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Repository Citation

Elizabeth Leonard, *How Dreamland Colored My Summer Vacation and Thinking about the Opioid Epidemic* JOTWELL (2018),
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How Dreamland Colored My Summer Vacation and Thinking about the Opioid Epidemic

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Date : August 2, 2018

Sam Quinones, **Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic** (2018).

For my Jot this month, I chose a book that is somewhat outside of the typical academic genre, but, for reasons that I will explain, nonetheless worthy of attention by health law scholars. My summer travels this year were cast against the background of reading Sam Quinones's *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*, which I started mostly out of curiosity and desiring a page-turner, non-fiction story. Quinones is a former newspaper reporter, for various outlets, including the *Los Angeles Times*, who spent his career covering the crack epidemic, gangs, drug trafficking, immigration, neighborhood news, and local government. For nearly a decade he immersed himself in Mexican culture and politics, learning Spanish and delving into topics ranging from the street gangs, the PRI, Tijuana opera, drag queens, and taco and popsicle vendors. He is the author of myriad news articles and two other nonfiction books of stories. His ground-level experiences and insights come through in *Dreamland*, which weaves together three primary narratives: (1) heroin dealers from an obscure Mexican state of Nayarit; (2) pharmaceutical marketing practices and the evolution of pain treatment; and (3) economic decline and loss of opportunity in small-town and rural America. The chapters shift among those three narratives, interspersed with poignant anecdotes from individuals and families personally affected by addiction, overdose, and loss.

Working somewhat backwards chronologically, Quinones starts from his comfort zone, the tale of "black-tar" heroin dealers from Nayarit, Mexico, and their novel drug distribution strategy, which he likens to Domino's pizza franchising. Dealers avoided large cities that were the hotbeds of crack and other earlier illegal drug markets, locating instead in mid-sized cities with enough immigrant populations that the Nayarit dealers could blend in, and with a methadone clinic or two from which the entrepreneurial dealers could establish a customer base. Dealers maintained relatively small inventories and distributed their product via drivers carrying even smaller quantities, packaged in balloons that could be swallowed in the event they were pulled over. Even if caught, the quantities typically were not of much interest to law enforcement and resulted in short jail stays and/or deportation. Drivers who returned to Mexico by choice or by law were quickly replaced by other young, eager recruits, or themselves returned after reveling in the financial spoils (including dark-blue Levi jeans) of their time up North. The distribution method allowed addicts to call their dealer and receive delivery of the product in the comfort of their own cars or homes. Dealers prioritized customer service and loyalty, offering free product (including "welcome home" packages after customers' rehab or incarceration stays), undercutting the competition, and responding to calls quickly, efficiently, and on-demand.

To make the connection between heroin distribution and the prescription opioid crisis, Quinones has another story, one told with the same investigatory journalistic style as the Nayarit dealers' story. He describes pharmaceutical product research and development, the rise of pharmaceutical marketing to physicians, evolving medical standards of care for pain management, and the science and treatment of addiction. Knowing that each of those topics are deep and nuanced, and the research foci of serious health law, public health, and medical academics around the world, I was somewhat dubious of Quinones's ability to accurately address the issues. However, I found his coverage convincing enough, as he connected the dots between overprescribing and heroin addiction. His essential point is that patients prescribed opioids, often, at least initially, for legitimate medical reasons, become addicted, then turn to illegal heroin for greater highs, easier access, and lower cost. The loss of economic opportunity and "[diseases of despair](#)" (although he does not use that term, specifically) across America, with the loss of manufacturing and agricultural jobs and the Great Recession, further fuels the addictions.

Again, I remained at times dubious of Quinones's account, convinced that there was often more to the story. But the parts he told worked well enough to advance a compelling narrative. His account of the role of the zero-to-ten pain scale and the role of Joint Commission standards in incentivizing hospitals and medical providers to aggressively treat post-surgical and other pain was convincing. Also convincing was his assertion that the most widely cited "study" on the non-addictive nature of oxycontin and earlier classes of prescription opioids and narcotics was a back-of-the-envelope tabulation by a Boston University professor, correlating patients prescribed pain medications with patients developing addictions. Dr. Hershel Jick's "study" was pulled from a single database, never scientifically studied or peer reviewed, and published in a single-paragraph [letter to the editor](#) of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Quinones is not the only commentator to suggest that Dr. Jick's letter fueled the opioid crisis, and that one piece of the story is itself a topic of [considerable discussion](#). But my point is that although certain elements of the health care and pharmaceutical industry background may be oversimplified in *Dreamland*, the book is well-researched, especially through first-person accounts, and does a good-enough job hitting on key points necessary to connect the narrative.

