

Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club Study Guide

**Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and
the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club by Sonny Barger**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

[Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 4](#)

[Chapter 1: Muster to Custer..... 6](#)

[Chapter 2: Blue-Collar Oakland, Jungle Jim's, and Ralph The Lumper..... 7](#)

[Chapter 3: Sleeping in the Snake Pit..... 9](#)

[Chapter 4: Harleys, Choppers, Full Dressers, and Stolen Wheels..... 11](#)

[Chapter 5: The Proud, the \(Filthy\) Few. . . The Hell's Angels..... 13](#)

[Chapter 6: Old Ladies, Main Squeezes, and the Maid of Livermore..... 15](#)

[Chapter 7: The Sizzling, Acid-Drenched Sixties..... 17](#)

[Chapter 8: Running through the Jungle, Porterville, and Shooting Pool with an Automatic..... 19](#)

[Chapter 9: Let It Bleed: No Sympathy for the Devils of Altamont..... 21](#)

[Chapter 10: Murder, Mayhem, Living Outside the Law..... 22](#)

[Chapter 11: Locked Up and Low Down - Angels on Ice..... 24](#)

[Chapter 12: RICO My Ass - the Law with the Funny Name..... 25](#)

[Chapter 13: Rats, Infil-traitors and Government Informants..... 27](#)

[Chapter 14: Taz Kicks the Big C..... 28](#)

[Chapter 15: Oakland in My Rearview Mirror, Carefree Highway through my Windshield..... 29](#)

[Characters..... 30](#)

[Objects/Places..... 33](#)

[Themes..... 35](#)

[Style..... 37](#)

[Quotes..... 39](#)

Topics for Discussion.....41



Plot Summary

"Hell's Angel - The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club" by Ralph "Sonny" Barger is the story of the founding of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club. The author, Sonny Barger, is one of the early founders of the club. Sonny was born in central California to Ralph, Sr., a "lumper" or a laborer who loads and unloads trucks and ships and to Kathryn. Kathryn left her husband, daughter Shirley, and Sonny when he was just four months old. Sonny never saw his mother again.

The family had a rough time and eventually relocated to Oakland, California. Ralph didn't make much money although his jobs often took him away from home for long periods of time. He was a functioning alcoholic, which created additional suffering for the young children. The family lived with Ralph's mother until she died when Sonny was eight years old. Ralph married another woman named Sylvia. They had Sonny's half-sister, Virginia. But Sylvia only stayed around four years and one day was gone, taking Virginia and everything that wasn't nailed down with her.

Sonny and his older sister were pretty much on their own after Sylvia left and their grandmother died. When Ralph was home, he was usually drunk or at the bar and paid little attention to his children. Sonny hated school and as the years passed, he tended to hang with the ruffians at school. When he was very young, he organized a club that was dubbed, "Earth Angels," a predecessor of a club he would later help form as an adult.

As a young teenager, Sonny got into his first scrapes with the law. He was arrested for DUI several times. His violations soon escalated to drug and assault charges. At sixteen, he found himself without a real home. He forged his birth certificate and joined the army. After serving fourteen months, his real age was exposed and he was forced to leave the army although he was given an honorable discharge. He returned to Oakland where he became interested in motorcycles. He associated with other young men, many of whom were military veterans who also loved motorcycles and the free spirit they felt that riding gave them.

The phrase "Hell's Angels" was popular in the military since World War I when a fighter squadron acquired the name. Through the years, the name was used for various military craft. Sonny helped to form the Oakland chapter of the Hell's Angels not knowing that there were several such organizations already forming in other areas of California. For many years, the club was strictly limited to California chapters but eventually clubs were allowed to form in other cities and even in other countries. However, the control and oversight of the organization as a whole was maintained in California.

The men who joined the Angels considered themselves patriotic and defenders of the first amendment. They displayed a loyalty to each other and their clubs. As the years went on, they began to gain a reputation for partying, fighting, drugging, drinking, free sex and eventually criminal activities. Although they had strict rules about their behavior



within their chapter and with other Hell's Angels chapters, they were very open when it came to outsiders. The Angels were a menacing and rowdy group who loved to get into fights and beat the living daylights out of their enemies, which could be anyone from a cop who was attempting to arrest them or someone who just looked at them the wrong way.

Law enforcement dogged the group from the early days of the club. The Angels learned to work around a lot of the laws which compelled the feds to charge them with federal RICO laws which incriminated an individual who was associated with any outlaw organization.

Sonny Barger had a leadership role in the Angels throughout his life. He was in and out of jail during most of those years. His first wife died when she tried to self-abort her baby. His second wife had a speed addiction. They split up when she realized that she'd never lose her drug problem while married to Sonny. He married a third time and had a daughter. After thirty-five years of smoking Camels, Barger was diagnosed with throat cancer. He survived however. Barger and the other dedicated Angels had a life-long love affair with their motorcycles and the freedom and identity that it gave them.



Chapter 1: Muster to Custer

Chapter 1: Muster to Custer Summary and Analysis

A "motorcycle run" to a Hell's Angel is a social experience. It's a get-together and moving party. It also symbolizes solidarity. The leader sets the pace. Some runs have clocked speeds at 90 mph in the rain. When Hell's Angels chapters began to spring up outside California in the late sixties, cross-country runs started to be organized.

In those early days, the gas tanks were small requiring the riders to stop frequently for gas. Today, a Harley FXRT has big gas tanks that can cover five or six hundred miles a day on just a few tanks. To Hell's Angels, they ARE their bikes. The cops, when aware of a run, would sometimes show up in great number to watch their activities. Other cops were friendly and helped clubs locate riders who got lost from the rest of the group.

The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club has some mandatory and other optional runs each year. One run that sticks out in Ralph "Sonny" Barger's mind is the run dubbed "Muster to Custer" that took place out of Sturgis, South Dakota in 1982. At first Hell's Angels as a group decided to skip the run because a rival club was taking part in it. But Sonny declared he was going to participate and soon his chapter, the Oakland Chapter, decided to join. Ultimately, the entire Hell's Angels group decided to participate. The Club decided on a place to meet for the run and kept it secret through a series of coded messages. Prior to the run, a number of the Oakland Charter met at Sonny's house to checkout their bikes to make sure they were ready for the long ride.

The thrill of everyone starting their bikes and taking off could only be understood by Club members. Sonny would take a position in the front with other club officers. On this particular ride, guys like Deacon, Fuzzy and Mouldy Marvin were jockeying for positions as near the front as possible. No one wanted to ride behind Fu Griffin. He wore loose fitting sneakers that could be lethal if they came off and were flung back at 80+ mph.

It took a few days to get from Oakland to Denver where they partied and slept outside. Sonny was in charge of safety and speed regulations for the group and deciding on when to make stops to refill. In Custer, South Dakota, the Oakland group of 200 met up with another 200 members from other charters. Along the way, they met up with still others. People in the small towns heard the deafening roar of all their bikes as they passed through them. Some of the townsfolk saluted them as they passed. Club members who weren't felons were carrying concealed weapons. No one was required to wear helmets at the time.

By the time all Club members met up in Sturgis, they were over 50,000 in number. Some of the townspeople were frightened, and ran and hid. Others just stood their ground. No one messed with the Angels and no trouble erupted. The run was important to Sonny as it proved to him he was where he belonged.



