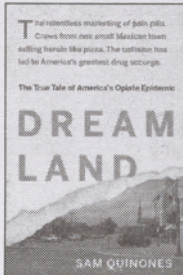


# The marketing of a drug scourge

*'Dreamland' explores how residents of a small town in Mexico built a heroin-trafficking enterprise on the back of pain-pill addiction in the U.S.*



**Dreamland**  
by Sam Quinones

**BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT**  
STAFF WRITER

**W**hen black tar heroin first reached Portland in the 1990s, you could buy it much like you would buy a pizza. Call a number, give an address and wait for a dealer to show up on your block, hiding small bags of dope in his mouth.

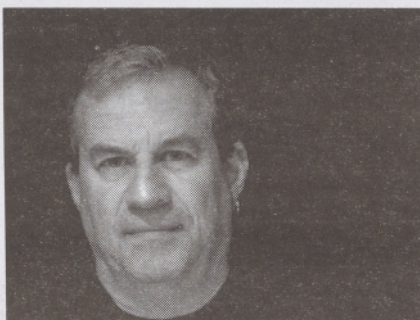
By the time the 2000s rolled around, this new, convenient way of selling black tar heroin was standard in midsize cities around the country — Charlotte, N.C.; Columbus, Ohio; Huntington, W.Va. — that had previously never been heroin towns. On top of that, black tar heroin overdoses were reaching epidemic proportions. The masters of this delivery system, young men from the a small rancho in Mexico, became known as the Xalisco Boys.

In his new book, "Dreamland," seasoned journalist Sam Quinones tells the story of how the marketing ingenuity of the Xalisco Boys along with the relentless marketing and prescribing of opiate painkillers, combined into a perfect storm of drug abuse, addiction and overdose that continues to keep America captive. Quinones, a veteran Los Angeles Times crime reporter, has spent years reporting on the drug trade, gang violence and Mexican immigration. In "Dreamland," he combines hours of interviews and

painstaking research with his gift for storytelling to weave a compelling tale of how America descended into and endures a dizzying and devastating opiate epidemic. Quinones chatted with me by phone from his home in Los Angeles about the Xalisco Boys, America's conflicted relationship with opiates, and the pain of addiction.

**Ann-Derrick Gaillot:** *How did your journalistic work lead you to investigating this story and writing a book about it?*

**SAM QUINONES**  
VETERAN REPORTER  
AND AUTHOR OF "DREAMLAND"



**"I thought to myself, this is an amazing story. That one small town could be this major source of our heroin in the United States was mindboggling."**

**Sam Quinones:** Years ago I was a crime reporter in Stockton, Calif., and one thing I learned about was black tar heroin because the local cops and the DEA told me that heroin in the Western United States always came from Mexico and was only black tar. I went down to Mexico after working in Stockton. When I was down there, I did a lot of study of and writing about immigration. So that was part of my background when I did the story. After living in Mexico, I went back to the United States and I was placed



PHOTO BY LUCY NICHOLSON/REUTERS  
*Black tar heroin from Mexico has been linked to an increasing number of deaths in the United States.*

on a team of reporters and my job was to write about how drugs were trafficked once they came into the U.S. side of the border. As I was doing that, I found a series of stories about people dying of black tar heroin overdoses in Huntington, W.Va. So I called up the police department there, and they said well, all our dope comes out of Columbus. So I called up the Columbus DEA, and they began to tell me this interesting story about these guys driving around the town selling heroin and how they have a delivery service system. (The DEA) would arrest these guys, begin operations against them, and then three days later, a week later, two weeks later, they'd be replaced. It was this continual problem. I began to write a bunch of different guys who had been arrested. I think I must have sent out about 15 or 20 letters and nobody responded for a while until one guy called me back who had been a telephone operator in this system and had been arrested. He said they are from a small town called Xalisco. And that opened up an amazing bunch of possibilities, that there could be one town where every man in the town is actually a drug trafficker. And then it got even better because he said they don't only go to Columbus, and he could name off dozens of cities where they were selling, all across the country. And I thought to myself, this is an amazing story. That one small town could be this major source of our heroin in the United States was mindboggling. That was the background to how I

understand what the story was when this guy in Columbus began talking about it.

**A.G:** *It's in line with a lot of your past work to focus on the stories of people like the Xalisco Boys, who don't get a lot of widespread attention. Why was it important for you to include the story of the pharmaceutical companies, as well?*

**S.Q.:** Well, as I got into writing about the Xalisco Boys, the other question that their presence or the presence of their dope in Huntington, W.Va., brought up was how is it that there's so many heroin addicts in Huntington, W.Va.? I just always thought of heroin as being in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City, Baltimore, places like that. What's it doing in West Virginia?

And I realized as time went on that I was actually writing the second half of the story. The first half of the story was how a revolution in U.S. medicine had taken place with regard to the use of opiates in the treatment of pain.

On one hand, pain specialists and pharmaceutical companies were convincing Americans that (an opiate painkiller) is how you treat pain and this is a safe thing and it's virtually non-addictive. That was a big, big part of it. And on the other hand you have the classic street drug dealers in the form of the Xalisco Boys, who are masters of marketing — who understand the power

See **QUINONES**, page 5