November 21, 2011

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Espousal Abuse

Reviewed of Hi, My Name is Jack: One Man's Story of the Tumultuous Road to Sobriety and a Changed Life. By Jack Watts. Howard Books. 223 pp. $22.99

It's tempting to make fun of Hi, My Name is Jack, the melodramatic memoir of a now sober marketer for Christian ministries and publishers. After all, on the very first page of his book, Jack Watts promises to emulate Joe Friday, the police sergeant, played by Jack Webb, from the iconic '50s television show, Dragnet, and seek "the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Apparently, Watts does not know that this phrase is used to swear in witnesses in court; or that Friday actually asked for "just the facts, ma'am, just the facts."

Toward the end of his narrative, when his situation is dire and his prospects are bleak, Watts asks God why He has allowed so much bad stuff to happen and hears a thunderous reply: "I don't know. Something about you just pisses me off." Watts hastens to add that he's joking. His readers, we suspect, may agree with the sentiment, whatever its source.

Employing the familiar "I once was lost but now am found" formula, Hi, My Name is Jack contains few fresh insights about alcoholism or recovery. The book is worth analyzing, however, because it illustrates the tendency of America's culture of confession to promote what we call "espousal abuse."

Although Watts acknowledges that he was "angry, addictive, and volatile," Hi, My Name is Jack does not take the "searching and fearless moral inventory" required by Alcoholics Anonymous. Instead, Watts portrays himself as "naïve and trustworthy," inviting the conclusion that he was more a victim than a victimizer. And, it seems to us, he uses the genre of the public confession, of telling "the whole truth" because "you are only as sick as your secrets," as it is so often used in popular culture these days, not to make amends to those who have been harmed or to illuminate the path to a life filled with purpose but to tell -- and sell -- a sensational story and settle scores.

Hi, My Name is Jack is a soap opera, whose characters have no redeeming virtues. Watts changes names to "protect" the people in his story, but this device merely allows him to unload on them. Jack's father, he indicates, was a bully, with a proclivity "to exploit and manipulate rather than do what was right." His mother was a nasty drunk, who gave "the finger" to anyone who crossed her. His brother slept with Jack's wife and sexually abused his children. His first wife began cheating on him three weeks after they got married. His second wife forbade him from going to the hospital to be with his daughter during emergency surgery for a tubal pregnancy. In her diary, his third wife vented her hatred of the "unlovable Jack," who "says childish, immature, and asinine things, and has no class... When men don't meet my expectations, I discard them." When his fourth wife discovered his lack of support for alternative medicine, she demanded a divorce. One of Watts' daughters accused him, falsely, of molesting her. Another embezzled hundreds of thousand dollars from his firm. He discovered, too late, that his accountant, who was in on the scam, wasn't even a CPA.

Watts' clueless and self-destructive behavior, it is important to note, persisted for more than a decade after he began attending AA meetings, realized that alcohol "medicated" stress, disillusionment, and emotional pain rather than dealing with them, and became sober. He remained "an idiot" long after he had become a Christian. And so, it's not at all clear why wisdom began to enter his heart in 2005, providing "clarity, maturity and acceptance."

Like so many tales of redemption, it seems to us, Hi, My Name is Jack betrays an "I did it" hubris and shies away from describing the hard, painful work of self-examination and behavior modification that is associated with "recovery" from substance abuse. Watts is right, of course, to remind us that drinking and thinking like an alcoholic produce "chaos, dysfunction, and insanity," making life a wasteland. Although some of us may not agree with him that "every successful AA story is a God story" and that "the Lord restores the years eaten by the locust," he is right as well that virtually no one can conquer addiction on his or her own and without stepping out of emotional prisons.

The hard questions, however, which to date only AA has made a serious attempt to address, remain: What causes a person to become an alcoholic? How might a troubled individual be made to see the error of his or her ways? What does it take to summon the will -- and maintain the momentum -- to make fundamental life changes?

As with so many of our most perplexing problems, it's much easier with alcoholism to figure out we want to go, than how we're going to get there.