

Triggered Memories

Reviewed by Justyna Kret

The Tender Bar.

Moehringer, J.R..

New York: Hyperion, 2005. 384 pp.

The past is deeply embedded in the obscure corners of the mind. Many memories are forgotten, while others are promptly recalled with the help of a trigger—a smell, a phrase, a taste. Sometimes, the details are seemingly insignificant, but when thought about in the context of an entire event, one realizes that it is the small things which matter. This is why writing a memoir is very demanding of the writer. To be true to the experience, one must not only rely on one's own recollection, but also on the input of others.

A few decades removed from his youth, J.R. Moehringer embarks on piecing the puzzle of his past in *The Tender Bar*. Looking backwards from the rat race that is adulthood, he examines the glory days of youth, smiles because they happened, and aches because they passed.

Moehringer's biography could read like a rags-to-riches story: a boy from a dysfunctional family goes to Yale, writes for the *New York Times*, and eventually wins the Pulitzer Prize as a feature writer for *The Los Angeles Times*. Instead, the focus of Moehringer's memoir is a bar, *The Bar*, as he quite touchingly points out that, sometimes life's most important lessons are learned from the most unlikely places, from the most unlikely teachers. Moehringer writes a poignant ode to the neighborhood watering hole - the place where he finds acceptance, finds love, and most of all, he finds himself.

Moehringer's sanctuary is a neighborhood pub on Plandome Road in Manhasset, Long Island. *Publicans*, a word meaning "tavern keeper" or "bartender" was just "142 steps" from his boyhood home. With a penchant for details such as those, Moehringer painstakingly recreates the characters and the dialogue which bring *Publicans* to life. He is not overly sentimental, and is keen on spewing out the facts: the who, what, when, where, why, and how. And he truly masters the *how*. Moehringer's storytelling is simple, yet powerful, as he has meticulously researched, interviewed, and recreated each character of his boyhood. He manages to reconstruct the story of a romance which develops between the boy and the bar and tells about the charming side of bar culture. As the boy is abandoned by his father, and

is reared by a single mother struggling to make ends meet, his story develops into a tale of unusual heroes, all of whom Moehringer credits with helping him become a man. The cast of characters include Uncle Charlie, the somewhat surrogate father-figure; Steve, the bar owner; and Charlie's cronies and bar regulars which include Colt, Joey D, and Bobo. What's so appealing about drunken men, sulking patrons, "pickled people marinating in regret," and that musky odor that accompanies most taverns? Evidently, there is a lot. Moehringer's recreation of the bar atmosphere is right on, complete with the customary nicknames, which usually identify regulars by their first name and a profession, a quirky trait, or a catch phrase - Bob the Cop, Smelly, Fuckembabe. Such minor, yet vital, details allow for a sneak peak into the exclusive fraternity that is *Publicans*.

This meticulous attention to detail is what makes Moehringer's memoir so appealing: He describes the ordinary, but does it in such a way in which he gives life to the seemingly mundane. He makes a great effort in vouching for his claim that the bar was more than just a bar. He does this by infusing various facts about man's fancy for brewski, including pointing out that (unbeknownst to me) the Puritans "build a bar before they built a church" (5).

Moehringer's story is engaging, almost novel-esque at times. After all, he profiles the town served as the setting for *The Great Gatsby*. In fact, there are a number of similarities between J.R. and Jay Gatsby - namely a chase after the American dream, and, more importantly, a love affair with alcohol. In *that* Long Island novel, as one would recall, the liquor too flowed freely and a good time was the way of life. *The Tender Bar* is not just about that, Moehringer points out; for example, he includes several touching scenes with his mother. He recalls the car rides with his mother to the ritzy part of town, where mother and son would daydream about living in the grandiose mansions. As the two gaze with desire, they must soon return to their lonely reality. Soon, however, with a quick run to The Bar for a pack of cigarettes for Uncle Charlie, Moehringer exits solitude and with his first step into the bar, the nine-year old takes his first step toward manhood.

Moehringer's tale takes us on a long and bumpy rollercoaster. He moves between Manhasset and Arizona, drunkenness and sobriety, and success and rejection. Each detailed is profiled along the journey. Perhaps one of the more interesting places he stops is in an Arizona bookstore. With a Yale degree under his belt, Moehringer recounts the days of his "true" education, and fondly recalls Bill and Bud, an eccentric pair for whom he worked at the store, whom he credits for introducing him to the beauty of the written word. After a particularly moving Cheever work, he writes: "I didn't know sentences could be made like that" (117). Just as Moehringer finds art in the everyday tasks of stringing words together, we see the value in carousing along the dark wooden plank with friends and with strangers. One may not know that the bar could function like that. Yet, there is something to be learned from the goers, the drinkers. Who they are. What they drink. Why they don't. There are the little things, such as simple pub etiquette - from buying someone a drink (backing him or her up) to making every third drink on the house (often a customary procedure of "buying back"). It's friendship, it's loyalty, it's thanks. For all you have, for who you know.

Moehringer revisits his childhood home years later, a man several years “on the wagon,” who has realized that becoming a man meant kicking his frat boy habit. The bar has been renamed and that chapter of his youth is gone. Though the book has been written, Moehringer reminds all that it can always be open and one can always sneak a peak into those childhood days of bliss.

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