Moreover, the tragic and harrowing stories make for highly engaging reading, regardless of one's background or interest in the topic. But, to be sure, the topic of opioids is of professional interest and a hot-topic among health law and other scholars. By way of example, I am working on one project examining health care challenges in rural America and another cataloguing local government costs of opioids. A number of colleagues, including [Abbe Gluck](#), [Nic Terry](#), [Scott Burris](#), [Kelly Dineen](#), to name a few, are deeply engaged on various opioid-related topics. Indeed, opioids were front-and-center at my first trip of the summer to the American Society of Law, Medicine & Ethics annual Health Law Professors Conference, which, this year, happened to be in Cleveland, Ohio. *The Journal of Law Medicine & Ethics* just published a [symposium issue](#) dedicated to opioid-related issues. The host school, Case Western, included a keynote address by Judge Dan Polster, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, the judge handling the opioid multidistrict litigation (MDL). Sitting a few tables away from the podium, sneaking photos of Judge Polster on my phone, I felt like a teenager at a Bruno Mars concert. Here before me was the man poised to play a central role in the narrative that I was reading and that is still unfolding across the country.

As Judge Polster explained, it is no coincidence that the MDL landed in an Ohio court. Quinones's book likewise opens by explaining myriad factors that converged to make Ohio Ground Zero for the opioid epidemic: economic downturn and lack of opportunity in small-town America; aggressive marketing and other health policy drivers for overprescribing; lack of access to primary care in rural America; and the unique heroin distribution strategy by dealers from one small region of Mexico targeting mid-sized U.S. cities. The eponymous "Dreamland" reference is to a once-glorious, football-field-sized, public swimming pool in Portsmouth, Ohio, now closed and paved over—a symbol of the decline of the American Heartland.

My second summer trip was a family road trip up and down the East Coast. Viewing the landscape out my car window through the lens of *Dreamland* was like wearing opioid-colored glasses: Walmarts were filled with addicts shoplifting Levi's jeans to pay off their dealers; highway billboards advertised McDonalds, alongside Subutex; defunct manufacturing plants and empty Main Streets left scores of unemployed workers, treating their despair with legal and illegal drugs; a hotel in suburban Charlotte, NC, surrounded by upper-class white teenagers with smart phones and drug addictions; highway signs for hospitals prescribing pain meds on one floor while treating overdoses on another; a deflated water balloon in a New York City park; officials in Philadelphia considering supervised injection centers, like the needle exchange programs of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

The true-crime style, sensational accounts, and colorful characters depicted in *Dreamland* made it a highly readable summer book. As my fellow *Jotwell* Health Law Section readers know, the pharmaceutical, health care, public health regulatory landscapes are far more complex than even laypersons who have done their homework realize. And I can imagine that other dynamics—law enforcement, criminal investigations, prosecutorial discretion and strategy, immigration policy, medical standards of care, addiction and recovery—are similarly multidimensional topics. But even my skepticism about the straightness of the lines that Quinones draws from opioid prescribing to heroin addiction, from pill mills to government health care programs, from Nayarit, Mexico to Portsmouth, Ohio raised my awareness, anxiety, and desire to know more. Sparking new questions and lines of research seems a hallmark of academic scholarship.

The fact that Quinones's trade publication achieves that purpose, along with crafting a riveting, well-told tale that has drawn public attention to an evolving crisis is surely worthy of praise. In sum, I highly recommend *Dreamland* to anyone interested in any aspect of the opioid crisis and encourage readers to enjoy the ride while letting their academic formalities take a back seat, at least for the summer.

Cite as: Elizabeth Weeks Leonard, *How Dreamland Colored My Summer Vacation and Thinking about the Opioid Epidemic*, JOTWELL (August 2, 2018) (reviewing Sam Quinones, **Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic** (2018)), <https://health.jotwell.com/how-dreamland-colored-my-summer-vacation-and-thinking-about-the-opioid-epidemic/>.