



Put Me Back on My Bike: In Search of Tom Simpson

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'The best cycling biography ever written' - Velo Tom Simpson was an Olympic medallist, world champion and the first Briton to wear the fabled yellow jersey of the Tour de France. He died a tragic early death on the barren moonscape of the Mont Ventoux during the 1967 Tour. Almost 35 years on, hundreds of fans still make the pilgrimage to the windswept memorial which marks the spot where he died. A man of contradictions, Simpson was one of the first cyclists to admit to using banned drugs, and was accused of fixing races, yet the dapper "Major Tom" inspired awe and affection for the obsessive will to win which was ultimately to cost him his life. Put me Back on my Bike revisits the places and people associated with Simpson to produce the definitive story of Britain's greatest ever cyclist.

Put Me Back on My Bike: In Search of Tom Simpson Details

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Simon Curtis says

A fascinating account of the life of Tommy Simpson - whose memorial on Mt Ventoux I have stood next to on over a dozen occasions - from his early life to his tragic death. Intensely driven, a desire for money overcoming any health fears, it ultimately led to a death on a lunar landscape in heat of 40degrees.

Neil says

I just knew of Tom Simpson as "the English guy who died cycling up a mountain in the Tour, and he took drugs". It's a much more complex story and Fotheringham manages to tell not only Tom's story, but the story of professional cycling at that time, and you need to know about the latter to understand the former. At times it feels like the whole book is built around his death on the Ventoux, and everything seen in the context of that. It's not really, but even so it was obviously such a seismic event in the world of British and professional cycling, that it's probably warranted. Simpson has clearly been revered in British cycling circles for a long time, and others writing about Simpson have invoked all sorts of emotions in people. Fotheringham managed to write a respectful, positive, yet honest and balanced biography.

Colin Lowndes says

Thoroughly excellent read! Extremely well balanced account of a man who would have split the cycling world if he were alive today! This covers the triumphs as a track pursuit cyclist and a road racer as well as the substance abuse Simpson went through to be the best and sadly led to his death on Mont Ventoux during the 1967 Tour de France. An excellent read about Britain's first wearer of the Maillot Jaune!

Luka says

Combines surgical precision when it comes to detail and at the same time it is so poetic in its admiration of Simpson and Mont Ventoux that the reader questions him/herself how is this even possible. That Mr Fotheringham achieves that in this book is no mean feat and it makes him a great journalist and author. Quite easily the best cycling book I've read so far. A classic.

Jason Taylor says

Interesting read. Tom becomes more human through the book, it admits to tip toeing around the amphetamines issue and being from the middle of the Armstrong years it casts the world in a light that doesn't sit true now.

Fiona says

This book is excellent. You don't need to be knowledgeable on cycling or medicine as it breaks everything down into layman's terms. If you don't follow the Tour de France every July, I suggest you find some footage of a stage that involves mont ventoux so you can see exactly what a beast it is.

There were a few minor irritations from the writing. Words are spelt differently (with a hyphen here, without there). Events raised in an early chapter and then in a subsequent chapter were not referenced to each other very well, as if the chapters were written separately then cut and paste together rather than flowing from start to end. They do not detract from the story not my rating but they did irritate me and I thought the editor could have done a better job.

April Sanders says

An interesting look into the life and death of Tom Simpson, one of the first Brits to make it good on the European cycling scene. What I did not know was his hero status to the French and Belgians. He was adopted as one of their own. This adoration of Tommy Simpson in 1967 is not something that we see so much now among the nonEuropean riders. If you follow cycling, this is a good book.

Akin says

Fotheringham is an excellent sports journalist, and his knowledge of the arcane world of professional cycling is evident in this book. Two quibbles: in tackling the question of drug use in cycling, he never quite manages to evoke the corps de esprit amongst the cycling fraternity which undoubtedly is at the heart of the chronic doping problem - the sense of a world where certain rules apply differently, an understanding that "what happens in the Peleton stays in the Peleton."

My other problem with the book - and I accept that this may be unfair - is that Fotheringham doesn't explore fully the issue of the immense commercial pressures that cyclists face to dope. True, he does write about the horrendously exhausting conditions that professional cyclists had to contend with in order to earn a wage in the 60s, and the relatively slender salaries all but the most successful were able to command at the time. But he has less to say about the demand from spectators, sponsors, organisers, upon the cyclists to push themselves beyond the limits of their natural abilities - and to turn all sanctimonious when doping issues emerge, as they tend to do every decade or so. I suspect that this might have made the book more balanced.

It's an interesting read for cycling enthusiasts, but less so for the general reader

russell barnes says

Even with the updated afterward and chapters, this is essentially a very big story struggling to get out of a thin book about a man cycling up a mountain and dying at the top.

Where it gets interesting are the vignettes from Simpson's life that Fotheringham unearths, each one fleshing out the man who for most of us only exists as a memorial stone on Mount Ventoux, and few grainy photos.

What emerges is a hugely appealing personality, whose drive and ambition, tragically combined with the treadmill of professional cycling, and which contributed to his untimely death.

What's disappointing is whilst it *is* touched on, the bigger story lurking in the background is really about drugs in the sport and the collusion involved of the industry, which still cloud the issue 30 years on. Both of which mean whilst Fotheringham can build an intriguing narrative of Simpson's life, his death remains shrouded in murky mystery.

Martin Roberts says

A fascinating, well crafter, thoughtful and often moving -- but never sentimental -- book.

I think its focus is skewed, because it revolves around the circumstances of Simpson's untimely death and his legacy, to the point where childhood traits are seen as presaging his end, and indeed the entire final chapter is devoted to describing the Mont Ventoux. This is all very well when it comes to dispelling myths which have grown up, but it does often read like a long post mortem rather than the story of a remarkable man's life and I fear reads too much into the sad fact that he died before time.

Colin Climie says

This biography starts routinely enough and was easy to pick up and put back down. However, as I progressed, the urge to read more became greater. There is a relevancy here that has lasted.

Kimberly says

I really admired Fotheringham's balanced approach to his subject. It's sometimes too easy to give in and be defensive when you genuinely like the person you're writing about, and Simpson clearly was a likeable man.

Fotheringham kept enough distance to write about where Simpson went wrong, and how Simpson's death was a tragedy brought on not only by the amphetamines in his system, but by his determination to ride himself into oblivion, which cost him his life a short distance from the summit of Mont Ventoux.

This reader was left with a pervasive sense of loss upon finishing the book. I'd found the book remarkably moving, the prose exceptionally profound in places, and like the author himself, I found myself wishing I could spend more time in Simpson's company. Sadly, tragically, this is of course impossible.

As a result of Fotheringham's descriptive writing, his in-depth approach to his subject, and his frank honesty, I can genuinely say I will never look at Tom Simpson - or even Mont Ventoux - the same way again.

Antony says

This was a real eye-opener. I was aware of the casual drug use already but the "bottle raids" where riders would go into bars and grab bottles because otherwise they only had 4 bidons per tour stage! How about this bit of quackery: "Avoid drinking when racing, especially in hot weather. When you drink too much you will perspire and lose your strength."

John says

We've read about modern-day dopers — this is the rest of story.

Dan Cohen says

Good biography of Tom Simpson and well worth a read. As with a number of books on similar subjects recently, it's almost as much about the author's journey in finding out about his subject as it is about the subject himself. If truth be told I'm getting a bit bored with this approach, although I do understand the temptation.
