Books

Sobering Words

In her new memoir, *The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath*, Leslie Jamison, the director of the nonfiction concentration in the graduate writing program at Columbia’s School of the Arts, explores the links between alcohol addiction, recovery, and creativity.

By
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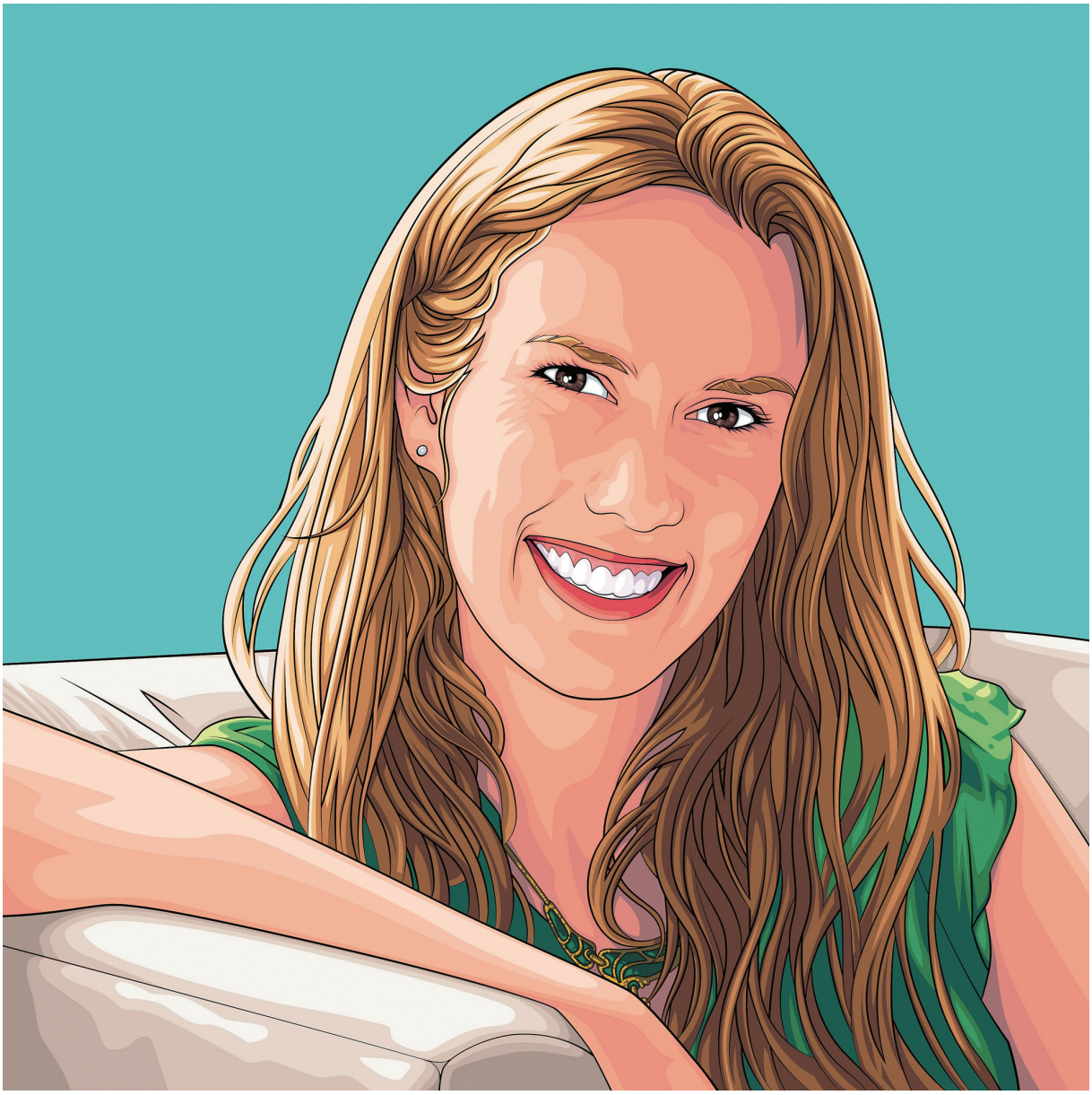

Illustration by Mel Marcelo

Tell us a little about the genesis of the book.

Alcohol was a dominant force in my life for years, and when I stopped drinking at twenty-seven I decided to interrogate and document what addiction and recovery had been like for me. I wanted to bring my story into chorus with the stories of others, so I incorporated academic research on famous writers who had struggled with addiction and also interviewed other men and women in recovery communities.

You say that as a young writer you idolized legendary drinkers like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway and felt quite invested in the

relationship between creativity and addiction.

Yes, in some ways I wrote the book for selfish reasons. I wanted to believe I could be just as creative in my sobriety. The book explores how authors including David Foster Wallace, John Berryman, and William S. Burroughs got sober — or tried to get sober — and how sobriety became part of their creative process. My initial desire was to prove to myself and to the world that it's all a big myth: that you don't need to be inside a dysfunctionality to access your most creative self. I wanted to uncouple all these links between dysfunctionality and meaning-making, addiction and creativity, darkness and truth, but what I found was something much more complicated and vexed.

In what way?

Well, Charles Jackson and John Berryman both tried to write from and about sobriety, and neither one fully succeeded; and David Foster Wallace wrote a beautiful book about recovery, but he also committed suicide in his forties. There is a relationship between addiction and creativity; people have created incredible work from that space of thrall and darkness. But that isn't the only way work can be made.

You say that female alcoholics rarely get to strike "the same rogue silhouettes as male ones." Can you talk about these gender differences?

Very similar addictions get narrated in very different ways depending on all kinds of variables, like gender, race, and class. Stories of appealing roguishness seem to attach more readily to male addictions. Their drinking is often seen as proof of a certain authenticity or inner depth. Women's addictions are often narrated as a form of hysteria or melodrama, or as an abnegation of their role as caregivers. They are the archetypal bad mothers.

In the book you talk about having to resist your "hunger for a story larger than my own, with taller buildings and sharper knives." Is there a tendency toward dramatic inflation when it comes to addiction narratives?

In the literary world there's a premium put on originality. It's as if you have to up the ante to make your story worth telling. I resist that idea not only because it can lead to exaggeration or fabrication, but also because it implies that only extraordinary lives are worth narrating. Most experiences are very un-extraordinary, but that doesn't mean there's not a meaningful narrative lying inside them.

That belief must be pretty central to your life as a teacher.

One of the most frequent anxieties students articulate when they write personal essays is that nobody would care about their lives. But I tell them writing doesn't have to be some hubristic act of asserting that your life has been more extraordinary than someone else's. It's about finding the meaning inside the experiences you have at your disposal. In fact, there is something about unoriginality that can be a source of power rather than shame. In recovery communities, storytelling is absolutely central, and the story is seen as a gift or offering. What matters isn't telling a unique story, it's telling a story that has been told before and will be told again. Cliché sometimes exposes us to the truth of our lives, and this book, in many ways, is a celebration of the ordinary story.

Your book has already been highly praised. Have you convinced yourself that you are a better writer without alcohol than with it?

Well, the book is the artifact of what it's trying to prove. In that sense, I do feel proud of it.

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