Chapter 2: Blue-Collar Oakland, Jungle Jim's, and Ralph The Lumper

Chapter 2: Blue-Collar Oakland, Jungle Jim's, and Ralph The Lumper Summary and Analysis

The Barger family split their time between Modesto and Oakland. When he was born, Sonny's father, Ralph Barger, Sr., was a road worker. Since his father's job kept him away from home for long periods of time, Sonny, his mother Kathryn and his older sister, Shirley Marie, traveled between Modesto and Oakland like gypsies. Sadly, when Sonny was just four months old, Kathryn ran off with a bus driver and never came back. She left him with a babysitter who turned him into child services when Kathryn failed to show up. His father and sister later tracked him down and claimed him. Sonny's father was a functioning alcoholic who always held down a job. He had a large variety of jobs as a laborer over the years but most of the time he served as a "lumper" who loaded and unloaded ships and trucks.

After Kathryn left, the family found a place to live in Oakland. Nora, his paternal grandmother, moved in with them. It was the forties and no one ever locked their doors. Grandma Nora took Sonny and Shirley to a Pentecostal church every Sunday. People talked in tongues there which frightened Sonny. The family was very poor. The only Christmas gifts the kids got were from the nearby Catholic Church charity. Ralph kept the family going but just barely. Ralph would often take Sonny with him to a local bar called Jungle Jim's.

Grandma Barger died in 1946 when Sonny was eight-years old. Shirley and Sonny had to do most of the cooking and cleaning. Neighbors knew that the kids lived with a drunk and looked out for them as much as they could. Sonny didn't do well in school and was often in trouble. Ralph got married again to a woman named Sylvia. Sonny hated Sylvia. They had a daughter, Virginia, who was born before they married.

Sonny's first experience with a bike was with his Schwinn. He would ride it all over Oakland and even over to San Francisco. He loved the freedom, independence and the wind on his face as he rode for hours with his friends. After four years of marriage, Sylvia took off with Virginia. She took everything except their beds. He never saw Sylvia or Virginia again. Ralph made a lame suicide attempt but survived.

When Shirley was sixteen she ran away with an older boy in the neighborhood. Sonny began to drink and run with a rough crowd. The boys would "borrow" cars from their parents and drive drunk and without a license. Sonny was arrested a few time for drunk driving. The only thing he liked to do at school was fight which he would do at least once a week. His fighting ways led to his expulsion on occasion. He hated high school and flunked every class. He had his first reefer at fourteen.



In 1954, Sonny organized a club with other corner ruffians which was dubbed, "Earth Angels," after a song by the Penguins. Shirley was married and his father moved to a hotel room. Since he had really no place to live, Sonny decided to join the Army except he was too young. He forged a birth certificate and was sworn into the US Army at sixteen.

After basic training, Sonny was stationed in Hawaii. He partied with the older guys in the bars and learned a lot about weapons. After serving fourteen months, his real age was discovered. He was dismissed with an honorable discharge and went back to Oakland where he got a job as a night janitor and later a job in a factory. He hated the "nine-to-five" grind and was itching for something more exciting.



Chapter 3: Sleeping in the Snake Pit

Chapter 3: Sleeping in the Snake Pit Summary and Analysis

Sonny was only nine-years old when the 1947 Hollister motorcycle fracas occurred. It began as an American Motorcyclist Association racing competition and got out of hand with the participation of some outlaw clubs like BoozeFighters who got drunk and rowdy. Bikers were arrested for lewd behavior and public drunkenness. The incident was the first of its kind involving a biker club. The Marlon Brando movie, "The Wild One," was made in 1954 and was based on the Hollister, California, incident. Some biker clubs disbanded after the movie claiming that it ruined their reputations. The movie had a huge impact on Sonny. In particular, the featured bad boy played by Lee Marvin was especially appealing to him. One good thing about joining the Army was that Sonny was gone when most of his friends became drug addicts, many hooked on heroin.

After returning from the service, Sonny lived with Shirley. But she grew tired of his friends coming and going on their loud cycles. He joined his first biker club, the Oakland Panthers, in 1956. But the club didn't have the esprit de corps that he was looking for. Other clubs around town also were not for him. One club was comprised of former military men. The term "Hell's Angels" had been a familiar one in the military since World War I when a fighter squadron was given the name. The term was used for other units through the years. Since World War I the motorcycle was important for the work done by couriers, scouts and communications officers. The Nazis used them in combat roles during World War II.

Many of the returning soldiers were adept and even daredevil cycle riders. Before WWII, motorcycle clubs were gentlemen's clubs; after, the majority of their members were seasoned and rugged military veterans. Sonny met up with Don "Boots" Reeves and together in 1957, they formed a club they called Hell's Angels. They were not aware that there were several other Hell's Angels groups already established in California. The club's symbol was a modified Air Force patch with a skull and set of wings. When Sonny's bike broke down on the side of the road, Vic Bettneourt, a Hell's Angels member from Gardena in Southern California, stopped to help him. Vic introduced him to members from other chapters. Sonny found out that the first Hell's Angels club was formed in 1948 in San Bernardino.

Vic taught Sonny what was expected of Hell's Angels chapters, although they were only loosely affiliated. Most members were in their twenties and were high school dropouts. Boots became the first president of the Oakland chapter and ran its meetings using an informal parliamentary procedure that Vic had taught them. Territorial regulations were established between charters and new members were not able to curse or fight with each other.



A few members had jobs and shared their money. Most members had nothing and just scraped by each day. However, they accumulated enough money after a year to rent a clubhouse that they called the Snake Pit. Their identifying "death head" patch changed from a modest one to a larger version that simply indicated "California" rather than their home cities. There were conflicts between clubs but most of their fighting was done with other biker clubs like the Gypsy Jokers.

By 1966, chapters were opening up in states other than California. There was even chapters in Australia and Switzerland. California chapters remained the national overseer of all national and international chapters. They monitored activities to ensure that no illegal chapters were allowed to be founded. The government considered Hell's Angels, Banditos, Outlaws and Pagans as the top outlaw biker clubs. The latter three were established after Hell's Angels and were greatly influenced by them. Hell's Angels is the largest outlaw club and has hundreds of active chapters and thousands of members. There are hundreds of other smaller clubs.

Sonny began to wear a belt with a Nazi swastika on it. The fad spread around the clubs and soon Hell's Angels were associated with Nazis although there were no political ties. Once German chapters were established, the club abandoned the wearing of any Nazi symbols.

Hell's Angels were known as rabble-rousing fighters. The American Motorcycle tried to clean up bike clubs and claimed that only one-percent of all such clubs were outlaw organizations. Hell's Angels clubs made it a point to be a thorn in the AMA's side by being ever-present and as disruptive as possible.

Special California Rules for Hell's Angels chapters were established. They included regulations including the requirement to have regularly scheduled meetings, fines for missing meetings, no fighting among club members, anyone kicked out of a club could be readmitted, no throwing ammunition on bon fires, no messing around with other members' wives, no dope during meetings and no drug burns (drug thefts.)



Chapter 4: Harleys, Choppers, Full Dressers, and Stolen Wheels

Chapter 4: Harleys, Choppers, Full Dressers, and Stolen Wheels Summary and Analysis

As a kid, Sonny didn't like cops but he always admired their motorcycles. Motorcycles became the rage in California after World War II. It was a cheap way to get around and it was just dangerous enough to be exciting. Sonny bought his first motor scooter, a Cushman, when he was thirteen. He worked odd jobs and saved enough money to buy his first motorcycle when he was eighteen and fresh out of the Army. It was a 1936 Harley. With gas at nineteen cents a gallon, it was a cheap way to ride around Oakland.

