

My drug hell

So-called 'misery memoirs' have become a popular genre with the British book-buying public. And tales of drug torment make up a significant slice of this market. But what purpose do they serve?

Diane Taylor reports

It started with books like Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* in the mid-nineties. These confessional memoirs of troubled childhoods spawned a generation of non-fiction books dubbed 'misery memoirs' in the book trade.

Selling in large numbers in supermarkets, as well as ordinary bookshops, often to non-traditional book buyers, many made it into the bestseller list. At the height of this genre's popularity, one major publishing house was publishing a book a month.

Sales of these books have peaked, but they have spawned a series of 'sub-genres' – confessional books about living with cancer, about bad relationships with parents and about (usually) hellish drug experiences.

At this point I must declare an interest. As a freelance journalist and ghost writer two of my books have been drug memoirs – *My Name Is Angel* (Virgin), about an ex-sex worker and drug dealer and *Sentenced To Hell* (Sphere), about a woman who escaped Venezuela's harsh prison system.

In the last few years there has been a proliferation of these stories – Pete Doherty's mum has put pen to paper,

Amy Winehouse's dad, the journalist and author Julie Myerson, as well as several less high profile drug users, ex-drug users and members of their families.

So why are these books so popular? Is it voyeuristic Middle Englanders who read these books and sigh with relief that their family has not been blighted by addiction. Or is it people who have been through the same things, who feel less alone when they read about experiences that chime with theirs and take comfort from the messages of redemption that many of them contain?

While these books are undoubtedly of interest to those who have specific experience that relates to the text, there is also a universal element of human struggle which many readers can identify with, whether or not they have any involvement with drugs.

Debra Bell's *The Cannabis Diaries* (Hammersmith Press) is a painfully honest account of her son Will's deterioration when he began smoking a lot of skunk – 12 grams a week at one point.

Bell had not planned to write a memoir. She set up a website on which she posted a weekly diary about the family's struggle with Will when he

began to use skunk heavily.

"Trying to have any sort of relationship with a drug smoking, male teenager can be horrendous. I looked for support for Will and us and couldn't find anything so I decided to take matters into my own hands and set up the website. I thought that maybe I could help others by sharing our story. I wanted other people going through this to see that they are not on their own," she says.

"Unfortunately I had become an expert on cannabis and kids. I was a mother struggling to save her family and I wrote the diaries every week. At first I was just writing them for myself, because not many people saw the website."

But everything changed when Bell wrote an article for the *Guardian* about the problems cannabis was causing for her son and the fallout on the rest of the family. The article struck a chord with many readers.

"I received literally thousands of responses, mainly from parents and grandparents," says Bell.

It was after the website got this hugely increased exposure that Bell got a book deal. Previously a freelance

journalist she now dedicates herself to supporting other families.

She has come under fire from some quarters, notably from cannabis smokers who have got in touch and said: "I smoke cannabis and I'm absolutely fine. Who the hell do you think you are?"

But the hostility has not deterred her. "I have kept steaming ahead. I know what I'm doing and there is an evidence base for this."

Will no longer smokes skunk and is now reconciled with his family. Along with her website she has set up telephone workshops to offer advice and support to family members going through similar experiences to hers.

Elizabeth Burton-Phillips, a teacher, had twin sons, both of whom became addicted to heroin. One of them, Nick, tragically died at the age of 27. His death gave his heartbroken twin brother Simon the impetus to become drug-free. Simon and his mother wrote a book about the family's experience of addiction together – *Mum, Can You Lend Me Twenty Quid* (Piatkus).

Like Bell, Burton-Phillips hopes that putting her family's story into a book has and will continue to help others who have been through similar traumas, as well as acting as a warning to the uninitiated, that drugs can and do kill.

"When you have experienced the ultimate loss of someone to addiction, for some people and certainly for me, part of the healing process was to write down what had happened to us. A couple of people had suggested it but I didn't absorb the challenge until my son had died. I was in the unusual situation of having identical twins, both addicted to heroin. To lose a child is such a massive blow to a mother. But I had to divide up my emotions.

"While I was grief stricken at the loss of one child I felt enormous relief that the other one had come through."

While both her sons were alive and addicted to heroin, Burton-Phillips had tried to keep their addiction a secret and endured stigma and shame. It was an enormous relief to

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her to have the whole thing out in the open.

As well as helping her to heal, the book has had a huge impact on those who have read it. She has received more than 13,000 e-mails in response to it.

"The majority said to me 'your story is our story'. There has been no downside for me in doing the book. I have received no nasty letters or e-mails, only 150 per cent support."

She is working directly with more than 300 people who have been in touch

with her about their own loss of a family member to drugs and is working on a piece of research about how best to help those bereaved by addiction. She has set up a charity called DrugFam and a website. She is also hoping to set up a national support helpline and would also like to find a way of reaching young people to warn them of the dangers of addiction. Weekly support groups for families are offered in Slough, Wokingham and High Wycombe.

"We are looking at how we can develop an educational package, helping parents to educate themselves about drugs and alcohol so they are not in denial," she says.

Both Bell and Burton-Phillips are not setting themselves up as scientific authorities on drugs, but feel that their own first hand experiences mean that they are in a position to offer emotional support to other families who are experiencing problems with drugs.

Vivienne Evans OBE, Chief Executive of Adfam, says: "Families affected by someone else's drug use often feel incredibly isolated and this type of book can help to reassure them they're not alone – the importance of this solidarity shouldn't be underestimated. Writing the books can also be an extremely valuable

