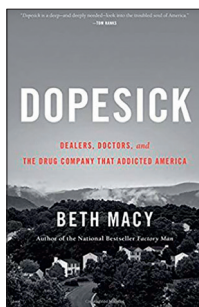


Life & Times Books

Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America **Beth Macy**

Head of Zeus, an Apollo book, 2018, HB, 384pp, £20.00, 978-1788549370



HISTORY OF THE OPIOID CRISIS IN THE US

Dopesick is an unflinching look at the opioid crisis in the US, which is predicted to kill more Americans in a decade than HIV has since it emerged in the 1980s.

Beth Macy tells the story from the point of view of the communities that have been devastated by a surge in opioid addicts and heroin users. Macy puts the blame firmly at the foot of Purdue Pharma, the makers of OxyContin, who marketed the drug as a safe analgesic for non-cancer pain with the potential for addiction of less than 1%. She details their massive annual marketing budget (\$4bn), the financial bonuses the drug reps were given, and the way that family doctors continued to prescribe the drugs to avoid affecting their income-linked patient satisfaction scores. The ease with which doctors prescribed these drugs and the considerable volumes prescribed to patients flooded these communities with opioids. Patients, now addicted, soon realised that they could rub off the slow-release coating from the drugs, snorting or injecting the contents for an immediate high.

Macy documents the initial denial and then disbelief in rural towns as ordinary people suddenly started dying from drug overdoses. She shares heartbreaking stories from addicts and their families, which all seem to start with a prescription for seemingly harmless painkillers from their doctor. She finds that the same health system that allowed such easy access to these drugs makes accessing drug detoxification and treatments like methadone almost impossible.

Truly shocking in some places, *Dopesick* is a wake-up call for doctors and the pharmaceutical industry to examine the way we prescribe opioids and the catastrophic harm that can be done when we give these out indiscriminately and without proper monitoring. It gives some context to recent events that have led to bankruptcy filing by Purdue Pharma, as it attempts to shield the Sackler family's private wealth from over 2600 lawsuits seeking billions of dollars in damages led by a number of local governments and state prosecutors.

Thomas Hodson,

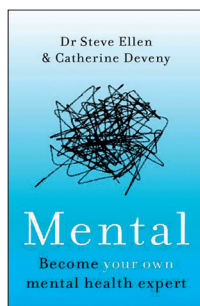
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706445>

Mental: Everything You Never Knew You Needed to Know about Mental Health **Steve Ellen and Catherine Deveny**

Head of Zeus, an Anima book, 2019, PB, 416pp, £9.99, 978-1789540673



SELF-HELP FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Mental is a good basic introduction into mental health care from the patient's perspective. The book would be ideal for a person with a new mental health diagnosis or family member/carer. The authors, who have themselves had mental health problems, speak in a personal way, as reflected in their stories. This book would make a good assistant for someone going through the journey from diagnosis to treatment, answering a lot of the questions it may be difficult to find online. The book has more detailed subsections that work through a basic guide to different mental health conditions including anxiety, depression, psychosis, as well as personality disorders

and addictions. There is also information on organic brain disorders such as Parkinson's and dementia. One obvious topic that seems to be missed is self-harm. As GPs we see a large number of patients who self-harm, and the book would benefit from a section on this with some self-help advice on how to reduce harmful thoughts. The authors focus on the adult population, and, although it does have a brief section on child and adolescent mental health, parents may be better off looking elsewhere for substantial information.

The medication section features some useful tables on the likelihood of experiencing certain side effects, which could be helpful for decision making and planning. These are presented in a visual style that makes it easier to understand for patients. The book also goes through the mysteries of psychotherapy, which as GPs we don't always understand. The final section contains a unique guide to self-help, detailing suggestions for patients to help manage symptoms and aid recovery, such as writing, physical exercise, courses, and music. Finding a good guide to mental health problems can be difficult but this book offers up a fresh presentation of the key facts and information for patients in a friendly and helpful way.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706457>

Help **Simon Amstell**

Vintage, 2019, PB, 224pp, £8.99, 978-1784705695



COMEDY AND THE CONSTRUCT OF SELF

Beginning with Simon Amstell's childhood,

his obsession with television, and the solace of the stage, *Help* develops into a discussion on the nature of being human, focusing particularly on our anxieties, our internal monologues, and our need to be accepted by others. A society infatuated by celebrities and superficial quick fixes to happiness can lead to a relentless review and readjustment of the self until we no longer know who we are, and are incapable of being what we strive daily to appear as: (what is considered to be) 'normal'.

