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20 years after his last drink Pete Hamill looks back on his early life. As a child during the depression and World War II he learnt that drinking was to be an essential part of being a man, it was only later he discovered its ability to destroy lives.

A Drinking Life Details

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From Reader Review A Drinking Life for online ebook

Tim says

Pete Hamill nailed it at the end when he talked about “acting” at life vs. living life. It’s this authenticity – this striving for whatever it is that’s real that’s driven me in my own life. And it’s the escapism in substances that’s illusionary in that the positive it offers is intense and as short as a second. The problem is the negatives always outweigh it no matter how you try to rationalize it. And the negatives increase the longer the use continues.

I thought this book as centered around alcohol was fascinating in the way the story of New York was told around and through the inclusion of alcohol in the narrative. It’s almost as if the book wasn’t meant explicitly to center around alcohol yet there it was. That’s precisely the insidious and damaging nature particularly of alcohol in society. It’s not only the legality of a dangerous substance but the full-on social acceptance and ritual of it. Breaking away from or quitting drink is not as simple as simply not picking up a drink for most people. It’s also the breaking of a way of living in society - the places you go, the people you’re around, the friendships you’ve made, etc... it’s a death in a way – dying to one life and often to many friendships – no matter how substantive they might have been.

Hamill is a master of prose, and the book is a great read from a man who has obviously discovered a great deal about life from his clarity and decision to stay lucid.

Patrick O'Neil says

With A Drinking Life, Hamill has written the great American proletarian memoir. Which is no small feat considering, aside from his working class roots, Hamill has become anything but a proletariat. I’m not disputing he was a hard working journalist who put his time in writing for the New York Post – a profession almost as hard as his former two fisted drinking binges. But what I find interesting is Hamill’s insistence on romancing his working stiff upbringing as if it somehow not only justifies his drinking, but also allows him the credibility to poetically philosophize the psyche of the entire working class.

Well written, concise, compact and prose driven A Drinking Life is Hamill’s narrative of his attempts at several careers, school, love, marriage, and his relationship with his father – all of which he lost, abandoned, or simple ignored, due to his alcoholism. Waxing nostalgically he chronologically leads us through his life: from birth, to adolescence, and finally adulthood. The majority of the book concentrates on his rather tough childhood in Brooklyn New York. Where, due to his father’s inability to work as a result of his alcoholism, at the age of 16, Hamill left school to work in the Navy shipyards. Torn between earning money for his family, and resuming his education, Hamill follows in his father’s footsteps and begins drinking as a way of coping with the difficulties of life.

195 pages into his book, the entirety being 265 pages, Hamill hasn’t taken us far. He’s in his twenties and is attending College in Mexico. Due to his drinking he has run afoul of the law and is incarcerated in jail. Not the best of circumstances to begin with, his experience is brutally horrendous. From his detailed and lengthy depiction of this episode, one would think it a pivotal turning point for him. Knowing he was there due to his drinking it would seem Hamill is showing us this scene because it influenced him, or gave him reason to reevaluate his lifestyle. Instead it appears his inclusion of this scene is primarily for establishing his credibility as a libertarian of the underprivileged. Although thoroughly mortified by what he has witnessed,

Hamill does nothing, and flees Mexico, returning to New York to attend the prestigious Pratt Institute to continue his studies, and eventually become a journalist/reporter.

Interestingly this is when Hamill's drinking began to escalate in earnest, only he caulks it up as merely a hazard of the profession, sort of gentleman's club activity for journalists. Leaving me wondering if Hamill was ever going to take responsibility for his drinking. Yet what is of further interest, and what pretty much answers that question with a resounding "kind of," is his leaving only the last 52 pages to describe the next twenty years of his life: his final days of drinking, his failed marriage, abandoning his children, his extramarital affairs, his workaholic behavior. As if it was all something he preferred to forget rather than admit. However in these last few chapters Hammill writes some of his strongest work, allowing to reader to catch a glimpse of who he really was.

Yet unfortunately in the final five-page epilogue titled "Dry," Hamill simply tells us he just quit drinking and than attempts to explain it away as a decision he made, rather than it being a result of trying to repair all the damage he has done to himself and those around him. Hardly the insightful summary I had expected. Yet maybe that was my problem from the very beginning. I expected more. I wasn't so concerned with the colorful tales of his childhood, or his youthful transgressions, instead I would have been more interested in the factual, not so glamorous, aspect of his drinking life. But then, having already been swayed by the book's hype – the least of which coming from the New York Times' book review: "Tough-minded, brimming with energy, and unflinchingly honest." I came prepared to read a much different story.

