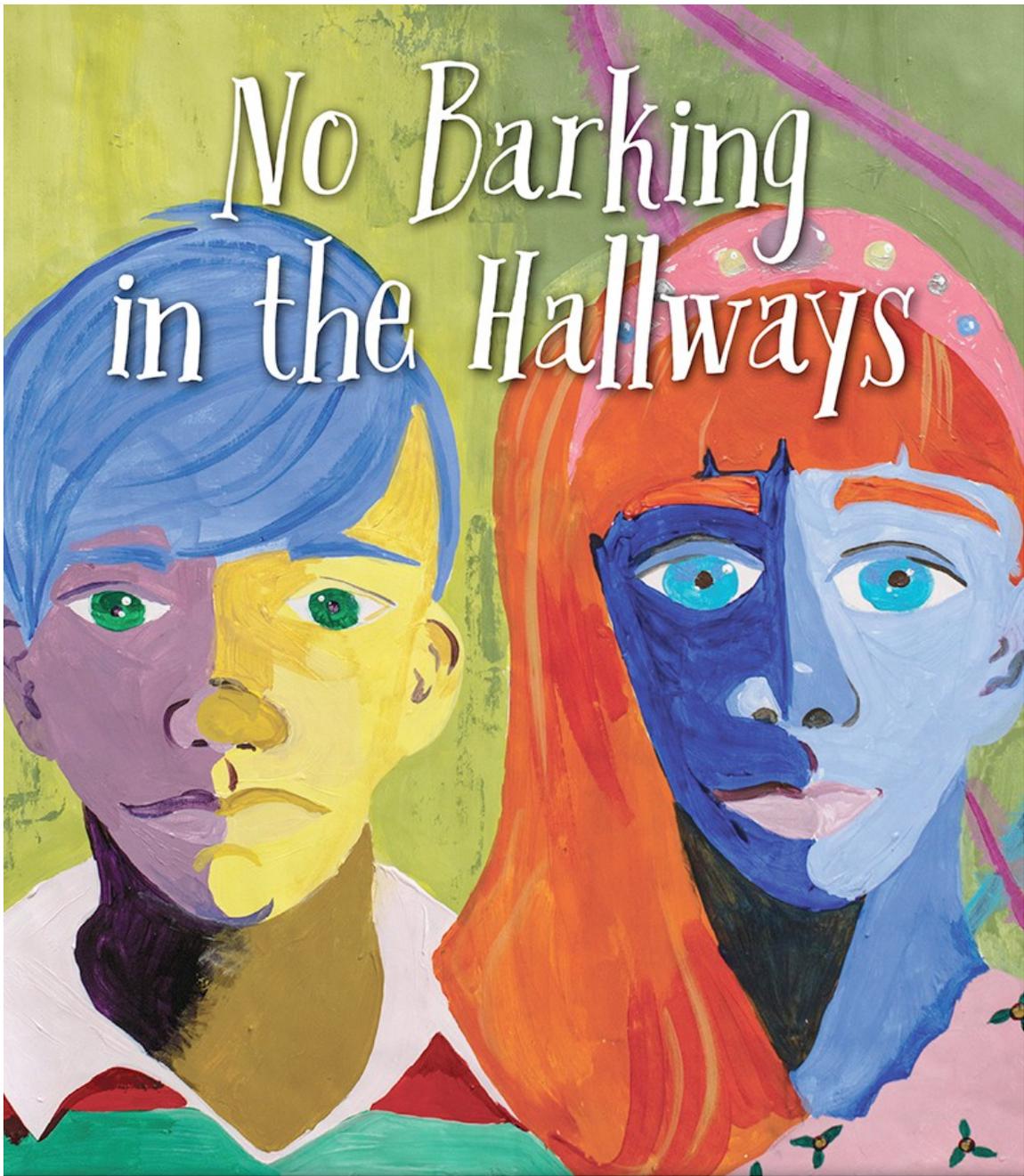


Press Kit for Ann Bracken

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Poems from the classroom

ANN BRACKEN

SYNOPSIS: *No Barking in the Hallways: Poems from the Classroom*

"Frankly, there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love once you've heard their story." Those words of the beloved Fred Rogers, star of the long-running PBS children's show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, serve as the catalyst for the narrative poems that detail my experiences as a teachers. While the voices of students and teachers are frequently absent in today's education debate, *No Barking in the Hallways: Poems from the Classroom* offers readers a window into their stories as both groups struggle to be successful in our test-obsessed culture.

