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# Discovering Unmapped Worlds

*Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*, a surfer's Pulitzer Prize winning memoir of his search for waves in the world's exotic locales

By Leo Maxam



In his recent Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Barbarian Day: A Surfing Life*, author William Finnegan reflects on a lifetime of chasing waves around the world. Inseparable from the thrill of his “surfer’s path,” however, is a lifelong struggle all too familiar to dedicated surfers: how to balance surfing’s obsessive pull with a meaningful career and healthy relationships. From his days as a college dropout scraping by on Maui, to his domesticated life as a father and investigative journalist living in New York City, the albatross of surfing addiction remains omnipresent throughout Finnegan’s life.

In the 1970s, Finnegan found his way to Santa Cruz as a college student, a life stage ripe for surfing overdose. At UCSC, he studied the local breaks when he wasn’t occupied with his course syllabi. And yet, in spite of its enchanting waves, natural beauty and vibrant surf culture—all of which have served as muse for many writers and artists—Santa Cruz plays only a bit part in Finnegan’s memoir, alluded to with the occasional anecdote, but never featuring prominently in the narrative. In the following interview, Finnegan reflects on the relationship between Santa Cruz and the young barbarian of *Barbarian Days*.

**SC Style:** You reference surfing in Santa Cruz often in *Barbarian Days*, including your time as an undergrad at UC Santa Cruz, but you don’t write about the town as intimately as other surfing epicenters where you spent time. Why was your time in Santa Cruz not a point of emphasis in the book?

**William Finnegan:** “It’s true that I surfed a lot in Santa Cruz in the 1970s, when I was at UCSC and for a few years afterward, and I was quite smitten with the town and the coast, particularly north of town, and the waves were certainly lovely. I wasn’t moved to write much about it, though, for a couple of reasons. One, my life there was never fully ocean-centered. By that I mean that I couldn’t

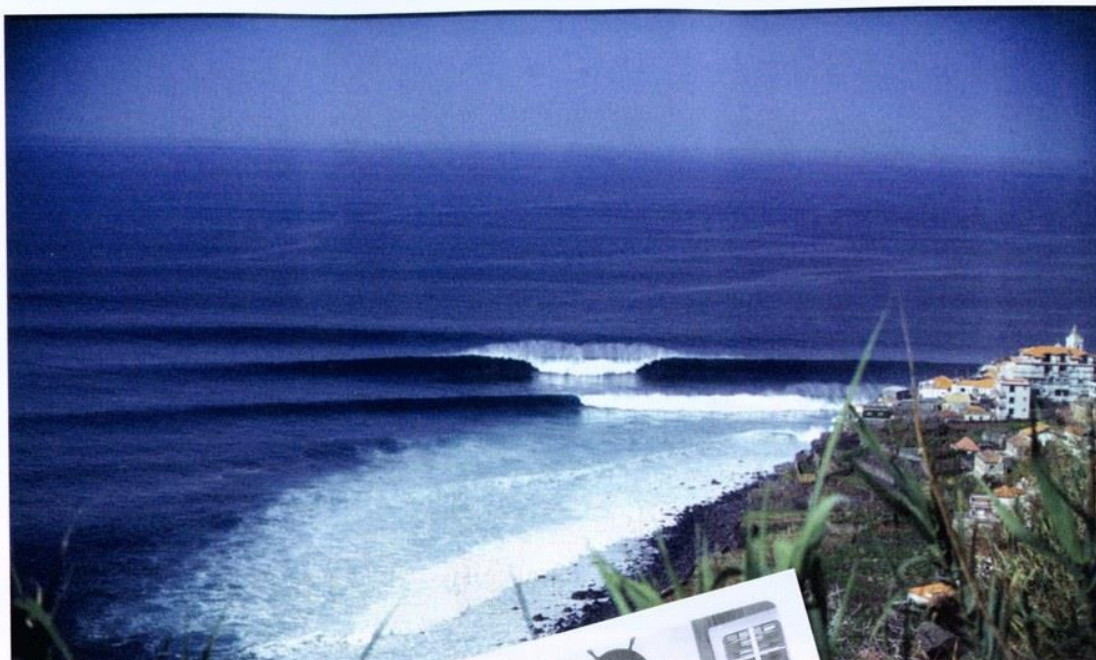
have told you, during the years I lived in Santa Cruz, what the tide and wind and swell were doing every hour of every day. I took my studies seriously, and then after graduation I had an engrossing job, as a freight brakeman on the railroad—it was the Southern Pacific then, and I worked out of Watsonville and Salinas—which meant that I surfed when I wasn’t busy with other things. That seemed, in retrospect, kind of half-assed compared to my surfing life in other places, which was either more full-bore or at least more vivid. Secondly, the book is about male friendship, at least as much as it’s about surfing, and those two things have been deeply entangled in certain chapters of my life. But that wasn’t the case in

