

Fentanyl, Inc.: How Rogue Chemists Are Creating the Deadliest Wave of the Opioid Epidemic

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A remarkable 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

A deeply human story, *Fentanyl, Inc.* is the first 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. "A whole new crop of chemicals is radically changing the recreational drug landscape," writes Ben Westhoff. "These are known as Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and they include replacements for known drugs like heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, and marijuana. They are synthetic, made in a laboratory, and are much more potent than traditional drugs"—and all-too-often tragically lethal.

Drugs like fentanyl, K2, and Spice—and those with arcane acronyms like 25i-NBOMe—were all originally conceived in legitimate laboratories for proper scientific and medicinal purposes. Their formulas were then hijacked and manufactured by rogue chemists, largely in China, who change their molecular structures to stay ahead of the law, making the drugs' effects impossible to predict. Westhoff has infiltrated this shadowy world. He tracks down the little-known scientists who invented these drugs and inadvertently killed thousands, as well as a mysterious drug baron who turned the law upside down in his home country of New Zealand. Westhoff visits the shady factories in China from which these drugs emanate, providing startling and original reporting on how China's vast chemical industry operates, and how the Chinese government subsidizes it. Poignantly, he chronicles the lives of addicted users and dealers, families of victims, law enforcement officers, and underground drug awareness organizers in the U.S. and Europe. Together they represent the shocking and riveting full anatomy of a calamity we are just beginning to understand. From its depths, as Westhoff relates, are emerging new strategies that may provide essential long-term solutions to the drug crisis that has affected so many.

Ben Westhoff is an award-winning investigative reporter who has covered stories ranging from Los Angeles gangsta rap to Native American tribal disputes to government corruption. He is the author of two previous books: *Original Gangstas* about the birth of West Coast rap, and *Dirty South* about the southern rappers who re-invented hip-hop. He has written at length about culture, drugs, and corruption in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Rolling Stone*, the *Guardian*, *Village Voice*, *Vice*, *Oxford American*, and elsewhere. Praise for *Fentanyl, Inc.*:

"Our 25 Favorite Books of 2019"—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"Best Books of 2019"—*Buzzfeed*

"Best Nonfiction of 2019"—*Kirkus Reviews*

"50 Best books of 2019"-Daily Telegraph

"Best Nonfiction Books of 2019"-Tyler Cowen

"A really fascinating book on a terrifying subject."-Joe Rogan

"Timely and agonizing . . . [Westhoff's] book is the product of a four-year deep-dive into the world of designer drugs, and it's an impressive work of investigative journalism. He interviewed 160 people and visited laboratories all over the world; he even infiltrated a pair of Chinese drug operations."-USA Today

"A history lesson on American drug use and drug laws, a crash course in chemistry and neuroscience, a multifaceted portrait of addiction, and a look at how harm reduction programs can atone for the failures of the War on Drugs . . . A finely woven and accessible analysis of the connection between university chemistry professors, dark web sales, drug cartels, law enforcement, and the dealers and addicts dependent on it . . . Westhoff is a skilled and empathetic biographer, and this gift serves the composite of the dealers, users, and bereaved of Fentanyl, Inc. . . . It's in this focus on the human cost of the crisis, of empathy over criminalization, that this accomplished book feels most urgently important."-St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"Excellent . . . Readable and alternately engaging and chilling in its account of the development, deployment, and devastating consequences of NPS . . . Politicians, police, and the public continue to debate how to handle the use of psychoactive substances in our culture and legal system. Westhoff's Fentanyl, Inc. should be required reading for anyone who wishes to contribute to a knowledgeable discussion."-Winnipeg Free Press

"An exhaustive history of the development and rise of the drug at the center of the opioid crisis . . . Where the book really shines is in Westhoff's ability to get inside the lives of his characters . . . A feat of reporting [and] an important book that arrives at a key juncture in the opioid crisis."-New York Journal of Books

"A sucker-punch of a read, cinematic in scope, zooming in to scenes around the world- undercover in a drug factory in China; with the cartels in Mexico; among middle-class youngsters in Dallas dying in droves."-Daily Telegraph

"The most frightening book of the year, and it's mandatory reading . . . Epic . . . This is a story about people, and Fentanyl, Inc. features a roster of villains and victims who stray far from movie archetypes."-Dig Boston

"Setting Fentanyl, Inc. apart from most other books that focus on the supply-side of illegal drugs, Westhoff smartly avoids pro-drug-war narratives that push for an intensified law-and-order response to the proliferation of more potent synthetic drugs . . . The War on Drugs and misguided law enforcement efforts have not stemmed the spread of fentanyl,

but instead have contributed to its takeover, Westhoff carefully explains."-Filter

"Extensively reported and vividly written . . . Westhoff elevates his impressive examination of the opioid epidemic by reporting on the U.S. government's failed war on drugs and the promise of innovative 'harm reduction' policies that recognize that 'Just Say No' is a losing proposition."-National Book Review

"Westhoff looks at the new wave of synthetic drugs that are taking the opioid epidemic to a whole new deadly level. He managed to go undercover into one of the many labs in China where these drugs are being manufactured, and the results of his research there and elsewhere are terrifying . . . Anyone who is interested in learning more about the opioid crisis, or has read Dopesick, is going to want to check this out."-Omnivoracious, the Amazon Book Review

"An information-packed work of reporting that traces the rise of designer drugs, including synthetic and/or more dangerous versions of weed, acid, and heroin, the last of which gives the book its title. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that's chemically similar to morphine and heroin, is the top cause of fatal drug overdoses in the United States. The most illuminating parts of the book are those that reveal the business practices of Chinese labs that supply illicit fentanyl to U.S. dealers. These labs are a source of death and destabilization for our country, American officials say, while Chinese leaders contend that it's on us to deal with Americans' appetite for the stuff."-Francie Diep, Pacific Standard

