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Top of the heap: Helen Keane

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By Ekaterina Anderson and Maria Cecilia Dedios



For this installment of “Top of the heap,” we spoke to Helen Keane, senior lecturer in sociology and gender studies at the Australian National University, who recommended a number of books and articles about addiction, drugs and alcohol.

Helen Keane

As a sociologist in the business of producing knowledge about addiction and drug and alcohol use, I like to read fiction which deals with these topics. It's not that I think any one type of writing has privileged access to the truth, but I do think the best fiction writing can communicate something unique about desire, habit and passionate attachments (and the predicaments that can arise from these attachments). Two works of fiction which I have read and re-read with pleasure and admiration are Denis Johnson's short story collection [Jesus' Son](#) (St Martin's Press, 2009) and A.L. Kennedy's novel [Paradise](#) (Vintage, 2005). Both works employ an episodic first person narrative which captures the highs and lows of psychoactive dependence. I like the authors' unsentimental and clear-eyed compassion for their protagonists (who do behave very badly) and the humour and sense of the absurd which enlivens both texts.

Jesus's Son is narrated by a young man adrift in the 1970s United States. His frequently surreal experiences include lot of drinking in bars, drug deals, a car crash, an abortion, violent crime and ultimately a job in a nursing home where he begins to feel at home and starts 'getting a little better every day'. The writing is both deadpan and poetic. A [1999 film adaptation](#) is also worth watching.

Paradise takes the form of an extended monologue in which Hannah, a downwardly mobile Scottish woman in her thirties provides an entertaining but grim account of her attachment to alcohol. There are blackouts in strange hotel rooms and stints in hospital and rehab, but also a tender and erotic affair with a fellow drinker. Hannah is skilled in self-justification but also insightful about her condition. She tells the reader that being a drinker is a full-time job that requires constant work, 'like being a miner or a nurse'.

A book which elegantly combines fiction, memoir and cultural history is another on my re-reading list. [The Smoking Book](#) (University of Chicago Press, 1999) by Lesley Stern is a brilliant exploration of craving, attachment, renunciation and what happens to our sense of self when are forced to give up the things that make us who we are. It is a book about addiction, but in the broadest sense. In *The Smoking Book* habits of smoking, eating, loving, writing and remembering are all constitutive of subjectivity.

Smoking (and the status of nicotine as drug and medicine) is one of my current areas of interest. It has been wonderful to see social science literature expand to include ethnographic approaches which are not limited

to reiterating the harms of smoking (although they do not deny these harms). Geographer Qian Hui Tan has recently published an illuminating series of articles about smoking as a spatial practice which exemplifies the possibilities of this kind of research: '[Towards an Affective Smoking Geography](#)' (*Geography Compass*, 2012); '[Smell in the city: Smoking and Olfactory Politics](#)' (*Urban Studies*, 2013); and '[Smoking Spaces as Enabling Spaces of Wellbeing](#)' (*Health & Place*, 2013). By locating her study of smoking in the field of sensory urbanism and examining relations between smokers and non-smokers in the specific spaces of contemporary Singapore, Qian moves beyond the familiar frameworks of health, addiction and stigma.

Finally, I'd like to mention a recent article which shares with Qian's work the imaginative and felicitous combining of theory, method and analysis which is reinvigorating drug and alcohol studies. In '[The Missing Work of Collaboration: Using Assemblages to Rethink Antidepressant Action](#)' (*Contemporary Drug Problems*, 2014) Kim McLeod takes on the vexed question, 'how do anti-depressants work?' Drawing on the Deleuzian notion of assemblage allows her to shift the focus away from the depressed individual and their chemical or social deficits, and instead re-imagine recovery from depression as 'collaborative, connective labor' which involves human and non-human entities. She illustrates how this collaborative process works through her 'research encounters' with three depressed people. These encounters, which include materials such as wellbeing charts, participant-generated photographs and conversations, form a methodology consistent with the ambitious theoretical framework. While conceptual innovation is in itself fascinating, I'm always delighted by work like this which demonstrates the usefulness of theory.

[Helen Keane](#) is a senior lecturer in sociology and gender studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. Her research focuses on drug and alcohol use, including pharmaceutical, recreational and illicit drugs (and the relationships between these categories and forms of use). She has a particular interest in understandings and practices of addiction, and is the author of [What's Wrong with Addiction?](#) (New York University Press, 2002). Her co-authored book with Suzanne Fraser and David Moore, [Habits: Remaking Addiction](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) re-examines addiction in an era of neuroscience and expanding pathologies of compulsive consumption.

Image: Sigmar Polke, [Menschenbrücke](#), detail, 2005.

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