Chasing the Scream: the First and Last Days of the War on Drugs by Johann Hari

For the first time, the startling full story of the disastrous war on drugs – propelled by moving human stories, revolutionary insight into addiction, and fearless international reporting.


About the Author: Johann Hari is the author of Lost Connections. He was twice named Newspaper Journalist of the Year by Amnesty International UK. He has written for the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and others, and he is a regular panelist on HBO’s Real Time with Bill Maher. His TED talk, “Everything You Think You Know About Addiction Is Wrong,” and the animation based on it have more than twenty million views. Hari lives in London.

Questions for Discussion

1. Let’s start off with the most obvious question, did Mr. Hari convince you? Is his case sound? What are the flaws in his argument?

2. Do you find the ethnographic style of writing, in the Studs Terkei/World War Z vein, effective?

3. Does it surprise you that one of the strongest proponents for war on drugs is the organized crime industry? What about the fact that the prohibition laws were, and still are, at least partly motivated by racially-tinged hysteria (see also Michelle Alexander’s book, “The New Jim Crow”)? Or that the initial calls for prohibition were based on junk science, e.g., the “unspeakable sexual depravity” that marijuana use would unleash?

4. One of the more breathtaking portions is the tale of a punitive anti-drug regime in Arizona that took the life of Prisoner 109416-Marcia Powell—a forty-something crystal meth addict, who in May 2009 was left outdoors in a metal cage for four hours in searing heat by prison officers who were encouraged to believe that addicts had rendered themselves subhuman. Are such actions consistent with the values and image that we wish associated America? Has the War on Drugs corrupted our entire criminal justice system?

5. Many conservatives profess to believe in a limited government. Government should refrain from action unless the proposed course of action passes a cost/benefit litmus. Is there a cogent argument that the benefits of drug prohibition exceed its cost? The United States is now the most prolific jailer in the history of the world. How do we enumerate the costs of imprisoning such a large portion of our population?
6. One common criticism of “Chasing the Scream” is Mr. Hari too often glosses over what the concerted use of particular drugs, particularly heroin,

(Questions provided by the Las Vegas Non-Fiction Book Club)