



The Bitter Pill

DELVE DEEPER READING LIST



This list of fiction and nonfiction books, compiled by retired librarian Susan Conlon, provides a range of perspectives on the issues raised by the POV documentary *The Bitter Pill*.

With his hometown ravaged by the opioid epidemic, attorney Paul Farrell Jr. takes on pharmaceutical giants to secure funds for recovery efforts. When his innovative legal strategy catches national attention, the case transforms into America's largest civil litigation. As stakes escalate, Farrell fights for justice—not just for his community, but for a nation in crisis.

Contributors



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ADULT NON-FICTION

Eyre, Eric. *Death in Mudlick: A Coal Country Fight Against the Drug Companies That Delivered the Opioid Epidemic*. Scribner, 2020.

The ongoing opioid epidemic has, sadly, detrimentally impacted the entire United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 109,680 people died from a drug overdose in 2022, which has risen over the years. Unfortunately, a poor Appalachian state—West Virginia—has led the nation in such deaths. The book tells the story of the fight against those responsible for so many opioid deaths in the Mountain State. The book's author, Eric Eyre, is a West Virginia journalist and investigative reporter. Eyre was a long-time correspondent for the Charleston Gazette-Mail, the leading newspaper in West Virginia's capital city. In 2017, he won the Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting for his coverage of the flow of opioids into the economically depressed counties of West Virginia.

Hampton, Ryan. *Unsettled: How the Purdue Pharma Bankruptcy Failed the Victims of the American Overdose Crisis*. St. Martin's Press, 2021.

In September 2019, Purdue Pharma--the maker of OxyContin and a company controlled by the billionaire Sackler family--filed for bankruptcy to protect itself from 2,600 lawsuits for its role in fueling the U.S. overdose crisis. Author and activist Ryan Hampton served as co-chair of the official creditors committee that acted as a watchdog during the process, one of only four victims appointed among representatives of big insurance companies, hospitals, and pharmacies. He entered the case believing that exposing the Sacklers and mobilizing against Purdue would be enough to right the scales of justice. But he soon learned that behind closed doors, justice had plenty of other competition--and it came with a hefty price tag.

Higham, Scott. *American Cartel: Inside the Battle to Bring Down the Opioid Industry*. Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2022.

A deeply documented dive into the culpability of the drug companies behind the staggering death toll of the opioid epidemic. It follows a small band of DEA agents led by Joseph Rannazzisi, a tough-talking New Yorker who had spent a storied thirty years bringing down bad guys, along with a band of lawyers, including West Virginia native Paul Farrell Jr., who fought to hold the drug industry to account in the face of the worst man-made drug epidemic in American history.

Keefe, Patrick Radden. *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*. Doubleday, 2021.

The book presents a portrait of three generations of the Sackler family who built their fortune on the sale of Valium and later sponsored the creation and marketing of one of the most commonly prescribed and addictive painkillers of the opioid crisis.

Lembke, Anna. *Drug Dealer, MD: How Doctors Were Duped, Patients Got Hooked, and Why It's So Hard to Stop*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Combining case studies from her own practice with vital statistics drawn from public policy, cultural anthropology, and neuroscience, Dr. Anna Lembke explores the complex relationship between doctors

and patients, the science of addiction, and the barriers to successfully addressing drug dependence and addiction.

Macy, Beth. *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America*. Little, Brown and Company, 2018.

This book chronicles America's more than twenty-year struggle with opioid addiction, from the introduction of OxyContin in 1996, through the spread of addiction in distressed communities in Central Appalachia, to the current national crisis.

Macy, Beth. *Raising Lazarus: Hope, Justice, and the Future of America's Overdose Crisis*. Little, Brown and Company, 2022.

In this complex story of public health, big pharma, dark money, politics, race and class, the New York Times best-selling author of *Dopesick* takes us to the forefront of the opioid crisis, where we meet the everyday heroes fighting to stem the tide of drug overdose.

Meier, Barry. *Pain Killer: An Empire of Deceit and the Origin of America's Opioid Epidemic*. Random House, 2018.

Over the past few decades, more than 250,000 Americans have died from overdoses involving prescription painkillers, a plague ignited by the aggressive marketing of OxyContin by its maker, Purdue Pharma. Purdue, owned by the wealthy Sackler family, knew early on that teenagers and others were abusing its billion-dollar wonder drug. Meier reveals new and shocking information about how long the drugmaker knew about OxyContin abuse -- even as it continued to sell and market the drug -- and about the way government officials passed up opportunities to protect tens of thousands of lives.