In answer to the question of why so many students fail to achieve adequately, readers will discover some of the emotional baggage that many adolescents carry, baggage which interferes with their ability to focus and to learn in school. Readers discover "Zeke" and the secret reason he was so withdrawn in class, the reason he drew guns all over his books. In another poem readers meet Liam, a bright student struggling with Asperger's Syndrome and the social isolation that so often accompanies that condition.

Teachers' stories round out the picture of what is actually happening in America's data-obsessed classrooms. Teachers like Mrs. Murphy, of the title poem, "No More Barking in the Hallways," who struggles to reward her students in meaningful and respectful ways, rather than resort to the demeaning use of tokens and slogans. Teachers like Horace's teacher in "The Testing Game," trying to do the right thing for students. Readers will find many people to cheer for and many reforms that deserve questioning when they meet the students and teachers of *No Barking in the Hallways*.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Was there something specific that happened that made you decide to write poems about your students?

Ann Bracken: When I began writing this collection of student-poems, I was searching for a way to connect with severely learning-disabled and emotionally-disturbed adolescents who were my students in a large psychiatric hospital. I found that by telling their stories in the form of a poem, I discovered paths of understanding that helped me to create welcoming spaces where my students could both learn and feel safe. Even after I left the hospital job, I continued writing poems, often as a way to reframe problems I encountered—with both students and administrators. Poetry also helped me to give voice to my own observations and experiences of inequity

Q: When did you decide to become a teacher?

AB: Actually, my father decided when he offered me a deal. He said, "If you sign the teacher's pledge and promise to teach for two years, I'll buy you a car. If you don't sign, you can take the bus to school." The university I chose to attend was on the other side of town, and I'd been riding the city buses throughout my high school years. The idea of four more years on a transit bus was appalling. I had thought of being a teacher, so I opted for the car and the teacher's pledge. When I decided to major in French, I dreamed of teaching for a few years, travelling to France, and then perhaps working at the United Nations as a translator. But that dream was short-lived. I changed majors in my

sophomore year when I discovered speech pathology and audiology. I was hooked on the idea of learning about speech and language development and working with children. As part of that program, I took many courses in psychology and education as well as linguistics and semantics. Even though I was no longer studying French, I was immersed in the field of language.

Q: You returned to the teaching profession after a twenty-year hiatus while you raised your children. How would you describe your reentry experience?

AB: Most of my early teaching experiences were in elementary and middle schools where I worked with children. When I was raising my kids, I began teaching bread-baking classes for an adult-education program, and eventually I offered sewing classes both at home at a G Street Fabrics, a fabric store in Rockville, MD, that also offers classes. About three years before I returned to teaching full-time, I had worked with a mentor who taught me a lot about nonfiction writing, and I began writing articles for a local business journal and a mental health newsletter. With those experiences behind me, though I had never taught a college-level writing class and I didn't have a background in literature, I knew that if I could teach bread-baking and sewing, I could teach writing. Because my own children were in high school and college, I was comfortable with the college-aged students. I have always enjoyed learning, so I welcomed to the challenge of mastering a new subject and creating a college-level course.

Q: Who were some of the influential teachers in your life? What did you learn from them?

AB: Sr. Miriam Jude, SSND, was my high school French teacher. She must have been an excellent teacher because 40 years after I finished her class, I was able to pick up French again and speak pretty well. Sister made the class fun right from the beginning by employing puppets to act out the dialogs we learned as part of each unit. She smiled all the time and gently encouraged all of us as we worked to master French grammar and pronunciation. I learned the value of persistence from Sr. Miriam Jude.

On the other hand, I had a teacher who struck fear in my heart and used intimidation to motivate us in Latin class—she's the inspiration for the Sr. Bertha character in my poem "Mythology." I remember how she used to embarrass us and compare us to her other classes—who were invariably much smarter. Once she even told me I belonged in the dumb group. Sr. Bertha taught me how destructive fear can be to the learning process.

Lastly, my friend Kate Schrufer taught me the value of play in the classroom. I've never known any teacher who could immerse herself and her students in any subject so thoroughly and so engagingly as Kate. For example, when she taught Greek mythology as part of the ninth-grade English curriculum, Kate had the students write personal ads from the gods and goddesses. She also designed an activity where the kids could create a product that one of the gods or goddesses could sell and then write an ad for the product. The kids had to apply what they had learned about mythology in a real-world context, so the writing was authentic and engaging.

