

The appearance of an addiction memoir at the top of the US bestseller list reflects the growing popularity of 'my drug hell' books. Peter McDermott on a genre kicked off by a Victorian hippy

Junky journals: writing through the wringer

ADDICTION memoirs are big business. But once you've read one, why would you read another? In order to have something new to say, it seems as though each new author must outdo those that went before in their quest to describe the depths to which they sank before eventually 'bottoming out'.

The first work in the genre is Thomas DeQuincy's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. One of a notorious bunch of 19th century hippie types who liked to get wasted and write poetry, DeQuincy's work still seems essentially modern in that he feels no shame about his habit. "It isn't just me", he says. "I also know a Dean, a peer of the realm, a philosopher and an under-secretary of state who are also Boys for the Black Stuff. You prohibitionist hypocrites all need to get off my back." Or they could have done, if they'd actually had prohibition in those days.

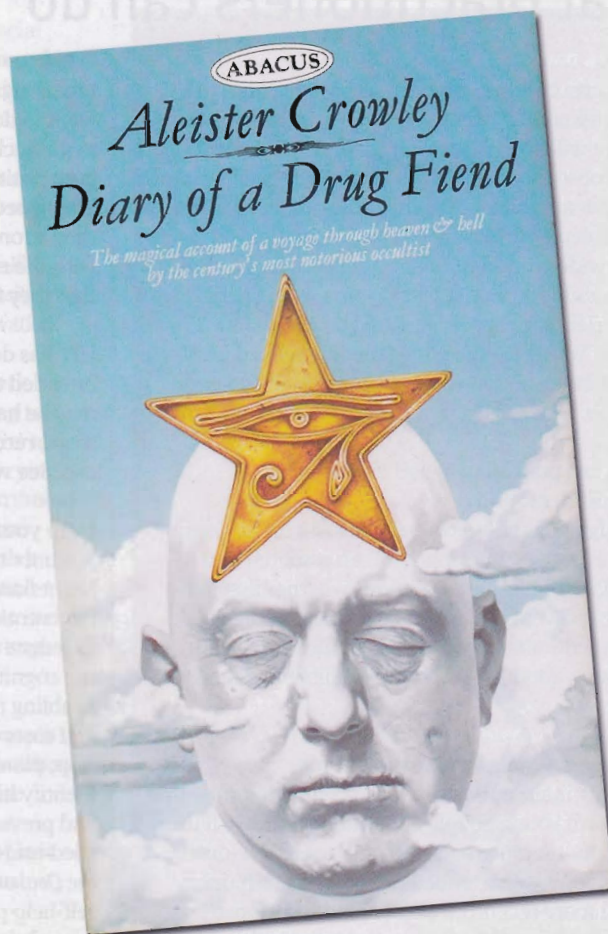
ORIGINALS

DeQuincy's portrayal of the pleasures of opium intoxication, followed by the miserable experience of withdrawal and his struggle to sustain abstinence book, foreshadows almost every other addiction memoir to date. Like most other memoirs, he does tend to over-egg the pudding when it comes to the horrors of withdrawal, yet DeQuincy's efforts have at least two things that commend it above most other addiction memoirs. Firstly, he did it before the hundreds of others who were to follow, and secondly the man could at least write.

Sometimes addiction memoirs come in the form of an autobiographical novel. The second great addiction memoir, Aleister Crowley's *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, takes that particular path.

Like DeQuincy, Crowley's work seems peculiarly modern in attitude. Dismissive of expert opinion regarding the treatment of drug dependence, Crowley decides that a gradual reduction cure actually imbues his habit with even greater power. The sensible approach is to obtain dominance over the drug, and the best way to achieve that is to take ever-increasing doses until body and brain were fully saturated.

I like the logic of Crowley's thinking. His approach didn't work for me, but I sure had fun trying.



The third notable example of the genre, like Crowley's, comes as a thinly disguised autobiographical novel. William Burroughs' *Junky* is a book that launched a million fixes. Burroughs populates his noir landscape with a cast of fascinating characters, describing a rich subculture that no longer exists on the council estates and bedsits where blood brothers shoot up with the same dirty needle. Like the earlier examples, *Junky* stands the test of time better than most, because Burroughs largely avoids the cheap moralizing that's endemic to the genre, and sticks to serving up what the reader really wants: a piping-hot helping of pharmaceutical pornography.

