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# The Street-Fighting Years

Gregory John Peter Smith, who became Gregory David Roberts, author of the international bestselling novel *Shantaram*, was two years into a nineteen-year sentence for twenty-four armed robberies when he absconded down the front wall of Pentridge with contract killer Trevor Raymond Jolly and disappeared for a decade.

There is no doubt Greg is the real thing—albeit perhaps not in quite the way he would like to have been. He was a deft and efficient armed robber who committed a breathtaking number of crimes in a short space of time. He survived H Division at Pentridge and audaciously escaped from B Division in what unimaginative commentators invariably describe as ‘broad daylight’. He managed to stay on the run for ten years, whereas most criminals are lucky to survive a week. If he did half of the things he attributes to his character in *Shantaram*—and he probably did—he has led an astonishing, dangerous, wildly adventurous life. But even

if he did none of them and spent his missing years working as an accountant for a financial management company in Dubbo, it makes no difference. Because, as Greg has repeatedly and emphatically stated, *Shantaram* is a novel.

Since *Shantaram* was first published in Australia in 2003, it has sold about six million copies around the world. It was well received by most local critics, and journalists were keen to interview Greg—as there is not much a reporter likes more than an author who has lived his text. The earliest and best story about Greg was written by crime writer Andrew Rule. If Greg told Rule something that could not be corroborated, Rule described it as a claim rather than a fact. But in the many Australian broadcast interviews that followed, more credulous presenters seemed unwilling to let the truth get in the way of a good storyteller. And Greg is a fabulous raconteur, perhaps a better speaker than he is a writer. He comes across as charming and brilliant, enlightened and evolved, pure-hearted and street-tough, self-deprecating and self-aware.

*Shantaram* is an epic about a criminal who escapes from prison with a murderer then starts a new (criminal) life in India before heading off to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most of the true stories Greg likes to share with interviewers and audiences concern his life on the run in West Asia in the 1980s. He has always been less forthcoming about his criminal career in Australia in the 1970s. The robberies are not fictionalised in *Shantaram*. ‘I don’t write about them and I don’t really talk about them as individuated events,’ he said, ‘because I put those people through a terrible torment.’ But his crimes do crop up in his early book-publicity interviews—where they do become progressively more fictionalised, until they are barely recognisable.

When he was an armed robber and a heroin addict, Greg told the ABC, he thought it was ‘somehow morally acceptable to steal from businesses that were insured—but, of course, there’s no honour in it and it’s a stupid, gutless thing to do’. He said he tried to ‘limit damage by being polite and courteous and saying please and thank you’.

Later, his good manners transformed into ineptitude. He told a Swedish TV show that he was ‘arguably the most incompetent criminal in the history of crime’. ‘I was known as “the Gentleman Bandit”,’ he claimed. ‘Sometimes I was so polite, people didn’t know that they were being robbed. On the front page of a newspaper after I’d robbed one bank, there were three women who were tellers in the bank, and they were all smiling . . . and the heading said “Gentleman Bandit Strikes at Bank” and underneath it one of the ladies was quoted as saying, “He was so polite, we don’t mind if he comes back again.”’

‘So I did,’ said Greg. ‘And when I went back to the bank a week later and opened the door, one of the ladies saw me and said, “Hallo, love, it’s you again!” and started putting money on the counter. So, technically, because I never said a word, I didn’t rob that bank—they did.’

In another telling, in a different country, that bank became a cinema. ‘I never even wore a mask, in case it frightened people,’ Greg told *The Telegraph* in London in 2004. ‘I remember robbing a cinema and coming back a few weeks later. The woman said, “Oh hello there, love, it’s you,” and started piling up money before I’d even asked her.’

He told CNN *Talk Asia*: ‘I had a three-piece suit. I showed this pistol and said, “I’m terribly sorry, I don’t want to point this. Someone might get hurt.” So people would

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start putting money on the counter and I'd say, "No, please, stop. I only need a little bit of money to buy my heroin." And they would look at [me] and go "okay" and put more money on the counter, and I'd say, "No, please stop giving me money."

Aside from the cheery greeting, this picture of Greg's criminal rampage would not have been familiar to his victims. Greg's serious criminal history began in November 1977, when he robbed a Melbourne cinema with a toy gun. It escalated at a head-spinning pace, until he was arrested in February 1978 and charged with the twenty-four armed robberies and two attempted armed robberies—about two a week for the previous three months. In the tabloid tradition, he was nicknamed 'the Building Societies Bandit', in honour of his preferred targets. But he was also known as 'the Chicken Man', after he held up a branch of the Chicken Inn.

Criminals rarely get to choose their own nicknames. If they did, we would find ourselves back in the great days of bushranging and the underworld would be populated by Captain Moonlites, Captain Thunderbolts and Gentlemen Bandits. But there probably would not be many Chicken Men.

