

Books by the Bay: Author Erin Marie Daly's 'Generation Rx' lays out our ongoing crisis with opiate drugs

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Addiction, memory, survival and the tales of a real-life medical examiner: These new nonfiction works by Bay Area authors span a range of eye-opening subjects.

n "Generation Rx: A Story of Dope, Death, and America's Opiate Crisis" by Erin Marie Daly (Counterpoint, \$26, 368 pages) Erin Marie Daly, a reporter based in San Francisco, lost her younger brother, Pat, to a heroin overdose in 2009; he was 20 years old and addicted to the prescription painkiller OxyContin. In this informative, often wrenching memoir, she charts the events that led to Pat's death -- his casual drug use as a teen, deepening substance abuse, the inevitable arrests and attempts at rehab. She also recounts, in chapters titled "Denial," "Anger," "Bargaining," "Depression" and "Acceptance," her own responses to his downward spiral.

Along the way, Daly applies her journalistic skills to researching today's addiction epidemic, interviewing experts, addicts and their families. The statistics she lays out are shocking. In 2011, 4.2 million Americans aged 12 or older reported using heroin at least once. Increasingly, prescription opiates such as OxyContin pave the way, and when sources for those highly addictive drugs dry up, users often turn to heroin as a readily available alternative. Daly, who spent five years covering the pharmaceutical industry for the New York-based newswire Law360, started her own blog, Oxywatchdog (www.oxywatchdog.com) in 2009. "Generation Rx" includes a list of resources and a timeline of America's history with prescription painkillers and heroin abuse: It begins in 1898, when the Bayer Co. released heroin as an over-the-counter cough suppressant. Daly will read from the book Aug. 28 at Diesel Books in Oakland, and Sept. 8 at Book Passage in Corte Madera.

- "Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner" by Judy Melinek, M.D., and T. J. Mitchell (Scribner, \$25, 272 pages) Two months into her new job as a forensic pathologist at the New York City office of Chief Medical Examiner, Judy Melinek became one of 30 doctors asked to identify victims of the Sept. 11 attacks. She and her husband, co-author T.J. Mitchell, have since relocated to San Francisco, and they describe that case and others in detail. It's gritty, real-life stuff -- although word has it that Warner Bros. is already developing the book as a dramatic series.
- "The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload" by Daniel J. Levitin (Dutton, \$27.95, 512 pages) TMI (Too much information) isn't just a catchphrase. According to neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin ("This Is Your Brain on Music") it's our way of life. Every day, says the author, millions of us lose our keys, glasses, scraps of paper with important phone numbers -- a result of information overload. The fault is in our brains, which have not kept pace with the rapid changes in our world. What's changed is the sheer amount of information out there -- an avalanche of data we're tasked with processing on a daily basis.

It can be overwhelming, but Levitin, who divides his time between Montreal and Orinda, doesn't think it's hopeless. The book makes practical suggestions -- filing systems, multiple computers assigned to handle specific tasks and frequent evaluations of the "usefulness" of incoming information. Yet "The Organized Mind" is more than a self-help book, and Levitin's insights into sleep, time, socializing and decision-making are profound. Some of his best writing is devoted to the science of memory, including the way similar recollections can become composite ones, while highly emotional events can create memories that are entirely false. He cites the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001; in a recent survey,

80 percent of Americans recalled watching TV coverage of the North and South Towers hit 20 minutes apart. In fact, video of the North Tower wasn't broadcast until Sept. 12. "Memory," he writes, "is not just a replaying, but a rewriting."

Levitine reads at Town Center Books in Pleasanton on Aug. 22.

- "Supersurvivors: The Surprising Link Between Suffering and Success" by David B. Feldman and Lee Daniel Kravetz (HarperWave/Harper Collins, \$25.99, 256 pages) Can traumatic experiences actually make us stronger? Psychologists David B. Feldman and Lee Daniel Kravetz, both South Bay residents, think the answer is yes. The secret to healing, they suggest, is action. The survivors they profile experienced trauma in different ways, but all demonstrated enormous resilience: Alan Lock, the first blind man to row across the Atlantic; Clemantine Wamariya, who survived the 1994 Rwanda massacre and was appointed by President Obama to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council; Cindy Sheehan, motivated by her soldier son's death to become a leading anti-war activist; and Nobel Prize winner Betty Williams, whose witnessing of violence in Northern Ireland led her to start a new movement for peace.

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