As a memoir, *Help* provides a fascinating insight into Amstell's life, from his troubled relationship with his family and their difficulty accepting his sexuality, to exploring in detail the intricacies of his past and current relationships, ultimately ending with his ayahuasca drug-taking experience, something he found both therapeutic and traumatic. Despite this, his 'trip' ends with him quite literally vomiting forth an understanding of his true self via a series of potent and life-changing visions, and finally being able to accept his own identity.

Arguably the most illuminating aspects of *Help*, however, are the stand-up transcripts littered throughout the text. Stand-up comedy, when transcribed and taken out of context in this way, transforms into something entirely different: the self-deprecating joke becomes bleak, real, dangerous. Without a crowd of people to cut the post-joke hush with laughter, the build-up and the punchline stagnate in our minds — the wall of security created by the usual cacophony disappears, and behind the human making jokes on stage is just a human, like ourselves, fragile, sensitive, desperate for connection and to be accepted.

What are transcripts from a comedy routine soon begin to read as revealing transcripts from a therapy session, offering not only a unique discussion on the role and purpose of comedy in our society as a means to protect ourselves and others, but also as a means to reveal our most vulnerable states.

Help explores the common themes of all memoirs — childhood, identity, trauma, family, desire — yet the interspersed transcripts offer something unique to the form, elevating it from an important examination of life, anxiety, and connection to a deconstruction of the position of comedy and humour in a world plagued by tragedy, insecurity, and loss.

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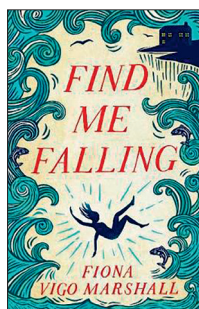
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706469>

Find Me Falling

Fiona Vigo Marshall

Fairlight Books, 2019, PB, 304pp, £8.99, 978-1912054220



REAL OR IMAGINED

Find Me Falling is a novel set on Waste Island, a fictional seaside resort off the coast of England. The story revolves around a love affair between Dominic, a road sweeper, and Bonnie, a 30-something pianist from London, who has newly arrived on the island. Both are married, and both have more going on than first meets the eye. Dominic has epilepsy, poorly controlled in part because

of his lack of compliance with medication, and Bonnie is traumatised after the birth of her son almost 4 years ago, and has become reclusive and anhedonic, much to the dismay of her husband Austin.

The prose is descriptive and beautifully written, transporting the reader to a bleak, salty, haunting place, as Bonnie and Dominic, an unlikely couple, become increasingly caught up in each other's worlds. As the book progresses, it becomes clear that neither are fully living in reality; Dominic's seizures cause him to lose touch with the world around him, and Bonnie's mental health worsens, to the point she possibly begins to have auditory hallucinations (or there could be a supernatural explanation). The reader also becomes increasingly unsure about what is real, and what is the result of the neurological and psychological make-up of the pair.

From a GP's perspective, the book contains interesting descriptions of epilepsy from a patient's perspective — the loss of career aspirations due to intractable seizures, the role of the neurologist as a malevolent god-like figure, the dismay at an ambulance being called, and the ambivalence about taking medication. The author has previously written non-fiction books on epilepsy, and clearly draws from this knowledge to create the character of Dominic.

Alongside the themes of epilepsy and mental illness, the book also touches on miscarriage, grief, and alcoholism.

Overall, this book is an entrancing, powerful read, which is very well written, and will stay with you; I found myself dreaming about it upon putting it down!

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706481>

