



Accentuating her negatives

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Decades have passed since the publication of Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, which made the case for the illuminating potential of some drugs. So much misery and so many wasted lives have resulted from addiction that the subject has been appropriated by psychologists and other experts who claim to know what causes and cures the addictive personality.

Undaunted by the myriad theories of rehabilitation that swamp the bookstores, Kathryn Harrison shows that the novel remains the most powerful vehicle for exploring the inner workings of the unwell mind. In her second novel, *Exposure*, she analyses with unflinching compassion and a clinical honesty the nature of addiction, and shows how the habit always damages and eventually replaces life itself.

Her central character, Ann Rogers, is a successful videographer; like the author she lives in New York. She is married to an equally successful renovator of landmark buildings. Her husband is kind and appears to treat Ann with unflinching respect and patience. But Ann does drugs. She injects herself, daily, with insulin and then follows up with a dose of "crystal" ("speed"). The mixture of the two drugs creates havoc with her system, but also the perfect state of mind for Shoplifting.

Ann's actual life, her husband and her work offer her a very tepid pleasure; but her habits surrounding the drug-taking offer her ecstasy. She is as infatuated with the absence of the drug as with its presence, as if in the waiting for pleasure may lie salvation. The moments when she is high are almost experienced as hangovers, for they are over almost before they begin.

As we proceed deeper into Ann's mind, we learn of the secret quest behind the addiction. Ann's fulfillment arrives in the aftermath of the drug, in the near-death state that graces her, the moment when all pain, ends. For Ann, this death-like State returns her to her only moments of communion with her late father, the photographer Edgar Rogers, who made his name by picturing his daughter, naked and feigning death.

In one of Ann's imaginary letters to her father which punctuate the narrative she recalls: "I longed for a wound that showed. I used to fantasize that you beat me – you who never touched me except to turn my head this way or that — I imagined that you beat me until I was black and blue. Because I wanted wounds, stigmata ... I wanted my pain manifest."



But lest we should lay the blame on Edgar Rogers for being the cause of his daughter's drug habit, Harrison takes us still further back in time, to Edgar's own father, who earned his living taking photos of dead children as mementos for their grieving parents. The possibility of transcending this destiny is slim, in Harrison's sombre world view. Ann's chances of recovery are far outweighed by her desire to be faithful to and loved by her father, who was "unable to translate suffering into love".

It is only when an Edgar Rogers retrospective opens at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that she is again confronted with the voyeuristic images of her father's infatuation with her. As if drunk on the memory of his abuse of her, she heads straight for a last binge of self-destruction, involving, as always, the drugs and the shoplifting. At long last, her pain is made manifest. She is caught in Tiffany's stealing jewellery. She is known publicly now. The wound shows.

The cure will lie in Ann's ability to "translate suffering into love", to imagine within herself the capacity to give what was never given to her, Salvation lies in the powers of her imagination, for the drugs, rather than enhancing her imagination, merely suppress it and return her to the facts of her childhood.

Harrison navigates her way through her most chilling and abusive characters without stooping to assign blame. Rather, she marvels at the real culprit – the talent that the human spirit possesses for preserving familial traditions, be they salutary or fatal.

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