Quinones, Sam. *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*. Bloomsbury Press, 2015.

The author chronicles how enterprising sugar cane farmers in a small county on the west coast of Mexico created a unique distribution system that brought black tar heroin-- the cheapest, most addictive form of the opiate, 2 to 3 times purer than its white powder cousin-- to the veins of people across the United States.

Temple, John. *American Pain: How a Young Felon and His Ring of Doctors Unleashed America's Deadliest Drug Epidemic*. Lyons Press, 2015.

The king of the Florida pill mills was American Pain, a mega-clinic expressly created to serve addicts posing as patients. From a fortress-like former bank building, American Pain's doctors distributed massive quantities of oxycodone to hundreds of customers a day, mostly traffickers and addicts who came by the vanload. deep-dive investigation of a hazardous and illicit industry that has created a worldwide epidemic, ravaging communities and overwhelming and confounding government agencies that are challenged to combat it.

Westhoff, Ben. *Fentanyl, Inc.: How Rogue Chemists Are Creating the Deadliest Wave of the Opioid Epidemic*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2019.

A four-year investigation into the dangerous world of synthetic drugs—from black market drug factories in China to users and dealers on the streets of the U.S. to harm reduction activists in Europe—which reveals for the first time the next wave of the opioid epidemic.

ADULT FICTION

Austin, Emily R. *We Could Be Rats*. Atria Books, 2025.

Sigrid and Margit are very different; Margit is the high-achieving older sister who left for college, while Sigrid, who did not graduate high school, is stuck in their small town working at a Dollar Pal store. Both are deeply affected by their volatile, abusive upbringing and their shared loss to the town's opioid crisis.

Kingsolver, Barga. *Demon Copperhead*. Harper, 2022.

The teenage son of an Appalachian single mother who dies when he is eleven uses his good looks, wit, and instincts to survive foster care, child labor, addiction, disastrous loves, and crushing losses.

Mulhauser, Travis. *Sweetgirl*. Ecco, 2016.

Braving a northern Michigan blizzard to search for her missing meth-addicted mother, Percy James stops by the cabin of two drug addicts and flees with their endangered baby, triggering a dangerous race from the elements and a band of desperate criminals.

Pease, Amy. *Northwoods*. Emily Bestler Books/Atria, 2024.

A murder with ties to America's opioid epidemic reveals the dark underbelly of an idyllic Midwestern resort town.

Shaffer, Andrew. *Hope Never Dies: A Novel*. Quirk Books, 2018.

Vice President Joe Biden is fresh out of the Obama White House and feeling adrift when his favorite railroad conductor dies in a suspicious accident, leaving behind an ailing wife and a trail of clues. To unravel the mystery, "Amtrak Joe" re-teams with the only man he's ever fully trusted--the 44th president of the United States. Together they'll plumb the darkest corners of Delaware, traveling from cheap motels to biker bars and beyond, as they uncover the sinister forces advancing America's opioid epidemic.

Swinson, Kiki. *The Black Market*. Dafina Books/Kensington, 2018.

Misty Heiress steals drugs from a pharmacy, just trying to help her cousin in constant pain, but the plan snowballs into dealing opioids, and Misty and her cousin Jillian are in real trouble.

YOUNG ADULT NON-FICTION

Braun, Eric. *Big Pharma and the Opioid Epidemic*. Compass Point Books, 2020.

Addiction to legal and illegal opioids has been declared a national crisis. What caused this massive problem? Can the crisis be slowed or reversed? Students will get practical tips on how to help someone suffering from an addiction or experiencing an overdose, and learn about how the nation is trying to deal with the crisis.

Krosoczka, Jarrett. *Hey, Kiddo: How I Lost My Mother, Found My Father, and Dealt with a Family Addiction*. Graphix, 2018.

In kindergarten, Jarrett Krosoczka's teacher asks him to draw his family, with a mommy and a daddy. But Jarrett's family is much more complicated than that. His mom is an addict, in and out of rehab, and in and out of Jarrett's life. His father is a mystery -- Jarrett doesn't know where to find him, or even what his name is. Jarrett lives with his grandparents -- two very loud, very loving, very opinionated people who had thought they were through with raising children until Jarrett came along.

Lerner Publishing Group. *The Opioid Epidemic and the Addiction Crisis. Part of the Issues in Action series, Interest Level Grade 4-8, Reading Level Grade 4*. 2002.

