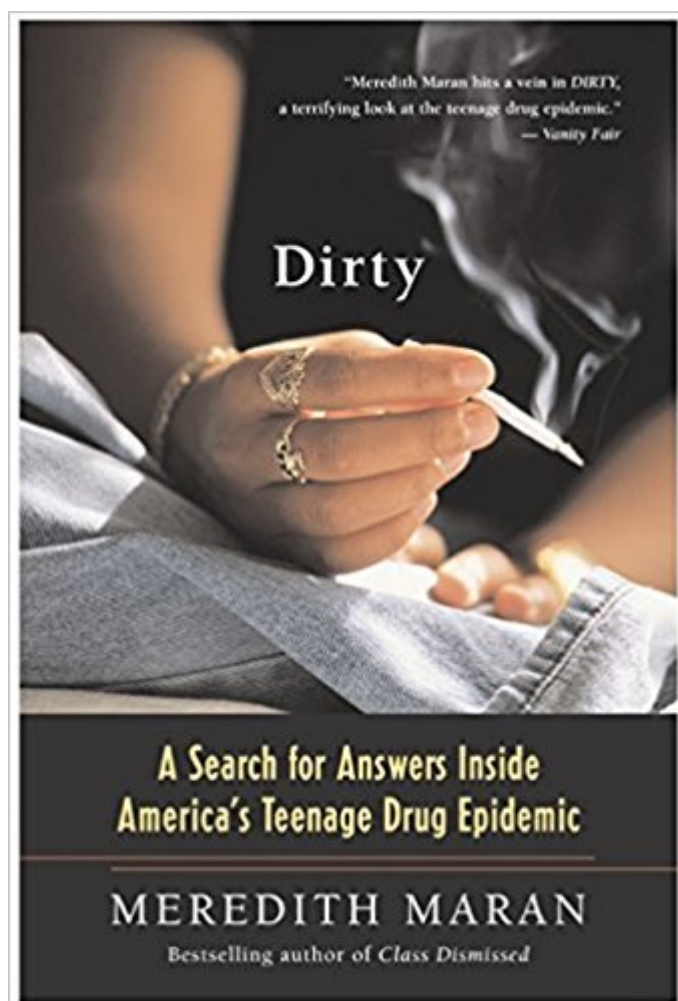


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# Dirty: A Search For Answers Inside America's Teenage Drug Epidemic



## Synopsis

Venturing into uncharted territory, mother and award-winning journalist Meredith Maran takes us inside teenagers' hearts, minds, and central nervous systems to explore the causes and consequences of our nation's drug crisis. In these pages we get to know the kids, the parents, the therapists, and the drug treatment programs at their best and worst. We're face-to-face with seventeen-year-old Mike, whose life revolves around selling, smoking, and snorting speed; fifteen-year-old Tristan - the boy next door - who can't get enough pot, pills, or vodka; and sixteen-year-old Zalika, a runaway, crack dealer, and prostitute since the age of twelve. Combining powerful on-the-street reporting and groundbreaking research, *Dirty* is essential reading for every parent and professional who works with or cares about children or teenagers.

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## Customer Reviews

Meredith Maran's *Dirty: A Search For Answers Inside America's Teenage Drug Epidemic* is a moving study of America's failure to address teen drug use. The book, which grew out of the author's struggles with her own son's addiction, throughout harmonizes a general analysis of America's War on Drugs and drug treatment programs with a close study of three particular teens. Zalika, Mike, and Tristan offer no happy endings. For Tristan, a boy from a well-to-do family, even the loving treatment of Phoenix Academy cannot lead to a life free from chemical dependency. The prison-like therapeutic community of Center Point, meanwhile, seems only to drive Mike and his fellow addicts further into deception and isolation. A prostitute and

sometimes addict, sixteen-year-old Zalika is eventually abandoned by her family and the drug court system as she watches her closest friends die around her. Though the book offers horrifying statistics regarding the rise of teen drug use, Dirty's stories of Zalika, Tristan, and Mike are the most effective exposition of America's failure to serve its most needy citizens. With Tristan, Maran takes the controversial stand that some limited drug use may actually be helpful in the process of self-discovery. Through Mike, readers see the failure of the adult AA model for teens who are not ready to embrace change. With Zalika Maran observes that a diagnosis of drug addiction is often only a "partial diagnosis"--a means to get a troubled teen into treatment that inevitably ignores a host of family, socio-economic, and educational problems. Threaded throughout remains Maran's personal longing to understand why and how her own son could have fallen prey to drugs; and how he was lucky enough to return sober. --Patrick O'Kelley --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Maran (Class Dismissed) was herself the mother of a teenage drug abuser; she learned the hard way that there are no easy answers to the questions "Why do kids use drugs?" and "How can we help them?" "Nearly two-thirds of the teenagers in America today do drugs before they finish high school-one-third of them by the time they're in eighth grade," and none of the current programs, from DARE to detention camps to jails, have worked. Maran studies three leading treatment approaches by following three particular teenagers in care. The Center Point adolescent program separates kids from their families and friends to break bad habits and focus on behavior modification. The Phoenix Academy program keeps kids connected with their community and uses small classes, individual mentoring and AA/12-step participation to target addiction. Drug Court combines monitoring by court professionals with an after-school program of group therapy sessions, sports and drug testing. Unfortunately, the bottom line with youth programs-and these are better than most-is that they're hard and kids don't want to do them, so they run away, and there's no enforcement of participation. Indeed, none of Maran's subjects stayed with their programs-they all lapsed. Still, Maran learned enough to make some recommendations for improving teen care, outlined at the book's end. This is an insightful, compassionate look at the mistakes we are making with our teenagers. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Read this book, but take the author's theories with a grain of salt. The accounts of the teens' experiences are well worth reading, and the author makes some trenchant observations as well.