Dan McCoig says

This book was published in 1994. I ran across the title in a list of "must read memoirs." The book more than lived up to its billing. Hamill is a journalist, essayist, and novelist who began his writing career with the New York Post.

Hamill tells the story of his Irish Catholic upbringing in 1940s and 1950s Park Slope, Brooklyn, his professional ascendancy as a writer in the 1960s and 1970s, and the role of beer and whiskey in his undoing personally. In Hamill's world, strong drink accompanied life's high and low points and every point in between.

Hamill discloses his disenchantment with the Roman Catholic Church, his frustration with The Neighborhood [his immediate blocks in Brooklyn], his struggle to be both good boy and bad boy, and his love of the writers of the Lost Generation, especially Hemingway. His account of his search for his "Great Good Place" as a writer leads him to Mexico City, Barcelona, Belfast, and London as well as other locales in which to ply his trade.

Drink costs Hamill his first wife and their daughters. Drink made Hamill a stranger to himself. He concludes that he "played" his life rather than "lived" it. This realization provides him with the power to get and stay "on the wagon."

The story is gripping. Hamill's prose makes it all the more gripping.

Spider the Doof Warrior says

I'm nearly done with this book. I don't drink more than wussy sweet wine, no higher than 4% alcohol. I do not think I am so dorky for this. Pete Hamill talks about growing up surrounded with alcohol, having his first drink around the age of 11 and how drinking shaped his life. He talked about wanting to be an artist and a writer and having the pressure to not rise above his station thrust-ed on him by his peers.

I say, screw that. Live life the way you want to. Don't just drown your feelings in booze. Feel them! Live them! This book is about how he opens his eyes to this fact and decides to break the pattern. To stop drinking to deal with the agony of not living the life the way he wants to.

It's very inspiring. Especially since he, like me wanted to be a writer and also an artist. I say let's work on making our dreams come true.

The only thing is folks go on about how great the past is and how it was so much nicer than it is nowadays, but they had the same problems only no one TALKED about them. No one talked about alcoholism, they just scorned people who could not handle their booze and folks didn't talk about their bad marriages they just struggled through them. I wonder if that's actually healthy.

8/18/18

I read to it again and it makes me seriously hate alcohol. At the culture behind it. I am not judging drinkers but the larger society. I'm not saying teetotal totally but there's something warped about society and how it handles drinking and gender roles and life in general and I really don't know what to do about it. Also he married a 17 year old. Gross.

The booze kept him from dealing with why his life sucked and why his decisions sucked and he realized he was acting through life and wanted to change thatat least.

Derek says

Much like David Byrne's *Bicycle Diaries*, the title for Pete Hamill's memoir is a bit of a misnomer; to be sure, drinking plays a central role in Hamill's life, but this reads much more like a standard autobiography with lots of drinking to serve as the backdrop. Which is fine, of course, if you're a reader who happens to be interested in the life of Pete Hamill. I wasn't, necessarily, and that became a barrier to my enjoyment of the book.

So why wasn't I interested? Well, I might have been, but the book spectacularly manages to get off on the wrong foot. There's so much ironic narrative distance in the sections where Hamill describes himself as a boy that the prose is nearly unbearable. If nothing else, it seems amateurish. One such example, though you could find one on nearly every page, comes from when the adolescent Pete observes a friend's sister doing some rooftop sunbathing:

She lathered suntan oil on her bright pink body, rubbed some on the tops of her breasts, then lay back with her eyes closed and her abundant black hair spilling onto a white towel. I didn't know why but that made me feel funny. I turned away and went down the street. I did not tell my mother about this.

This type of downright *obvious* narrative distance, when coupled with the goofy Brooklyn-ese and weirdly idealized WWII NYC setting, is grating to say the least. There's nothing in this section we haven't read before. There are no revelations about boyhood, or unique experiences of the war. There is nervousness and confusion. Kids make sense of it through comic books. You've seen this setup in dozens of movies.

It gets better, though. Once young Hamill strikes out on his own to make something of himself, the story gets a bit more interesting and the voice a bit more inventive (though there are still lots of plodding passages about breasts). He gets into a scrape in a Mexico jail, which is memorable not only to Hamill but the reader as well. He rubs elbows with NYC literary Somebodies. He philanders and marries and travels and sires. And that's enough to keep the reader going.

