

# 'Altar' a poet's brave, daring confessional

BY SONJA JAMES

Special to The Journal

*"The Altar of Innocence"* by Ann Bracken (New Academia Publishing, 2015, \$20)

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Ann Bracken's *"The Altar of Innocence"* is a brave and daring volume of confessional poetry. In this slim book, Bracken explores childhood memories of her mother's alcoholism and depression as well as her own journey to overcome depression and chronic migraines. The journey of healing leads her to leave a destructive marriage and to find the voice to tell about it. In fact, finding and owning one's voice is what the book is about. In her preface, Bracken states that the collection is "a book about claiming your voice."

The volume opens with a poem about her mother. In "Helen's Choice, 1937," Bracken recreates



her mother's decision to marry her father. Her mother renounced her potential career as a fashion designer to marry her father and have children: "When potential collided with practical,/my mother chose Mark's hand."

In "Postpartum," she chronicles her mother's depression after the birth of her fourth child. Already her mother feels the need for alcohol to give her relief. She describes her mother as "Wanting the sweet relief/of wine in her

veins."

In the title poem, "The Altar of Innocence," Bracken explores the pain she and her siblings endure as her mother's condition worsens: "The children keep a silent vigil/and place their unasked questions/on the altar of their innocence."

Bracken continues to describe her mother's dependency on alcohol in "Martini Memories." In fact, this poem describes the entire family's dependency on alcohol. The poem, which tells of a family holiday being celebrated at her grandmother's house, opens with an expression of doubt: "I never understood the allure of those martinis/served with tiny green olives or slippery pearl onions." The poet then describes the inevitability of the adult consumption of alcohol:

*The holidays at  
Grandma's were pre-*

*dictable —  
always sliced carrots  
always sour cream and  
onion dip.  
And always the martini.*

The later poem "The Same" is painful to read because in it Bracken recounts her mother's attempt at suicide. In this poem, Bracken describes the day after the suicide attempt where everything is "The same except for the white gauze bandages on her wrists."

In "Intervention," Bracken describes her attempt to help her mother by telling her "All she has to do is go to AA meetings/and stop drinking." Bracken then recounts how her father sabotaged the aid: "When it's time to take her to the meeting,/Mom tells me/Daddy says I'm not an alcoholic."

Bracken then shifts modes and writes of her own turbulent marriage. In "Notes on the Table," she

describes life with her husband as "Another home made and unmade/by words on the page."

The final third of the volume describes Bracken's ordeal with her own adult depression and the psychiatric care she received. The poems "Day Treatment," "The Shock Machine," "This Is An Outpatient Facility" and "The Hopkins Doctor Diagnoses Me" chronicle her medical ordeal with depression, migraines, and a failing marriage.

The volume concludes with "Repurposed," an account of salvaging a ceramic heart once jointly owned by herself and her husband.

After the divorce, he discards the heart "on top of his piles of trash." She then rescues the object "so like my own heart/bled dry/from nights of sleeping alone/with silence sprawling between us."

As a whole, Ann Bracken's *"The Altar of*

*Innocence"* is a gripping survey of two generations of life rendered uncertain by the emotional tumult of mental illness and dependency. Like Sylvia Plath before her, Bracken triumphs by telling all. As she states in her preface, her story is her way of offering to us "a glimpse into the secret worlds that so many still inhabit today. We are never as alone as we think."

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*Sonja James is the author of "Baiting the Hook" (the Bunny & the Crocodile Press, 1999), "Children of the Moon" (Argonne House Press, 2004) "Calling Old Ghosts to Supper" (Finishing Line Press, 2013) and "The White Spider in My Hand" (New Academia Publishing, 2015).*

*Poets are invited to submit recent books for review consideration. Contact Sonja James at sonjajames@comcast.net.*

## Maryland International Film Festival coming up

HAGERSTOWN, Md. — The fourth annual Maryland International Film Festival, Hagerstown has received over 250 submissions, and the judges have announced the selections.

"We have really grown this year and we're very excited to see the filmmaker talent," said Tracie Hovey, executive director. "The board is anticipating a sensational event that will be well attended. We are incredibly thankful for all the community support that we continue to receive and look forward to another successful festival."

The Maryland

International Film Festival, Hagerstown is scheduled to run March 26-28 and will be screening more than 70 films from around the globe. Several world premieres will be screened, including two major features — "In God We Trust" and "Writer's Cramp."

"We have added a fourth venue this year, with films being shown in the downtown Hagerstown branch of the Washington County Free Library, along with the other three theaters," said Tom Riford, MDIFF-H president. "We are proud to be able to keep the festival in venues in downtown

Hagerstown. We want visitors to see Hagerstown and give them a reason to return. Offering the screenings downtown will encourage festival attendees to explore all Hagerstown has to offer."

Opening night, March 26, is at the Historic Maryland Theatre. Other venues on March 27 and 28 include the Academy Theater and the Bridge of Life Center, along with the Washington County Free Library Fletcher Branch.

Tickets are now on sale, through the Maryland Theatre box office, and also online at [www.marylandiff.com](http://www.marylandiff.com).

Films include documentaries, short, animated films, features and student films. New this year for the high school student films, MDIFF-H has asked that participating students include a Maryland landmark while shooting their scenes as part of the contest. Several films have been submitted.

Filmmakers and film lovers are coming from around the world to experience the festival.

"We have film makers from Canada, New Zealand, California, New York, Florida, throughout the Mid-Atlantic and from many other places," Hovey said.

"We are pleased to welcome again the award-winning Joe Carnahan, who will be screening his new film 'Stretch' on opening night."

Carnahan is the director of producer of several major films and television projects, including "Blacklist" and "State of Affairs."

The MDIFF-H mission is to be a platform for independent filmmakers to engage audiences, collaborate with other filmmakers and educate the community with the celebration of film. For more information about MDIFF-H, including venues and times, visit [www.marylandiff.com](http://www.marylandiff.com).

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