

# Book Review

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# Secrets and Lies

Steve Geng's memoir of addiction is also an elegy to his sister, a writer for *The New Yorker* who died in 1997.

## THICK AS THIEVES

*A Brother, a Sister — a True Story of Two Turbulent Lives.*

By Steve Geng.

292 pp. Henry Holt & Company. \$24.

By TONI BENTLEY

**W**HEN they asked me why I lied, I lied," confesses Steve Geng, small-time crook, sometime actor, drug addict and drunk. (Or is he lying and was he, in fact, telling the truth?) At the time, Geng was living at the Daytop Village rehab facility on Staten Island, wearing a "Pinocchio nose" and a can labeled "A Can of Lies" to remind him of his predilection. You've gotta love the literalness of recovery programs.

For anyone who still hasn't reached personal closure with James "I am an Alcoholic and I am a Drug Addict and I am a Criminal" Frey and his self-aggrandizement, Geng's memoir, "Thick as Thieves," is here as a reminder: addicts lie as often as they need a fix. What was so disturbing about the Frey debacle was not his deceit, but that the entire world, and Oprah Winfrey, were so surprised at his mendacity. I bet no friends of Bill's were surprised.

Geng's memoir, his first book, is a welcome antidote to Freysian cynicism and does much to restore integrity to the genre of the addict memoir as presented in classics by William S. Burroughs, Hunter S. Thompson and Jerry Stahl — all true tales, no doubt. Geng's story is tamer, to be sure, but he has earned his misery honestly: arriving in his mid-60s having been arrested some 30 times; spending, cumulatively, years in jail, less time in rehab; going head to head with a claw hammer; and being set on fire by a girlfriend.

Geng's story carries no dedication, but the book is clearly an elegy — and a confession — for his sister, Veronica Geng, the brilliant *New Yorker* writer and editor who died in 1997 at the age of 56. This memoir could have been called "Steve Loves Ron." "Ron," two years older than Steve, was the hero of his life. She was a fragile, sad, mercurial, difficult creature, but "her laugh was the clearest manifestation of love, and I learned early how to get it."

At their childhood home in Philadelphia, they are sitting one day at the breakfast table with bowls of steaming oatmeal in front of them. After their mother, Rosina, leaves the room, Ron suddenly rubs her hands in her hair and whispers: "Hey, Stevie. Shampoo!" "I was no dummy," Geng writes. "I scooped up handfuls of porridge and plopped them on my head."

The glimpses of young Veronica are one of the chief delights of Geng's story. Ron was a wit from the start, defending herself against her father, Charlie, a career Army officer whose inane, often drunken remarks — his "kiddin' around" — "would reduce Ron to tears." When she proudly displays her Easter shoes, her father comments, "Christ, you could land a plane on those skis." The torture called teasing is an underreported form of insidious soul murder for many earnest little girls. To see just how far Ron took revenge, read her collection "Love

Toni Bentley, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet, is the author, most recently, of *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir*.



Courtesy of Steve Geng

Trouble," a compendium of such militant satire and wicked irony that it will disinherit your serotonin without a prescription.

When Steve asks his big sister if they are ever going to grow up "like Mom and Daddy," Ron replies: "Like Daddy? Jeez, I hope not." She goes on to explain that "what Daddy did is more like ... photosynthesis."

"Charlie," Rosina says one day to her husband, "did you see this beautiful new vacuum cleaner, the Hoover?"

"The Hoover?" he responds. "We got Commies taking over the railroads and you're telling me about a goddamned vacuum cleaner?"

"We should definitely get the vacuum," Ron adds, "before Commies take over the Hoover." Charlie remained unimpressed with his daugh-

ter's talent and intelligence her whole life. He was that kind of dad.

Young Steve engages in cruder forms of subversion, like pulling his mother aside one day and pointing to one of his frequent adolescent erections, saying: "Hey, Mom. What's this all about?" Ron gets A's, Steve gets D's and F's. He has his first beer at the age of 8, and likes it plenty. His goal is simple: "Get out of the house." Before long he is stealing and setting fires just for "the exquisite thrill of getting away with it." Soon Charlie is making his "On the Waterfront" proclamation: "That kid's a bum and he's always gonna be a bum!" That kind of dad.

"Although resentment isn't quite the same thing as having a direction in life," Geng writes in his lucid prose, "it revved me up and gave me some torque." He is now ready for a life of sex, crime, drugs and rock 'n' roll. His role models: "the hipster, the hophead and the hustler." The locales change as Geng's capers proceed. In Paris he enjoys the whores of Rue Pigalle: "She exuded a certain confidence now that I was a repeat customer. It was as close as I'd come at that point to having my own girlfriend."

Back in the States, Geng is soon on the lam in San Francisco for hot-wiring and crashing a car with a friend while high on methedrine. After a chase by the cops, who open fire, he is arrested and spends a few months in San Bruno County Jail. Out of prison

he repairs to his parents' house in Clearwater, Fla., for a little R&R, and works at Kentucky Fried Chicken. When he's saved enough money, he heads to New York to resume his pursuit of "serious drugs." He has his first taste of heroin and "finally found what I was looking for ... better than sex." Did I mention that Chet Baker is one of Geng's idols?