But it's not enough, unfortunately, to elevate this text above a hoary Pete Hamill reciting his exploits. There's a moment in the book where a friend admonishes him for feeling that he's above everyone else, and that he lords this superiority over his friends and acquaintances. An exchange to which Hamill writes, "And though I was hurt and wounded, another thought slid through my mind: Maybe he was right." Okay, great--some self-awareness, a bit of severely lacking self-excoriation. But Hamill stops there. If he does feel guilt (and I have no reason to believe that he doesn't), he never gets that on the page in the same way that he captures his unease with being a Brooklynite good-ol'-boy or his fascination with art and comics. And really, that's a pretty vital element to a memoir about drinking, isn't it? But it's only ever on the page in brief glimpses. When weighed against his gleefully described drunken escapades, well, a drinking life sounds like a pretty damn good one. I'm guessing that wasn't his intention.

John Hintz says

I have read ten or more drinking memoirs in the past couple of months, as I try to assess the role of alcohol in my life. This and Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story* are my two favorites. But unlike Knapp's, which very much is a drinking memoir, Hamill's book is more of a complete memoir. A *Life* much more than just a "drinking" life. Alcohol is not central to many parts of the book, even though it's always there. And there is no moralizing whatsoever. (Of course, no memoir worth its salt would do this, especially not one penned by a seasoned journalist.)

As many reviewers and critics have noted, perhaps the most lasting thing about this book is the incredibly evocative imprint of mid-century Brooklyn that Hamill paints in the first half of the book. I have read few books where place is so clearly portrayed, with what seems like the perfect dose of sentimentality.

But even beyond Brooklyn, during his time in Vietnam, his expatriate pilgrimages, and his return to New York, the book remains gripping. It's honest, frank, and plainly laid before the reader. By the time alcohol starts to become questioned, rather than just an uncritically central theme, there are only thirty or so pages left in the book. Yet, there is still enough "drinking memoir" there to leave that reader breathless and satisfied. Truly brilliant, highly recommended. Clearly, a genre-defining book. Imitators should be very wary.

Steve Moskowitz says

I really enjoyed this book. It was a great page Turner. The beginning is better than the end.

Tim O'Hearn says

I can certainly understand why high schools select *Angela's Ashes* instead of *A Drinking Life*. This could never be read or analyzed in a classroom filled with minors. But the message is more powerful; the story

more thrilling. The author, in my opinion, a better one. Frank McCourt, rest his soul, was accused of exaggerating his poverty (including by his own mother). Pete Hamill's account, by my inspection, never blurs the line between what sounds good and what actually happened. Pete's account is credited as the direct inspiration for *Angela's Ashes* being written and that's quite the honor.

We have this emotionally-charged agenda against heroin. I get it, there are social consequences that accompany the opioid epidemic. Is someone going to prick my arm with a syringe loaded with dope while I walk down Jackson St? Eh. A book like this makes you angry that nobody seems to complain about alcohol anymore except when it comes to driving.

A Drinking Life isn't an account of someone's rapid disintegration and degeneration into addiction. It's just about the central place that alcohol had in the author's life, with the larger implication being, hey, reader, maybe you should evaluate alcohol's role in your own life. While *Angela's Ashes* may be remembered as an empathy-builder for immigrants and the dregs of society, this one weaves introspection with a heroic narrative--the only common thread being the Irish-Catholic guilt complex (well, not really, but the rest are evident).

There are no truly gruesome or stomach-turning scenes caused by alcohol in this book. Many saddening, but few scarring, which helps to underline the slow process of alcohol dependence and the virtual impossibility of emerging from a drinking life scot-free. Aside from the widely-agreed-upon DUI, at which point are we comfortable *blaming* alcohol? I'm a bit melancholy writing this review because I'm 24 and there are already clear signs of it damaging the lives of young people I know. How can we not debate this social cost? The lost hours of productivity, the muddled emotions, the erased memories--don't these things count for something? Hamill outlines the pressure he felt, in his poor community in Brooklyn, to be mediocre in school and in life. Alcohol plays a major part in wasting his time and talents. As we cast aside some of the perils he faced as being "from a different time," is it not appropriate to examine the aspects of the book that are playing out the exact same way today?

In a word, and I really do hate myself for writing this, sobering.

Roy says

My dad gave me this book because it resonated with him and his life. He was barely one-year-old for V-E day, and he grew up in Harlem, not Brooklyn, so his life wasn't in lock step with Hamill's *Drinking Life*, but there were similarities. Both went to Catholic school, drank in the same bars, found early solace in the public library, and hated Cardinal Spellman. Like most boys in New York in the 50s they ran up against, and with, gangs. For this and other reasons, when it was time for my dad to raise a kid, he left the city.