Harley's share of the market is about half with the other half going to Japanese makes. The Harleys were so much in demand that Sonny suspected that the company held up production to drive up demand and prices. Titan, American Eagle and American Illusion made "clone" bikes and were just copies of Harleys. When Hell's Angels was first organized, Harley was the only American made motorcycle and it was important to the club to ride only American-made bikes. Today, Japanese models are cheaper and better built than Harleys. Sonny rides a Harley FXRT which is the best model for long distance rides. One of the things that people love about the Harley is the sound, the distinctive rumble they make. They have brute horsepower with up to 50 horsepower to the rear wheel.

The unique Hell's Angels chopper was created when the members started taking off the front fenders, lopping off the back fender and altering the handlebars. The chopper was the type of bike featured in "The Wild One." The Angels converted other parts of the Harley. The large seat was replaced with a smaller one and the oversized headlights were changed to ones with smaller beams. The entire bike was transformed into a sleeker version of the original.

The Angels would chrome every part of the bike possible and install dual carburetors. The distinctive emblem of the Angels, the death head, was painted onto the gas tanks. The extended front and dropped frame of a Hell's Angel bike were its identifying features. An eighteen inch wheel was used in the back against a twenty-one inch wheel in the front. As far as function, the bike's capability was improved by the addition of new cams and solid push rods, bigger valves and a punched-up carburetor. "Full dressers" were motorcycles that had the original manufacturer's equipment. In the old days, a Hell's Angel would never be caught dead on a full dresser.

When the transformation of the bikes became too extreme the government began passing laws limiting some of the alterations. States passed laws which limited the height of handlebars to no higher than shoulder level. Helmets weren't even a concept



in the early days. In 1991, California finally passed a helmet law. Sonny had fought against such a law for years.

Although the Angels had rules against stealing another member's bikes, there was no rule against stealing bikes from other clubs. In just one day in 1967, Big Al Perryman, Fu Griffin and Cisco Valderrama stole twenty-seven motorcycles. But they had gone over the line and Sonny made them return every bike although some had already been stripped down. Sonny's bike, "Sweet Cocaine" was stolen from him the next year. Sonny put out the alert to the club members to look for his bike.

Sonny was the president of the Oakland chapter at the time. They figured out that a member of a club called the Unknowns took his bike. They rounded up members of the club and brought them to Sonny's house where his girlfriend, Sharon, held them at gunpoint. The Angels bull-whipped and beat them with dog collars and broke their fingers with hammers. The Angels took all their motorcycles, sold them and broke up the club. The message was loud and clear: don't get caught stealing a Hell's Angel's bike, especially the president's.



Chapter 5: The Proud, the (Filthy) Few. . . The Hell's Angels

Chapter 5: The Proud, the (Filthy) Few. . . The Hell's Angels Summary and Analysis

The Hells' Angels is a brotherhood of men who will fight and die for each other. Sonny's good friend and one of the first Oakland members was Skip Workman. He eventually rose to the position of vice president of the chapter. Skip was a real scrapper and never walks away from a fist-fight even one with cops.

One of the early presidents of the San Bernardino (Berdo) chapter was Bobby Zimmerman who was killed in a freak accident. He made a u-turn to retrieve a part that fell off his bike and another biker plowed into him. He died instantly. Sonny got all his front teeth knocked out in an accident when the Oakland chapter was first formed. He wound up in the hospital and in addition to his missing teeth, he had a broken nose and jaw.

Terry the Tramp was to many of the members the ultimate Hell's Angel. He was fun-loving and rowdy. Tramp drew his hair long, wore a full beard and was covered in tattoos. He dressed in black leather most of the time but sometimes would wear bright psychedelic colors. Tramp had a drug habit that eventually caught up with him. He died of a Seconal overdose.

Big Al Perryman was a member of Hell's Angels for over thirty years. After serving in the Army he was caught committing a robbery. He served seven years of a ten-year sentence. After his release, he moved to Sacramento and bought his first Harley-Davidson. He soon joined the local Angels chapter. He developed a heroin addiction and wound up in rehab prison. After his release, he became an Oakland charter member where Sonny and the other guys watched him to keep him from relapsing.

Charlie Tinsley who was called Charlie Magoo because he wore thick glasses transferred into the Oakland chapter. He and Sonny got into a fight one night and miraculously Sonny, who was much smaller, got the better of him. Sonny has a scar on his chin from the fight. Another biker, Winston McConnelly, was a flashy with his money and clothes.

The Hell's Angels were famous for the big funerals they held for fellow members. The members would ride their bikes alongside the hearse as it made its way through streets. Waldo was one of the early Oakland members and one of the biggest guys Sonny had ever seen. He was a heroin addict who quit the club voluntarily because addicts weren't allowed to be members.



Jimmy Scraggs, another early member, was a hillbilly country singer and had been in a band for a while. Scraggs was killed by a bullet that was lodged in a gun he was cleaning. His seven-year-old daughter found his body. Hi Ho Steve Vaughan hated authority and once showed up for a court date with half his face painted green. Once he tried to pull out an aching tooth with a pliers and wound up pull out part of his jaw bone. Norton Bob transferred to Oakland from San Diego. He formed his own aviation company and died in a plane crash while delivering a twin-engine airplane to a client in New Zealand. Cisco was an Angel for thirty years. He was part Filipino and was raised on the tough streets of East Los Angeles.



Chapter 6: Old Ladies, Main Squeezes, and the Maid of Livermore

Chapter 6: Old Ladies, Main Squeezes, and the Maid of Livermore Summary and Analysis

Hell's Angels are very protective of their women. Women had always baffled Sonny since his mother abandoned him as a baby. She wrote letters to him and tried to regain contact with him, but he rejected her attempts. During the early days of the club, Tommy Thomas was the only married member and Sonny always had a steady girlfriend. The other guys usually wound up with the town sluts. Some very sophisticated girls, however, were drawn to the wild side that the Angels represented.

The members were sexually active to say the least. The Monterey rape incident drew the attention of the national press. Sonny was in jail at the time on a drug bust. The bikers rode into Monterey and wound up on the outskirts of the town in a place called Marina Beach. Two underage girls were apprehended by the police and claimed to have had sex with some of the Angels. It was either a bogus claim or there was a lack of evidence and the case was dropped. But the national headline was that Hell's Angels were rapists! The next year the California State Attorney released a criminal dossier on the outlaw gang and declared them a "corroding influence and a threat to society." (101)

Sonny met his first wife, Elsie, in 1962. They married in Reno in 1965. Elsie had two children and became pregnant in 1967. They decided not to have the child. Elsie died after she tried to self-abort the child by pumping air inside of herself. An air bubble entered her bloodstream and killed her.

The original Hell's Angels charters in San Francisco and San Bernardino allowed female members. That changed by the time Sonny became president of the Oakland chapter. Women were no longer welcomed as members. Of course, women could still ride with them. Sharon was Sonny's second wife and they were together for over two decades. He met Sharon Gruhlke after Elsie died. She was nineteen and had been crowned the Maid of Livermore. She was a successful model and at nineteen moved to San Francisco to pursue her career. She used drugs to keep her weight down. She became associated with the Hell's Angels when her roommate began dating a member.

