Opium: Reality’s Dark Dream. By Thomas Dormandy. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2012. 376 pp. US $40 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0300175325.

On the book’s cover, Thomas Dormandy’s Opium: Reality’s Dark Dream is advertised to “encompass the entire history of the world’s most fascinating drug.” But at fewer than 400 pages, the book actually reads more like a story, or a series of stories, about opium’s role in various societies. The problem with storytelling, however, is that the whole thing hinges on the use of language. Awkward wording, poor timing, and meandering digressions can sabotage an otherwise compelling story. These mistakes are often fatal — not merely distracting — because by jarring and tormenting the readers, the storyteller alienates his audience, so they rebuff his attempts to convince them.

Unfortunately, Dormandy’s book is loaded with these sorts of mistakes. Pretentious language is his worst offense, which clutters and confuses some sentences beyond recognition. Twice for example, he remarks, “The profits could be luminous,” perhaps meaning great or, alternatively, light. Nearly as exasperating is his penchant for overly dramatic language and halting, jerky sentence fragments, both of which leave the reader feeling emotionally manipulated.

The real problem with Dormandy’s collection of stories, however, is that it lacks a true audience. The book is too much for the interested layman, who would be buried beneath an avalanche of petty details, important only to dedicated scholars. (For example, in one story, Dormandy remarks that a woman’s “past history was unremarkable,” then spends nearly a page recounting her upbringing and education.) At the same time, the book is too unscientific for any academic, thanks to its sarcastic tone, dramatic hyperbole, and random, bizarre outbursts against capitalism (in one instance he attributes economic depression to “as usual, the greed of entrepreneurs in New York, Boston, and Chicago.”) Meanwhile, blatantly factually incorrect statements — inserted for dramatic effect — explode like landmines underfoot, further rattling Dormandy’s credibility: “In the wild, it [the white poppy] is most likely to flourish in earth that has recently been dug, ploughed, or most effectively, torn apart by shrapnel.” These emotional exaggerations provide the book with its energy and excitement, which — perversely — means that the captivating, memorable lines of the text are the dramatic falsehoods.

Finally, Dormandy’s selection of which stories to tell may leave some readers surprised and disappointed. For example, he spends three chapters discussing the influence of opium on Romantic-era literature, but only eight pages on Afghanistan and two on methadone. The largest and best portion of the book examines opium’s ancient role as an analgesic prior to the emergence of treatments for many diseases, when doctors often had nothing to offer their patients but pain relief. But even here, all the above criticisms apply, and the stories regularly disintegrate around their writing.

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Pharmacology: An Illustrated Review. By Mark A. Simmons. New York: Thieme; 2012, 414 pp. US $39.99 Paperback. ISBN 978-1604062052.

Pharmacology: An Illustrated Review is the pioneer publication of Thieme’s newest series of basic science review books targeting medical students. The introductory section covers general principles ranging from first pass metabolism to receptor structures to considerations in elderly or pregnant patients. Subsequent chapters are divided by organ systems. Each chapter contains a brief overview of the physiology, followed by drugs organized by indication, target, and structural class. Information is given on each drug’s mechanism of action, pharmacokinetics, uses, and relevant side effects, or contraindications. Questions in the style of USMLE Step 1 as well as answers and explanations are listed at the end of the chap-
ters. There are more online, and access to the website is included.

The text is overall succinct in bullet point form, but the scheme of organization has inevitably added redundancy in the system. For example, information about barbiturates is presented three times under anesthetics, anticonvulsants, and drugs of abuse. The beautifully crafted, full-color infographics and summary tables are what really set this book above other pharmacology review books. The author should be commended for including many drugs’ chemical structures, especially when comparing agents of the same class or contrasting with endogenous chemicals. Flow charts are frequently used to delineate drug effects, making the complex feedback loops between different cells and organs easy to comprehend. The book’s successful effort to visually simplify intricate scientific information without compromising the pertinent details makes it an efficient studying aid, perhaps even superior to traditional textbooks. In addition, wide margins and liberal use of blank spaces on the pages prompt self-directed learning. Thus, although marketed for board preparation, many students may also find the book a great classroom companion.

However, several shortcomings limit the book’s usefulness in the clinical years, beyond Step 1. Brand names of drugs are never mentioned, understandably as the international publisher may sell the book simultaneously in different countries. Neither are common dosages, even when the same drug has multiple indications. Cautions and interactions relevant in clinical applications, such as the necessity of a heparin bridge during warfarin initiation and renal toxicity of angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, are also omitted. Most disappointing is that despite being published in 2012, this book does not include the most updated information on available agents. The anticoagulants section does not include dabigatran, which was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in fall 2010 and has gained much clinical traction to become the main oral agent prescribed for atrial fibrillation besides warfarin.

In summary, *Pharmacology: An Illustrated Review* is an attractive choice for learning the science of the field and passing Step 1, but it is inadequate for preparing the medical student to become an effective clinician.

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**You’re Hired! Now What? A Guide for New Science Faculty.** By Mohamed A.F. Noor. Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, Inc.; 2012. 96 pp. US $11.95 Paperback. ISBN: 978-0878939636.

I cannot speak to the accuracy of the material presented in *You’re Hired! Now What? A Guide for New Science Faculty*, as I have never been a new faculty member. However, I can attest to the colloquial language and accessibility of the text. Reading this book feels much like having a friendly faculty mentor answering your initial questions about the myriad responsibilities of a new professor. Author Mohamed A.F. Noor’s advice comes with the added benefit of not having to watch his face contort into a horrified grimace as he perceives the depths of your ignorance regarding running a lab, teaching classes, and serving on grant review panels.

Noor knows his target audience well. The book is fast and easy to read, perfect for someone already overwhelmed by a demanding new career. The chapters are clearly delineated, with multiple subheadings, a lot of lists describing key points, and the main idea of each paragraph provided in bold text, for the extra-impatient reader — just in case you only have time to read sentence fragments and can’t waste energy on both subject and predicate.

*You’re Hired! Now What?* covers topics ranging from interpersonal interactions and managing students and research technicians to keeping your CV up-to-date and competitive. A helpful set of appendices offers templates on laboratory rules, authorship policies, and appropriate student/mentor expectations. Chapter 9 was co-authored by a