Santa Cruz. I got to know plenty of surfers in town, but mainly as nodding acquaintances, just guys I saw in the water. My close friends didn’t surf. I usually chased waves alone. So, in the end, I didn’t think the book really needed a chapter about my solitary surf life in a well-known California surf town. The book’s pretty long as it is.”

**SCS:** If you had included a section in the book dedicated to your life in Santa Cruz, is there a particular wave you would have focused on?

(Top) William Finnegan checks the surf at G-Land on Grajagan Bay, Java, during a trip in 1979.

Photo: © Mark Cordesius

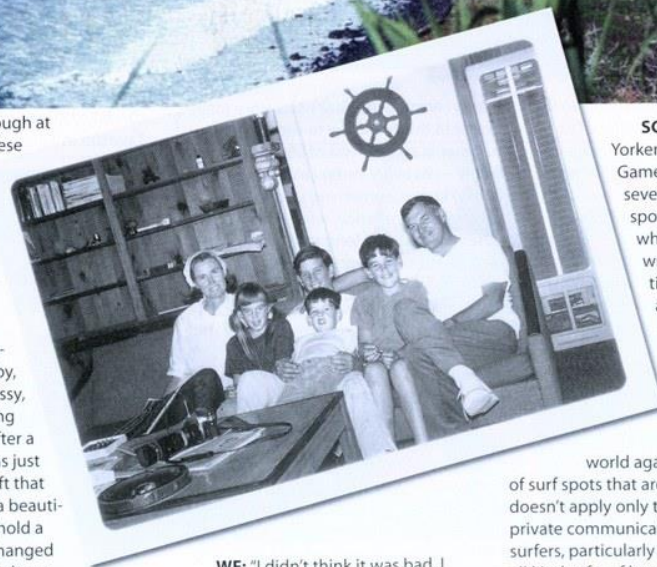


(Above) Large waves pour through at Jardim do Mar on the Portuguese island of Madeira in 1968.

**WF:** "There was a spot I would love to have written about—a torrid surf affair I lucked into. It was a winter at Rivermouth, after heavy November rains formed a massive sandbar. I was living nearby, so I was on it from the first messy, muddy, dredging days, dodging tree branches. It cleaned up after a week or two, and the wave was just amazing—a blazing hollow left that not many people surfed, and a beautiful, muscular right that could hold a surprising amount of size. It changed every week, as the bar packed down and spread out, but it stayed absurdly good for months. I was addicted. It was like a fever dream that you never wanted to end. By spring, of course, it was closing out and smaller, and I never saw it break like that again."

**SCS:** You lived and surfed in Santa Cruz in the 1970s, when the town was infamous for its fierce surf localism and intimidation of outsiders. How intense was the scene in the water back then?

Photos: © Courtesy William Finnegan



**WF:** "I didn't think it was bad. I grew up surfing Malibu and Rincon, both of which had crowds that were far more intense than anything I found in Santa Cruz. I quit college briefly after my freshman year to surf Honolua Bay, on Maui, which had, even in 1971, a really fierce, really talented pack of locals. Santa Cruz had its bullies, of course, and its good surfers, but nothing compared to Hawaii. The best surfer in town when I got there was a kid named Kevin Reed. He was electric, and really fun to surf with."

