

## Book reviews

**Fast Lives: Women who use Crack Cocaine.** By Claire E. Sterk. Pp. 242. (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1999.) US\$ 19.95, ISBN 1-56639-672-7, paperback; US\$ 59.50, ISBN 1-56639-671-9, hardback.

Crack is a highly addictive form of cocaine, sold in rock form rather than the more expensive powder. Because of its relative inexpensiveness it is available to a far wider section of the population than powder cocaine, which retains its reputation as 'Yuppie sherbet'. In the USA crack is strongly associated with social deprivation and its use is particularly common in African-American communities. For these reasons the drug is loaded with moral and social symbolism, with its metaphors of welfare dependence, racial conflict, violent crime, crumbling social and institutional fabric, lawlessness, hopelessness and community breakdown. It is interesting that cocaine has come to symbolize two opposite ends of the social spectrum. During the 1980s cocaine was considered to be the 'designer drug'. It represented the dominant, individualistic consumer ethic of the new rich. In its crack form it has come to represent the underbelly of the *laissez faire* 1980s: poverty, social exclusion, inequality, rampant crime and loss of community.

Studying drug use among women is important, as it is a phenomenon that is often denied. The roles of mother and junkie are seen to be especially incompatible, but there are many women who live both roles. Those who have to combine these apparently incongruous roles receive little sympathy and support. 'Crack mothers' – women who have children while they are addicts, and whose children are often born addicted – are not seen as real people trying to live their lives in trying circumstances but as symbols of all that is wrong with America. The crack mother becomes a cipher, encapsulating social and familial breakdown. As a result of this, individuals are stigmatized and have difficulty accessing support, either institutional or familial.

Sterk examines the lives of women who use crack cocaine, and has carried out an impressive amount of fieldwork in some very difficult and challenging situations. She used a variety of qualitative methods, including participant observation, focus groups, interviews and group discussions. Her investigation focuses on a number of important issues. These include how women crack users generate income; their relationships with partners and others; combining the role of mother with that of addict; the prevalence of AIDS and other risk factors; and their experience of violence.

The cliché is that female crack addicts will do anything for a hit, such as exchanging sex for a few dollars' worth of rocks. In fact, the women Sterk worked with were involved in a wide variety of income-generating activities. Many were on welfare, some had jobs in the formal economy, and many were also engaged in illicit activities. These included prostitution, but several women had established themselves as 'Queens of the Scene', occupying significant positions in the drug hierarchy.

Sterk has gathered some very rich and valuable data. Here is one Black woman talking about racial differences: 'Black women are different. We are strong, not like those white ladies . . . Most of the white sisters don't know how to make it on their own'.

It appears that addicts draw some of their identity from their ability to use the drug and cope with the milieu surrounding it. Black addicts, like this one, read into it a racial difference. For them, you have to be quick-witted and tough to survive in the situations they find themselves in. They can handle it, so they must be tough, and especially tougher than white women. Perhaps of a piece with this attitude, they also tend to view feminism and psychotherapy as an introspective, backward-looking practice of middle class white women.

*Fast Lives* is a well-written work about a hard-to-access group. Throughout, Sterk exhibits a deep empathy with her research subjects, who she has clearly worked hard to gain the trust of. Their opinions and accounts of their situations come through very strongly, which is a tribute not only to the effort the author put in to gain access, but also to her clear and focused writing style.

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