Sonny met Sharon at a party at his house. He was immediately attracted to her and they began dating. On their first date, they went to a party where Sharon smoked her first pot. They rode over to another member's house who had a stash of guns he was selling. His wife was passed out on Seconal. It looked serious. Sonny knew that a shot of speed would wake her up. What he didn't know was that it could kill her. They found injected the woman with speed and it work her up.



When Sonny finished a movie, "Hell's Angels '69," he took Sharon on a publicity tour with him. On one occasion, they drove cross-country to Buffalo. Sharon eventually moved into Sonny's house. The couple liked to get high and had more than their share of blow during the 1970s. Sharon was doing cocaine and speed. When Sonny was in jail, she increased her use of speed to fight off depression.

Sharon learned how to ride and Sonny customized a special bike for her. They decided to get married when Sonny was serving time in Folsom Prison. They had to overcome an array of legal obstacles, but finally were able to get married while he was still incarcerated. After Sonny got out of prison, Sharon went into detox for her speed habit. After Sharon was clean she realized she couldn't live with Sonny and not take drugs. They split up after being together for twenty-seven years. Sonny wound up marrying Noel a friend of Sharon's who had helped him around the house when Sharon was in detox. Sonny and Noel had a daughter, Sarrah.



Chapter 7: The Sizzling, Acid-Drenched Sixties

Chapter 7: The Sizzling, Acid-Drenched Sixties Summary and Analysis

In a 1999 documentary about the Hell's Angels, UCLA professor Donald Cosentino concluded that the Angels never change. The Angels didn't like the anti-war left-wing protestors. A Vietnam Day Committee demonstration took place in October 1965 on the Oakland-Berkeley city line. Similar demonstrations were planned for across the nation. Sonny and eight other Angels moved through the crowd and started a fight but did not hurt any women or children. They brutally kicked and beat the male protestors demanding that they go home. Sonny personally went for Jerry Rubin, the famous antiwar writer and organizer, but was stopped by the cops. The Angels supported the war and were upset that America was probably going to pull out.

They issued a press release explaining their absence from the next large protest. They were patriots and didn't want to bring any more attention to the anti-American protestors. Many Americans supported them and looked at them as heroes. Sonny wrote a letter to the President offering the services of the Hell's Angels to fight behind the lines in Vietnam. They received a letter back stating they'd have to join the military if they wanted to fight. But the Angels couldn't join since most of them were felons.

Hunter S. Thompson wrote an article entitled, "The Motorcycle Gangs, Losers and Outsiders" in *The Nation* in May 1965. The article was well-written and Sonny initially liked Thompson and let him hang out with the gang. But he was exposed as a coward and phony and was brutally beaten by the Angels. Sonny thought he egged the beating on so he could write about it. Thompson wrote the book, "Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga." Sonny read it and thought it was a piece of junk.

The Angels held a Memorial Day California run to La Honda in 1966. Half way through the run, the cops started chasing them. The gang didn't slow down and the cops finally gave up and drove off. After arriving in La Honda, they began to party. Sonny loved LSD and took several cubes with no reaction. He was angry assuming that he was sold some bad LSD. But as he raced to the seller's house at what he thought was 100 mph to complain about the LSD, he realized that he was on a high because the speedometer indicated he was only going thirty!

The sixties were the best thing that ever happened to the Angels. They had a lot in common with the mellow hippies in San Francisco. They weren't radical and anti-war like the Berkeley left-wing anti-war crowd. The hippies just wanted to get high on drugs and sex. The Angels wore their hair long before it came in style with the hippies. Some Angels became part of the hippie scene in Haight-Ashbury. They become friendly with

the Grateful Dead through the Frisco chapter. Sonny and a number of other Angels participated in the "be-in" at Golden Gate Park during the 1967 Summer of Love.

Sonny started getting as much as \$5,000 to consult on movie scripts about the Angels. They sued producer Roger Corman for \$10,000 for basing a movie on the Angels without their permission. Easy Rider was considered the greatest bike movie ever made but it was really a drama about drug dealers. Jack Nicholson had a knack for fitting in with the club members. Joe Solomon, the director who made many of the biker films, based fight scene on real life incidents. Even Dick Clark negotiated a movie deal with the Angels. Biker movies took over the popularity that westerns had enjoyed. It was free publicity for the Hell's Angels and made it possible for them to get more money, girls and bikes.



Chapter 8: Running through the Jungle, Porterville, and Shooting Pool with an Automatic

Chapter 8: Running through the Jungle, Porterville, and Shooting Pool with an Automatic Summary and Analysis

In the early days of the Angels, bike runs were relatively short and rarely took bikers outside of California. In modern times, the runs are usually cross-country and take a week or two to complete. There are also world runs that are held in Europe, Canada, Australia or South America. In addition to long runs, the Angels liked the Bakersfield drags. When Oakland charter members showed up, they never went unnoticed. They had the longest hair and the most modified bikes. The guys usually got in bar fights.

The Oakland cops were always after the Angels, handing out phony traffic tickets and phony citations. The members would often get in fist-fights with cops in bars or at other hangouts. One night, a bunch of the guys got in a fight with Cal Berkeley football players who thought they were tough until they ran into the Hell's Angels. On that occasion, Sonny got arrested for failure to heed a law enforcement officer and using profanity in front of women and children.

The boys weren't immune from fighting each other. On one occasion, Cisco got into a fight with Wayne. The fist-fight turned into a knife fight and Sonny pulled his knife and got involved. Everyone came out of the fight alive although they all suffered injuries. At one point, the Frisco and Oakland chapters were feuding and, of course, fighting. The feud started when the Frisco club took the side of an outsider against a member. Ultimately, all the Northern California charters were against Frisco. After about a year the warring gangs agreed to a truce.

The first Porterville run was in 1963 and was one of the first big organized outlaw motorcycle gatherings. The first of many battles between the Angels and the cops took place there. The run was played up in the press as though the Angels were invading the small California town. It started with a fight in a bar between Magoo and a member of another outlaw group. The guy pulled a gun on Magoo and the Angels ascended on him and beat him so badly that he had to be hospitalized. The cops and the Angels got into a fight in the emergency room resulting in the arrest of some of the Angels.

The cops panicked, feeling that the gathering was slipping out of their control. They called in firetrucks and warned the Angels to leave town or the powerful firehouses would be turned on them and they'd be washed away. The Angels left but soon were tearing up the road back to Porterville for revenge and to free their incarcerated



brothers. There was a standoff between the Angels and the cops. A CHP commander agreed to let the members out for a bail of \$50 for each man. Sonny ordered the Oakland charter to leave town and soon the other clubs followed suit.

Sonny was arrested for a bar fight in which he almost killed a guy when his gun went off accidentally in the scuffle. He went to trial for assault with a deadly weapon. The DA and Sonny struck a deal after a the jury was hopelessly deadlocked. In all his years, Sonny had only one serious accident. When a woman with a pick-up plowed into him, his fellow riders thought he was dead. The Angels grew accustomed to the fact that wherever they roamed, trouble was always just around the corner.