Like my father, Hamill has great stories and fondness for the difficulties he had while growing up in New York. They both remember more about their early years, than I do, and though there were difficult times, they had adventures in a city and time that had fewer restrictions and more tribal segregation. Some of these tales sound only good in the re-telling. One thing I've come to realize is that an "adventure" is something that was uncomfortable-to-painful at the time, but makes for a great story. Hamill had a few adventures in his time, which makes me jealous I haven't lived out in the world more, but then again, I don't think I would ever follow his footsteps to Mexico, Paris, or even Bay Ridge.

There is also a certain *Forest Gump* quality to this memoir. Famous people and events happen in a flurry. It seems like people were more accessible in a pre-information age time. Surely I've lived a quieter life as I've never been in a situation to party with the Rolling Stones or Jack Kerouac.

One important difference between my father's upbringing and Hamill's was that my dad didn't grow up with a drunk. *A Drinking Life* illustrates how corrosive alcoholism can be, even if you ignore the cirrhosis. I can't imagine a life with someone so absent and useless as Billy Hamill. When you live a drinking life, you miss out on the rest of your life.

Hamill's life of drinking did not lead him to the expected depraved-low-point. In fact he takes his last drink during a swinging New Year's Eve event. He stops drinking because he doesn't like what it has done to his life and the lives around him. He stops drinking to embrace life and to be clear of thought. He stops drinking so that he can remember all that he has done.

Emma says

I often think I can't remember that much about my childhood, comparatively speaking. You know those people who can provide you intricate detail of what they wore, and how they felt towards every teacher they ever had, and aesthetic details about houses? I thought I did not belong among them, until I read this book. It is probably very strange that a memoir set from World War Two onward, set in New York City, about a poor Irish American kid, would prompt such strong memories for me (and an identification) but it did, because Hamill and I share something in common, and I imagine you do too: the drinking life. And I don't mean that in the sense that I am (or you are) an alcoholic - although I do identify on the personal level, having had very close relationships with those who are - but also in the sense that I am part of a deeply entrenched Western drinking culture, one where celebrations, failures, monotones, weekends, weekdays, can all reasonably be reacted to with a drink. When remembering childhood through the lens of drinking remarkable memories resurfaced, which I decline to share but acknowledge in my own way.

And this is what is remarkable about this book: Hamill could have just opened the shame file, recounting only embarrassing and humiliating stories from the depths of his alcoholism (which he does do a bit of). If he had done that, this probably would have been a sad little book that we could have appropriately distanced ourselves from because, after all, we have never broken the door of a brothel and been fired at by Mexican police as a result. And, I mean, that's all interesting to read about, and the name dropping is fabulous (Norma Mailer et al). But, by making this a memoir from childhood, he illustrates a deeper issue with drinking culture that transcends the individual and he illustrates the ways in which such a culture facilitates, in some ways, the naturalisation and denial of alcoholism even in the face of its devastating consequences. In this way the realities of his particular struggle become more real and the decisions more understandable, at the same time that they stop being uniquely his.

I will note two more things: firstly, the title should not have an 'A' at the front - it should just be *Drinking Life* because it is not just the story of a singular drinking life and then it would more readily have the double meaning of 'drinking life'; secondly, the accounts of alcoholics who have a flash of clarity and never drink again are really quite astounding to read (Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA is one such case)

Daniel says

My friend Sally thinks *Anna Karenina* should be called *Levin*; I always thought you might as well complain that *Moby Dick* isn't about the whale. I think I have found, however, the winner of the least apt title: this book has almost nothing to do with the author's drinking problem. It's a memoir, and the struggle with drink is no more a thread to his story than is the fact of his Irish ancestry. It's an interesting book, written in a forceful, journalistic style, but there are some questions it raises in my mind about memoir. Question 1: How