Q: What were some of the struggles you faced as a special education teacher

working in high schools?

AB: I had two main challenges as a high school special education teacher: managing difficult behavior in the classroom and managing difficult administrators. A typical day might involve a student coming into my class and saying, “You’re old. When are you going to retire?” or “I already know how to read, so I don’t need this class.” I had to learn not to take things personally and to recognize that many of my students had a long history of school failure. By the time they got to high school, they had figured out that it was better to refuse to do the work and call me names than to risk more failure in front of their peers. After that revelation, I could usually find a way to engage the students personally and create some lessons that were challenging yet allowed them to be successful. With some students who were on the verge of dropping out, my goal would be to simply keep them in the room.

Administrators posed even greater challenges. Because I was not afraid to question some of the accepted practices in the school, I think some of my administrators perceived me as difficult. I remember one of my principals coming in for an unannounced formal observation the day after I reported a threat from a student to the police. She walked into my classroom the next morning at 7:20 am for the last observation I needed to be granted tenure. Luckily, I had everything ready, but her presence threw me. Another time I had tested several students in the high school who were reading at about the third grade level, but after working with me for a year, their reading skills had come up by about two years. The administrator would not allow the students to continue in my reading class, citing technicalities with credits. She was more concerned with the graduation numbers than with the literacy skills of the students.

Q: There is a move in society towards deprofessionalizing teaching by using scripted learning and personalized learning on computers. What do you think of these trends?

AB: Scripted lessons have no place in a classroom. Most teachers spend years learning the subject matter and designing lessons that keep students engaged. Then teachers tweak the lessons based on how well they work with a class and the interests of each new group of students. Because scripts are developed in isolation, they demean both teachers and students, and lead to boredom and even student rebellion. And students *should* rebel against that kind of awful teaching.

As for computers and personalized learning, what personalized learning actually means in practice is that students complete short, skill-based lessons and then move to the next level after they pass a computerized test. The only thing personal about that is that each student has a computer screen that they stare into. Based on child development and learning theory, children, as well as adolescents and adults, need to move to learn. They need to be engaged with the material in some kind of meaningful way and to be able to experiment. They need an emotional connection with the material—no computer can deliver that kind of personal attention. They need the human dimension to really grow and learn.

Q: You are very critical of the current regime of Common Core, standardized testing, and the over-reliance on data. What would you like to see instead?

AB: I'd like to see us admit, as a society, that when children experience trauma, poverty, and homelessness, their ability to learn is affected. Think about it: if your basic needs are not being met, if you've had an threatening or violent experience, you won't be able to give your attention to learning academic material. The idea that poverty is not an excuse has somehow gotten translated to mean that if we put children in uniforms and give them rigid behavioral expectations, they will learn despite whatever else is going on in their lives. Our schools need to be humane and welcoming places where children feel valued, safe, and appreciated.

What would such a school look like? For one thing, the building would be in excellent physical condition with enough desks, chairs, books and classroom materials. The water would be clean and lead-free. Students would have adequate recess—at least 30 minutes a day—along with regular physical education, art, and music classes. Research has shown that reducing class size has great benefits for students. Here's a summary of the research results obtained by William J. Mathis, author of "Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking: The Effectiveness of Class Size Reduction" (2016):

The research brief outlines the benefits of smaller classes in terms of student achievement, graduation rates and non-cognitive skills.

Mathis recommends class sizes between 15-18 (with room for variation based in subject), and argues that while class size reduction can be costly, it could prove to be the most cost-effective policy in the long run.

Teachers would guide student learning using hands-on experiences to explore a curriculum based on research and age-appropriate objectives. The curriculum would be decided on a state level, with each school system free to adapt it according to local needs. Art, music, and physical education would be as important to the school experience as reading, writing, math, social studies, and science skills. The Common Core curriculum, PARCC, SBAC, and all standardized testing would be eliminated. No more Teach for America. No more charter schools. Higher pay for teachers. Local control in the hands of elected school boards would be the norm. Most of all, we would be guiding our students to become thoughtful, kind, informed citizens and treat them with dignity and respect.

