

Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic

Sam Quinones

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of *Dreamland*.

About this book

In *Dreamland*, Sam Quinones chronicles the rise of black tar heroin in America, due to an innovative distribution system by a group of Mexican immigrants called the Xalisco Boys, and OxyContin addiction. Once a uniquely urban East Coast problem, opiate addiction is now seen across the American heartland in rural communities. Through his investigative book, Quinones weaves together two narratives of capitalism—young men in Mexico searching for profit and the rise of Purdue Pharma, the maker of Oxycontin—to show the cause and effect of widespread American addiction to opiates. Around these two main threads, Quinones folds in politics, law enforcement, the medical community, and the addicts and their families themselves.

Dreamland is an incendiary book that cracks open notions of pain, addiction, class struggle, and drug culture with rich true-life accounts. With his detailed reporting, Quinones uncovers realities about America that have remained hidden for years.

For discussion

1. Consider the title *Dreamland*. What does it refer to? Pinpoint where Quinones returns to the image of Dreamland throughout the book. How is he using Dreamland as a symbol to explain the themes of his book?
2. What are the typical preconceived notions that a reader might have about opiate addiction? In what ways does the book work against those ideas to show a more nuanced portrait of addiction?
3. Explain how capitalism has been a driving force in the rise of opiate addiction in America. Who is searching for financial power and why? How do class divides propel addiction?
4. How did the Xalisco Boys revolutionize selling drugs in America? How did their new method of distribution help them thwart the police? In what ways did it make addiction easier for drug users?
5. Explain the connection between OxyContin and black tar heroin. How are they similar? How are they different? How does the existence of both forms of opiates feed into addiction?
6. Discuss Purdue Pharma's marketing of OxyContin. How have publicity and propaganda affected public opinion about OxyContin? Do companies like Purdue have a responsibility to be more transparent with their consumers?

7. Why are teens particularly susceptible to opiate addiction? How are drugs a form of rebellion or excitement? How can parents and other authority figures prevent teen addiction and/or assist teens through rehabilitation?
8. How have medical practitioners contributed to the rise of opiate addiction? Discuss the ethics of their actions. Do you feel that any of the doctors and researchers in this book were justified in their reasoning and methods? How does the book speak to problematic aspects of American health care?
9. The concept of rehabilitation comes up in the book as some of the characters try to “get clean.” What versions of rehabilitation seem effective? How can systems be put into place to give addicts more help?
10. How does the concept of the American Dream encourage the buying, selling, and using of opiates? Consider characters like Mary Ann Henson from “Junkie Kingdom in Dreamland” and those like Enrique.
11. The book discusses law enforcement and criminal justice. In what ways have police forces/courts been successful in dealing with addiction? In what ways can they improve and use better strategies to help addicts?
12. Quinones explains that political agendas have morphed to adapt to trying to deal with the problem of opiate addiction in America. Describe some of the ways in which politicians have tried to help victims of addiction. As you consider the current state of politics, how do you anticipate these policies evolving in the future?
13. According to their interviews, the Xalisco Boys rarely sell to African Americans. Why is this? How do race relations play into the ways that opiates are distributed and used as compared to other types of drugs?
14. Throughout the book, people feel shame for a variety of reasons associated with buying/selling drugs and being around addiction. How does shame evolve into silence and complicity?
15. In the Afterword, Quinones says that one of the reasons for addiction is that teens are taught that they should be able to avoid pain as much as possible—and the opiates are a way to continue to try to escape the harsh realities of day-to-day life. He suggests that community is a way to rethink happiness and pain avoidance. Do you agree with this? If so, what are some methods to create better and more fulfilling communities?

Recommended reading

American Pain: How a Young Felon and His Ring of Doctors Unleashed America's Deadliest Drug Epidemic by John Temple, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* by Ioan Grillo, *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers* by Andrea Tone, *This Is Your Country on Drugs: The Secret History of Getting High in America* by Ryan Grim