

*The Tender Bar: A Memoir* by J. R. Moehringer

This wonderful book makes me break my self-imposed rule of reviewing only new or recent books. It was published in 2006. It's captivating, hilarious, touching, even soulful. It's the story of a boy longing for his father and finding a surrogate in a saloon in a town that served as a setting of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. J. R.'s surrogate father is his Uncle Charlie, a bar tender at the saloon that becomes J. R.'s haven and his school for how to be a man.

J.R.'s mother, a paragon of grit and intelligence, moves with him back to her parental home which is ruled by her tyrannical and unfeeling father. Uncle Charlie also lives there. J.R. spends many of his nights glued to his radio, searching across the dial for the voice of his father, a violent alcoholic when drunk, whose mellifluous voice and frenzied life send him from radio station to radio station as an announcer.

J.R. also spends much of days and evenings at Publicans, charming the regulars and learning by osmosis how to be a man. The place teemed with characters, all of them colorful and individual. J.R. took notes, of which we are the beneficiaries.

J.R.'s life moves by twists and turns as he gets a job at a book store and is taken under the literary wing of two eccentric men who run the place and love literature. He spends middle school in Phoenix, Arizona, where his mother has moved, to flee the turbulence of her father's house and to establish a life of her own. We are treated to fascinating reports of first love encounter, of his application to and acceptance by Yale, of his getting a job for a while at the *New York Times*,

Through it all, Publicans and its habitués provide J. R. and us with fascinating stories of life lived fully.

Other readers have found *The Tender Bar* "a fierce and funny coming of age story," "heartfelt, overflowing with longing," "emotionally engrossing, beautifully written," "an exquisite memoir."

I looked it up on Amazon. There are lots of copies available. Perhaps you can treat yourself to a wonderfully satisfying read.

Bob McDonnell