
Book review

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The alchemy of meth. A decomposition

by Pine, J

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Spring is late this year in the Netherlands. Only now young green leaves start to show their radiance of spring and in the evenings the first shrieks of swallows returning from Africa can be heard.

Harry

When Harry turned 60, he had a party and, at the occasion, a close and good colleague gave him a present, Jason Pine's (2019) ethnography *The Alchemy of Meth. A Decomposition*. This is not Harry's normal cup of tea, as he is more into animal–human relations in nature conservation. The chances that he would have come across this ethnography by himself are, therefore, slim. Intrigued and maybe a bit surprised by the colleague's choice for this particular present, Harry nonetheless started reading it and, slightly to his surprise, did not need any perseverance to finish it. It was a good read and an interesting play with the format of an academic ethnography. The book paints an empathetic picture of the meth scene in Missouri and its decomposing consequences for all sorts of social structures, from family, to friends, to partners. As Harry considers himself also, like Jason, an ethnographer, he appreciates the courage and the deep levels Jason is prepared to go to in his fieldwork and participant observation. The resulting ethnography surely shows that Jason tries to make sense of this meth community from the inside out.

Mike

When Mike had suggested Harry that we write this review in the style adopted by the book, he had not thought it through. As a former editor of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, he has always encouraged authors to develop different styles. All efforts to play with the norms of academic writing are to be welcomed, but carrying it off isn't easy. And writing in a way that echoes the book under review underlines the effort that it takes. Reading Jason's book, he seeks to show rather than tell. He follows fictionalized characters as they grapple with the consequences of meth, but what is it that he is telling us? In part, that is our responsibility as readers. However, if Jason's aim is to write affectively in order to be effective (as he suggests in his afterword), I am not sure it is clear what effect he hopes to have. I finish the book intrigued but a little unclear.

In Liverpool, the blossom is still on the trees, but is beginning to fall. The birds – finches, tits and sparrows – are nesting, the hedges shaking with their ceaseless activity.

Harry

Harry's delight is reading ethnography from cover to cover. He just loves the genre just as Steve Lubet (2017) does. In his enthusiasm for this ethnography, he expected that, toward the end, things would come together, one way or another, or that there would be some more general reflections, "take home messages", or some other form of apotheoses or fitting finale.



In his reading of the book, none of the four happened. The end is dominated by The Tin Woodman, who returns three times, but is a rather odd character next to the *dramatis personae* that Jason has presented at the beginning and has brought to life throughout the book. So, Harry felt as if the candle fizzled out a little, which on the other hand might be considered a fitting finale to ethnography on *The Alchemy of Meth, A Decomposition?* – decomposition which is emphasized in the play on the words “chimaera” and “chemaera” (186), the chimaera being a composed hybrid mythological figure. The chemaera being a chemical composition, but a decomposing one because the combined chemical components create something that is “leaky and diffuse” . . . “ontological murk that is us” (186).

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The spring, late this year in the month of May, is the season of composing and growing new life. If Harry would have written this review in the autumn, the very word decomposition might have spoken more strongly to him because of the falling of dead leaves.

Mike

The metaphor, at the heart of the book, comparing cooking meth to alchemy, is an intriguing one. Occasional diversions into the works of Roger Bacon and Paracelsus suggest the modern recipes, using household items readily available in retail outlets, can change base items into gold – or at least into hope in a world largely devoid of it. Items are readily available except, that is, for the all-important pseudoephedrine found in cold medicines. Sales are restricted and purchasers must present ID. This is one of the trails the police officers follow, for the volume of purchases will be an indication of involvement in the manufacture of meth. Are the heroes, in this story, the police? Or perhaps it is the cooks, as they risk life and limb to offer their potions to those in need? We might think of the pharmaceutical start-up company, developing a cold relief that does not rely on pseudoephedrine, as the real alchemists? Or are they the destroyers of those moments of hope to which tweakers cling? You decide.

Was the book a good present for Harry on his 60th birthday? Mike would say so.

Harry

Harry is usually happy with any gift, but this one was special. Because of his 60th birthday? Because it was from his colleague and friend? Or that Harry’s party was without meth?

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