PAGE-TURNER

IN HEROIN'S WHITE THRALL

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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Part of the anxious pleasure of reading a book about drugs is never knowing exactly what you're rooting for. In the case of, say, "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," you sort of want Hunter S. Thompson to just keep doing drugs, if only so he'll see more giant lizards. The same goes for reading Thomas De Quincey, whose "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" is, with the possible exception of the book of Ezekiel, the first classic psychoactive travelogue. His lavish, genteel description of the laudanum user as proto-flaneur had a great seductiveness, something for which he was criticized when the book was published, in 1821. There are counterexamples. Anybody who's read "Being and Nothingness" can agree that there's such thing as too many drugs. And in Tao Lin's new novel, "Taipei," in which drugs function as a kind of extended metaphor for the addictive boredom of the Internet, the drug use is effectively tiresome. In the case of what is far and away the best drug book in recent memory, Denis Johnson's "Jesus' Son," we might call a stalemate: Johnson, it seems, did just enough drugs to produce the book, and not too many not to produce the book.

It's not quite a trivial point. As John Lanchester wrote in this magazine, drug writing since De Quincey is interesting precisely insofar as it's marked by an author's ambivalence about the depraved condition of drug abuse, which is just another way for him to express ambivalence about the depraved condition of the straight world. Writers who take up the subject feel, on the one hand, like they ought to take the responsible position against drugs; on the other hand, most of them revel in their fiendish case for the defense. The pro-drug camp, not entirely unreasonably, suggests that the problem might not be with drugs but with the world itself.

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What most drug books don't do is make the reader, upon closing the book, feel as though he or she really ought to think more seriously about experimenting with drugs. Any critic with a sense of social responsibility, then, has got to have some qualms about conceding that Michael W. Clune's "White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin" is as good as it is. Clune, an English professor at Case Western Reserve, has been clean for ten years. This memoir has been put out by the publishing wing of Hazelden, a network of addiction-treatment centers, so it's at least prima facie a warning about the zombie preoccupation of the heroin user. The trouble is that Clune's dreamily exact writing—sensual and hilarious—makes an exactingly dreamy argument for smack. It must be terrible for someone from his previous life—the people he stole from, deceived, and sold out—to read this, but now one would be hard put to think of a book that makes you so glad the writer has ruined so many years of his life in heroin's thrall.

The book is itself a sketchy map of a blanched aurora borealis. There is a narrative, but it swims murkily, the way Clune himself "floated like an astronaut in the white world." The beginning, wonderfully indebted to Denis Johnson in its laconic, good-natured mistake-making, mostly tours the comic depredations of his advanced junkie apprenticeship. Taken from a page at random: his junkie friend Dom, in his bare apartment's "bright heart-attack darkness," has "a neck that looked like a broken foot with the toes missing." Compared to Dom, "the off-white aluminum refrigerator in the corner had a healthy human glow." Clune, in his junkie incarnation, doesn't do all that much. He drives around Baltimore, where he was, notionally, a graduate student in English at Johns Hopkins, from dope spot to a chain of abandoned rentals to dope spot to rehab center to dope spot, and he has conversations with such new friends as Funboy. At one point, Funboy complains about how unfair it is that black people get to live in the slums,

near where all the good dope spots are. Clune drily advances the position that perhaps the black people have no choice but to live there and do what they do. "Funboy snorted. 'Forced to become drug dealers.' He looked disgusted with me. 'Forced to drive Mercedes and fuck hot bitches and get all the money and all the dope. And what do you mean, black people have to live in the part of the city where there's drugs? I'd do anything to live in that part of the city! A dope spot within walking distance? Are you kidding?' " Clune describes the junkies waiting on the junk dole when he and Funboy get to the dope spot. "Some were wearing ratty jeans and faded Metallica T-shirts. Some were wearing ratty jeans and faded Bob Marley T-shirts. Some were wearing ratty jeans and faded 'Baltimore Reads!' T-shirts. It was a diverse crowd." What's effective about the writing is Clune's double consciousness—not just the contrast of present sobriety with past depravity, but the fantasy that, even at the time, he kept some measure of the thing. One gets the idea that, in a period of life when Clune mostly sat on the dirty floors of defurnitured apartments, this really *was* a diverse crowd; at the same time, he never gave himself over to dope so entirely that an argument like Funboy's made any sense.

The book drifts back and forth among only five or six discrete moments in time, though it's a book that makes it hard to say much about duration. He returns frequently to a key memory of his childhood, in the northern suburbs of Chicago, where he tells the other six-year-olds on his street that he's discovered that Candy Land, with its garish gumdrop mountains and neon molasses swamp, is a real place, located mere blocks from where they live. He describes the expedition they mount in great detail, and just as he turns the last corner, preparing himself to arrive at the colorful bounty of instant infinite gratification, we find him on a roof in New York, near the end of college. It's his first time doing heroin, alongside two people, a man and a woman, that he's in love with.

