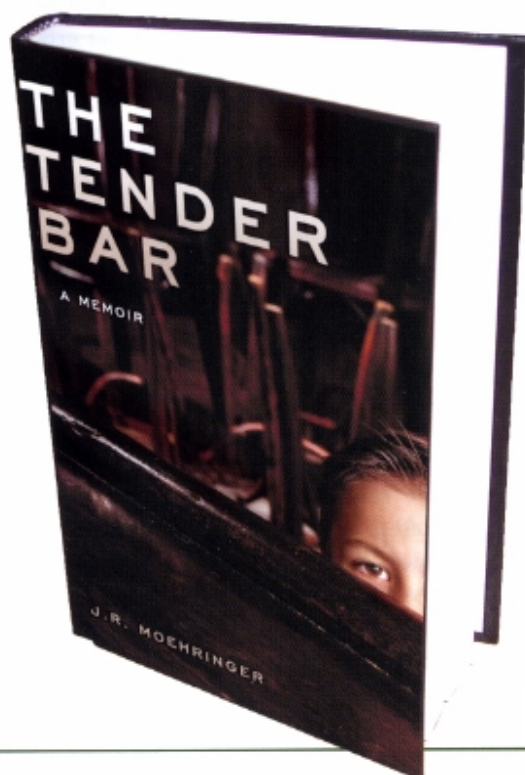


Tortured Souls & Misplaced Trust



The Tender Bar: A Memoir

J.R. Moeringer (Hyperion, \$23.95) Review by Kevin C. Madigan

Having a deadbeat father can make for some interesting literature. So can finding solace in booze and comfort in the company of strangers. Beating the odds and rising out of poverty to make something of yourself doesn't hurt either.

J.R. Moeringer, a Denver-based reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, originally wanted to write a novel based on his unusual childhood and adolescence, but it turned out that real life in his case made a much more compelling story. The bar in question was a Manhasset, Long Island, joint that the author relied upon from an early age to make sense of his troubled upbringing. The chief bartender was his uncle Charlie, who dispensed wisdom and advice, as did the motley crew of shady and colorful characters that constituted the saloon's regulars.

"Their way of showing affection was to blow smoke in your face," recalled the dapper author fondly during a recent visit to Atlanta. Cool and confident in the flesh, Moeringer is unlike the vulnerable and confused child, his former self,

portrayed in the book.

Seduced by its charms and welcomed by its patrons, Moeringer sought safe haven from the chaos and uncertainty of his life, wrapping himself in the blanket of protection that the place offered. He writes that this bar (known at first as Dickens, then Publicans) was not like others in town that were "full of pickled people marinating in regret." The bar filled a void but gradually became a crutch from which he would eventually flee in order to survive.

"It's about replacement love," said Moeringer when asked to describe the book. Yes, this is a man with severe abandonment issues, but he manages to keep self-pity to a minimum while exploring his own failings and those of the people around him. He genuinely cares about and for his mother, who raised him, and is repeatedly exasperated and disappointed by his father, a distant (in all senses) figure with a penchant for violence who works as a radio disc jockey and whose absence spans the author's entire youth. "My father chose fame over family," he said, adding that "I could not have written this book if he hadn't passed away." His

father, or his lack of one, is both the saddest and most eloquent part of the story.

But this memoir does not spend all its time propping up the bar. He writes: "I went into the world, worked and failed, fell in love, played the fool, had my heart broken and my threshold tested." That

**His father...the
saddest and most
eloquent part
of the story.**

journey took him to Arizona while still a boy, in the company of his mother, to live near relatives who promptly left the area. Stoic as ever, his mother found various inferior jobs and eventually declared bankruptcy, while young J.R. landed a position as a sales clerk in a bookstore, a move that would have long-lasting effects on his life. Bill and Bud, the store's effete managers, take it upon themselves to show the fourteen-year-

old boy the wonders of books and persuade him to apply for a scholarship to Yale University, something the young lad didn't believe was remotely attainable.

Dismayed to find himself at Yale a few years later, he courts women and disaster in equal measure. He is in way over his head, much as he was subsequently as a *New York Times* copy boy. At times J.R. appears to be his own worst enemy, squandering opportunities and alienating people along his bumpy road. Not surprisingly, Moeringer also picked up a fierce booze habit in the process—since tamed—and mastered the art of escapism. Showing little bitterness and a fair bit of clarity in retrospect, he's tough on those who've hurt him, but he's hardest on himself. He also learned how to tell a very good story—his own. ♦

Kevin C. Madigan is a freelance writer based in Atlanta.