

1: The Redemption Of Jamison Creed | Download eBook PDF/EPUB

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But *The Recovering* changed my life. A personal story, she suggests, can be told only in the context of other personal stories and the conditions that shape them. Perhaps most importantly, the book challenges intellectual snobbery. Jamison explains the paradoxically profound and sloganeering rhetorical logic of twelve-step philosophy in ways no one has before. They are the subterranean passageways connecting one life to another. During the first weeks of the New Year, we wrote emails back and forth. JAMISON I always knew I wanted the book to function as a kind of chorus—placing my own story among other stories—rather than offering any single perspective. And the book ended up interrogating that, too—exploring the shame of memoir, especially the shame attached to the idea of the addiction memoir as an overplayed and overly familiar genre. In any case, I was passionately committed to the idea that the book would hold lots of stories, but at first I had no idea what that would look like, structurally speaking. I had to structure and restructure this book so many times, spreading pages on the floor to make myself maps through the wilderness. From early on, I knew I wanted to write about creative people who had gotten sober, or tried to—who had, in many cases, gone into recovery—and I knew I wanted to think about the relationship between their sobriety and their creativity. I also came to realize that there were even larger questions about addiction and storytelling I wanted to be asking—about the War on Drugs, for example, and the ways that certain racialized scripts about addiction have been deployed, for many decades, to justify its ongoing punitive fever. Often, with this book, I had the feeling of living in a house that kept growing all around me. It was like the Winchester Mystery House—crazy passageways kept opening up, demanding to be explored, just when I thought I was done. There have been many books written on the subject, and the addiction memoir is almost always a self-congratulatory tale of redemption. And they are the majority. The account of your relapse in *The Recovering* seems pretty matter of fact. These are often more frustrating stories, emotionally and structurally, about relapse or suicide or alienation. But I wanted very much to map the many courses addiction can take, to use multiple lives to refuse the false fiction of a single path. So much of the book is a fight against exceptionalism. You know, the process of thinking, Why is this day different from all other days? To reject this mode automatically opens up other possibilities—aesthetically, historically, existentially. I think I first encountered that quote reading your response to a question about whether you considered your work confessional. And how does the recovery ethos around storytelling—the practice of telling your story without understanding your story as exceptional—connect or resonate with the ways you have deployed your own life in your work? Selfhood was a deck of superlatives I kept reshuffling. Case studies are not personal! By using specific, singular detail, they become exemplary of something else. Writing the Acker biography, I thought about that quote again. I always want to move the backdrop to the fore. I love that notion of moving the backdrop to the fore. Sitting in rooms, listening to other people—that practice, that wonder, that intentionality, that engagement—it was absolutely connected to my evolving life as a nonfiction writer. That experience of listening was also deeply connected to research and archival work, which is to say, seeking out the stories of others, in so many shapes and forms. I come from a place of believing everyone has a bunch of stories worth telling. It was about sharing an experience that might resonate with someone else. In that sense, the less original, the better. But I was taking language and speech too literally. Reading *The Recovering*, I think I understood it for the first time. You describe talking to someone in a meeting who was living in a car and who was grateful to be able to fall back on a common phrase like take it one day at a time. How can these words—maybe familiar, maybe trite—serve as a bridge between our very different lives? So often in writing, I think specificity, rather than its absence, is what allows a reader to connect with a story far removed from her own life. That can be true in recovery, too. In the book, I call them safeguards against alibis of exceptionality. The workshop was a common locale among many of the writers whose addictions and work you describe—Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver, John Berryman, George Cain. They were by no means a

group, but they all taught or guest taught there at some point. In terms of writers who lived with addictions, the pool to draw from is vast. But then, so was the start of AA—it was quintessentially American. I lived there again in my twenties, trying to build a life with my former partner and eventually getting sober. So I felt like Iowa shaped me, and it was interesting to follow it back toward these other lives. The difference between a male alcoholic—tormented, interesting, et cetera—and a female—bad mother, negligent, slatternly, et cetera. There are no interesting ways to be a female alcoholic, which makes the lives of Marguerite Duras and Jean Rhys seem even more triumphant and vital, beyond their merits as writers. What are the different kinds of stories we tell about losing control? And how does it code differently when a woman loses control—how does it seem like selfishness or how is it falling down on the eternal job of being a caregiver? How does that diverge from the romantic gloss that can attach to a man losing control, surrendering himself to the overpowering forces of creative frenzy or metaphysical angst, with intoxication or dependence serving as barometers of that overwhelm? Like most fruitful veins of inquiry in my writing, this one began with self-interrogation—“Why were so many of the figures in my book male? One of the things I have always loved about many of your female characters is the way they interrogate gender asymmetries without getting preachy or bombastic about it. For example, the main character in *I Love Dick* inhabits a posture—romantic pursuit—that looks different when occupied by men, in whom it often looks roguish, swaggering, part of a grand tradition of aggressive courtship, and by women, in whom it is often seen as abject or pathetic. So some of the cultural residue of the early days, especially around gender, is subject to constant debate and interrogation, rather than coding as gospel. You managed to track down a few of the members who are still living and record firsthand testimonies that augment the archives. How did you become aware of Seneca, and what drew you to use them as a case study? I was immediately intrigued by his description of Seneca as a kind of duct-taped-and-glued-together site of survival, and I embarked on a year of interviews with people who had gone through it. Their stories came to constitute an important thread of the book. I also really liked the idea of choosing a community as my case study, rather than simply gathering stories from isolated individuals, because so much of recovery is about social ecosystems, rather than isolated psyches. The form of that book suggests that every biography of an individual is actually the biography of an ecosystem, or several ecosystems. Was that always part of your sense of how you wanted to approach her life and her art—or did its necessity emerge somewhere along the way? The Seneca part of *The Recovering* dovetailed with research I did for the Acker book into addiction-therapy cults of the same era. Compared to shock therapies like Synanon, the Seneca experiment seems so democratic and grounded. It allows you to illuminate the ways a psyche—and an artist—is always shaped by all these streams around her, and to explore the ways in which she brought multiple and distinct, if overlapping, selves to her various relationships and social ecosystems. No life is an island. The cross-pollination is where things get interesting. How did that community shape them, how did they shape each other? How does listening to multiple voices give a richer sense of recovery than simply listening to one? The same event gets narrated sixteen different ways. With the Seneca House folks, I wanted to look at how they had turned their own lives into stories in order to stay sober, how they thought about sobriety as a kind of upward mobility, or a productive humbling, or a reclaiming of self. And yes, absolutely—I love the big-tent quality of communal recovery. Part of what makes a meeting work is the fact that people are telling a hundred different stories, rather than the same story over and over again. Someone is telling the story of living in a van with her kid. Someone else is telling the story of losing his job as a professor. Someone else is telling the story of getting out of prison and trying to rebuild his life. Someone else is telling the story of being a drunk housewife.

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