



by Gregor Hens  
S. Fischer  
March 2011 / 192pp  
Biography and Memoir



The Goethe-Institut  
supported the English  
translation of this book.

## Nicotine

### *Nikotin*

#### review

Irresistibly humorous, eminently readable and concerned with a contentious issue that continues to be hotly debated, *Nicotine* is the fascinating autobiographical account of one man's addiction to smoking. Writing with the passion of an obsessive, the author analyses how his addiction has shaped his thought and behaviour patterns in ways that would initially appear to be entirely unrelated to cigarettes.

Hens grew up near Cologne, attended a Catholic boarding school and lived for a time in Berlin before settling in Columbus, Ohio. His parents both smoked intensively and he was given his first cigarette at the age of four or five. He recalls a revelatory moment of clarity and self-awareness, when he first looked at himself from the outside and realised that life consisted not of episodic experiences and emotions, but of a connected whole whose elements could be understood and narrated. It is a state of mind which he has come to associate with cigarettes.

In one of the book's funniest episodes, Hens recounts waking up in hospital after having crashed his bicycle into a lorry at 40kph. He hadn't smoked in years and, once he was able to walk again, he dragged himself to a corner shop and bought a packet of cigarettes. As he lit up and inhaled, he found himself weeping with joy. *Nicotine* proceeds from here via numerous anecdotes to how his father, having smoked eighty a day, abruptly quit and then began to hold himself up as an example of superhuman will-power.

Hens conducts a number of experiments on himself, such as imagining a packet of cigarettes in front of him and resisting the urge to light up, something which produces such a strong reaction in him that he has to stand up and leave the room. He visits a hypnotist but worries that he knows too much about the techniques of hypnosis to be susceptible to it. This visit is described in great detail, especially in terms of how the hypnotist's technique of creating momentary uncertainties about where he is or what he can hear overlaps with the author's own academic work on syntax.

Moving towards its conclusion, *Nicotine* becomes ever more explicitly a discussion of the nature of habit and of decisionmaking. Smoking has changed Hens's brain functions irreversibly, but he asserts his ability to learn new ways of thinking and of living, and so finally to conquer his addiction.

## press quotes

*'This is not a story about quitting, but an accomplished and unsettling meditation on one's own addiction.'*

– Die Zeit

*'This book is not an advice manual, nor an attempt to account for an addiction, but rather a gripping investigation: What was that first cigarette like, that first conscious inhalation of nicotine, which moments are inseparable from smoking and always will be?'*

– Deutschlandradio Kultur

*'A passionate attempt to banish the addiction through words.'* – sf-magazin

*'"I don't smoke any more, but there are always moments when I can think of nothing else but cigarettes. This is one of those moments. I really shouldn't write this book, it's much too risky ...". But Hens needn't worry that this book might bring him harm; for even if he does start smoking again one day, Nicotine may well be his most successful book yet.'* – Die Zeit

## about the author

**Gregor Hens** was born in 1965 in Cologne. He studied German and

English literature at the University of Bonn, the University of Missouri, and the University of California, Berkeley. Today he is a professor at the Institute of Germanic Studies at Ohio State University.

**Previous works include:**

*In diesem neuen Licht* ('In This New Light', 2006); *Matta verlässt seine Kinder* ('Matta Leaves His Children', 2004)

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