

White, W. (2010). In search of recovery (Book Review) Gabor Maté. (2008). In the realm of hungry ghosts: Close encounters with addiction. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 28, 1-2.

In Search of Recovery

Gabor Maté. (2008). *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. Toronto, Canada: Vintage Canada. 465 pp. \$22.00.

Dr. Gabor Maté is exceptionally well-qualified to depict close encounters with addiction. His long-time work as a physician caring for people with addiction-related medical problems in Vancouver, Canada, provides a unique vantage point to share human stories so vividly detailed that they are painful to read. These stories have particular value for those working in the increasingly pristine world of addiction treatment who have not been exposed to the subterranean subcultures from which some of their patients are drawn. *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* achieves many things, but its greatest emotional impact is as an ethnographic study of urban addiction.

Dr. Maté offers several contributions in his latest book that will be of interest to addictions professionals. First, he illuminates the human stories—the faces and voices—behind late stage addiction, and he explains with remarkable clarity the brain disease that underlies the inexplicable behaviors that so baffle the addicted, their families, and an army of would-be helpers and social control agents. He also includes a fascinating discussion on the role of social dislocation in the etiology of addiction. The “who are these people and how did they end up this way” portions of the book are a particularly engaging and valuable read.

Second, Dr. Maté reveals portions of his own story through this book, with a particular focus on his own zones of compulsion. While these revelations underscore how the professional helper’s own use of self can enhance or interfere with the helping process, they struck this reader as a diversion from the book’s central focus. Dr. Maté’s depiction of his workaholic and compulsive CD and book buying as addictions struck this reader as a self-conscious effort to find some common, sense-making ground with people whose drug addictions are far more severe than even those commonly seen in addiction treatment centers.

The third topical theme of this book encompasses reflections on what the author views as a failed drug war and potential elements of a sane, science-based national drug policy. Readers will find particularly interesting

and provocative his advocacy of the “decriminalization of all substance dependence and the provision of such substances to confirmed users under safely controlled conditions.”

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts has much to commend it, but something quite essential is all but missing from this book. That missing ingredient is recovery. The personal tragedies and deaths in this book are so unrelenting that one is left almost gasping for hope. Only one of 34 chapters briefly attempts to take on the subject of recovery, and a chapter directed to families is strikingly silent on the processes of long-term family recovery. The last page of the book ends not with healing and hope, but with the report of the death of a woman who had continued to beg her friends to smuggle cocaine into her hospital room.

It is my most sincere hope that for his next book, Dr. Maté will shift his exceptional intellect and considerable writing abilities toward a focus on long-term addiction recovery. Dr. Maté has offered us one of the best ethnographies of addiction; what we need now are ethnographies of long-term personal and family recovery.

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