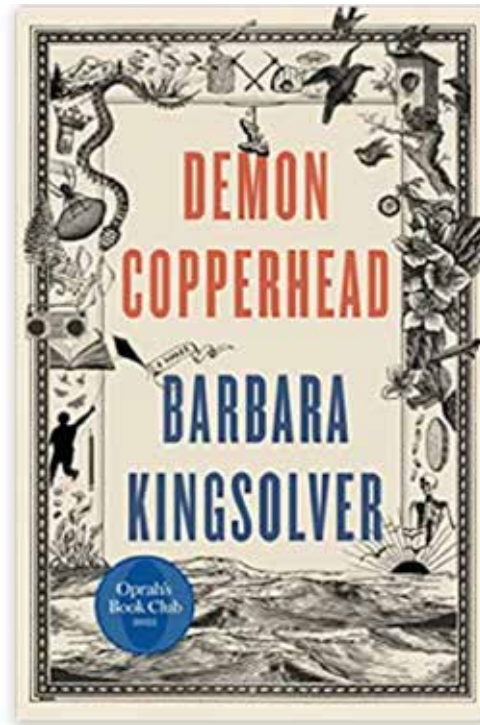


Medicine on the big and small screen:

The Case of *Dopesick* and *Demon Copperhead* and the opioid crisis



Dopesick (TV miniseries)

Starring Michael Keaton, Peter Sarsgaard, Michael Stuhlbarg

Directed by Michael Cuesta (2 episodes); Barry Levinson; Patricia Riggen; Danny Strong

Hulu, 8 one-hour episodes; 2021

Demon Copperhead

Written by Barbara Kingsolver

Harper, October 18, 2022

560 pages

Reviewed by J. Russell Teagarden, DMH

The opioid crisis of the 1990s and 2000s, which is yet to abate, is generating a voluminous body of nonfiction books and investigative journalism reports. In sim-

ilar fashion, literary fiction featuring the opioid crisis is expanding at a clip sufficient for Mitchum Huehls to propose a category he calls, “The New Opioid Novels.”¹ Nonfiction and investigative journalism appeal to many who seek an understanding of the opioid crisis, however, literary fiction adds significantly to the findings of nonfiction accounts. A case in point is how the recently published Barbara Kingsolver novel, *Demon Copperhead*,² adds insights to the nonfiction book, *Dopesick*,³ and the original television series of the same name based on the book, released in 2021 and available through Hulu.

In *Dopesick*, journalist Beth Macy investigates the causes and effects of the opioid crisis, mostly as it developed and demolished lives and communities in the Appalachian regions of Virginia. She explores the multi-dimensional factors that make people in the area vulnerable to opioid addiction—how the drugs found them even when they weren’t looking. The center of Macy’s investigations accounts for the actions of both organizations (e.g., opi-

oid manufacturers, distributors, legislatures, regulatory agencies) and individuals (e.g., sellers, clinicians, activists, law enforcement personnel). She includes the stories of several people who became addicted to explain the causes and effects of the crisis, but the impact on their daily lives is relatively peripheral to the primary elements of her investigation. For the Hulu series, Macy served as executive producer and contributed to the writing. Danny Strong was the series' creator.

Filling in the fuller experience of the opioid crisis for its victims is where *Demon Copperhead* adds to *Dopesick*. In the novel, Kingsolver flips the narrative to put the victims at the center. She offers a view of the opioid crisis in Appalachia from ground zero in Lee County, Virginia, which is not far from where she has resided for the past 20 years. The novel revolves around characters and circumstances based on the author's familiarity with the territory and its inhabitants. We follow these characters from birth or early childhood through adulthood. The lead character, *Demon Copperhead*, begins telling his story when he is very young – his stepfather beats him, his mother dies from a drug overdose, he is placed into a broken and impoverished foster care system, attends school off and on, and works assorted jobs, many of which involve illegal, unethical, and dangerous activities. He is variously abused, starved, and exploited.

As a result, *Demon* and others in his predicament face alcoholism, unemployment, hazardous occupations, unfinished education, familial disintegration, societal abandonment, and, opioid addiction. But, opioid addiction is just one among the many threats they face. The forces creating risks for opioid addiction—the organizations and individuals drawing most of Macy's attention—are unknown or at least not top-of-mind for Kingsolver's

characters. They are taking on many simultaneous challenges that affect whether they live to see another day.

Huehls divides "New Opioid Novels" into three categories: epistemological, ontological, and phenomenological. Kingsolver's novel fits the ontological category because it "treats opioid use not as a phenomenon that requires explanation, justification, or understanding, but simply as a given, as a fact in the world."^{1p4} As such, the novel situates Macy's objective-with-pathos journalistic investigation into the causes and consequences of the opioid crisis amidst the complexities of lives under a wide range of serious threats.

Demon Copperhead serves as a worthy companion to *Dopesick*, both text and television, for those interested in a fuller exploration of the opioid crisis. All three illustrate how deciding between a nonfiction and fiction account of a particular topic is not always the choice to make, but rather, which to read or view first.

References

1. Huehls M. The New Opioid Novel. *Genre*. 2022; 55(1): 1–25.
2. Kingsolver B. *Demon Copperhead*. New York; Harper; 2022.
3. Macy B. *Dopesick*. New York; Little, Brown and Company; 2018.

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