an author currently living in the United States, most recognized for his crime and mystery novels.” That’s the one-sentence entirety of the biographical notice Mr. Winslow has attracted on Wikipedia, though he has a dozen novels, a couple of movie deals, a slew of ardent reviews, a whip-cracking way with words and a whole lot of Southern Cali-

fornia surfer baditude to his credit.

Those earlier books (11 published here, one available in England with no set American publication date) have much sparkle to recommend them. But they aren’t “Savages,” the one that will jolt Mr. Winslow into a different league. “Savages” is his 13th and most boisterously stylish crime book, his gutsiest and most startling bid for attention.

It’s clear that “Savages” has no dearth of nerve from the snow-white,

### Savages

By Don Winslow  
302 pages. Simon & Schuster.  
\$25.



one-page opening chapter, which consists of exactly two words. The first one isn’t “thank.” The second one is “you.” As opening gambits go, this one is pure kamikaze, and it could have backfired

accordingly. But Mr. Winslow has written the killer book to back it up.

“Savages” is full of wild-card moves. And it’s not afraid to risk missing its mark. But its wisecracks are so sharp, its characters so mega-cool and its storytelling so ferocious that the risks pay off, thanks especially to Mr. Winslow’s no-prisoners sense of humor. About a Latino neighborhood: “You hear English here it’s the mailman talking to himself.” About skewering the bourgeois-

sie: “Every great wine-tasting should end with arsenic.” About an Iraq war veteran who feels overlooked in Orange County’s smug atmosphere: “Without men like me, the clubhouse whores would be wearing burqas, my friend.”

The Iraq vet, a former member of the Navy Seals, is the ostensible reason for that note of hostility on the book’s first page. He calls himself Chon

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## New-Wave Drug Dealers vs. the Old

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(though his given name is John), and he’s half of a pragmatic new-wave drug-dealing partnership in Laguna Beach. Chon and his partner, Ben, aren’t tired old “Scarface” types. They represent a more creative kind of illicit entrepreneurship. Chon’s case of what this acronym-filled book calls “PTLOSD” (“Post-Traumatic Lack of Stress Disorder”) has empowered him to sign on as a private-security mercenary in Afghanistan and to come home carrying the most potent marijuana seeds he could find.

When Chon entrusted these seeds to the wonkier Ben, the book says, it was “like giving Michelangelo some paintbrushes and a blank ceiling and saying—“Go for it, dude.”

*(The occasional free-verse layout is another of Mr. Winslow’s potentially dangerous tricks.)*

Ben bred the seeds until they were even stronger. He created “a plant that could almost get up, walk around, find a lighter, and fire itself up.” But Ben and Chon have grown this crop too successfully for their own good, attracting the extreme interest of a Mexican cartel in Baja, a group not friendly to competition.

Now Ben wants out of the drug business. He’s become interested in philanthropy in third world nations. He certainly doesn’t want to grow crops for the Mexican cartel. “He appreciates the irony, though, that the Mexicans basically want to turn them into field workers,” Mr. Winslow writes. And: “He digs the reverse colonialism of it, but it just isn’t his thing.”

So “Savages” is a battle of wills. And that battle, for all the book’s throwaway humor, turns as vicious as the title implies. As



ANDY ANDERSON

### Don Winslow

the story begins, Chon is with Ophelia. Ophelia is called O for short, and nicknamed Multiple O. She enjoys her life in Laguna Beach as a part-time dysfunctional daughter (her mother is known as P.A.Q.U., for “Passive Aggressive Queen of the Uni-

### In Southern California, a battle of wills turns vicious.

verse”) and full-time slacker.

When Ophelia sees Chon staring intensely at his computer screen, she thinks he’s looking at pornography. He is. But it’s not the type she imagines. It’s a monstrous snuff scene sent by the Baja cartel as a warning, showing what can happen to rogue dealers. And it strikes not just fear but also curiosity into Chon. He’s just enough of an etymologist to notice that “behead-

ing” is both a noun and a verb.

“You want my advice, boys? And girl?” asks the D.E.A. agent whom Ben, Chon and O regularly bribe. “I’ll miss you, I’ll miss your money, but run.” Chon is old-school enough to think that if you start running you can never stop. (Ben insists irrelevantly that running is fun and good for the cardiovascular system.) The point is they’re ready to fight the cartel in a war of nerves.

Since the video wasn’t enough to scare Ben and Chon, the cartel has a second idea: kidnap O. So she becomes a hostage, a role that allows her to fulfill a dream. (“I’m actually forced at gunpoint to lie around my room and do nothing but watch bad TV.”) While in captivity she starts demanding her rights, like the rights to Internet access and salad. Soon she is half-trying to fool P.A.Q.U. about her whereabouts with bogus messages. As in: “It’s very nice here, with the Eiffel Tower and all that.” And: “Okay, it’s off to Trafalgar Square and later to the West End to see a play. I might even give Shakespeare a try! Who’d a thunk, huh?”

As the peril in “Savages” escalates, Chon finds himself forced back into military mode. Ben finds himself prodded toward behavior that he can justify but not condone. And what began in the tone of Elmore Leonard moves into the darker realm of Oliver Stone, who plans to film “Savages” but will have to walk a tightrope when he takes it on.

The Winslow effect is to fuse the grave and the playful, the body blow and the joke, the nightmare and the pipe dream. It’s flippant and dead serious simultaneously. “Whatever happened to morality?” somebody asks in “Savages.” Mr. Winslow answer: “Replaced by a newer, faster, easier technology.”