His scudding reminiscence goes on for pages. "A single cloud moved through the blue sky," it begins. "I was on my back looking up. My eye was a glass box, and inside it there was no time." Clune's impressions are almost always built from the same austere units: something concrete and transparent (glass); something concrete and opaque (clouds); and something both simple and abstract (time). He writes about a state of crystalline, eternal purity, across which the cloudy emblems of obscurity and evanescence float by. His description of lying on that roof goes on for almost too long, until Clune shakes himself out of the reverie to address the reader directly. "It might seem like I'm kind of obsessed by the first time I did dope. No shit. If you're writing a book about this, and you don't use at least this much space writing about the first time, you're not being honest. That first time follows you around. It doesn't stay in one place."

It follows you around because the right now of heroin, he says, is just a switchboard between the first time you did it and the next time you're going to do it. It's not, as so many people think, a matter of simple nostalgia for the first hit; it's a matter of complicated nostalgia for the fact of novelty itself. It's a bad metaphor, he writes, to refer to a dope habit. Habits are dead patterns. Dope is an anti-habit. Clune's prose, in turn, mimics the drug's procession of endless dawns with a clever profusion of tenses: "Dope never gets old for addicts. It never looks old. It never looks like something I've seen before. It always looks like nothing I've ever seen." It is, necessarily, white.

"White Out" 's presiding metaphor is this whiteness. At first, and most prosaically, it's the whiteness of the first "white top" vial he encountered; it was the first heroin "brand" he used. But the white is a protean white, an invitational white, the omnivorously accepting white of the white whale. It is the space between the original whiteness of the past and the new, vital whiteness of the future. As the book progresses, he keeps reinventing the meaning of white: now it reflects something about time (heroin's white stalls time as well as inflates it); now something about shape (heroin's white encompasses both the sharp and the

blurry); now something about temperature (white snow, white sun). The white skin of a cigarette is "as deep and rich and full of the future as a baby's." The first time he did dope is "the mummy's white heart, pumping whiteness." "In white time," death is just "a white line in a white room." Heroin whites over our desires and whites through our past, replacing the world's terminal riot of color with a silent, ageless white.

Unfortunately, "once you get a glimpse of something that never gets old you'll never be able to live like the others." This means, along with De Quincey, an escape from the plodding world: "I got the cure. It came in white-topped vials. Sometimes they had red tops. The cancer of putting gas in my car in fair weather or foul without being high was history." Cured, too, from the "cancer of being vulnerable to constantly changing feelings." The religious suggestions throughout the book—heroin's route to an eternal body beyond the flux of things—are deliberate, and it comes as no particular surprise when, after finally getting clean, he describes his attempt to sit and meditate. It's just one of the normal habits he attempts to cultivate while living and recovering in his father's basement, along with exercise and eating food. He needs habits for the way they bring him close to the world in exactly the way heroin drove him whitely away. But, given his anxieties about the banality of his straight life, his wry humor doesn't desert him in sobriety: "Habits are like reunion parties for me and my favorite things that happen every day."

In a sense, the addiction memoir is the simplest form of self-accounting, a grossly distended version of the curve of many people's lives: I sinned, I sinned repeatedly, my sinning felt beyond my control, I hit something that felt like rock bottom, I realized I wanted to be redeemed, with the help of divine or earthly love I was redeemed, and now I'm here to declare not only that I'm still around but that I'm better than ever, as proven by the existence of this book. The writer always gives himself some cover by suggesting that he's written this book to help other addicts

or recovering addicts or their families, but even if that's obviously true, it's rarely the real point. The real point is that the book itself is the capstone of redemption, and the fact of the book retroactively justifies the addiction—and not only justifies it but renders it, in retrospect, necessary. (The myth of "Jesus' Son" is that it sidestepped this whole process. The story told is that Johnson found some sketchy drafts in a drawer some time after he wrote them; he hadn't ever intended them for publication.) The more skillful the resulting narrative, the better justified the addiction: the reward for having visited derangement—systematic or not—is the bounty of vital language and deep gratitude one has brought back. The takeaway, though, is that the despond has been safely deposited in the past. The unusual risk taken by Clune's unusually good addiction memoir is its enduring lyrical reverence for heroin. The heroin is so close you can see the white. It hasn't been relegated to the past. It has an honest and dangerous smile. It's right here, whitely licking its chops.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus's "A Sense of Direction" is out in paperback.

Photograph by Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum



Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering technology, academia, and books, among other topics. He is the author of the memoir "A Sense of Direction."

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