**SCS:** In your acclaimed New Yorker article, "Playing Doc's Game" (1992), you described several sensitive California surf spots by name and location, which goes against the unwritten code of surf publications. Was that a consideration when writing about any of the special waves and places you chronicle in *Barbarian Days*?

**JM:** "There is a strong taboo in the surf world against revealing the location of surf spots that aren't well-known, and it doesn't apply only to publication. It applies to private communications as well. Most serious surfers, particularly those who've traveled, have all kinds of surf knowledge that they don't share—except, perhaps, very selectively. I've been chasing waves for more than 50 years, through too many countries to count, so I've had my heart broken on this score a few times. In fact, I write in *Barbarian Days* about a major discovery in the South Pacific that a few of us tried to keep under our hats for years, without success. Surf mags actually honor the code

(Above/Inset) The Finnegans, (L-R) Patricia, Colleen, William (rear), Michael, Kevin, and Bill at home Ventura, California, in 1966.

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you mention more in the breach than in the observance. Like many other surfers, I've found my share of 'secret' waves simply by reading the mags and figuring out where some great, newly-discovered spot might be and traveling there in the right season. The editors don't always try particularly hard to keep locations unknown. In this book, I mostly write about spots that are well-known. In the few cases where discretion might be an issue, I try to give no clues. The last chapter includes a description of surfing around New York City, for example, and I have to be coy about exactly which spots I surf. The people I surf with do not want to give our favorite reefs and sandbars any publicity, and neither, of course, do I."

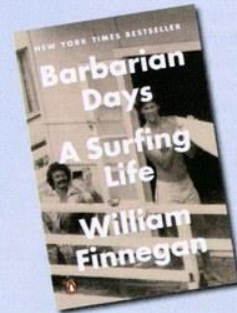
**SCS:** Many of the surfing "beauty spots" you write about in the book have attracted legions of pilgrims into making permanent homes there and setting down roots. It seems you chose to spend relatively short, intense stays at many wave-rich spots around the world. Why do you think you never felt the gravitational pull to settle at one spot for very long?

**WF:** "Oh, I've felt it. In France, Australia, Indonesia, Mexico, and other places that shall go unnamed. There are surf spots that I've gone back to year after year, like a migratory bird, and I sometimes think, 'All I really want to do is surf this wave!' But that's never really true. There are lots of other

things I want to do. That's actually a main theme in this book: the tension between surf mania and the rest of life. Work, love, family — as every surfer (and every surfer's family) knows, something's gotta give. In part, with this memoir, what I'm trying to describe is just the long struggle to grow up, to become a responsible citizen. Surfing is such a supremely pointless, unproductive thing to do with your time, and yet it's so seductive. It's obsessive, exhilarating. I'm also trying to describe, therefore, the struggle against responsibility. I want to be a citizen, in the ancient sense of the word—to contribute to society and the public good, which in my case means trying to do good journalism. But I'm also sympathetic to the barbarian, also in the ancient sense of that word—the outsider, who worships strange nature gods and seeks to build nothing lasting. Surfing represents, in my bipolar life, the North Pole of irresponsibility. So I partly wrote this book to try to account for the absolutely ridiculous amount of time I have spent chasing waves. But it's not true that I have never, as you suggest, settled in one place. I have lived in the same neighborhood in New York City for 30 years. Yes, it's not a surf mecca, but it does have nearby waves, and it is its own type of beauty spot. My daughter, who's 14, says New York is her favorite place in the world. Which may be odd, I guess, but makes me happy to hear." 🌊

(Above) Riding backside, Finnegan carves the face of wave during an excursion to Tavarua in Fiji.

**A Book for the Beach**



**Barbarian Days:  
A Surfing Life**  
by William Finnegan

"A Surfing Life...it's also about a writer's life and, even more generally, a quester's life, more carefully observed and precisely rendered than any I've read in a long time."  
—Los Angeles Times

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