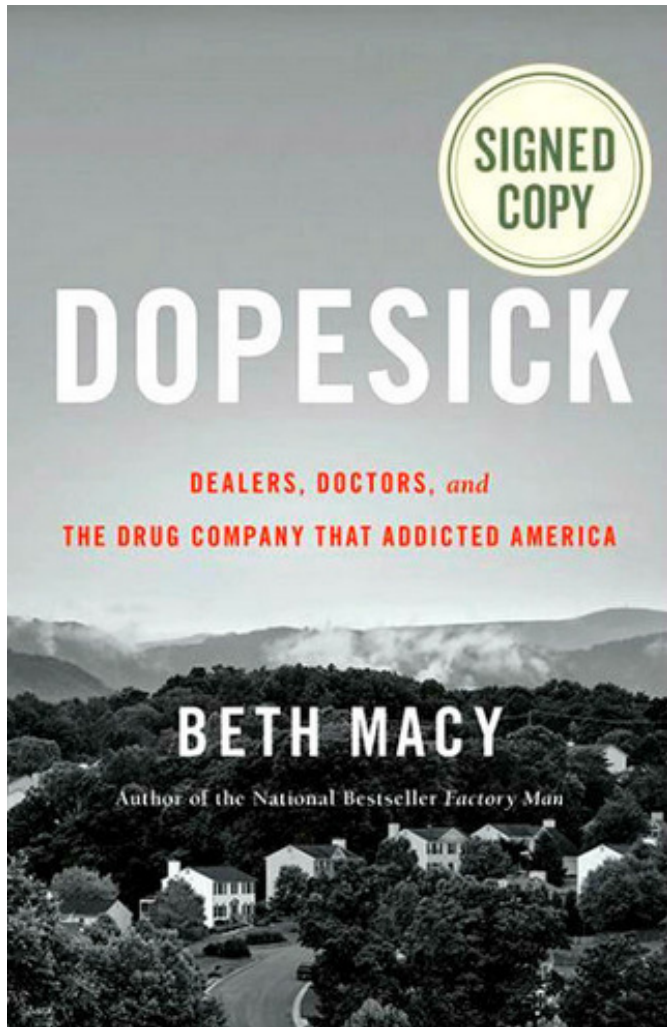


Powerful book focuses on addiction epidemic

Posted: Sunday, August 19, 2018

“Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America” by Beth Macy. New York: Hachette Book Group (an imprint of Little, Brown and Company), 2018, 384 pages, \$28.00.



“In 2012, I began reporting on the heroin epidemic as it landed in the suburbs of Roanoke, Va., where I had covered marginalized families for the Roanoke Times for two decades, predominantly those based in the inner city,” Beth Macy notes near the beginning of “Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America,” her new expose on the opioid scourge currently ripping our country apart.

“When I first wrote about heroin in the suburbs, most families I interviewed were too ashamed to go on the record,” she continues. “A few interviewees died before I had time to transcribe my notes, including one by his own hand after relapsing and fearing his wife – whom he loved more than anything in the world – would divorce him.”

So begins one of the most interesting and insightful books I have ever read on the subject of addiction and its impact on both the individual at the center of the hurricane as well as those who find themselves caught up in the perpetual drama enveloping those who struggle with this insidious and deceptively complex disease. What distinguishes “Dopesick” from most of its contemporaries, however, is the manner in which

Macy humanizes the victims in a way that often eludes other authors. Rather than approach her subject matter from a clinical or academic perspective, she brings the experience of addiction to life in an extremely visceral manner; as I made my way through her thought-provoking and instinctively heart-wrenching narrative, I was physically and emotionally shaken several times.

“Dopesick” consists of 13 chapters arranged in three major sections: “The People v. Purdue,” “Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear” and “A Broken System.” The manuscript is extensively researched – primarily through formal interviews with the diverse cast of characters populating the stories that permeate Macy’s powerful and eloquent prose. Her credibility is further enhanced by the realization that – like many of those who quickly turned “Dopesick” into a New York Times best-seller – she has lived through the nightmare that always accompanies drug addiction.

“Dopesick” works on multiple levels. On the one hand, it is a chronology of the rise of the opioid epidemic that was inadvertently jump-started in 1996 with the introduction of OxyContin. Physicians were quick to prescribe this new class of painkillers; the pills were initially seen as a godsend for those seeking relief from the constant agony and chronic discomfort accompanying many medical conditions. The primary problem: Millions of prescriptions were written before it became clear the benefits associated with these new miracle drugs also came with a tremendous downside. Once hooked on painkillers, the probability of anything resembling a normal life became miniscule for most users. Macy addresses this recurring dilemma and its consequences throughout the book, including this revealing excerpt from the inaugural chapter, “The United States of America.”

“But what exactly was adequate pain relief? That point was unaddressed. Nor could anyone define it. No one questioned whether the notion of pain, invisible to the human eye, could actually be measured simply by asking the patient for his or her subjective opinion. Quantifying pain makes it easy to standardize procedures, but experts would later concede that it was objective only in appearance – transition labor and a stubbed toe could both measure as a 10, depending on a person’s tolerance. And not only did reliance on pain scales not correlate with improved patient outcomes, it also had the effect of increasing opioid prescribing and opioid abuse.”

On the other hand, “Dopesick” describes a very private yet all-too-common journey many readers have either experienced personally or been affected by someone who has. See if you can relate to the following passage, from the Epilogue, depicting an episode that has unfortunately become all too common in households throughout America:

“By the time Tess left for Nevada, as she wrote in her journal around that time, ‘I was stealing, robbing, selling my body and anything else I could do to make money for drugs. I was beaten, raped, robbed and malnourished. I ended up in the hospital with my mom’s help where I detoxed and got on medication and where I am writing this now. I am going to die if I keep living the way I am.’ She was dead now, her grieving family a perfect microcosm of the nation’s response to the opioid epidemic: well-meaning but as divided as it was helpless, and utterly worn out.”

Macy is an award-winning journalist who has spent most of her career trying to give a voice to the voiceless. Her honors include a Nieman Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard and the 2013 J. Anthony Lukas Word-in-Progress award for her previous book, “Factory Man: How One Furniture Maker Battled Offshoring, Stayed Local – and Helped Save an American Town,” which is now considered a classic.

The author makes it clear that the imbroglio we continue to face in 2018 had its origins with the pharmaceutical companies that were aided and abetted by the medical community at large. She also believes a way out of this mess is possible, but it is going to take a concerted effort on the part of all those who share responsibility for its origins and rapid proliferation. Macy is definitely not interested in blaming the victim; she places responsibility for the current situation squarely on the shoulders of the prescription drug industry.

As Sir Angus Deaton, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Economics, observed, “Everyone should read Beth Macy’s story of the American opioid epidemic.” I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.