For more information on class size, see *Class Size Matters: a clearinghouse for information on class size and the proven benefits of smaller classes.*

<http://www.classsizematters.org/research-and-links/#benefits%20for%20teachers%20and%20students>

ABOUT AUTHOR

Ann Bracken is a writer, educator, and expressive arts consultant and the author of two collections of poetry, *No Barking in the Hallways: Poems from the Classroom* (2017) and *The Altar of Innocence* (2015), both published by New Academia Publishing, Scarith Imprint, and she serves as a deputy editor for *Little Patuxent Review*. Her poetry, essays,

and interviews have appeared in anthologies and journals, including *Little Patuxent Review*, *Bared: Contemporary Poetry and Art on Bras and Breasts*, *New Verse News*, *Reckless Writing Anthology: Emerging Poets of the 21st Century*, and *Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence among others*. Ann's poetry has garnered two nominations for the Pushcart Prize. She is the founder of the Possibility Project, which offers expressive arts and creativity workshops for people of all ages, as well as poetry and writing workshops in prisons and schools. Ann has two grown children and lives in Columbia, MD.

BOOK INFORMATION:

Published by: New Academia Publishing/Scarith Books, 2017.

ISBN: 978-0-9981477-0-3

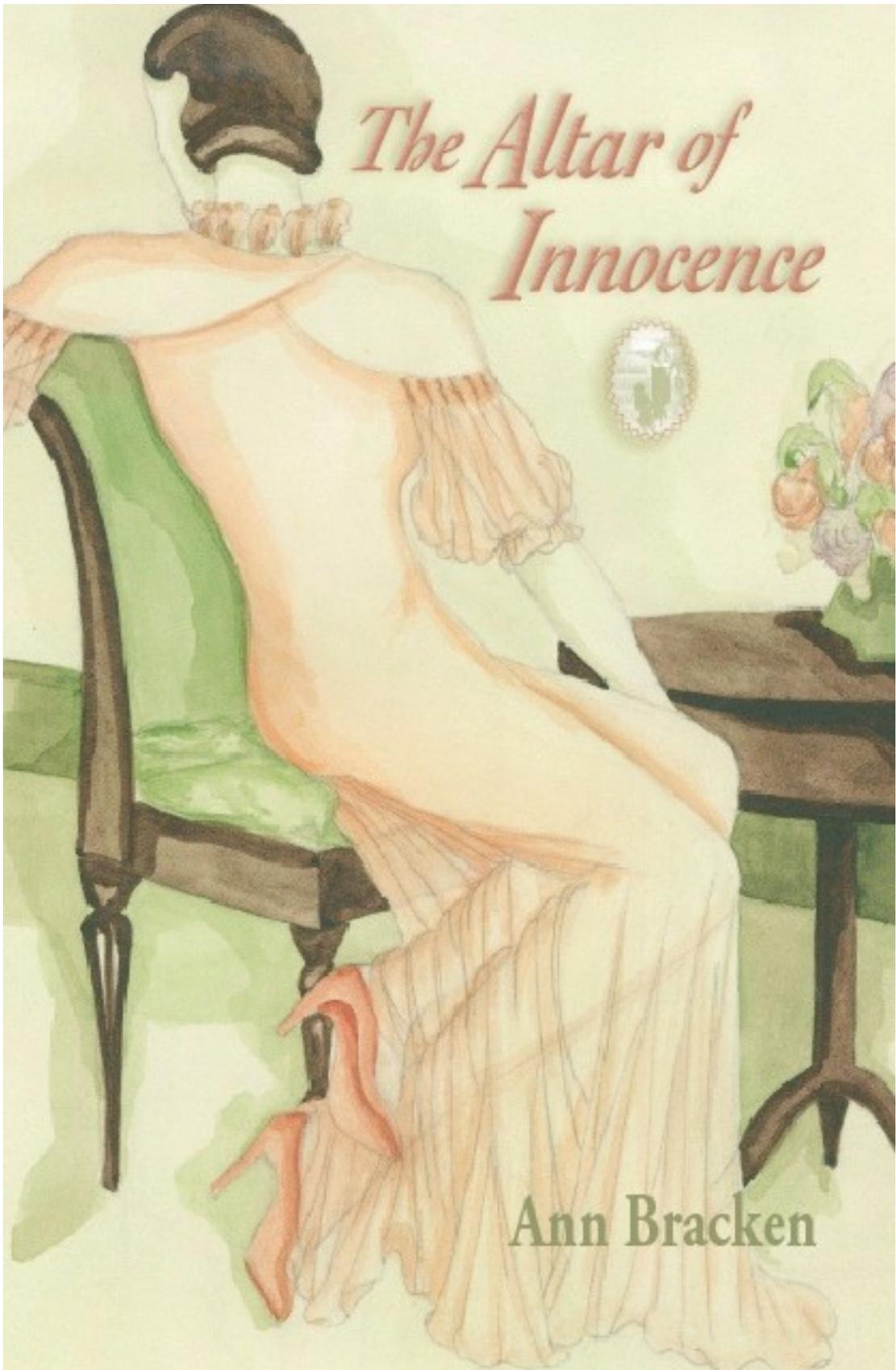
Format: Paperback, 80 pages

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Available for purchase: [New Academia Publishing](#), [Amazon.com](#), [BarnesandNoble.com](#), [Author's website](#)



*The Altar of
Innocence*

Ann Bracken

SYNOPSIS: *The Altar of Innocence*

The Altar of Innocence is a memoir written in verse about a mother who was an unfulfilled artist and her daughter who struggled to untangle the web of her mother's depression, alcoholism, and suicide attempt. As the daughter grew into womanhood, she confronted her own despair and a crumbling marriage. Deeply dissatisfied with the explanation of depression as a chemical imbalance in the brain, the daughter peered into the dark night of her own soul and undertook a spiritual journey. In order to finally claim her voice, the daughter overcame the patriarchy of the mental health system, challenged her treatment options, and navigated an increasingly difficult relationship with her husband. The poems in *The Altar of Innocence* came from the heart and a sincere desire to share a journey in the hopes that others may find courage and inspiration.

Lovely and poignant, *The Altar of Innocence* will leave you contemplating complex issues about having a voice, mental illness and compassion. The book also explores the concept of forgiveness as a way for individuals to heal from unimaginable adversity. It will leave the reader feeling hopeful.

ABOUT AUTHOR ANN BRACKEN

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BOOK INFORMATION:

Published by: New Academia Publishing/Scarith Books, 2015.

ISBN: 978-0-9906939-5-6

Format: Paperback, 90 pages

Website: www.annbrackenauthor.com