Chapter 9: Let It Bleed: No Sympathy for the Devils of Altamont

Chapter 9: Let It Bleed: No Sympathy for the Devils of Altamont Summary and Analysis

In November 1969, the Rolling Stones decided to have a Woodstock-like concert in San Francisco at the end of their American "Let It Bleed" tour. A San Francisco hipster named Emmett Grogan decided that the Hell's Angels would be the ideal security force to recruit for the event. Both the San Francisco and the Oakland charters were involved. It was difficult to find a venue large enough for the free concert but ultimately Altamont Raceway in the Livermore Valley was decided upon.

There was no place to park so when Sonny, Sharon and some of the other Oakland members drove in they improvised and drove their bikes right up to the stage. They were escorted on stage and introduced to the Rolling Stones. They weren't very friendly and were dressed in prissy clothes and were wearing make-up. After opening bands finished performing, it was time for the Stones but they kept delaying their appearance.

The drunken and stoned crowd had grown impatient and angry. When the Stones finally came out, the crowd started to converge on the stage. The Angels stood their ground and wound up pushing them off the stage. A bike belonging to one of the members accidentally caught on fire. Sonny started for the burning bike but chaos ensued and a huge fight broke out. Keith Richards threatened to stop playing but changed his mind when Sonny stuck a gun in his side and ordered him to keep playing. One spectator, Meredith Hunter, got shot and stabbed and eventually died. Sonny blamed the entire episode on the Stones for agitating the crowd although many in the press and public blamed the Hell's Angels.



Chapter 10: Murder, Mayhem, Living Outside the Law

Chapter 10: Murder, Mayhem, Living Outside the Law Summary and Analysis

Over the years, Sonny was more than his share of scrapes with the law. His first bust was for marijuana in 1963. A friend, Gus Pimental, was staying with him. The cops raided the house on a tip that Gus was selling. They arrested Gus and then found pot in Sonny's girlfriend's suitcase. Sonny took the rap for his girlfriend and was arrested. After being found guilty, he was sentenced to six months in the county jail and six months probation.

Sonny encountered another problem when, as a convicted felon, he was caught with firearms, a violation of his parole. After that incident, the cops were almost on constant surveillance outside his house, on the lookout for other gun-toting Angels who might be dropping by. Another member dropped a suitcase full of heroin and cocaine off in his garage when he spotted the cops. The suitcase full of drugs was found and Sonny was arrested for possession to sell. After he was bailed out by his lawyer and a trial date was set, Sonny knew that he was facing serious prison time. Soon after several DEA agents were robbed by men posing as Angels. The feds thought Sonny was involved but he was able to expose them as fakes and turned them into the cops.

After Altamont, Sharon was on Sonny's case for being too involved in the club. He was snorting coke so much that he didn't know what he was doing from one moment to the next. One night Sonny was in his Cadillac following another hopped-up member in his Pontiac. They were driving in the Oakland woods and a park ranger, noticing that the Pontiac was rear-heavy, went after them. The guy in the Pontiac sped off and was chased by the rangers who shot a tire out causing the the car to crash. Two tied up Angels "prospects" were in the trunk along with a small arsenal of weapons. Sonny had guns in his car and took off but was soon apprehended and arrested. He was charged with kidnapping and causing great bodily harm along with some miscellaneous weapons charges. Sonny and the others were bailed out.

Sonny was also dragged into a triple murder that occurred in May 1972. Kelly Smith, Willard Thomas and Gary Kemp were shot to death in San Leandro. At almost the same time, a Cuban national named Severo Agero was found shot to death a short distance away. The authorities thought the murders were connected. An acquaintance of Sonny's was picked up and questioned by the cops. Under much duress, he claimed that Sonny and several other Angels were responsible for all four murders. The next day, thirty-nine law enforcement officers surrounded Sonny's house. Acting on a search warrant, the cops confiscated weapons, drugs and photos of the murder victims as evidence. Sharon was arrested on separate drug charges. Another dead body was found and connected to the case - raising the body count to five.



Bail was set too high for Sonny the others to get out. They had to sit it out in jail until the trial. As it turned out much of the prosecution's case fell apart. Sonny and the others were found not guilty on the murder charges. Sonny was found guilty of possession for sale of heroin. Since he was a repeat felon, his sentence was expanded and with weapons and false imprisonment charges, Sonny was sentence to serve thirty years in a state lock-up.



Chapter 11: Locked Up and Low Down - Angels on Ice

Chapter 11: Locked Up and Low Down - Angels on Ice Summary and Analysis

The prospect of spending most of the rest of his life in jail terrified Sonny. When he was assigned to the maximum security Folsom Prison matters just seemed worse since prisoners were rarely paroled out early from that facility. During his first few weeks in prison, tax evasion charges were added to the charges. Sonny was in a dangerous situation. In a maximum security prison, the guards were known to shoot first and ask questions later.

There were race problems in Folsom but apparently not as bad as they were in San Quentin. Drug testing was held routinely. Sonny endured the boredom of prison by reading a lot. He learned how to type and play the guitar while incarcerated. He took a prison job working on the trash truck so he could have more time outside.

When the death penalty was overturned in California, most of the state's death row prisoners wound up at Folsom. Two former death row in-mates, Slim and Motormouth, worked with Sonny on the trash detail and became good friends. As a veteran, Sonny was entitled to GI Bill benefits. He received \$350 for education but sent it to Sharon because she was having a difficult time. He signed up for the prison school and eventually earned an AA from Sacramento college.

Since Sharon was considered Sonny's co-conspirator in some of his crimes, she was routinely refused visiting rights. In 1976, conjugal visits were allowed and Sharon was permitted to come more often. Sonny thought that he owed the state a five-year sentence but nothing more. He knew that after five years, he would get out of prison somehow. Sharon contacted the office of famous San Francisco attorney Melvin Belli for help. Kent Russell from Belli's office took on the case. He tried a new tactic that worked. Sonny's first felony, possession of marijuana, was now just a misdemeanor. By successfully reducing that first charge to a misdemeanor, the other charges lost their strength. Sonny's sentence was reduced to time served and he was out the day after the decision came down. But Sonny's problems with the law were not over.



Chapter 12: RICO My Ass - the Law with the Funny Name

Chapter 12: RICO My Ass - the Law with the Funny Name Summary and Analysis

A Solano County sheriff named William Zerbe was severely injured in a bombing. At the same time, a police sergeant named Kroc was also injured by a bomb. Both had arrested a Hell's Angel named James "Jim Jim" Brandes. A grand jury was convened but there was not enough evidence to indict Jim Jim. But the incident caused law enforcement to focus on the Angels more than ever. The cops were also angry that Sonny refused to give up his association with the Angels after his release from prison.

In order to find a way to stop the activities of outlaw groups like the Hell's Angels, the feds came up with the RICO law - Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations. This law made it a crime for a person to associate with criminal gangs. RICO was first used against Mafia figures. The FBI, DEA and California law enforcement together decided that the activities of the Hell's Angels constituted a criminal conspiracy and was therefore culpable under federal RICO laws. The punishment was stiff—each RICO violation could engender twenty years in prison.

The first RICO raid against the Oakland chapter was on June 13, 1979. They first raided the houses of a few members culminating with a raid on the clubhouse. They found nothing incriminating making them suspect that there was a tip-off. Sonny, Sharon and other members had taken off by foot but were caught up with and arrested. The news carried stories about the raid and arrests. The Angels were being accused of everything from being drug kings to bribing judges. Sonny saw the RICO laws as sweeping and unfair. RICO charges could reach back and encompass anything a person had ever been arrested for.

