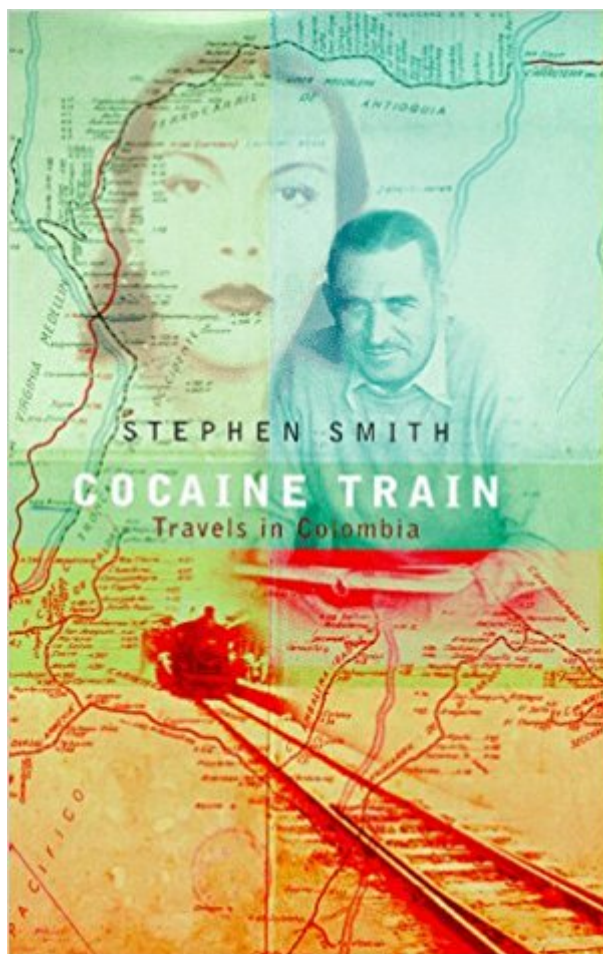


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# Cocaine Train: Tracing My Bloodline Through Colombia



## Synopsis

One of the most violent countries on earth, where the cause of death is regularly 'massacre', drink drivers play chicken and kidnap stories pass for dinner party conversation; nine times more dangerous than the United States, Columbia is no place for the nervous traveller. So it is much against his better judgement that, in the summer of 1998, coinciding with a World Cup and a general election, journalist Stephen Smith finds himself boarding the Cocaine Train out of Cali, home of Columbia's infamous drugs cartel. Its passengers prey to thieves, extortionists and a dozen different varieties of paramilitary, the Cocaine Train is one of the last remnants of a once great railway system, and Smith is riding in it in search of a grandfather he barely knew: Fred Leslie Frost, pioneering railwayman, upright citizen and diplomat, with a Colombian mistress and an illegitimate son. And the Columbia Stephen Smith uncovers on his extraordinary journey - surreally beautiful, unfathomably savage, seedily glamorous and mercilessly corroded by the trade in drugs- is as remote from his suburban British origins as it is possible to imagine.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'Stephen Smith has both style and destination, and has written a book that is hard to put down ... this is the sort of book that has you greeting each new page with excitement and anticipation' INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY 'This writer has a good eye for the fleeting and bizarre, and there are some marvellous descriptive passages ... COCAINE TRAIN deserves to share the success of Smith's previous excellent travelogue, FOR THE LAND OF MIRACLES' NEW STATESMAN 'Fascinating ... genuinely brilliant' Jon Snow, OBSERVER 'He is the best sort of reporter: detached,

ironic, yet well-versed on the terrain he's exploring ... a compelling portrait of a society on the verge of an ideological breakdown' Douglas Kennedy, INDEPENDENT 'The best guide to this beautiful, bedevilled island. Unfailingly well-written' SUNDAY TIMES 'Essential reading' Norman Lewis 'An intimate portrait of Columbia, its land, people and way of life, COCAINE TRAIN is a travel book which gives a fascinating insight into a society as far removed from suburban Britain as it is possible to imagine.' IRISH NEWS 'Colombia is one of the most beautiful and hospitable countries in the world. Many visitors recall its glorious mountain scenery and geniality of the people. Yet it's also a dangerous country where you feel something wild could happen at any time. 40 percent of Colombia is under guerrilla control and mass slaughters occur daily. This is the aspect of Colombia Channel 4 News reporter Stephen Smith chooses to focus on in Cocaine Train. Smith sets out to trace the life of his enigmatic grandfather, a railway pioneer in Colombia. Smith's grandfather sired a child late in life with a Colombian--and somewhere in Colombia there is a relative no one in Smith's family has met--leading to an unheralded denouement. Understandably, Smith's knowledge of the country's dangers sometimes sours his perceptions. He has a sharp eye for gruesome details, and a sense of panic comes across in his relation of atrocities. When Smith comes across people leading ordinary lives and experiences people's humility in the face of adversity--as when England trounce Colombia in the football world cup--his astonishment is palpable. Those seeking an in-depth look at Colombia's problems may not find Cocaine Train to their taste. Nevertheless, the family history is interesting, and Cocaine Train does shed light on the darkness engulfing one of the most beautiful countries in South America.' - Tabitha Vert, .CO.UK REVIEW

Steven Smith works for Channel 4 news and writes regularly for the LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS.

"Cocaine Train" is essentially three books, mixed together in one. I will rank these three parts according to their narrative quality and their ability to hold the reader's interest. First, there is a sharp-witted description of Colombia's violent beauty. These sections are beautiful reading, and will interest the amateur political scientist, the lover of unusual cultures, and the sports fan alike (owing to the focus on football, as the book was written during the '98 World Cup). Second, there is a travel guide and a history of Colombia's aging, decrepit railroad system, which will truly fascinate only railroad buffs, but is moderately interesting reading for the rest of us. And finally, there is a family history centered on the author's British grandfather, Leslie Frost, the man who guided the construction of the Colombian rail system half a century ago. These sections are the least

interesting, unless the idea of meeting long-lost relatives from other countries really gets you going. Smith's book starts slowly, meandering through snapshots of Grandpa and rickety train rides through jungles, but by the time he hits Medellin and begins discussing the drug trade, the civil war, and the fortunes of the Colombian national soccer team, the book "gathers steam" (no pun intended) and hits a pretty good pace. I recommend "Cocaine Train" for any train buffs, family history buffs, Latin American buffs, soccer buffs, cocaine buffs(?) or curious people in general. Just be prepared to skim through a few slow parts and the book should be great reading.

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