Now that he's found his métier, he develops his skills in "boosting" to support his habit. He becomes famous as "Record Steve," stealing records under his coat, as many as 20 to 30 at a time, and selling them out of shopping bags on Eighth Street. His career trajectory is regularly interrupted by jail time — three months on Rikers Island, 30 days on Hart Island, almost a year in Pinellas County Jail, nine months in

Steve Geng's role models were 'the hipster, the hophead and the hustler.' Heroin, he found, was 'better than sex.'

"WE DO NOT NEED TO BE THE SAME, BUT WE CAN HOLD HANDS AS FELLOW TRAVELERS IN THIS LIFE"

## A DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Gülen's Islamic Ideals and Humanistic Discourse

BY B. JILL CARROLL

FOREWORD BY  
AKBAR AHMED

"Brilliant and timely..."

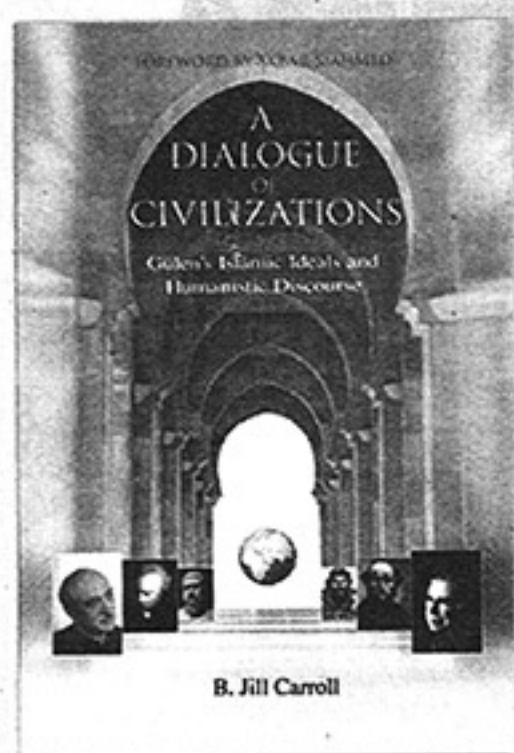
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"An inspiring book..."

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*The Light*

www.thelightpublishing.com

Nassau County Jail. Eat your heart out, James Frey.

In 1966, during another Florida break with Mom and Dad, he receives his draft papers. Although he enjoys running around Fort Riley with a bayonet screaming "Kill, kill!" during basic training, Steve decides it's time to make some other maneuvers before getting airlifted into the real war. With the help of a few LSD sugar cubes and an insanity act, he manages to get a "general discharge, honorable conditions." Back to boosting.

**A**FTER the numerous prostitutes, Geng tries real love. Lorraine is "part American Indian and part black, an exotic-looking, oversexed girl" who wears "the sexiest micromini dresses she could find." The romance comes to a grinding halt after Steve slugs her one and receives, in return, several hammer blows to the head from her brother, landing him in a pool of blood and then the emergency room.

In a misguided attempt to "go legit," he invests some of his ill-gotten gains in a Greenwich Village saloon and moves in with its feisty co-owner, Stella. For a while there's lots of good food, sex, drugs and alcohol while Eric Clapton blasts on the jukebox. Then money runs out, the cook is fired and Steve, drunk, knocks Stella out cold. Later, Stella slips Valium into Steve's coffee, soaks him in lighter fluid and flambés him. Waking in a bed of flames, he wonders why he can't meet a woman "as levelheaded as my sister."

Geng keeps us apprised of Ron's checkered love life as she proceeds up the ladder of New York publishing. She never married, and with some regularity Geng mentions the names of her distinguished list of lovers at The New Yorker — it does sound rather like an incest pool — with the unmistakable implication that they failed her and could have benefited from a brotherly hammer to the head. After all, Steve knows about failing those you love.

In the early 1980s, Geng gets sober and begins a career as a theater actor and repeat guest on "Miami Vice." During an initial love affair with a 12-step program, he falls for Laura, a beautiful, blond Southern Baptist, who clearly expects to do better than Record Steve, and thus she becomes the elusive

angel of his sober gaze. He joins a Baptist church, briefly.

Sobriety, in fact, introduces all sorts of problems into Geng's narrative, which races along in tight, low-key, Elmore Leonard-like prose while he's high, violent and angry. Sober, he gets soppy. Events suddenly become "incredibly dear to me," he has many moments he would "cherish," and, horror of horrors, he uses "gifted" as a verb. The name-dropping deteriorates too. When he's sober, we hear about Don Johnson, Alec Baldwin and Andrew Wylie; when he's strung out, we hear about Sometime Annie, Rotten Rita, Junky George and the Turtle. Who do you think tells better tales? (Although, in a touching moment of cross-cultural connection, Wylie admits to dealings with the Turtle.)

