

Q&A with Author Sam Quinones: Healing Communities in Order to Deal with the Addictions Crisis

Sam Quinones is a journalist and the author of two acclaimed books on the opioid crisis: *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (2015) and *The Least of Us: True Tales of America and Hope in the Time of Fentanyl and Meth* (2021). *The Least of Us* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award for Best Nonfiction Book of 2021. *Dreamland* won a National Book Critics Circle award for the Best Nonfiction Book of 2015.



TFAH: How has the opioid crisis evolved over time?

Sam Quinones: There have been two sources of drug supply. The first was prescription pain pills from doctors. All over the country, doctors were badgered and pressured into prescribing these pills. Some of them embraced it eagerly and some never did, but a lot did, and this was happening coast to coast. The prescribing data looks like an airplane taking off from the tarmac—going up and up, raising every year—covering the country in this very potent stuff and sold as if it was not addictive for anyone. Then a second source emerged, Mexican drug traffic, which has covered the entire country with two synthetic drugs—illicit fentanyl and very potent methamphetamine. The overprescribing of prescription medications set the stage for the illicit drug overdose crisis. Many people were helped by prescribed pain medications, but there was catastrophic collateral damage. The root of it all is in the massive supply and wanton prescribing.

This is really a supply story overlaid on a culture that is vulnerable because so many of the things that bind us have been thrown away as if they don't matter. Today we can afford to live

alone, but people die in isolation. This is a story that's getting repeated all over the country—ghastly unending supplies of these drugs in towns, communities, and cities where a lot of people are alone in many ways.

Two things were extraordinary kindling to this fire. One was addiction. People don't like to talk about addiction; the silence I encountered when I was writing my first book about on the topic, *Dreamland*, was remarkable. We have to acknowledge addiction. The other thing I hope the overdose crisis forces us to look at is a deep reservoir of trauma all across the country in the course of, you name it: abuse, neglect, rape, two wars fought by the same very small portion of Americans who come back with their own forms of trauma from war. All of that is part of the mix and difficult to untangle.

TFAH: You've spent a lot of time in communities experiencing the opioid crisis. Are there common factors among them?

Quinones: What strikes me is that the opioid crisis has hit every community in America. I think that's because as a culture we have done so much to shred the feelings of community, the things

that link us together and bind us. This has happened in poor areas, in working-class areas, in upper-class areas.

Within the communities I studied for my books early in the crisis, during the prescribing overdose phase, it was a remarkably white phenomenon—which I don't have a good explanation for. Now that has changed. Fentanyl changes everything. Now we are seeing, in the Black community in particular, people using cocaine mixed with fentanyl. They have no tolerance for fentanyl, and they die. Dealers figured out early on that if they put fentanyl in cocaine, they'll create opioid addicts. They also got people dying, too.

In addition, we have a consumer culture in which we are constantly bombarded; our brain chemistry is constantly being fished by companies that make products designed to prod us into impulse buying, impulse spending, and impulse use. Social media, sugar, gambling, pornography, alcohol, and drugs—there's a very long list all on the same continuum.

TFAH: It's obvious there's a crisis. What is the solution? What needs to be done?

Quinones: What seems to work best is when people get together and work in the smallest of ways. This is the theme of my book *The Least of Us*. I write about the town of Portsmouth, Ohio. In Portsmouth, I found that the smallest, little responses were sparks of a bigger way of moving forward. It takes people coming together, people who are sick of the dope, the smoking, the obesity, and other signs of ill-health that are rampant in southern Ohio. These people came together to find productive ways to move forward. Some started small businesses; some

worked to rehab vacant buildings. Little synergies. No big factory came to town. It was in the smallest, little ways that progress was being made. It's the daily showing up, the daily working, people connecting. Now there are a few cafés in Portsmouth where people can do that kind of connecting organically. It's about personalities with energy coming together, finding each other, and the sparks that fly from that. It's not sexy, and it's not going to make the news. It's not saving the world—it's small, daily efforts to bring people together in ways that we've lost as a culture.

TFAH: Is addiction a cause of what is happening in many lower socioeconomic communities or is it a symptom of what's happening?

Quinones: There's a circular phenomenon at work, both contribute. In rural areas I visited, the jobs are gone, the businesses are gone, the mom-and-pop stores are gone, a lot of the population has departed as well. That's a town that is poorly prepared for a lot of issues and then along comes the overprescribing of pain pills and those communities become consumed. If there had been a more connected, a more economically vibrant community, would they have been able to ward it off? Perhaps. It does seem to me that the overdose crisis starts in those places experiencing economic distress. However, it then moves—out of Appalachia, out of the Rust Belt, and into the most well-off communities around the country. You would think that those better-off communities would have had the ability to fend off the crisis, but that's where I came to the conclusion that this wasn't an economic story; it was a story of isolation. Cultural isolation combined with these isolating drugs, which these opioids are. It's a catastrophe in the making.

TFAH: You talk in your books about the notion of community repair. Can you say more about that?

Quinones: We've done a lot in this country to destroy communities. In the last 40 years, we've decided that the thing that has kept us alive and allowed us to prosper, which is the feeling of needing other people, we didn't need that anymore. The problem is, throughout history, people die in isolation. In many ways—you can die before your time because you're all alone.

How do we defend ourselves against these potent drugs out of Mexico and the mass marketing of fast food, for example? The way to defend yourself is to band together. That's why when I wrote *The Least of Us*, I filled it with stories of people who in small, non-sexy ways were working to repair community. I'm not trying to give everyone a prescription of how to solve the opioid problem in their town, but maybe we need to give these ideas a chance—work in the smallest way to begin repairing your neighborhood. Bring people out to work together after being alone for so long. We need to get back to repairing that which we have always needed as human beings. We learned this again in COVID. We learned how important it was to be around other people, how devastating it was to be all alone. Screens are an impoverished substitute for real, human, face-to-face interaction. This is all part of the addiction problem—it has grown out of our lack of connectivity with each other.

TFAH: What's your advice to policymakers about how to end the country's addiction crisis?

Quinones: I'm somewhat reluctant to talk about this because I'm not the expert. The experts are on the ground,

they work in schools and ERs, etc. But there are two things that I think are very important.

First, we really need to rethink how we do jail. Jail for a lot of people has been a huge boon. For some people being arrested—saved their life, it began their sobriety. But overall, jail in the way it's done in America is a real disaster and it's part of the problem. Jail is the moment we need to make special use of. People come off the street completely commandeered by dope. They detox, and all of a sudden, they view the world a little differently. But at that moment we put them in a jail that's boring, negative, and predatory.

Jail can be an investment in recovery, and we're seeing this in many counties hardest hit by the opioid epidemic. They are experimenting with pods of recovery. These are voluntary pods where everyone is working on recovery. To me, this is a momentously positive thing. It is not, however, a panacea. It's one small step—as they all must be—toward a community that is prepared to help people succeed in recovery from addiction. I'd like to see a national jail conference on how to do it differently. The point is that we need to try different things in criminal justice, try new programs and compare notes with others.

The other thing that I think is essential and, in many counties, already exists but needs to be everywhere, is drug courts, recovery courts. We need to use the leverage of the criminal justice system to pry people away—little by little—little by little—from dope and nurture a readiness that will not develop on the street. To suggest that people need to be ready before they come to treatment with the drugs on the street today means a death sentence for too many people. That's been proven over and over again all across the country.