do people remember all these things? I, for one, can hardly remember my childhood, so how is it that these people writing memoirs can describe scenes from age 6 with such clarity? Question 2: Would you write a tell-all autobiography while your mother is still living? This guy's mother appears to have been a nice Irish Catholic lady, so how could he announce to the world (and to her) his sexual exploits at age 15, 16, 17, all in lurid, foul-mouthed detail? I mean, doesn't he have any sense of shame? And why do we all rush to call it "unflinchingly honest" (NYT) instead of bizarrely indiscreet? Poor Mum. Question 3: At what age does it become idiotic to blame all your moral failings on your father? Towards the end of this book, when our anti-hero is telling us how he wrecked his marriage (and finally is getting around to mentioning drinking as a serious theme), he speaks of how he didn't have much sense of how you behave as a father because of his father blah blah blah. OK, dear reader, there is this little thing called The Golden Rule, and here's how it works. Did you like it when your father ignored you and went to a bar to drink? No? It made you feel bad inside? Then you try *not* to do that to your kids -- see? You do the *opposite* of the things that made you feel bad. I miss St Augustine. Sure, agonizing over those apples might be a bit tiresome, but at least Auggie made a real effort to understand his past and why he did things. Atheist or not, isn't it an interesting problem to figure out how morals work? What constitutes the good life? And if you haven't lived it properly, aren't you ashamed?

Jim Golden says

I was expecting more of a story about alcoholism and specific drunk events in Hamill's life. This is much more than a story about alcoholism, it is a story about Hamill's life, and alcohol just so happens to be pervasive throughout his childhood and adulthood. This is truly a complete picture of a man, of his boyhood in the Neighborhood, his family, marriage, his career, and alcohol touched every aspect of his life. Drinking was a constant throughout Pete's journey--a way to celebrate with friends, a way to get through your anger, a way to be social in the Neighborhood, and a way to relate to your co-workers as a newspaperman. In Hamill's boyhood, it was a point of pride in the Neighborhood to be able to handle your liquor, not to be a drunk, but to keep a steady stream of drinking while trading jokes and stories and songs.

Hamill doesn't push any kind of 12-step program in this book. He got sober on his own, in a snap, and he is unusual in his ability to do so. For this reason, for alcoholics looking to relate and to get some insight into their disease, I would recommend Caroline Knapp's book instead. For anyone looking for a fascinating memoir, a touching journey through life, and an inside look and the life of being a reporter, Hamill's memoir is highly recommended.

Ruth says

This book is an autobiography of Pete Hamill, a reporter and writer from Brooklyn, New York. He grew up in the forties, during the war. His father was (yawn) an Irish immigrant who drank too much (yawn), was mean to his family (yawn). Pete's mother was a loving, intelligent woman who does not get nearly enough credit in this book.

Unfortunately, Pete resembles his father in the selfish way he lives his life. The best part of this book is the early part, with descriptions of life in Brooklyn during the 40s. He plays games with other kids, runs around the neighborhood, and loves comic books. There is a real street life because no one has TVs yet.

As the oldest in his family, his perspective is unique, but Mr. H. does not delve into much discussion there, something I would have been interested in. I am one of the youngest, and it was very interesting to

contemplate the space of the olders... His experience was far different than, say brother number five, or only sister number 3.

The major grievance I have with this book is that I started to really dislike the narrator and his pick and choose method of telling his story. For example, bartenders get more attention than his siblings. Only two brothers get any attention. This is likely because, he did not spend much time with the younger ones?

It the same w/ his first marriage. He marries a very young woman (Age 18 to his 26 or more years), and doesn't really explain why. He also doesn't explain why, after divorcing, he sends his two kids to boarding school in Switzerland. We hear about his early sex life, his relationship w/ Shirley McClain, but not why they broke up.

It is partly the price of reading an autobiography, I admit, but still.

The title is "A Drinking Life" and he tracks his drinking, from a young teenager and beyond. Finally he gets sick of it and stops. This is well after his marriage has ended. His kids probably benefited from this, but he does not bring them home, since Shirley is not into being any kind of step mom.

This is a case of the man quitting the drink and is still a selfish ass hole!

He loved comic books as a kid and tries to tie comic book characters who drink potions to transform into super heroes to his view of alcohol and its allure of transformation. He sees his father drink and become mean and abusive. He sees his mother work work work and have babies indefinitely.

The author goes on and on about his relationship with his father, but after he is about 12, his mother gets mentioned less and less. I started to resent this. Hamill is in Belfast with his father the time JFK was assassinated. What a self indulgent piece of work. Ohhh boo hoo for you and your drunk daddy. I'm not dismissing his emotions, it is just he is such a selfish bastard it is hard to look over his horrible husbandry to feel empathy for him howling in the dark streets, and everyone knows the Kennedys are a bunch of fake heroes.

So, this book held my interest because my contempt for it grew and grew.... I did like the neighbors drinking tea in the hot summer nights. Also, there are some fierce sex scenes, if you are into that.

Daina Fanning says

This was an amazing book. Vividly written and painted a picture of the author's personal struggles and the world at large in the 50's to 70's.

Paul says

Very well done Pete Hamill.