CELEBS

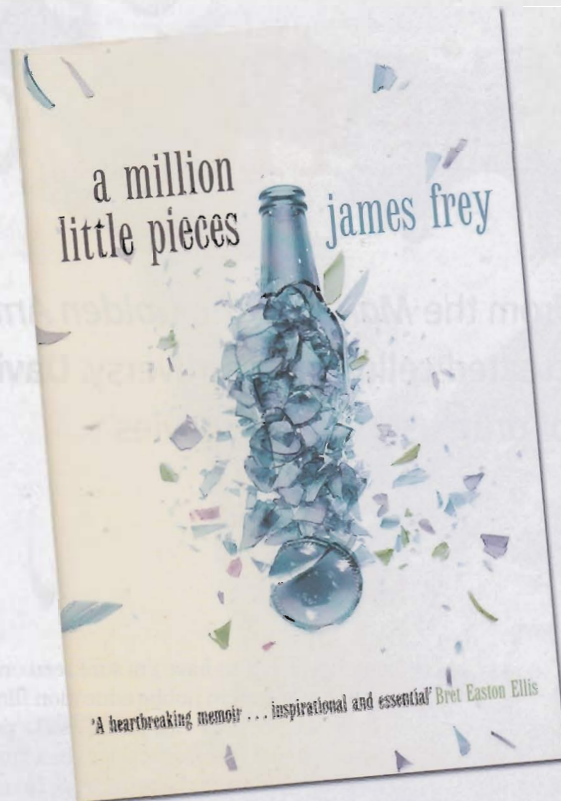
Since *Junky* though, it's been pretty much downhill all the way. The last 50 years or so have provided us with a host of trite celebrity addiction memoirs modelled on the structure of the stories in Alcoholics Anonymous's *Big Book*. The narrative arc (to borrow a term from the movie industry) generally goes like this: innocent falls in with the wrong crowd, discovers drugs and enjoys forbidden pleasures. This fall from grace is then followed by negative consequences of some sort (ie, they get caught and either go to jail, or go into treatment to avoid jail) where they discover the steps, achieve a spiritual awakening before becoming free at last, free at last, thank my higher power, I'm free at last.

James Frey's recent book, *A Million Little Pieces* follows this narrative trajectory but ditches the higher power component. One of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club choices, his appearance on the biggest US talk show powered Frey's book to second place on the bestseller list, just behind the latest Harry Potter. An unsuccessful Hollywood screenwriter, Frey's book combined high quality drug porn with memorable characters and a strong narrative arc that describes a modern version of the *Rake's Progress*, as our wealthy frat boy goes from cocaine dealing in the dorm room to alcoholism, crack addiction, crime and prison.

Frey's unique selling point was that, in contrast with most American addiction memoirs, he rejected the twelve step fellowships and all their works, claiming instead that a strategy he describes as 'just hold on' was responsible for keeping him clean and sober.

Not surprisingly, given the dominance of twelve-step theology in the US treatment system, there were those who took issue with Frey's account. Many argued that if 'just hold on' was a viable strategy for dealing with addiction, there really wouldn't be any need for treatment facilities. Others described him as a 'dry drunk' who was 'white knuckling it' due to his lack of any genuine spiritual awakening. Staff took issue with the account of his time at the thinly disguised 'Hazelden Centre', claiming that the oppressive regime he describes there bore no resemblance to what actually goes on in the place. And Dr John Dolan, writing in the Russian webzine, *The Exile*, noticed that his stories seemed to be plagiarized from the work of the late Eddie Little, whose columns, 'Outlaw LA' were running while Frey was struggling to make it as a Hollywood screenwriter.

But it wasn't until *The Smoking Gun*, a website that specializes in tracking down the court documents of the rich and famous, started to dig around looking for Frey's mugshots that the house of cards he'd constructed came toppling down. Before long, most of the dramatic incidents that populate his story were revealed to be completely untrue. The 40-year-old tough guy showed up on the Larry King Show with his mum, seeking to defend his work by arguing that a memoir needn't be literally true, it just had to reveal the essential truth about his addiction as he remembered it. But it wasn't long before his initial supporter, Oprah Winfrey, dragged him back onto her show to face



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an inquisition from a panel of experts on ethics in reporting for a final ritual humiliation. None of which hurt sales, as the book shot back up the bestseller lists.

IMAGINATION

Yet despite all of his sins, I've got some sympathy with Frey. Apparently, he had originally tried to pitch his memoir as a novel, but couldn't find a publisher who would go for it. First novels are just too tough a sell, so publishers go for the literary equivalent of reality TV. And faced with trying to create a compelling story, while denied the imaginative devices of the novelist, the impulse to embroider and enhance is very strong, because in reality, the lives of most addicts just aren't that interesting. We hustle, we score, we use, we go to bed, we wake up and it starts all over again.

There are a couple of very good examples of the genre that I would commend to anybody. William Pryor's *Survival of the Coolest* and Jerry Stahl's *Permanent Midnight*. Both books work because they are able to transform the base metal of a life, into the gold of a good story. And that's not an easy thing to do. ●

Drug memoirs links:

<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/0104061jamesfrey1.html>

http://www.exile.ru/2006-January27/freys_fall.html

<http://users.lycaeum.org/~sputnik/Ludlow/Texts/Opium/>

<http://www.leestringer.net/central.html>