

# The Addiction Memoir

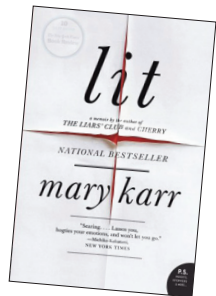
BY ELIZABETH GONZALEZ JAMES

If the genre of addiction memoir had a beginning, it would likely have been *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* by Thomas de Quincey. Published in 1821, this spiraling account details the author's wanderings through London while suffering laudanum-induced hallucinations, and it catalogs, in elegant prose, the giddy highs and crushing lows of opium addiction. One hundred years later, Jack London recounted his struggle with alcoholism in *John Barleycorn: Alcoholic Memoirs* (1913), and Aleister Crowley wrote a thinly fictionalized account of his heroin addiction in *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1922). As drug use became more widespread in the 1950s and 1960s, dozens of literary accounts of addiction and excess surged through the public sphere, ranging from the poetic—*Junky* by William S. Burroughs (1953)—to the sensational—*Go Ask Alice* by Beatrice Sparks (1971), which was initially presented as a true diary.

Authors write addiction memoirs for different reasons. Koren Zailckas (*Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood*, 2005) wished to “offer a younger perspective” (Gothamist.com) and correct popular misconceptions about why young women choose to binge drink. Poet Mary Karr (*Lit*, 2009) turned to memoir writing because she was newly divorced, lacked a car, and “needed the cake” (*The Paris Review*). Perhaps in response to the immediacy of reality television and social media, memoirs frequently top the best seller lists and readers have a seemingly insatiable appetite for lurid tales of hard partying and Saturday nights that stretch on forever.

Beyond this prurient fascination, however, fans of this genre, many of whom have grappled with addiction themselves, find tragic heroes in the pages of memoirs as compelling and as memorable as any in a novel. Critic Laura Miller writes, “a good memoir is the closest thing you can get in book form to the unvarnished presence of an actual human being, unencumbered by the artifice of fiction” (*Slate*).

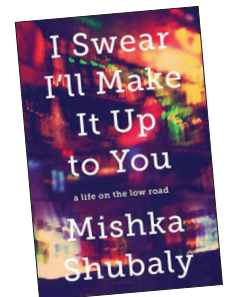
The field of addiction memoir is vast—it would be easy to write on books about alcoholism alone—and in the interest of covering many different types of addictions we've limited our scope to just a few books per category. The following list is broken up by type of addiction with a special section devoted to celebrities who have written addiction memoirs, an understandably crowded field. The books highlighted promise comedy and tragedy, nemesis and catharsis, and are all deeply, deeply human.



## ALCOHOL ADDICTION

Mary Karr wrote the book on memoir writing (*The Art of Memoir*, ★★★ Nov/Dec 2015) and is largely responsible for the genre's explosion in the last two decades. In *Lit* (2009), Karr's third memoir, she details how the alcoholism that plagued her mother (depicted in *The Liar's Club*, 1995) finally caught up with her around the time she married and gave birth to her son. Karr's story begins shortly after she leaves her family's East Texas home and follows her as she surfs in California, falls in love with poetry at college, and meets her future husband at graduate school in Vermont. But the demands of working, motherhood, and marriage are great, and Karr finds herself stashing liquor bottles around the house and sneaking drinks in between changing diapers. After years of struggling, she assents to visit Alcoholics Anonymous, which leads to her unlikely conversion to Catholicism. Karr's prose is highly charged and funny, and it sways to a distinctly Texan rhythm that is magic on the page, even as she is laying bare her biggest flaws.