Greg Smith reborn as Greg Roberts has never acknowledged his secret identity as the Chicken Man. In the same way, the press of the day never happened upon the idea that he was known as the Gentleman Bandit. On 8 December 1977, Greg stole \$10,621 from the National Mutual Permanent Building Society in the Hub Arcade in Melbourne's CBD. He walked into the branch dressed in a pinstripe suit, carrying a dark briefcase and a toy gun rolled

up in newspaper. *The Age* described him as ‘Melbourne’s “businessman” bandit’.

On December 16, he robbed the Statewide Building Society in Collins Street, where he was accidentally locked in by a teller, although he quickly managed to unlock the door and lose himself in the crowd outside—with about \$11,000 in his bag. On January 9, he held up the Greater Melbourne Permanent Building Society in Little Collins Street. On January 17, he raided the society’s Swanston Street branch. Two days later he robbed the Arnott First City Permanent Building Society on Bourke Street.

*The Age* began to run a tally, reporting each building society heist and totalising the bandit’s haul as he went along. On January 25, Greg, with his hair dyed red, hit the Statewide branch in Hawthorn, and pointed at the chest of the manageress with a weapon she described as a ‘sawn-off rifle fitted with a silencer’. ‘I don’t want to be mucked around,’ Greg warned her. ‘I’ve been mucked around before.’ On January 31, Greg grabbed about \$2000 from the National Mutual branch in Chapel Street. A young teller chased him for several hundred metres to Prahran Station, where Greg jumped on a moving train heading towards the city.

On February 8, Greg popped into the Greater Melbourne in Little Collins Street just before closing at 4.55 p.m. It was the second time in a month he had hit the branch.

‘Hello, ladies, it’s me again,’ said Greg to the manager—whom *The Age* described as ‘incredulous’.

He passed her his briefcase and told her to ‘fill it up’.

‘I was a bit shaken,’ she said, later.

The police set up a special phone line to gather information about the ‘super cool’ Building Societies Bandit,

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gifting the Melbourne *Herald* with the headline 'A "hot line" for "cool" bandit'. Readers were warned the robber had a 'distinctive scar' on his left cheek and treated to a *Herald* cartoonist's distinctly uncool impression of him.

*The Age* noted that he had taken to sporting a 'smart casual' look, including a fawn jumper. He was no longer even the Businessman Bandit. If there was ever a published headline 'Gentleman Bandit Strikes at Bank', I could not find it in the Melbourne papers. If Greg ever even robbed a bank—as opposed to a building society or a chicken shop—he was never charged with the crime. If there was ever a photograph of three female tellers smiling at the thought of being robbed, it has been purged from the archives. *The Age's* front-page picture of the twice-robbed Greater Melbourne Permanent Building Society manager shows a lone woman looking apprehensive and drained.



Greg was far from the standard boys'-home battered, clerically raped, barely literate boob rat. He was a university-educated revolutionary from an old socialist family and he felt viscerally uncomfortable threatening workers. 'I had this dream that I would walk out of one of these robberies and I would be shot by the police,' he said, later, 'and then they would discover on my body that I had a toy gun and they'd go, *Oh my God, he had a toy gun.*'

Then people would realise that he had never intended to hurt them.

'Well,' he admitted, 'that isn't what happened.' Instead, his heroin dealer apparently gave him up in exchange for

his own freedom. Police arrested Greg at a house in Mount Macedon, where he was struggling to come off drugs.

All the money from the 24 robberies had been spent, and Greg's only substantial property was a Holden Monaro coupe worth about \$2500. Detective Sergeant James Loudon of the Armed Robbery Squad told a court that Greg had to be treated for withdrawal during his police interviews.

As well as the building societies, Greg was accused of having robbed bookshops, jewellers and, of course, chicken bars. 'He subsequently admitted to all the offences and signed all interviews and statements,' said Loudon, who must have found it hard to believe his luck.



Gregory John Peter Smith was born in June 1952 into a cultured home in Richmond, Victoria. He was the first child of John William Alfred Smith and Catherine Ford. Greg told Andrew Rule that he was raised largely by his mother, who came from an old Melbourne family of alliteratively satisfying academics, actors and architects. Catherine was a Fabian who believed society could be improved through gradual reforms. Years later, Greg told the *Jamaica Gleaner*, 'The family is sprinkled with professors and medals of honour for those who fought valiantly in wars—typically academics and soldiers.'

'I had a social conscience that came from my family,' said Greg, on Zoom TV in India. 'I grew up as a child surrounded by books. And the house was a very political house. People came from all over the world to meet with my family.'

It is possible that there is an element of exaggeration here.

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Greg's parents were unhappily married, and only stayed together for the sake of their two sons. In Australia, Greg has said little about his upbringing, except that he was always a writer and he wrote his first play at five years old, for his family to read from their Christmas cards. In Mumbai, he once told a crowd that he had been beaten by his father and that every subsequent fight in his life had been 'in some way a recreation of the anger generated by his childhood experiences'.

The family moved to Heidelberg West. Greg was educated by the Christian Brothers at Parade College, Bundoora, a private Catholic boys' school. While Parade was at the cheaper end of the Catholic-educational system, Greg was preceded at the college by General John Stuart Baker, who became chief of the Australian Defence Force, and succeeded by Walter De Backer, who became the musician known as Gotye.

