

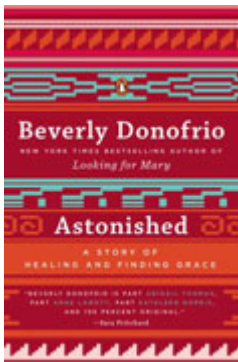
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Tenacity, poetry, irony in three memoirs

by Diane Scharper

Memoirs are often driven by questions. The question can be simple or complex. But as these three bestselling authors can attest, the answer is never easy to come by.



ASTONISHED: A STORY OF HEALING AND FINDING GRACE

By Beverly Donofrio

Published by Penguin, \$16

When *Astonished* opens, Beverly Donofrio's streak of bad luck seems to have ended. She's 56, a new grandmother, relatively healthy, and lives in her dream house in Mexico. Then on June 22, 2006, she awakens to the sound of breathing and the smell of liquor and sweat coming from an intruder, who, in the next few minutes, will rape her and plunge her life into chaos once again.

Why me? Donofrio (author of *Riding in Cars With Boys*) asks. Trying to find an answer, she spends several months visiting four monasteries located in various wilderness areas of the United States. Here, she muses on her connection to the divine and on her love for the Virgin Mary. Soon, she is inspired by the natural, sometimes harsh, beauty of the surroundings. As she attends Mass, prays, reads from spiritual

books (whose titles are listed in a final chapter), and meditates, she tries to overcome the trauma of being raped.

Although she feels at home with all of the religious orders, it's the Nada Hermitage run by the Carmelites in Crestone, Colo., that seems to best suit her. She takes temporary vows -- with the thought that she might permanently join the order. Whether she does or not becomes one of the book's plots. At Nada, she has a mystical experience at Mass as she prays before the crucified Christ and actually seems to feel his presence. She also connects on a visceral level to the Colorado Rockies. Nevertheless, she has nightmares and continues to struggle with the aftereffects of rape. When no one -- including God -- seems to have any definitive answers as to why this evil has befallen her, she decides to write this book as a way to process her experience.

Astonished is anything but a feel-good memoir. It's also loosely organized and at times reads like "undigested material," as opposed to art. Yet it offers a powerful testimony to one woman's tenacity as she deals with the realities of good and evil.



THE DARK PATH: A MEMOIR

By David Schickler

Published by Riverhead Books, \$27.95

Will David Schickler become a priest? His memoir, *The Dark Path*, begins as 10-year-old Schickler attends Mass and hears an inner voice directing him to the priesthood. The problem is, he also has a crush on a girl sitting in a nearby pew.

Schickler spends nearly 30 years testing what he calls his "priesthood ache" by continually asking God for a sign. He wants something definite and unmistakable telling him how he should live the rest of life.

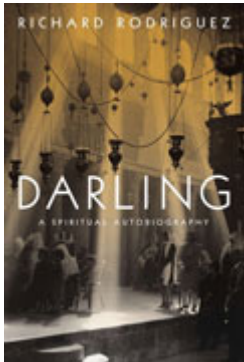
Growing up in the 1970s and '80s in Rochester, N.Y., Schickler (*Kissing in Manhattan*) is an altar boy. He has three older sisters and parents who would like nothing more than to see their son become a priest -- though they do not push him. Schickler has an especially strong bond with his dad, who attends daily Mass, plans to become a deacon, and seems to helicopter over his son's life. Schickler goes to an all-male Jesuit high school, then to Georgetown University, where he contracts a serious case of mono that, in an unusual way, leads him to the college hookup culture of parties, booze, drugs and sex.

But it also leads him to Mass -- albeit the nightly 11:15 liturgy where an older Jesuit (reminiscent of the wizard Gandalf) delivers darkly mystical homilies that speak of God as "a glad danger calling you forward in life." Schickler listens for God in the Mass and catches whispers of God in phrases like "In him we live and move and have our being ..."

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Schickler -- who is given to poetry -- describes the Mass as a "poem about death, and the death of death, and second chances, and glory." After college, he earns a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Columbia University, and then takes a job as a high school English teacher ? all the while trying to decide whether he should become a priest or marry.

The story line covers Schickler's life from boyhood to early middle age. It describes everything from Schickler's friendships, to his sexual experiences (including a possible groping incident by a spiritual mentor), to his attempts at writing, to his efforts at prayer, to his bouts with illness. He tells all in a series of polished, gem-like anecdotes that are by turns tear-jerking, suspenseful, thought-provoking and funny. Although the narrative feels overly long for a memoir, Schickler tries to hold the many elements of his story together with bright writing, and he generally succeeds.



DARLING: A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Richard Rodriguez

Published by Viking, \$26.95

Why would Richard Rodriguez, an openly gay Roman Catholic, stay with the Catholic church when it doesn't seem to want any part of him? The answer is *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*, which is not an autobiography or even a memoir. And the title character is not Rodriguez's sweetheart. The word is used ironically, as in Tallulah Bankhead's "Dahling," and at times seems to stand for all heterosexual women -- not just a particular woman.

This book contains 10 chapters, actually 10 essays -- with somewhat tenuous connections. Rodriguez (*Days of Obligation*, Pulitzer Prize finalist) examines contemporary religious and social issues, including same-sex marriage; the place of women, nuns, gays and lesbians in the church; the 2012 translation of the Mass; and the war in the Middle East. Several essays were published earlier in *Harper's Magazine*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Wilson Quarterly* and other periodicals.

Poetic and introspective, these essays depend on metaphor, irony, repetition and juxtaposition, as they make the point that spirituality is in everything -- at least from Rodriguez's perspective. The book isn't an easy read. It combines the best and often most demanding aspects of mysticism and poetry.

Rodriguez was inspired by the events of 9/11, specifically by the situational irony of the occasion: Islam, Judaism and Christianity all spring from Abraham and worship the same God. Yet they are enemies in a religious war that has been going on since the Crusades. But it is not called a religious war -- at least not by Americans.

Rodriguez points out numerous other ironies, like the way the church, which is considered the bride of Christ, is run by a group of old men, or how these old men of the Vatican have chastised U.S. nuns for their feminism. Rodriguez dedicates this book to the Sisters of Mercy, who educated him and gave him his professional start. He points out the added irony that the Mercy order once wore burqa-like habits that

resembled the apparel of Afghan women.

There's the irony of Rodriguez's friend dying from AIDS in Las Vegas during the Easter Triduum -- discussed in a chapter called "The True Cross," which isn't about what's generally considered the true cross.

And there's also the irony of the night lamp flicking on (by itself) at the moment his mother died in the light -- at least metaphorically -- although, as Rodriguez wryly notes, it may have been the result of a power surge.

These are not tell-all essays. They offer disappointingly little information concerning Rodriguez's personal life. Readers learn that Rodriguez is Roman Catholic and of Mexican descent, and lives in California. He attended Catholic elementary and high school, as did his straight brother, who spent two years in the seminary studying to be a priest, but later married and is now an atheist. Yet Rodriguez is a believer and won't abandon his religion, even though he feels it has abandoned him as a gay man.

"I stay in the Church," he says, in a statement that is worth the price of the book, "because the Church is more than its ignorance; the Church gives me more than it denies me. I stay in the Church because it is mine." Amen.

[Diane Scharper teaches a graduate course in writing memoir at Towson University. She is the editor, most recently, of *Reading Lips, and Other Ways to Overcome a Disability*, winner of the Helen Keller Memoir Competition.]

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