Originally twenty-eight people were indicted on RICO charges. Some were allowed to plead out to lesser charges and some weren't Angels. There were only seven Angels who went on trial. Sonny stayed in jail until his \$2 million bail was reduced to \$100,000. All the Angels stuck together and refused to plead guilty for lesser sentences. The defendants were all being tried together and each had his own lawyer. A huge courtroom had to be used in order to accommodate the sheer number of people involved. The news media portrayed the trial as the "most complex and costly trial in San Francisco history." (218)

The defendants were kept in a jail cell above the courtroom. Even though they were potentially in big trouble it didn't keep them from fighting with other prisoners and even the deputies. The prosecution had some bizarre evidence that was not especially convincing. After the prosecution rested its case, Sonny insisted on testifying even

though his lawyer advised him not to. Sonny emphasized that the Hell's Angels was a club comprised of a bunch of guys who liked to ride motorcycles.

All eighteen defense lawyers made final arguments making it difficult for the jury to stay tuned in. In June of 1980, the jury informed the judge that they had reached an impasse on some of the charges. No one wanted to repeat the trial that had already taken a year. The jury was instructed to continue their deliberations. The jury acquitted Sonny, Sharon and one other Angel on the RICO charges. The cost of defending Sonny and the others was between \$1 and \$2 million. The prosecution reportedly spent between \$3 and \$5 million.

Although the Angels beat the RICO charges, it took a toll on the club. A sizable number of members quit the club out of intimidation. Sonny felt that by defeating RICO charges the Angels had defended First Amendment rights.



Chapter 13: Rats, Infil-traitors and Government Informants

Chapter 13: Rats, Infil-traitors and Government Informants Summary and Analysis

A rat is the true enemy in a organization like the Hell's Angels. There haven't been many defectors over the years. Anthony Tait and George Wethern both ratted on the club and wrote books. Jim Jim informed on the club for years. He hung himself the night before he was scheduled to return to prison rather than return there. Sonny was falsely fingered by Wethern and another member for taking part in an insurance scam and for murder.

The biggest Hell's Angels rat was Anthony Tait. He was an infiltrator and informant. Tait always had a lot of money. Sonny figured he was selling drugs not knowing, of course, that he was receiving government money. A sign that he wasn't a true biker was that long runs always made him sick. Tait helped the Feds entrap Sonny on a bogus interstate conspiracy charge.



Chapter 14: Taz Kicks the Big C

Chapter 14: Taz Kicks the Big C Summary and Analysis

The biggest battle that Sonny ever faced was in 1982 when he was diagnosed with throat cancer. He had suffered with a sore throat for five months. He had smoked Camels for thirty-five years so naturally the possibility of cancer occurred to him. Sharon finally tricked him into going to the doctor. A biopsy confirmed the worst. Surgery was scheduled but Sonny was sure the cancer was going to kill him. His lymph nodes and vocal chords were removed. The lymph nodes had absorbed the cancer cells not allowing them to spread. Sonny couldn't talk after the operation. He underwent radiation therapy during recovery. Through therapy, he learned to talk through a valve sewn into his windpipe. Sonny quit his cigarette habit.



Chapter 15: Oakland in My Rearview Mirror, Carefree Highway through my Windshield

Chapter 15: Oakland in My Rearview Mirror, Carefree Highway through my Windshield Summary and Analysis

After his conviction on bombing conspiracy, Sonny was sent to the federal correction institution in Phoenix in 1987 and was released and placed on parole in 1992. Harley-Davidson quit making Sonny's favorite model, the FXRT, in the same year. About a hundred members welcomed Sonny home with a new FXRT. Sonny immediately violated his parole by attending a large rally in Hayward and associating with known felons. Sonny had liked Arizona so well that he wound up transferring his membership to the Arizona Hell's Angel, Cave Creek chapter.

The Hell's Angels formed a club in the fifties to ride and party. In the sixties, the Angels became a household name. The seventies was the gangster era for the club and in the eighties they were unfairly persecuted by law enforcement. In 1998, the club celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. In 1999, Sonny participated in a European Run. They rode through Switzerland, Austria, Liechtenstein and Italy.

During his rough and tumble life, Sonny knew pain and sadness along with joy and solitude while he lived the "forever free" life of a Hell's Angel.



Characters

Ralph

Ralph "Sonny" Barger is the author of "Hell's Angel - The Life and Times of Sonny Barger." Sonny was born in central California and raised in Oakland. His father, Ralph, Sr., was a menial laborer and was barely able to eke out a living for his wife and two children. Sonny's mother, Kathryn, didn't stay around long. She took off with a bus driver when Sonny was only four months old. Although she tried to resume contact with him in later years, he rejected her. The scar of abandonment is not one that heals easily.

Ralph, Sr., was not the ideal parent although he did stay with his children. Ralph was a functioning alcoholic, which means that he was able to control his drinking enough to keep his job but when he wasn't working he was blind drunk. Ralph's labor jobs kept him away from home leaving young Sonny to be mostly on his own at a very young age. He fell in with the wrong crowd and began to drink and take drugs at a young age. He was arrested for DUI and driving without a license at fourteen.

After faking a birth certificate, Sonny joined the Army at the age of sixteen. After serving fourteen months, his real age was exposed and he had to leave the military but was given an honorable discharge. Returning to Oakland, he began to hang with young ruffians like himself who loved to drink, party, and drive motorcycles.

Sonny helped to found the Oakland chapter of the Hell's Angels. It was the 1950s and the Angels were just a motorcycle club and charters were limited to California. But their popularity grew and soon there were chapters across the country and eventually in Europe and Australia. As the years passed, the Angels became more and more associated with criminal behavior. Sonny spent many years in prison on charges ranging from drug and assault violations to kidnapping and murder.

Sonny was one of the leaders of the Hell's Angels throughout his adult life. He loved the freedom and the image of being an Angel and he loved living outside the normal world. The Angels created their own world and Sonny Barger was one of the original architects of that distorted reality.

Sharon Barger

Sonny met Sharon Gruhlke after his first wife, Elsie, died. Sharon was a beautiful nineteen-year-old blond who had just been crowned the Maid of Livermore. Sharon tried her hand at modeling in her hometown and was successful enough that she decided to try her luck in the big city. She moved to San Francisco to pursue an acting and modeling career. The slim young woman was told she was a few pounds too heavy and began using drugs to keep her weight down. It eventually led Sharon down a dark path to addiction from which she could never fully recover. It didn't help her situation when



she became involved with the Hell's Angels, some of the biggest users and pushers on earth.

Sharon first met the Angels when her roommate began dating one. She dated another member casually and at one drunken party she met up with Sonny Barger who was older and a big shot in the Angels organization. She was impressed.

Sonny was immediately attracted to Sharon and they began dating. She moved in with him and they shared a passion for cocaine. Sharon was also addicted to speed which was her original drug of choice. The couple eventually married and were together a total of twenty-seven years. They went through a lot together. There were many years they lived apart when Sonny was in prison. Sharon was arrested herself for drug violations and was accused of violating federal RICO laws. Sharon and Sonny were found not guilty on the RICO charges.