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Available for purchase: [New Academia Publishing](#), [Amazon.com](#), [BarnesandNoble.com](#), [Author's website](#)

OTHER MEDIA:

Ann Bracken [interview](#) with Aaron Henkin, *The Signal*, WYPR-FM

Ann Bracken [interview](#) with Grace Cavalieri, *The Poet and The Poem*, Library of Congress

Ann Bracken reads "[Adultery](#)" at Little Patuxent Review's Summer 2011 Make Believe Issue launch

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Do you remember your first poem? What was it about?

Ann Bracken: Well, I don't have a great track record for auspicious beginnings. I remember when I was in the second grade, my teacher asked all of us to write a poem before we could go out for recess. Because I wanted it to be a good poem, I wrote down the only poem I knew at the time—"To Christella From Her Fella"—a poem my grandfather wrote to celebrate my birth. Of course, sister knew right away it wasn't my work and she was very kind about my plagiarism. The first poem I wrote on my own was in about 1966 when I was in the eighth grade. During the height of the Vietnam War, my class became pen pals with soldiers in Vietnam, and my pen pal was a Green Beret. I wrote poem for him praising the work of the Green Berets and used the refrain "for peace and democracy and freedom"—probably inspired by that song about the Green Berets that was popular at the time. I think the poem reveals my sincerity and my innocent embrace of patriotism.

Q: You talk a lot about the healing power of journaling. What else supported you on your way to being healthy?

AB: I belonged to an informal prayer group and we met twice a month in each other's homes. I remember one time two of my friends came over on a day when I was feeling particularly hopeless and they sat like bookends on either side of me, infusing me with their strength and love. So my spiritual beliefs helped me tremendously in facing those very dark days. Additionally, David Whyte's CD, "The Poetry of Self Compassion" introduced me to some wonderful poems and stories about the gifts one can find in the darkness and the courage it takes to enter the abyss, not knowing when and how you will emerge. (*Beowulf*, *The Inferno*, Mary Oliver's "*The Journey*", "*The Wild Geese*", and David Whyte's "*The Faces At Bragha*").

Q: Tell us about the how *The Altar of Innocence* came together.

AB: The book began very simply as a look back at my mother's struggles and how they affected my childhood. My mother's journey with depression and alcoholism have shadowed my entire life, and I can remember thinking, "I'll never be like my mother." To me, that meant not being able to fully participate in my children's lives, not being able to entertain in my home, not being able to work. I still did all of those things throughout my depression and migraine. But to my ex-husband, all that mattered was that I was depressed, and I think he feared I'd suffer from a lifelong depression, like my mother did. I like to think my book is full of hope because I show how a mother's story and journey do not confine the daughter to a similar fate.