Mishka Shubaly, like Karr, brings an unflinching wit to *I Swear I'll Make It Up To You: A Life on the Low Road* (2016), a story that would be unbearably grim in less capable hands. As a teenager Shubaly gains admission to the prestigious Simon's Rock, only to witness a school shooting there. To compound the tragedy, within hours Shubaly's father abandons his family, and the young man soon plunges into a 20-year marriage to alcohol and painkillers. He chronicles his descent with the lyricism of a musician, which Shubaly is, and ultimately finds salvation through ultrarunning, where he competes in 50 and 60 mile races. Shubaly, unlike many others, conquers his addictions without a 12-step program. Perhaps, as he puts it, he has simply replaced “one form of masochism with another” (*Guardian*).

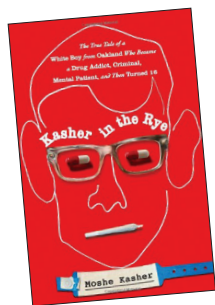


## DRUG ADDICTION

In *Blue Days, Black Nights: A Memoir* (2004), we meet Ron Nyswaner shortly after he's been nominated for an Oscar for his screenplay, *Philadelphia*. Following this success, Nyswaner is left scarred by emotional problems, caring for his elderly parents, and seeking an escape. Enter Johann. Johann is a liar, a hustler, and a crack addict, and Nyswaner follows him into a hellish year of paid-for sex and back-

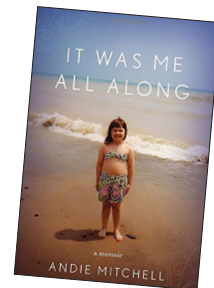
alley crystal meth use, all in the search for love and understanding. And just in case a wayward reader might expect a Hollywood ending from this screenwriter, the book opens with Johann's funeral. Nyswaner's style is sardonic, and it is easy to imagine him narrating his story as a camera pans across the lush lawns of the Hollywood elite, but his deeply drawn characterizations leave an indelible impression on the reader. You know these people. They are not that different from you.

About 350 miles away, in a starkly different part of California, Moshe Kasher battled his own demons. His brilliantly titled memoir, *Kasher in the Rye: The True Tale of a White Boy from Oakland Who Became a Drug Addict, Criminal, Mental Patient, and Then Turned 16* (2012), details the standup comedian's tumultuous childhood with an unsparing eye ... and tongue. Raised by deaf parents who divorced when he was nine, Kasher was brought from New York City to Oakland by his mother, where they subsisted largely on food stamps, while his father remained in New York and dedicated himself to Hasidic Judaism. Kasher started taking LSD at the age of 12, was kicked out of four different schools, suffered through years of psychoanalysis, and finally, at 16, decided to clean up, though he rejects the phrase "rock bottom." "This idea of a guy waking up in a hotel room with \$60,000 and a dead hooker," Kasher says. "It's exciting, but it's not as scary as the idea of having a thousand degrading moments and not realizing it until you've been in this grind for months" (*LA Weekly*).



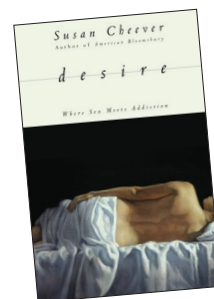
addict once said that a true coke addict knows when there is cocaine in the house. ... Well, I always know when there is fried rice in the house" (*The Hungry Years*).

Food blogger Andie Mitchell was overweight her entire life. At 20 years old and 268 pounds, she feared she would follow in the footsteps of her father who weighed 350 pounds and died of a stroke at 40. So she lost the weight—135 pounds in one year!—but was left feeling empty, depressed, fearful, and completely obsessed with food. *It Was Me All Along: A Memoir* (2015) follows Mitchell from Boston to Rome and back and catalogs her struggles with food addiction and body acceptance, concluding with the young woman finally achieving balance between satisfying her sweet tooth and eating an entire birthday cake.