In an effort to salvage her life, Sharon eventually went into rehab. Although she cared for Sonny, she knew that she could never stay off of drugs if she lived with him. They agreed to a divorce. It was an amicable parting and they remained friends.

Hell's Angels

The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club was first established in California in the 1950s. Later, charter clubs sprung up across the nation and eventually in Europe and Australia. Hell's Angels boasts hundreds of charters and thousands of members.

Ralph Barger, Sr.

Ralph Barger supported his two children with a variety of menial manual labor jobs. He was a functioning alcoholic who was able to hold down a job but was basically absent as a parent.

Kathryn Barger

Kathryn Barger was Sonny's mother. She abandoned him and his sister when she ran away with a bus driver. She tried to renew a relationship with him later but he rejected her attempts.

Shirley Barger

Shirley Barger was Sonny's older sister. She was left with a lot of the household responsibilities after her mother left and her father was off working or drinking. She married young and Sonny lived with her and her family at various times.



Elsie Barger

Elsie Barger was Sonny's first wife. After a few years of marriage, she found that she was pregnant. She and Sonny decided not to have the baby. She pumped air up inside of herself in an attempt to self-abort the baby. An air bubble hit her bloodstream and killed her.

James

James "Jim Jim" Brandes was arrested along with Sonny for attempted murder by explosives of several law enforcement officers. There was not enough evidence and the charges were later reduced.

Severo Agero

A Cuban national named Severo Agero was found shot to death. Sonny was arrested for murder after being framed by another outlaw. A jury found Sonny not guilty.

Terry the Tramp

Terry the Tramp was the ultimate Hell's Angel. He was fun-loving and rowdy. He had long hair and wore black leather. He abused Seconal and eventually died of an overdose.



Objects/Places

Harley-Davidson Motorcycles

The motorcycle of choice for the Hell's Angels was the Harley. Members in good standing would not be caught riding anything else. The Angels loved the Harleys but they altered them to give them their own distinctive style.

Oakland, California

Sonny Barger spent most of his childhood growing up in Oakland, CA. It was there that Sonny, young and just out of the military, became interested in motorcycles and eventually formed the Oakland chapter of the Angels.

Haight-Ashbury

Hell's Angels had an affinity with the laid back hippies in Haight-Ashbury during the Summer of Love in 1967. Members of Hell's Angels supplied most of the drugs in H-A.

Snake Pit

The Oakland chapter members saved for a year and were able to rent a building to be used as their meeting and rec club house. They called it the Snake Pit.

Monterey, California

The infamous Monterey rape incident brought national attention to the Hell's Angels. They were accused of having sex with under-age girls. The charges were ultimately dropped but the bad reputation that the Angels earned during the ordeal never left them.

Folsom State Prison

Sonny was sentenced to Folsom State Prison on assault, drug and weapons charges. Since he had a prior felony, he was sentenced to serve thirty years. He only served five years and got out on some legal maneuvering by his attorney.

RICO Laws

RICO stands for Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations. This federal law made it a crime for a person to associate with criminal gangs. RICO was first used



against Mafia figures. The FBI, DEA, and California law enforcement decided to use the law against the Hell's Angels.

Altamont Raceway in the Livermore Valley

The Rolling Stones decided to give a free concert at the end of their American "Let It Bleed" tour. The decision was made to hold the concert at the Altamont Raceway in Livermore Valley outside San Francisco. Hell's Angels members were used for security.

Porterville, California

The Porterville run in 1963 was the first big organized outlaw motorcycle gatherings. It was the site of first major battle between police and the Angels.

Cave Creek, Arizona

Sonny spent some time in a federal prison in Arizona. He liked the weather so well that after he got released, he moved to Arizona and transferred his Hell's Angels membership to the Cave Creek, Arizona chapter.



Themes

Co-Dependency

The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club is ostensibly an organization of men who love motorcycles and love to ride. Although in the fifties when Hell's Angels charters first starting popping up in California, the members were just fans of riding their Harleys together with their colleagues on club runs. However, as the organization grew, it more and more began to draw individual of a certain nature and character. Perhaps it was the liberty of riding in the wind and the freedom of choosing an atypical means of transportation that appealed to men who were on the fringes of society.

But there was a stronger allure to this aberrant lifestyle than the mere freedom of the road. The members tended to be outside the law or close to it. They had drug and drinking and relationship problems. Most all of the members had an inner anger that more often than not bubbled to the surface. Fighting was not only a frequent activity of the group, it was eagerly anticipated and even actively pursued. There was an inherent admiration for guns and other weaponry held by club members. Angels who fought cops, assaulted people, stole and served time in prison were often perceived as martyrs and even heroes by other members.

In "normal" society where most of humanity resides, fighting, worship of guns, drug and alcohol abuse, breaking the law, and assaulting people are all behaviors that are abnormal and unacceptable. Within a sub-culture such as Hell's Angels, men who lived on the edge of society could find a commonality with other members. Although the members of Hell's Angels consider themselves brave he-men who are ready to mix it up with everyone from cops to innocent by-standers, they are in reality fragile and weak. They find a measure of comfort in the club because they find others who, like themselves, need the approval of others to validate their value. The Hell's Angels is a house of cards and its existence is rests squarely on the unhealthy co-dependence upon which it is based.

Living on the Fringes

The story of the Hell's Angels is both clique and otherworldly. The ordinary person cannot begin to grasp what it would be live to live a fragile existence that is not living from paycheck to paycheck like many people. Instead, it is living from one day to the next, making it from Monday to Tuesday. Danger is always lurking. Friends and enemies alike are armed and dangerous. The men who became Angels were men who could not fit into regular society or perhaps did not want to or both.

The reasons that these men came to be members are no doubt varied and compelling in their own ways. However, what each member had in common was that they were misfits, they were people who could not live a traditional lifestyle. They either needed



the excitement, companionship and even the risk element that inherent in being an outlaw. Their distorted view of life is immediately obvious. They recognize that they are outside the norm and that they walk a thin line between living free and being incarcerated. They recognize that they are the "bad guys" but in their way of thinking, the cops and those who would present an obstacle to their way of life are worse, in fact, the real "bad guys."

The Angels exist on the edge. They drink too much, drive too fast, fight too hard and kill themselves on drink and drugs. They witness each other die from murder, suicide, fighting, drinking and drugging. When a member dies, the others watch him as though they are him because they are. There is a ominous presence that is ever-present in their daily lives. They know they will probably not live full lives and they are well aware that any day could be their last.

Child Abandonment

Ralph "Sonny" Barger was abandoned by his mother when he was just four months old. His father, Ralph, Sr., eked out a living for Sonny and his older sister, Shirley. Ralph worked as a "lumper" and in other menial jobs. He didn't earn much and there were never any extras. Although Sonny had a father, he was a father in name only. He was a functioning alcoholic, meaning that he held down a job and never drank enough on the job to lose it but made up for it when he was home.

The young motherless boy didn't have a father who cared what he did. And although he lived with his children, he wasn't really there for them. He didn't care how Sonny did at school. He apparently didn't care that Sonny was drinking and drugging as a young teen and was driving drunk without a license. In a way that was just as cruel as Sonny's mother's abandonment of him, his father abandoned Sonny as well. The results were equally devastating.