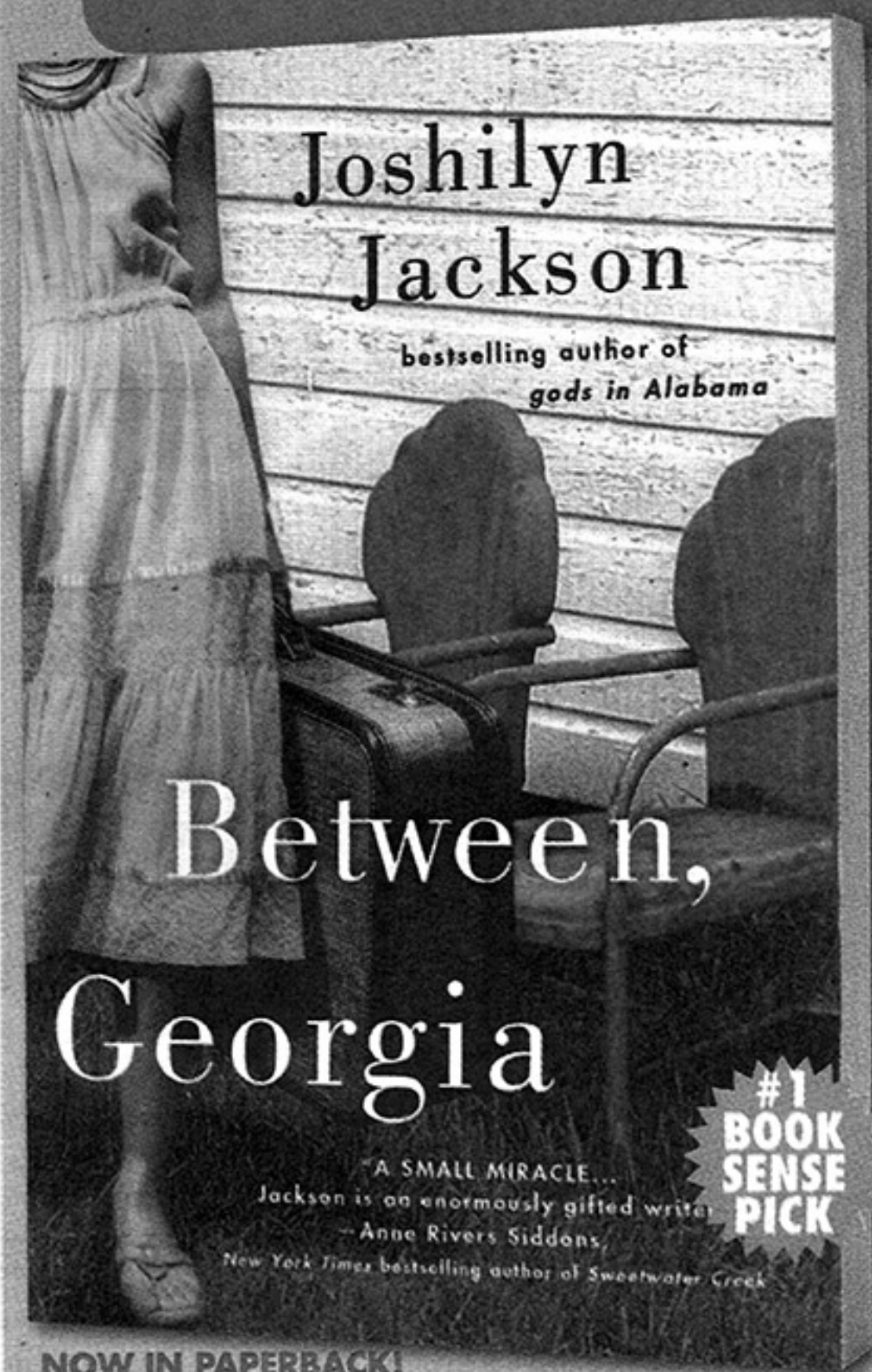
But, no worries, just when it seems that sobriety may ruin a good yarn, Record Steve, exhausted by goodness, re-emerges and is quickly stealing, drugging and whoring again. Reality is a petri dish for problems, and Steve concludes that drinking and drugging "was still the best solution I could come up with — have a drink, hit the mute button." Besides, if the high points of your sober life were occasional gigs on "Miami Vice," you might start boosting too.

One concludes from Geng's tale that until a life taken sober gets more muscle and music to it, the altered life will always beckon, though surely grace lies in that rarely found space that overlaps both, but is neither. "Thick as Thieves" does not, to Geng's credit, propound the false heroics of addiction and recovery so popular in the media these days. It just shows us how lies destroy love — no solutions, no wisdom. By the mid-1990s, Veronica Geng had given up on her wayward brother and was not speaking to him. Steve didn't know his sister was dying of a brain tumor the size of a grapefruit until she was dead.

"Every heart to love will come but like a refugee," Leonard Cohen growls in "Anthem." Steve Geng has not really survived his war. He is staggering from battle. Though he has been sober for more than eight years, his bones are literally dying from osteonecrosis, and he has AIDS. His book, one surmises, would not make his sister laugh, but weep with pride at the little boy with oatmeal on his head. □

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