Greg's mother apparently wanted him to become a psychiatrist, but he passed only his English exam and did not even turn up for the others. At seventeen years old, Greg has claimed, he founded the Anarchist People's Liberation Army. The APLA (as it is known nowhere) was one of the world's smaller paramilitary forces—although that does not make its members (if there were any) any less sincere.

In 1969, Greg began a relationship with a woman named Jeanette from Thornbury. Jeanette was about eight months older than Greg, but they were both just eighteen when they married at Thornbury's Holy Trinity Church on 10 July 1970. Greg gave his occupation on his marriage certificate as 'factory hand', Jeanette was a clerk. In January 1971, she gave birth to a daughter, Jessica.



Jeanette enrolled in Burwood Teachers' College, supported by Greg working as a sheet-metal worker. 'He was delighted with the old-fashioned practice of bringing his wage packet home and then getting part of the money back from his wife,' his counsel later told court.

Decades later, Greg told ABC radio presenter Richard Fidler that he had been 'a young revolutionary leader at the time of the Vietnam War'. He said, 'I was on the front page of the newspaper many a time, leading demonstrations opposing the war and opposing the draft.'

I have written two books about Australia's Vietnam War and I have never seen Greg's picture on the front page—or any page—of any newspaper during the war years, and the idea of one man leading a demonstration seems to me to be part-cinematic, part-folkloric.

Greg told Rule he had attended a bomb-making 'school' on the waterfront. Rule, careful as ever, used the term in inverted commas. Perhaps there was such a place or event—or, at least, something a bit like it. After Greg left Parade College, he became associated with Melbourne's colourful Maoists who, at their excitable peak, trained for armed insurrection. But in all the interviews given by Greg, I have never heard him mention his involvement with the Maoists.

Yeah, I know. Who cares, right?

It is just that Greg's story makes much more sense if you understand the Maoists. In fact, his journey from brilliant radical student to drug-addicted bank robber to miserable, victimised prisoner starts to feel inevitable rather than inexplicable—as if it was always going to happen to somebody in the Maoist orbit.

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The Maoists were led by men such as the Victorian Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) state secretary Norm Gallagher, who took the Chinese side in the Sino-Soviet split and broke from the Communist Party of Australia in 1964 to form the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist). Many prominent Melbourne Maoists, including Gallagher himself, ended up spending time in Pentridge for various unusual offences.

At first, student Maoists were strongest at Monash University, where the movement coalesced around the charismatic Albert Langer, who began a two-year jail sentence in 1971, on the convoluted charge of attempted incitement to assault police, but was released on appeal after six weeks. The Maoists were known for their determination, discipline and readiness to use violence—against police, local Nazis and other groups on the left. In Victoria, they were particularly conspicuous in demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

The Monash leadership quickly lost ground to a younger generation at the newer La Trobe University, about eighteen kilometres north of Melbourne. The radical growth spurt at La Trobe University is sometimes dated back to 11 September 1970 and an undistinguished anti-Vietnam War march along Waterdale Road, a semi-industrial street near the university. Former La Trobe Maoist Barry York told me, 'There were only about seventy of us and we were peaceful, but the police beat us up very badly.'

On September 16, the students called a second march, to assert their right to peaceful protest. 'This time, all the media were there,' said York, 'and the university chaplain was an observer and we marched from Northland Shopping Centre back to the campus but, about a block away, near

these panelbeaters and small factories, the cops got stuck into us worse than they did the previous time: one of the comrades was arrested at gunpoint.

‘Greg Smith was working in one of those small factories,’ said York.

The Maoists had no idea Greg had been a Parade College student.

‘He was a working-class bloke,’ said York. ‘It was a big deal for us, being university students and believing that workers and students had a common interest and should work together for change, and there was Greg: he was given a lot of kudos as a genuine worker who supported us.’

Former Monash Maoist Vic Zbar described Greg as ‘someone who could certainly say the stuff’. He added, ‘Whether it was believed in the same way [as the rest of us] I’m not sure. To some extent, there was always a little bit of a feeling that things were for an audience. Whereas others of us would say quite stupid things, regardless of audience.’

‘Greg was very individualistic and very charismatic,’ said York. ‘Good-looking women were very attracted to him and other blokes, including myself, were a bit envious.’

I asked York if Greg would ever have ‘led’ anti-war demonstrations. ‘I lived and breathed politics for several years,’ said York, ‘and I don’t remember Greg ever leading a protest march. I think that he was involved, on occasion, in organising—being on the committee, or whatever—but I have no recollection of him personally playing a leading role on an actual physical march. I can’t understand him saying that. I was on pretty much every march in Melbourne. Except when I was in jail.’

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I asked if Greg's name would have meant anything to anyone reading a newspaper.

'No,' said York. 'I can say with a great deal of certainty that his name wouldn't have meant anything to someone reading the paper.'