Without any direction, attention or moral compass, Sonny was left to develop his own set of values and his own self-worth. It was obvious when he was young, that the identity that he was attracted to and one that seemed a natural fit for a young boy who had no one to tell him otherwise, was one on the wild and lawless side. Sonny went on to live a life as an outlaw and criminal and to spend many adult years in prison.

This story is a testament to the reality that a child can be abandoned whether a parent physically leaves him or if the parent is physically there but is not emotionally available to him.



Style

Perspective

"Hell's Angel - The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angles Motorcycle Club" is written by Hell's Angels legend and founder Ralph "Sonny" Barger. The book is autobiographical and is a historical accounting of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club. It is written in the first-person narrative.

Since Sonny Barger was there from the beginning, he brings authenticity to the story of the outlaw club and its evolution from a "riding club" to a sub-culture of felons, substance abusers, and rabble-rousing men who relished living on the edge of society. The last section of the book is basically a three-page rap sheet comprised of Barger's arrests. There is a certain pride and esprit de corps within the organization that is misplaced. While they claim to be defenders of women and to be patriotic, their behavior tells a different story.

If it was Barger's intention to defend his lifestyle and to present it in some sense as an admirable one, it falls flat. He portrays his rugged childhood as a direct link to his life as an outlaw. But the number of men from poor childhoods who made better choices than Barger far outnumber those who followed the darker path that he ventured down.

There are more than several episodes in which Barger is arrested by the cops for weapons, assault, and drug violations in which he portrays himself as framed or only guilty by association. He seems to soft soap his own behavior and the reader only has his side of the story in each of the incidents. The other members who he blames some of his problems with the law on might have a different version of the events.

Tone

"Hell's Angel - The Life and Times of Sonny Barger" is written by Hell's Angels legend and founder Ralph "Sonny" Barger. The tone of the story is raw and blunt and hard-boiled. Barger does not hold back on the use of foul language and invectives. Apparently, Barger tells the story like he lived it. There is a swirl of bitterness and anger tinged oddly with pride, loyalty and even distorted patriotism. To say that reading this book is venturing into an unknown world is, in no way, overstatement.

One does not have to read very deeply into the story to realize that Barger and his Angel cronies view the world in a way that most people do not and, even with a stretch, cannot fathom. There is a contradictory thread that runs throughout the telling of the story of Hell's Angels. The Angels have stringent rules for their charters and members. No fighting is allowed among members and loyalty is more important than breathing. However, stepping out beyond the safety zone of an Angels charter, the rules dissolve and anything goes. The no fighting rule is out the window and members are in fact encouraged to and admired for fighting outsiders, including cops.



Another contradiction in the behavior of the Angels is their attitude toward women. While they mistreat women and use them and don't even come close to treating them as equals, they claim they will do anything to defend them. Women aren't allowed to be members and the Angels have no scruples when it comes to infidelity.

The words and messages of this book form the history of a group of people or outlaws, as they call themselves, who live as a sub-culture on the fringes of the normal world. But it is obvious that these men are just where they want to be and perhaps even belong.

Structure

"Hell's Angel - The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club" by Ralph "Sonny" Barger is separated into fifteen medium-length chapters. The book's structure is somewhat chaotic like its author and the story that he tells. The book switches from one place and time to another place and time within the same chapter and at times even within the same paragraph. This style compromises the continuity of the story and causes a presentation that is choppy and one that creates gaps in the story line.

It is sometimes difficult for the reader to keep a handle on the chronology of the saga and in the case of the Hell's Angels, it is not easy to follow who beat up who and who got drugs from who and who went to jail and who got off, etc. Barger presents his story of the Hell's Angels and is undoubtedly truthful at least in his view. However, most chapters are repetitious relative to the organization's fighting, drinking, drugging, partying, etc. and become quite tedious.

The last two chapters are the exception in that their focus is basically on one subject. They describe the later years of Sonny Barger's life. Chapter 14, "Taz Kicks the Big C," describes Barger's battle with cancer. The last chapter, Chapter 15, "Oakland in My Rearview Mirror, Carefree Highway Through My Windshield" is basically a brief summary of the history of the Hell's Angels and the organization's status at the time the book was written. Following the last chapter, there is an afterword entitled "The Rap-Up," which is a three-page summary of Barger's arrests.



Quotes

"In Texas a cop asked me, 'Excuse me, partner, but...why do you and your friends carry those big knives?' I told him, 'Because we're all felons and we can't carry a big gun like you.'" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"I didn't know at the time whether my mother was dead or alive. As far as my father was concerned, she was gone and buried" (Chapter 2, p. 12).

"Serving time in the barracks and the slammer teaches you discipline and survival. Jail teaches you to be on time: when those doors open and close each day, you'd better be set. After doing the Army and jail, you're ready for anything" (Chapter 3, p. 26).

"The story of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club is the story of a very select brotherhood of men who will fight and die for each other, no matter what the cause." (Chapter 5, p. 67).

"Women. Old ladies. Babes. Chicks. Can't live without them, can't use their bones for soup" (Chapter 6, p. 97).

"The Hell's Angels are an apolitical organization. But when the peace marches started in the sixties, there were club members who didn't like the upper-class antiwar radicals' attitudes toward vets like us. One afternoon we decided to express our opinions and take a stand against these left-wing peace creeps" (Chapter 7, p. 119).

"If you had a beef with somebody in the club that had not been settled, then you knew you were going to settle it up with them there. What better time to take care of it? No cops around, just Angels going toe toe toe, crossing swords" (Chapter 8, p. 140).

"Getting into trouble with the law forces you to think on your feet. It's a game. They use their crazy rules and end-around strategies to put you away, and you use your wits to find a way out" (Chapter 10, p. 171).

"Long hair and mustaches are in at Folsom. I sure wish my hair would grow faster, but I know one thing for sure: no more haircuts while I'm here" (Chapter 11, p. 195).

"Somebody asked me about the recruitment process for new Hell's Angels. 'We don't recruit,' I answered. 'We recognize. When we see somebody that's us, then they become us'" (Chapter 12, p. 226).

"I feel that our victory prevented criminal RICO from achieving what the government prosecutors wanted, which was to hog-tie First Amendment rights. In the process the government had plans to put a bunch of unpopular groups in jail and keep people from congregating with whomever they pleased. The criminal RICO side would have certainly gotten out of hand if we hadn't done what we did and fought back" (Chapter 12, p. 227).



"Most rats are loud-talking bullies who like to push people around and talk tough when the club surrounds them. They thump their chests and yell about how much they love the club and how they're going to be with us for the rest of their lives" (Chapter 13, p. 229).

Topics for Discussion

Describe Sonny Barger's childhood. What in his younger years made him pursue membership in an outlaw motorcycle band?

In what state did the first Hell's Angels first organize? At their height, how many charter groups and members did they have?

What were some of the ways the Hell's Angels would alter their motorcycles? What brand of motorcycle did the Angels prefer?

What occurred during the free concert given by the Rolling Stones? What was Sonny's opinion of the Rolling Stones? Why did the media blame the Hell's Angels for the fight that broke out during which a concert goer was killed?

What kind of criminal violations can be charged under RICO laws? What does the acronym stand for? Why did the feds devise the RICO laws?

How was Sonny able to beat a thirty year sentence he was given? What was fair or unfair about the sentence he initially received? What was fair or unfair about his early release?

What was Sharon charged with when she was arrested several times during her years with Sonny? Why were they bad for each other and why did they finally break-up?