# Raw Hope and Kindness: *The Burning Point*

Tracy McKay. *The Burning Point: A Memoir of Addiction, Destruction, Love, Parenting, Survival, and Hope.* Salt Lake City, UT: By Common Consent Press, 2017. 274 pp. Paper: $12.95. ISBN: 978-0998605210.

*Review by Mel Henderson*

When reading a good book I'll often hop online to supplement or enrich my sensory experience. This time I sought a detailed close-up for mala beads, a tactile sense of the silk handkerchief around a deck of tarot cards, an image of a gilded *ketubah*, and a sense of the gleaming stained glass medallion in the Nauvoo temple—but Tracy McKay's memoir also gave me opportunities to look up some classic songs and spend some time enjoying them through a new auditory "lens." One of the pleasures of reading *The Burning Point* is how it suggests its own soundtrack. It's unlikely that I will hear certain Bob Dylan (or Grateful Dead, or Paul Simon) songs ever again without thinking of McKay's story and re-experiencing the tenderness and courage with which she told it.

Perhaps the first challenge of writing a memoir is believing that your story is worth telling. McKay's story fosters genuine hope. She owns her story and commands it with a confidence that asserts that telling the story matters. It's powerful because there are countless women (and men and children) who never signed up for the train wreck that someone else's choices—someone they love—would make of their lives, and so many of us dearly need true, honest, accessible stories of both survival and forgiveness. We need to know it's possible to heal from the perceived shame of not being able to fix a problem for someone we love.

The (perhaps too-long) subtitle tries to touch on every aspect of the text; the story really is about addiction, destruction, love, parenting, survival, and hope. But more specifically, it chronicles her relationship with her narcotic-addict husband, and his addiction's devastating effect on their hoped-for future and the lives of their family—and then it illuminates the road back from devastation. If there is a central message in this story, it is that you are stronger than you think—but the only way to increase your strength exponentially is by being willing to ask for and receive a community of support. McKay reminds us that this is hard, especially at first. Incredibly hard. But never impossible.

One of the most striking things about this memoir is the kindness and respect with which McKay treats both her ex-husband and herself. She never sugarcoats a single moment of the struggle, but she never throws anyone under the bus, either. McKay is frank and kind when she describes her husband's battle, and she is respectful and honest about her own journey through it. When she describes his arrival to visit his children after a long separation for rehab, she says, "His clear eyes were naked, raw, no longer clouded as they had been the last hundred times [I] had seen him. The insulation of chemicals protecting him from the reality of what he had done was gone, and he stood openly before [me.] [I] couldn't look in his eyes; it hurt too much" (201).

In another passage, when McKay is in the throes of single-motherhood to three young children—one of them autistic—while pursuing a degree, keeping a home business afloat, and living more humbly than she ever imagined she'd have to, she beautifully describes the struggle against self-pity:

> I was plagued by doubts and worrying over imagined slights and conversational miscues. I wondered at my own intellect and doubted my own validity as a contributor to anything meaningful. *What was going on*? I knew better than this. Yet the malaise hung close. Narcissus beckoned. The siren's song was powerful . . . I knew better. Self-loathing

> and doubt were really no different than self-aggrandizement and ego in the underworld. Both amplified and elevated the importance of self to the exclusion of reality . . . *Snap out of it* . . . Shaking my head to clear the cobwebs, I knew the best step was to immerse myself in something physical, to get out of my own mind . . . [so] I headed downstairs to join the foam swordfight. (149)

McKay's descriptions of the acts of kindness shown to her and to her children in this season of her life are testament to the fact that healing balm is often borne to us in the hands of others. Prayers are sometimes answered through people who have time, ideas, or resources that we don't personally have access to. McKay praises friends and family who helped her with her children, who offered meals, brought their whole family to help with yard work, and especially the bishop who was able to offer her some choices for child care or schooling—opportunities she could never have created for herself at that time. She even dedicates the book to her dear friend Mo, to the two church Relief Societies that bore her through these hardships, and the women at several online resources who encouraged her writing and gave her forums for it. Readers come away marveling at the power of community, and contemplating whether or not they themselves have somehow missed an opportunity to be the sort of support these people were for McKay.

