

Medical, Criminal, or Public Health Problem? Substance Use, Health Care, and Children's Literature

Many young adult novels testify to the pain of substance use disorder. Some focus on addiction as a personal psychological illness; some, like Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, address how drug use causes ripple effects for family members; and still others, like Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, treat substance use as an issue that involves a whole community both in the problems it causes and in the solutions it demands.

This multiplicity of approaches to substance use mirrors the shifting status of substance abuse disorder in U.S. public discourse and policy. Substance use is situated at the nexus of the criminal justice system, the neo-liberal health care system, and the public health system, and is variously treated as a racialized problem of law, as a personal medical diagnosis requiring coverage for treatment, and as a subject for communal responsibility and protection akin to fire safety. Current debates over health care reform, including calls for a single-payer health care system, sometimes address pertinent issues of price controls for prescription medications, access to rehabilitation services, and availability (or overprescription) of substitute medications such as suboxone. Nevertheless, discourse about drug use in some ways points out the limitations of our current approaches to health care. Many critics call for drug use to be treated as a public health issue rather than as a legal issue; yet what does this mean in a culture where we approach health as a series of personal medical issues, in the midst of a broader society that causes stress and injury? At the same time, as children's literature often highlights, addiction is also a searing personal struggle requiring individual treatment.

I contend that as a whole, American children's literature insightfully situates substance use at the intersection of criminality, public health policy, and medicalization, but most individual novels tend to limit their attention to one side of the triangle. My goal as a part of this roundtable on health care is to open discussion on issues of health care access that may not ever be fully addressed by health care reform alone.