Q: You wrote in "When I Think of My Father" the following:

*When I think of my father, the rub of regret
wraps its hands around me
as if to strangle my answer.*

Tell us about your father, your relationship with him, and how your view of him has or hasn't changed over the years.

AB: My view of my father has certainly changed over the years. I remember being able to read my father's moods from a very early age and to model what my mother did—calm the waves, be nice, slip into the background. Dad loved all of us and had a sense of

humor, and he could also be very strict and stern. Now I realize the heavy burdens he was carrying and how afraid he must have been even to go to work every day, not knowing how my mother might be coping that day. As both of us aged, we were able to accept each other despite our differences in outlook and politics. I began to really enjoy time with my father and shared many wonderful days with him the last several years of his life. I miss him. He always supported my work and was proud of my poetry.

Q: You feel passionate about the use of pharmacology as it was used to treat your illness. In the poem "Diagnosis," you wrote,

*New drugs tamp me down to some arbitrary normal.
Life spreads itself before me,
daily postcards of people and plans.*

To others who are experiencing a similar haze right now, what would you like them to know?

AB: That's a tough question. I think everyone makes their own decision about how to handle anxiety and dark times. Over the years, I've come to see my anxiety as being related to past experiences which current events then trigger. When I feel anxious, I tell myself I can get through the situation, I do deep breathing, sometimes I use flower essences. I've also discovered Heart Math techniques, which I would describe as a cross between meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy.

The experience I was referring to in the poem involved doctors and therapists telling me I was hypomanic (Bipolar II) mostly because I had so much energy and could get lots of things done and because I had lots of passion and enthusiasm, strong opinions. Well, I still do. I believe I just have a higher "happiness set point" than some people and more energy and drive, but they certainly doesn't make me ill in the medical sense of the word. But no one would listen to me then because I was labeled as depressed and to express disagreement with a diagnosis or treatment could get one labeled as non-compliant.

Q: What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

AB: I think the most challenging part of writing the book was rereading my old journal. I had kept it on a shelf for twenty years and had only read bits and pieces over time, never the whole thing. In the summer of 2013, I sat down and read the entire journal and was deeply saddened by many of the things I read—things I said about myself, how I chastised myself, how my ex-husband treated me, how I responded. But the journal helped me as well because I was able to recreate incidents to tell my story by drawing on the details, feelings, and dialogs that I had written down.

Q: You cover dark topics in this book: mental illness, alcoholism, suicide, verbal abuse. How were able to find the light in these dark places and bring forth their humanness, without judgment?

AB: It's been a long journey getting here. I blamed myself for all of my failings—for suffering from depression, for feeling anxious, for staying in a verbally abusive marriage. But all along the way, I've had guides and helpers in the form of friends, therapists, and most of all, my children. I think my deep embrace of Buddhism and the acceptance of what is right now has helped me to keep moving forward with a compassionate heart. Desmond Tutu's work on forgiveness has also been extremely helpful, especially in my journey to forgive my ex-husband.

Q: "Stubborn Guests" captures so perfectly insidious voices inside one's head. Tell

us a little about this poem and where it came from.

AB: “Stubborn Guests” is what I call a gift poem—one day it just came to me and I wrote it down. Liz Gilbert, author of *Eat Pray Love*, talks about how the Muse sometimes runs by you and if you are lucky, you catch her. You have to be ready or she will visit someone else. That day I was ready. And I still entertain those “Stubborn Guests,” but not for long.

Q: What do you hope your readers take away from *The Altar of Innocence*?

AB: I hope readers will find a story they can relate to and see that no matter where you come from in your life, you can move forward, you can overcome, you can succeed. I hope they will be inspired in their own lives to keep trying and to stay hopeful.

Q: If you could have five minutes today with your mother, what would you talk about?

AB: First of all, I would hug her and tell her how much I appreciate everything she did for all of us and most of all, for always believing in me. I would praise her artistic gifts and tell her how much her paintings mean to everyone who sees them. Lastly, I’d ask her why she never told me about her dreams of becoming a fashion designer until so late in my life. Then I’d just sit and hug her as tightly as I could. Five minutes would not be long enough.

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