In the end, there were only two things about McKay's memoir that gave me pause—the first a craft/aesthetic concern and the second a broader social one.

Every memoirist, to greater or lesser affect, shoulders the narrative challenge that noted essayist and memoirist Phillip Lopate calls double-perspective, an approach that "allow[s] the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived . . . while conveying the sophisticated wisdom of one's current self. This second perspective, the author's retrospective employment [is] . . . *a more mature intelligence to*

*interpret the past* [emphasis added]."[5] McKay is mostly reliable in executing dual-perspective throughout the memoir, with a few interpretive lapses. For example, it's unclear when she first meets David (her future husband) what his declarations of being so impressed with her quick mind should mean to the reader. Is this shared to inform us that the author is smarter than average (*what I want you to know about me now*)? Or is it there to say she thought David was trying hard to flatter her (*what I thought he was doing then)*? Was this an opportunity to express to us that her young, searching self was drawn to a man a few years older who admired her mind (*what I think now, about myself, then*)? Or did it mean something else? Because McKay's writing consistently reveals the compassion she has for all concerned, engaging her mature intelligence in the service of interpreting her young self for readers can only enhance our connection to the story and endear her to us.

Also from a memoir-craft perspective, I sincerely tried to love the "Interludes," where McKay inserts a stand-alone piece between chapters here or there—each of them another piece of engaging memoir, but differing from the numbered chapters in that they are written about herself in third person, for example, "she had just left the dentist," or "realization washed over her in a giant wave" (114, 134). In theory, I quite like the idea of a memoirist pulling back from the intensity of the lived experience to briefly observe from the outside, like a detached narrator, even in third person. But I was looking for a discernible pattern: maybe the interludes were meant to be glimpses into humor, or purely solitary moments, or maybe the more unbearable parts, where a third-person buffer could provide some coping distance. But the Interludes featured a variety of scenes, people, dialogue, and emotional intensities, like the regular chapters, and (in the galley proof I read) they were also formatted exactly like the chapters, so I was unable to find unique meaning

5. Phillip Lopate, "Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story." *The Fourth Genre* 19, no.1 (Spring 2005): 143, doi: 10.1353/fge.2005.0016.

in them. Some sort of clear visual and content distinction might have helped the Interludes to feel more deliberate and purposeful, rather than just a clever idea at play.

My only other concern is that a reader could get the feeling that suffering with a partner's narcotic addiction is extraordinarily rare, even unlikely to happen to anyone you know. We are introduced to no one else in the book whose life has been uprooted by addiction. Over all the years of standing beside David in his struggle, his twelve-step programs, watching him come in and out of rehab, did McKay never meet anyone else with an addicted spouse? Narcotics addiction is a national epidemic, both inside and outside the LDS faith. (Utah has the seventh highest drug overdose rate in the United States.)[6] Her journey surely felt exquisitely isolating; perhaps it was an artistic choice to reflect that feeling.

Stories can be powerful gifts and catalysts. Because the drug issue is central to her story, I was anticipating an epilogue or an author's note acknowledging the epidemic and perhaps offering resources for readers who need them. Her story strives to foster hope, so hope should be on offer.

All told, *The Burning Point* is a wonderful read. McKay's frank and honest voice is a refreshing antidote to the social shame so often suffered within tightly defined communities where something that "isn't supposed to happen" is happening. I hope her memoir is widely read and shared, because even if addiction never touches our own lives, it will touch someone we love—and no matter our particular hardship, we all need the kind of confidence, compassion, resilience, and hope that McKay freely offers her readers.

6. "Stop the Opidemic," *Utah Department of Health,* 2016, http://www.opidemic.org/.