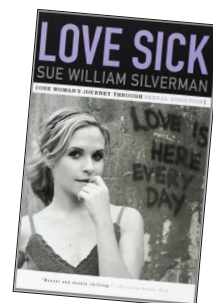


## SEX ADDICTION

Memoirist Susan Cheever has tackled many subjects: she discussed her struggle with alcoholism in *Note Found in a Bottle: My Life as a Drinker* (1999); she created waves when she revealed that her father, celebrated writer, John Cheever, was a closeted homosexual in *Home Before Dark* (1984); in 2008, she wrote publicly about her addiction to sex in *Desire: Where Sex Meets Addiction*. The latter book is "a straight look about some crooked feelings," as Cheever puts it, and to that end, she attempts to identify what addiction is, what causes it, and what we can do about it. She combines neurobiological studies with her own personal history in a confessional tome that some reviewers pointed out raises more questions than it answers.

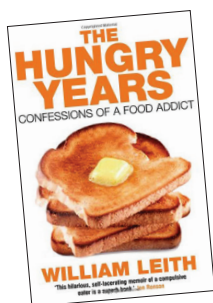


Sue William Silverman's memoir, *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction* (2001), focuses on the 28 days the author spent in a rehabilitation facility for sex addicts. Silverman shares her struggle against self-destruction and her quest to feel worthy of love after suffering 14 years of sexual abuse at the hands of her father, a story further detailed in *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (1996). This memoir is emotionally raw and often difficult to read—readers will not find Silverman's story more palatable through humor—but it is deeply inspiring and sheds light on the dark interior



## FOOD ADDICTION

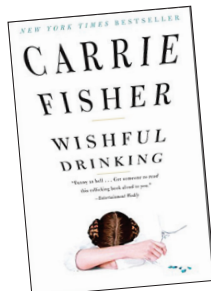
"I think it is accurate to say that William Leith invented a new kind of journalism: that which makes the reader say, 'I can't believe he just admitted that'" (*Guardian*). British writer William Leith's *The Hungry Years: Confessions of a Food Addict* (2005) combines journalism with confession as he leads the reader through his life in real time, and the writing is as immediate as the author's cravings. Leith's addiction to food is only the most recent manifestation of his tendency to binge: he likens his favorite foods to cocaine and alcohol, both of which he has previously enjoyed to excess. "Some famous



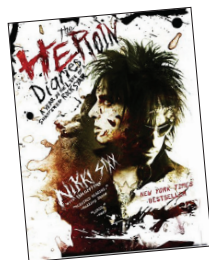
of an addiction, making it a valuable book for anyone with a family member battling his or her own dependency.

## CELEBRITY MEMOIRS ABOUT ADDICTION

Carrie Fisher's unexpected passing in December 2016 brought to light the actress's decades-long struggles with addiction and mental illness, which she had chronicled with her characteristic wit in *Wishful Drinking* (2008). Adapted from her one-woman show of the same name, *Wishful Drinking* is Fisher's life story—from her childhood as a “product of Hollywood in-breeding” to her failed marriage to Paul Simon, her alcoholism, her diagnosis of manic depression, and her use of electroconvulsive therapy. She speaks frankly about her addiction without a hint of self-pity. Heavily illustrated and even more heavily funny, this book will delight fans of Fisher, fans of old Hollywood, and anyone who enjoyed her brilliantly acid novel, *Postcards From the Edge* (1987).



Drugs and rock 'n roll are so enmeshed as to be cliché, but Mötley Crüe bassist Nikki Sixx's lauded memoir, *The Heroin Diaries: A Year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star* (2007), embraces the association. The *Rolling Stone* reviewer noted, “Nikki Sixx does so much heroin in this book it should have come in an aluminum-foil dust jacket.” This memoir is taken from Sixx's diary entries spanning the year between 1986 and 1987, when Mötley Crüe was at its apex and Sixx's life was a bleak cycle of drugs and paranoia. But to round out what would be a repetitive and meandering narrative, Sixx includes a Greek chorus of sorts as a counterpoint to his diary entries: Guns N' Roses guitarist, Slash; former band manager, Doc McGhee; and onetime Prince acolyte, Vanity; among others chime in throughout the memoir to reflect on their long, strange trips 20 years before.