Opioids are drugs that people have taken for centuries to alleviate pain, but they are also highly addictive. In the past several years, the United States has seen a growing number of people addicted to and dying from opioids, creating a health crisis that doctors and communities are working hard to solve. Learn how the United States became the world leader in daily opioid use, how the situation has impacted individuals and families, and what people are doing to treat the epidemic.

Quinones, Sam. *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*. Bloomsbury Children's Books, 2019.

In 1929, in the blue-collar city of Portsmouth, Ohio, a company built a swimming pool the size of a football field; named Dreamland, it became the vital center of the community. Now, addiction has devastated Portsmouth, as it has hundreds of small rural towns and suburbs across America. How that happened is the riveting story of Dreamland. Quinones explains how the rise of the prescription drug OxyContin, a miraculous and extremely addictive painkiller pushed by pharmaceutical companies, paralleled the massive influx of black tar heroin--cheap, potent, and originating from one small county on Mexico's west coast, independent of any drug cartel.

YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *The Impossible Knife of Memory*. Viking, 2014.

For the past five years, Hayley Kincaid and her father, Andy, have been on the road, never staying long in one place as he struggles to escape the demons that have tortured him since his return from Iraq. Now they are back in the town where he grew up, so Hayley can attend school. Perhaps, for the first time, Hayley can have a normal life, put aside her own painful memories, and even have a relationship with Finn, who obviously likes her but is hiding secrets of his own. Will being back home help Andy's PTSD, or will his terrible memories drag him to the edge of hell, and drugs push him over?

Cadow, Kenneth. M. *Gather*. Candlewick Press, 2023.

Ian Gray isn't supposed to have a dog, but a lot of things that shouldn't happen end up happening anyway. And *Gather*, Ian's adopted pup is good company now that Ian has to quit the basketball team, find a job, and take care of his mom as she tries to overcome her opioid addiction.

Fiore, Kelly. *Thicker Than Water*. HarperTeen, 2016.

Arrested for dealing drugs and playing a part in her brother's death, CeCe reflects on the injury that led to her brother's drug addiction and her fateful decision to steal and sell his drugs to protect him and save money.

King, Aldina. *The House No One Sees*. Feiwel and Friends, 2025.

When seventeen-year-old Penelope enters her childhood home, the house floods her with painful memories of her mother's opioid addiction that she must confront to mend her fractured past.

McGinnis, Mindy. *Heroine*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2019.

When a car crash sidelines Mickey just before softball season, she has to find a way to hold on to her spot as the catcher for a team. Behind the plate is the only place she's ever felt comfortable, and the painkillers she's been prescribed can help her get there. But as the pressure to be Mickey Catalan heightens, her need increases, and it becomes less about pain and more about want, something that could send her spiraling out of control.

Shusterman, Neal. *Roxy*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Two siblings get caught up in a wager between two manufactured gods, Roxicodone and Adderall, in this new thriller inspired by the opioid crisis.

BOOKS FOR YOUNGER LEARNERS AND CHILDREN

Baughman, Sarah R. *The Wild Path*. Little, Brown and Company, 2020.

Twelve-year-old Claire struggles to cope while her eighteen-year-old brother, Andy, is treated for drug addiction and her family prepares to sell her beloved horses, but finally accepts that change can be good.

Cochran, John. *Breaking into Sunlight*. Algonquin Young Readers, 2024.

Seventh-grader Reese struggles to cope with his dad's opioid addiction but finds solace in two new friends who are also dealing with issues beyond their control.

Elliott, Zetta. *Bird*. Lee & Low Books, 2008.

Bird, an artistic young African American boy, expresses himself through drawing as he struggles to understand his older brother's drug addiction and death, while a family friend, Uncle Son, provides guidance and understanding.

Hopkins, Ellen. *What About Will*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2021.

Trace's relationship with his older brother Will becomes increasingly complicated after Will suffers a traumatic brain injury and becomes addicted to pain pills.

Lendo, Nicole. *A Kids Book About Addiction*. DK Publishing, 2025.

The book is intended to help children ages 5-9 understand what addiction is and how to cope with the emotions that come from witnessing it in someone they know or love. With clear, empowering language and a minimalist design, the book creates a safe space for young readers to explore a difficult topic with honesty and compassion.

Moranville, Sharelle Byars. *Forget-Me-Not Blue*. Holiday House, 2003.

This intimate and heartfelt middle-grade novel follows two siblings fighting to stay together amidst the ripple effects of addiction and generational trauma.