
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

NINETY
DAYS

A Memoir of Recovery

by

BILL CLEGG

A conversation with Bill Clegg

The author of *Ninety Days* talks with Yale Breslin of *GQ*.

You've said that the day after you finished writing Ninety Days, you relapsed. Did you feel it coming? What factors do you attribute to your relapse?

I did not see it coming; in fact I'd never felt more serene, and sober. I was on an island in southern Thailand for a month finishing *Ninety Days* (a book about recovery, of all things), and felt deeply relaxed and connected to my sobriety. But the feeling was not accurate. I was in fact the most far away (from sobriety) I'd been in the five and a half years of being sober. I was away from the AA meeting I'd go to every day, away from my sober community, not in touch with other alcoholics and addicts in recovery in the way that I am usually: by phone, over coffee, after and before meetings. I'd talked to my sponsor, and taken on a new sponsee while I was away, but basically I'd disconnected from my sober family for the

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first time in sobriety. There is an expression that people in recovery hear and say all the time: “Feelings aren’t facts,” and in this case it was all too true.

Do you feel that you’re finished (for now) telling your story about addiction and recovery? Or do you see another book that documents another phase of the puzzle?

I think these two books say more than I ever expected to say on addiction and recovery. If there is anything more I’ll tell my cat, Benny.

Your musical tastes changed and progressed throughout the years, and you’ve mentioned that Rachael Yamagata’s music had a profound influence on your recovery. How so?

I listened to Rachael’s first album, *Happenstance*, during the year I spent unemployed, going to three meetings a day, getting sober. They were sad songs about loss and grief and moving on, and they sounded like I felt...especially in the first few months of returning to New York after rehab.

What was your first introduction to her as an artist?

I was in a coffee shop on Jane Street and heard the first few notes on a piano to a song of hers called “Quiet,” and they were the saddest, most mournful notes I’d ever heard.

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I thought: There I am; that's me. And I went home and downloaded *Happenstance* and listened to that album until I couldn't anymore.

In some ways, is it hard now to listen to her music?

I didn't listen to *Happenstance* for a long time after I got sober and went back to work. When I was writing *Ninety Days*, I began to listen to those songs again as a way of remembering. So I went back in for a while, and wallowed.

*You have formed a relationship with her—when did this start?
How did you meet?*

I met Rachael recently to do a reading and interview at Barnes and Noble. The format was that I would read a little, she'd play some songs, and we'd be interviewed in between. The first song she played was "Reason Why," which was one of the songs I listened to over and over. It begins with the lyrics, "I think about how it might have been..." which, in the early period of sobriety, was a haunting speculation I'd torture myself with. If I hadn't relapsed, if I'd stayed sober and not spiraled into the two-month bender that ruined everything. What if, What if... There is another lyric later in the song, "So I will head out alone and hope for the best, we can pat ourselves on the back and say that we tried..." I imagined many times that I'd have to leave New York, that

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I'd return to the small town in Connecticut I'd started out in, or go to live with my sister in Maine, and that I'd have to give up on New York, that I'd blown my chance here.

Have you always been into music?

I was obsessed with Bob Dylan throughout high school and college. I still am.

If you look back on your life—addiction, recovery, relapse, documentation, sobriety—how have you seen your musical tastes change?

I was pretty strict in high school about who I would listen to. Musicians like Neil Young, Cat Stevens, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell . . . who were, in my opinion, great writers. The music mattered, but it held hands with the lyrics, and the personality was, overall, unsullied. In the little rural town I grew up in, I missed out on the pop music of the time, the eighties, and now enjoy it in retrospect. It's as an adult that I've opened up to dance, hip-hop, R&B, and even big pop songs. But I guess I'm still drawn to singer-songwriters who have the voice, and conjure the lyrics and music into songs that seem like soul cries. Lately I listen a lot to Justin Vernon, Antony, Martha Wainwright, Brandi Carlile, and Feist.

Now that sobriety is one of your marked characteristics, do you feel that that helps or deters you from keeping sober?

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It helps, though it wasn't the reason or goal in writing the books. I spent the first thirty-three years of my life with secrets, and lots of them. I spent a great deal of energy worrying over what people thought and obscuring the things I was ashamed of... trying to appear what I thought was normal. My relationship to drugs and alcohol, and the depths my dependency on them brought me to, were the last things I ever wanted to be exposed. By writing about these things I not only lightened a long-carried load but, I hope, became of use to people who have, and who still do, struggle in the way that I struggled. In my first year of getting sober, I learned that being of use to other alcoholics and addicts (seeing how my experience could be helpful) was not only the surprising benefit of everything that led to my getting sober, but also the way I stayed sober. Writing these books was not something I initially thought would be part of my ongoing sobriety, but over time, as I get letters and e-mails about how something in one of them was helpful to someone, it reminds me of the usefulness I feel when working with others in recovery. Anything that reconnects me to the feeling that by staying clean I can be helpful to another alcoholic or drug addict helps keep me sober.

This interview appears courtesy of Yale Breslin.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Bill Clegg's friend Lotto was in rehab for drug use ten times before he was twenty-two. Finally, a successful recovery in Georgia led him to move there from a privileged life in Manhattan. What does his story tell you about the tenacity of addiction? Does it give you more empathy toward addicts?
2. One reviewer praised *Ninety Days* for being singular as a recovery book that is also about relapse. Did you think in the end that any of the people introduced in the book were fully recovered? Were you surprised by Asa's relapse?
3. Have you had experiences in your own life that didn't involve substance abuse but compared in some ways to addiction?
4. "It's the jaggedness of getting off the drugs—finding the language for that—that gives *Ninety Days* its stark

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power,” wrote Michael Klein in *Lambda Literary*. How did Bill Clegg’s prose style contribute to your response to his memoir?

5. Do you think *Ninety Days* can serve as a cautionary tale? Or that it can help readers who are dealing with past or current drug or alcohol addiction? If so, how?
6. What fundamental shift in the way he related to other people and himself did Bill Clegg make to attain sobriety? How did Polly and others in “the rooms” save his life—and he theirs, for whatever length of time?
7. The author still attends meetings at least once a day to maintain his years of sobriety. How can a person with an important career and many friends find time for such a commitment? Do you think the time consumed by addiction is any less demanding?
8. In an interview, Bill Clegg has said, “That first burst of sobriety, which people in recovery often describe as a pink cloud—I have never felt more exhilarated in my life.” Could breaking any habit or addiction of your own lead you to such happiness?

Also by Bill Clegg
PORTRAIT OF AN ADDICT AS A YOUNG MAN
A Memoir

“Clegg may not have been able to control his demons, but he is utterly in charge of this material, with a voice that is knowing and self-deprecating in exactly the right measure.”

—Jonathan Van Meter, *Vogue*

“Rings true in brutal, blunt strokes.”

—David Carr, *New York Times Book Review*

“Bill Clegg has written an exceptionally fine addition to a genre largely bereft of style, intelligence, and moral complexity....It’s plain to see that people stuck by him because they enjoy his company, because he inspires fierce loyalty. Now, at last, Bill Clegg seems capable of believing it.”

—Kirk Davis Swinehart, *Chicago Tribune*

“It turns out there is room on the shelf for one more addiction memoir....Clegg spares no one’s feelings, least of all his own; it’s not the brutality that makes this worthwhile but rather the strange beauty of the stream-of-consciousness prose. We’re voyeurs, as helpless to stop the carnage as the author himself.”

—Mickey Rapkin, *GQ*



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