"The author seamlessly blends past and present in his profiles of Belgian chemist Paul Janssen, who was responsible for fentanyl's initial development in 1959; police officers; politicians; LSD drug kingpins; and St. Louis street dealers . . . Perhaps most compelling is Westhoff's undercover infiltration of several rogue Chinese drug operations . . . Drawing material from official reports, drug databases, scores of interviews, and years of personal research, Westhoff presents an unflinching, illuminating portrait of a festering crisis involving a drug industry that thrives as effectively as it kills. Highly sobering, exemplary reportage delivered through richly detailed scenarios and diversified perspectives."-Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"Westhoff explores the many-tentacled world of illicit opioids, from the streets of East St. Louis to Chinese pharmaceutical companies, from music festivals deep in the Michigan woods to sanctioned 'shooting up rooms' in Barcelona, in this frank, insightful, and occasionally searing exposé . . . Offers a truly multifaceted view of the landscape of fentanyl use and abuse. The disparate narrative strands he weaves together-including tragic stories of drug users, straightforward analysis of the history of opioid use, tension-filled episodes of drug runs and supplier meet-ups, and the humane and hopeful work of the 'harm reduction' movement-all come together to provide a more complex understanding of the rise of, and response to, the opioid epidemic. Westhoff's well-reported and researched work will likely open eyes, slow knee-jerk responses, and start much needed conversations."-Publishers Weekly

"Will assist policymakers, activists, and general readers in understanding better how to

respond to the drug crisis that is only more intractable now."-Library Journal

"So many substance abuse books are a mix of hysterical in tone and a disappointing 'paint by numbers' in their execution, but [Fentanyl, Inc.] really stands out for its research, journalism, and overall analysis . . . It is also a great book on China, and how China and the Chinese chemicals industry works, backed up by extensive original investigation . . . Definitely recommended."-Tyler Cowen, Marginal Revolution

"In Fentanyl, Inc., Ben Westhoff lays bare the twisted history that led to opioids wreaking havoc on twenty-first century America. If you want to understand the bloody cycle of addiction and death gripping the nation, you need to read this book."-Ioan Grillo, author of El Narco and Gangster Warlords

"This is an exceptionally useful and well-timed book. I hope anyone concerned about this era's new addiction epidemic will read it and put its messages to use. Ben Westhoff very skillfully combines pharmacology, politics, law enforcement, and gripping international intrigue in his account of America's number-one public health problem. I hope Fentanyl, Inc. is widely read and influential."-James Fallows

"Through his courageous reporting Ben Westhoff takes us to the heart of the problem. In Fentanyl, Inc., he shines a light on the human wreckage and damage caused by the most powerful and dangerous of the opioids, fentanyl and its derivatives. He shows us how addiction, mislabeling, purposefully or mistakenly mixed drugs lead to tragic ends. The drug is often created out of factories operating with the permission of the Chinese government. To solve this epidemic, we must understand it. Make no mistake; the fentanyl problem is a global issue. Fentanyl, Inc., is a must-read, pulling the curtain back and showing us how this human tragedy occurs and how insidious and addictive a drug can be."-Katherine Tobin, Ph.D., Former Member of the U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission

Praise for Original Gangstas:

"This may be the best book ever written about the hip hop world."-S. Leigh Savidge, co-writer and Oscar nominee, Straight Outta Compton

"[Adds] fresh detail to the oft-told stories . . . [A] history that won't settle for easy heroes or villains."-Rolling Stone

"An impressive and exhaustive look inside the real world of the pioneering group that brought gangsta rap to the masses."-People

"A provocative, multifaceted portrait of essential rap pioneers . . . As raw, authoritative, and unflinching as the music Westhoff's narrative chronicles."-Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"An unforgettable history of the last time music was ever really dangerous."-Stephen Witt,

author of How Music Got Free

Praise for Dirty South:

"Dirty South is a must-read for anybody interested in hip-hop's ever-growing role in America's cultural consciousness."-Forbes

"Packed with lively reporting and colorful social history . . . Doesn't shy away from the bigger questions. Westhoff grapples with Southern rap's troubling racial politics and takes on the critics."-Rolling Stone

"Even if you only barely recognize the names in the full title . . . you can still understand and enjoy Ben Westhoff's new book."-Seattle Times

"A fascinating exploration of the musical and personal terrain of what has come to be known as the Southern sound of rap."-Publishers Weekly

"Westhoff offers an excellent introduction to hip-hop in the South that will be informative and enjoyable for both newbies and those familiar with Southern hip-hop . . . A great introduction to Southern hip-hop, and a fun book for those familiar with the genre and its artists."-Library Journal

Other Books

Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth-Century Mexico. This work brings together a new generation of drug historians and new historical sources to uncover the history of the drug trade and its regulations. While the US and Mexican governments developed anti-drug discourses and policies, which criminalized both high-profile traffickers and small-time addicts, these authorities also employed the criminals and cash connected to the drug trade to pursue more pressing political concerns. The politics, socioeconomic relations, and criminal justice system of modern Mexico has been shaped by standing public and covert state policies as well as by the interaction of subnational trajectories of drug production and trafficking. The essays in this study explore this complicated narrative and provide insight into Mexico's history and the wider contemporary global drug trade.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ . The Making of a Global Drug (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Ben Westhoff, Fentanyl, Inc. How Rogue Chemists Are Creating the Deadliest Wave of the Opioid Epidemic (London: Scribe, 2019), 26. Zsusa Gille and Seán Ó Riain, ..."