

A devastating portrait of alcoholism

By **Karen Brady**

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Life is raw in Leslie Jamison's astonishing first novel, a story of love and ruin in the American West.

Appropriately titled "The Gin Closet," it is a book that finds beauty in dysfunction — and, in doing so, gives us one of the truest and most devastating depictions of alcoholism to be had in some time.

That it does so in exquisite prose only strengthens the fact that societal norms will never suit everyone, that one person's damnation may be another's salvation — and that, along the way, there will be pain.

"Nearly every night my throat got swollen from crying," recalls Tilly, the elder of the novel's two narrators. "I poured the liquor down the ache, closed my eyes, and let the darkness swim. . . I'd drink anything, but I got to like the gin best, tart and sweet and bitter at the same time. It did the job quickest, felt like, and sent flu pangs all across the surface of my skin.

"Everything touched me a little sharper when I was drunk — blankets, wood, smoky air, hairy carpets—as if they'd been tucked right around the shape of my body. The whole world fit, and I was folded inside of it. I had a few blind moments of peace before passing out. I woke to the liquor I hadn't drunk the night before. Drinking on an empty stomach glazed the inside of my body like a clay pot."

Alcohol is an instant salve for Tilly — who discovers her proclivity for it as a girl. Her mother Lucy, scandalized, bans her daughter from her home, never uttering her name again until, 30 years later, feverish and terminally ill, she asks about "Matilda."

It is a query that stuns Stella, the offspring of Lucy's other daughter, Dora. Stella, in her 20s and the younger narrator here, had no idea that she has an aunt — and, after Lucy's death, sets out to find her.

"She'll make you tired, you'll see," Stella's mother Dora warns. "She'll hurt you."

"You've always been terrible at your own life," Stella's brother Tom tells her. "You're so greedy for everyone else's."

But young Stella has her own demons, demons that are drawing her to Tilly's. She is the survivor of an eating disorder; she is restless and dissatisfied, living aimlessly in Manhattan "in a room that had been a closet."

Tom goes along for the drive to rural Lovelock, Nevada, where Tilly is said to live in a trailer park. And there she is, "a bloated version of our mother," Stella says. "That was the first thing I thought: Somebody has swollen our mother, as if the parts of her face had been soaked in water for a long time —"

The besotted Tilly is not thrilled to see this niece and nephew she never knew she had—and Tom pulls away. But Stella lingers, telling Tom later:

"She's got a closet, Tom. Where she drinks. Just a cheap mattress and a pile of empty bottles. There was a stool like somebody had gotten punished — I'm telling you, it was something from a fairy tale. Where the bad witch lives."

Tom soon leaves, but Stella stays on, gradually reaching Tilly with tales of her own life.

“You’re good at describing moments,” Tilly tells her.

“That was just it,” Stella thinks. “I couldn’t remember my life as anything but these snapshots, small gestures of sight or reaction that were supposed to suggest the larger truths of my existence.”

“Larger truths” is what “The Gin Closet” is about, those truths made manifest in the parallel yet disparate lives of Tilly and Stella—who decide to set out together for San Francisco where Tilly’s successful but lonely son, Abe, will welcome them into his home.

But, first, Tilly will detox.

“I know most people started drinking with other people before they drank alone, but I went in the other direction,” she muses. “I loved the full heat of being drunk, like I was made of melting chocolate and spreading in all directions. I didn’t need other people around to want that feeling for myself.”

Giving that up is, at first, improbably easy — and dangerous. Tilly simply goes cold turkey — without ill effect, something unlikely in real life but the symbolism of the moment is clear: Something very deep is changing.

It won’t turn out to be what we think. Alcoholism seldom works that way, and Jamison knows that. She also knows that, where private worlds are a tilt, there can be silver linings even in the muck of incest and prostitution.

Jamison can also be droll. She describes Lucy’s longtime attorney, Sherman, as having a voice with “the feel of bleached fabric.” Sherman in turn speaks of Tilly “as the ‘severed member’ as if she were a thumb.” Tilly befriends a marvelous homeless woman who calls herself Toledo — as that is where her father died. And who could miss the mother and daughter, Stella/Dora — as if Jamison were snacking on Stella d’Oro breakfast treats as she named her characters.

With Tilly and Stella, Jamison is tender, letting Stella watch Tilly arranging and rearranging her son Abe’s home: “I knew that part of it was a way to keep busy, to say: Today I will not drink. I will dust. Her life was a series of substitutions — ”

There are some rough edges here. But the subject matter is rough. There are also overly obvious points made: Lucy’s modus operandi is, if unpleasant, out of sight is out of mind. Dora’s proclivity, as a high-octane immigration attorney, is to work for others while ignoring her own family; Stella’s had been to starve herself, Tom’s to avoid conflict, in the process finding himself alone, a lost soul.

Abe’s is to find intimacy in the verboten. “I’ve always known how to be in public,” he confides. “In private I’m never sure.” Stella thinks of Abe and herself: “What we shared was the sense of fleeing something else.”

Tilly, the only one of the lot to be deemed misguided, is clearly the winner here, even as she loses. It is the nature of alcoholism in a family that one person isn’t affected — they all are.

What Jamison sees is that love and connection can be found in the mess — in the gin closet, if you will.

And, as if that isn’t enough, Jamison is a mere 26. With that in mind, “The Gin Closet” is nothing short of a tour de force.

Yes, Leslie Jamison. Remember the name.

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