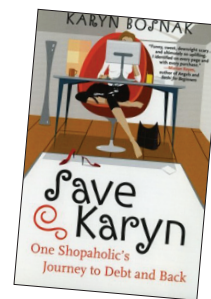
## OTHER ADDICTIONS

In *Born to Lose: Memoirs of a Compulsive Gambler* (2005), Bill Lee describes how, in the third grade, he gambled away his cherished baseball card collection and how, as an adult, he graduated from feverishly playing the stock market to losing everything at the blackjack tables in Las Vegas. Lee traces his problems back to his violent childhood in San Francisco and believes his addiction even predates his own birth: his father was sold as a young boy to cover his grand-

father's gambling debts. After trying and failing numerous times to control his gambling, Lee finally seeks the help of Gamblers Anonymous, and the book details his difficult recovery in clean, lucid prose.

Exercise bulimia is the focus of Peach Friedman's memoir, *Diary of an Exercise Addict* (2008), which delves into the obsessive workout regimen and eating disorder that almost took her life. After a difficult breakup in college, Friedman set out to take charge of her life by taking charge of her body. She began an exercise program that quickly ballooned into thrice daily workouts and an intake of only 800 calories per day. Conflating losing weight with feeling good, Friedman dropped below 100 pounds and was at risk of cardiac arrest before she was able to seek recovery.

Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic novels (2009–2016) have sold millions, and readers never tire of their favorite overspender as she shops her way through relationships, marriage, childbirth, and beyond. But would a real-life shopping addict be quite as endearing? *Save Karyn: One Shopaholic's Journey to Debt and Back* (2003) by Karyn Bosnak is a lighthearted, if somewhat shallow, memoir about how Bosnak shopped her way into \$20,000 in credit card debt (incurred through such extravagant purchases as \$800 lingerie). Rather than face the music, she chose to create a website, [www.savekaryn.com](http://www.savekaryn.com), where she could panhandle electronically. Bosnak touches occasionally on the causes of her shopping addiction—low self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive tendencies—but the memoir focuses mostly on her crafty plan and its efficacy: she repays her debt in only five months. “The bilious irony,” noted the *Kirkus* review, “is that she's made a bundle on film rights for overspending on ‘a bunch of designer crap.’”



### Further Reading

- SIRENS: A MEMOIR** | JOSHUA MOHR (2017)
- THE GILDED RAZOR** | SAM LANSKY (2015)
- I LEFT IT ON THE MOUNTAIN: A MEMOIR** | KEVIN SESSUMS (2015)
- DRUNK MOM: A MEMOIR** | JOWITA BYDŁOWSKA (2013)
- UNWASTED** | MY LUSH SOBRIETY | SACHA Z. SCOBLIC (2011)
- PORTRAIT OF AN ADDICT AS A YOUNG MAN: A MEMOIR** | BILL CLEGG (REVIEWED 2010)
- HIGH ON ARRIVAL: A MEMOIR** | MACKENZIE PHILLIPS (2009)
- LOVE JUNKIE: A MEMOIR** | RACHEL RESNICK (2008)
- BEAUTIFUL BOY: A FATHER'S JOURNEY THROUGH HIS SON'S ADDICTION** | DAVID SHEFF (2007)
- COMEBACK: A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER'S JOURNEY THROUGH HELL AND BACK** | CLAIRE FONTAINE, MIA FONTAINE (2006)
- A PIECE OF CAKE: A MEMOIR** | CUPCAKE BROWN (2006)
- DRINKING: A LOVE STORY** | CAROLINE KNAPP (1996)
- PERMANENT MIDNIGHT: A MEMOIR** | JERRY STAHL (1995)
- THE BASKETBALL DIARIES: THE CLASSIC ABOUT GROWING UP HIP ON NEW YORK'S MEAN STREETS** | JIM CARROLL (1978)
- ZOO STATION: THE STORY OF CHRISTIANE F.** | CHRISTIANE F. (1978) ■