She usefully distinguishes between drug use and drug abuse, which far too few commentators do. However, she relies on too few and too biased sources for information about the "teen drug epidemic" and about the course of addiction. Another concern I had about the book was that the subject she chose to follow through drug court appeared not to be an addict. Although this subject had serious problems (she ran away from home and worked as a prostitute, beginning at age 12) and both used and sold drugs, based on what is reported in the book she was not the kind of compulsive user who really qualifies as an addict. Although her story is interesting, it does not offer a fair evaluation of drug court programs. This subject was put in drug court as a last resort, not because it offered her the kinds of help she really needed. More troubling, some of Maran's thoughts about teen addiction are not borne out by the evidence in her own book (let alone the other data available). At several points in the book, she questions whether teenagers can really be "addicts," and/or whether it is useful to teach kids with drug problems that addiction is something they will have to deal with for their entire lives. While she makes a good point that "forever" is a difficult concept for kids to grasp, that fact does not justify sugarcoating the truth. Kids need adults to tell them the unvarnished truth, even when the truth is painful. Just as responsible adults would tell children with diabetes that, although we may hope for a cure, realistically it is likely they will have to deal with diabetes as long as they live, we should tell young drug addicts the same thing. (Not all users are addicts, but that does not mean addiction never occurs.) Maran's discomfort with the "addict" label and her subject in general seems to be messily bound up with her son's drug abuse, her own recreational use as a teenager, and the stigma associated with addiction. She appears guilty and defensive about her permissive parenting, even though the stories in the book teach us that authoritarian parents can also have kids who abuse drugs. She wants to believe that the teens she profiled may "age out" of their drug use, just as many young recreational drug users do, even when the kids' own stories suggest intervention is essential. She wants to believe that since she used drugs as a teen (and may still as an adult, although that is unclear) and experienced no untoward consequences, everyone else should be able to do the same. Unfortunately, life is not fair. Though most people who experiment with drugs will experience no significant problems as a result, about 10% will abuse drugs or become addicted to an extent that drug use interferes with their ability to fulfill obligations, maintain relationships, achieve goals, stay out of the justice system, and the like. Wishing it were otherwise will not make it so. Maran's thinking also appears clouded by the stigma of immorality associated with addiction. Parents, teens, addicts of all ages, and society at large would be well-served to reject this stigma at every opportunity. Even though addiction may seem to originate in "voluntary" behavior (the initial experimentation with drugs), virtually no one

sets out to be an addict, and no one is served by the moral opprobrium associated with addiction. Perhaps if the moral connotations could be stripped away, Maran would be more comfortable with the "addict" label. If not, she could refer to the problem as "abuse," but it is unconscionable to let readers believe that, with time, the abuse/addiction may magically go away on its own.

I read this book from a similar point of view as that of Maran--as the mother of a teen pulled into this vortex. According to every single checklist out there on "parenting to prevent drug use," my husband and I pass with flying colors. So what happened? That was my motivation for picking up this book. I disagree with her statement that the drug use of my generation was somehow more "rational," given the threat of Vietnam duty and such. This generation has equally "rational" reasons for tuning out--the possibility of the draft, bleak job outlooks and any number of other valid concerns. I had trouble with the book until I moved beyond that premise and accepted the points her unconventional approach uncovered. Flawed or not, she followed real kids struggling with real problems, which makes for compelling reading. She intersperses their stories with an assessment of the problem and the various solutions. I am inclined to agree with her final assessment as to the real causes for the current crisis, and am hopeful that flawed or not, the right eyes have read her book and might work for change. Following the stories of the three kids she befriended takes us into the worlds of these individuals, and for that, the book is worth the time spent to read it. She suggests changes in public policy with which I agree, but gives little to individual families trying to sort out and address similar problems given the state of affairs today. If you're hoping to find answers for your own particular situation, you won't find that, but you will gain insight into the mindset of many kids today that leads to taking such risks with their future.

As a social services professional, former educator, and parent, I've had my fill of simplistic "solutions" offered by career politicians and professional opportunists to the complex and systemic problems related to drug use and abuse by adolescents. Ms. Maran weaves the stories of three struggling teenagers in with social science, research, insights, and her own personal experiences in a way that will convince readers that we're all responsible for part of the problem and all capable of participating in a search for solutions. I hesitate to suggest anything is a "must read" or "must see," but if you care about our children or our American society, you need to read this book and experience the sense of urgency and purpose that may come to you at its end. If you read this book you'll reach the conclusions that: 1. We're failing our children as a nation; 2. There's nevertheless hope; and 3. You can do something to make a difference. Along the way, you'll feel your own

bewilderment, anger, frustration, hope, and disappointment - and you'll understand all those emotions from the point of view of the kids, families and caretakers caught up in drug abuse.

Being the mother of a child who is addicted to drugs has been the most painful journey imaginable. In my search for answers, I have run the gamut from counselors to drug rehabs to other parents living this nightmare. I wish Dirty had been available to me five years ago. Meredith Maran writes about the three kids in this book as a non judgmental observer who brings very human stories to life, as well as some ground breaking ideas about what we ALL can do to stem this epidemic. The stories of the main characters (who Maran chose from 3 different treatment modalities) are so compelling, and told with love, affection, and concern so often absent in the lives of kids like Mike, Zalika, and Tristan. Often kids like those portrayed have disconnected from family. Maran makes us recognize the humanity and value of these children. Even if you are not directly impacted by teenage drug addiction, you will find Dirty a great read.

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