

life. Seven months later, she is in Rwanda, working with artist Lily Yeh to bring beauty and a memorial to a village of 500 genocide survivors.

The genocide ended in 1994, but there are still tensions between Hutu and Tutsi. The survivors bear scars—emotional and physical—of the conflict. We see the pain through Williams’s eyes: in the piles of skulls, femurs, tibias. In the churches, now bare, where many were massacred. In the stories of survivors, many of them children. In accounts of rape and AIDS.

She attends a tribunal and is confronted by a killer who grabs a guard’s gun. Yet, she comes home with something unexpected and precious: an “adopted” son, her translator, who wants to go to school in the United States. She and Brooke enlarge their family, and the mosaic is richer.

## *from Sandra Hurtes*

On the surface, the essay collections *A Leak in the Heart*, by Faye Moskowitz, and *The Merry Recluse*, by Caroline Knapp, are so diverse, you wouldn’t put them in the same category. But as you read and get more deeply into the hearts and heads of the authors, you see that they tell the same story: how a life is shaped and lived. And whether you are Jewish and grew up in the 1940s, like Moskowitz, or Protestant and grew up in the 1960s, like Knapp, you’re guaranteed to see a piece of yourself in each writer’s life.

### *A Leak in the Heart*

FAYE MOSKOWITZ

DAVID R. GODINE PUBLISHER, 1987. 224 PAGES, PAPER, \$12.95.

Born in Detroit in the late 1930s, Moskowitz skillfully writes about the tender familial bond that exists between generations. In poignant prose, she explores the divide between her love for her Eastern European Jewish ancestors, and her wish to assimilate. In her opening essay, we meet the writer as a sophisticated American woman at a grocery in France, purchasing a baguette. One moment she’s smug in her knowledge of French, the next, realizing she was charged the wrong price, she gets flustered as the cashier “snatched the change purse from my fingers.” Feeling inadequate and small, her vulnerability makes her nostalgic for home.

In another essay, she is a young girl in downtown Detroit, walking with her Bobbe. “To me she is an enormous woman who swings her great hip against my side with each stride. . . . Like hungry jaws, her fingers swallow my small hand,” writes Moskowitz. As they walk, her Bobbe needs to go to the bathroom. Putting one foot in the street, the other on the sidewalk, she drops her skirts and relieves herself. “I put my head down and walk away from her . . . I have tears in my eyes,” writes Moskowitz. “I say to my grandmother, in Jewish, ‘This is America, Bobbe; we do not do that in America.’”

Were this collection published today, it might be termed a memoir because of the way these loosely connected essays move gracefully back and forth through time, taking Moskowitz from childhood to adulthood. We see her complicated feelings about her mother’s sickness (“I was afraid to walk the outer limits of her sickness; I dealt with death the way the rest of my family did . . . by denying it”); her marriage and the birth of her four children (“Out of high school into marriage, I found the fragile filaments of husband, then children, combining to weave a web seductive and strong enough to have kept me bound for more than thirty years”); and her growing determination to be more than who she was, eventually receiving her BA, MA, and PhD.

First published in 1985, *A Leak in the Heart* holds up today because of its gorgeous writing, its warmth, and its many insights into how immigrant families make sense of their lives and one another. Reading this book is like sitting in Moskowitz’s kitchen, having tea and toast with preserves, “eating the thick jam from the bottom of the glasses with long beaten-silver spoons.”

### *The Merry Recluse*

CAROLINE KNAPP

COUNTERPOINT, 2002. 304 PAGES, CLOTH, \$24.05.

Caroline Knapp, who passed away in 2002, became well-known for her bestselling memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*. The urgency of her story came pouring out, making it impossible to put the book down. *The Merry Recluse* is quieter, more like conversations with a close friend. The style gives the reader a chance to pause, contemplate, and walk around for a day or two while Knapp’s always fresh take on life sifts through your brain.

Many of the essays in this collection first appeared in such publications as *Salon.com* and *New Woman* magazine, and in the *Boston Phoenix*, where she

worked in the 1990s as a journalist. They are short pieces. Frank and fearlessly honest, Knapp doesn't shy away from subjects others might be squeamish about. In "Girl Crushes," for example, she is both provocative and psychological. She opens with "Psssst. Wanna hear a secret? I have a crush right now, on S." It turns out that S is female and has "thick, dark hair, an intense gaze, a charismatic smile, the kind that seems especially reserved for you." Knapp then takes this and runs with it, developing an essay around women's envy of, and attraction to, one another's qualities, which have nothing to do with homosexual love.

In "When You Just Want to Be Loved," she is masterfully playful with words. She begins: "*More*. I want more. I want to be held all night while I sleep and kissed mere seconds after I open my eyes in the morning." She then poses a question: "Do you think I'm asking for too much?" This is her signature style. Drawing in the reader, she sets up a dialogue and invites the reader into various scenarios of couples in love. Poking holes in the romanticized notion of love that so many people (including Knapp) pursue, she searches for answers as to what will make her full.

Some of the essays are so bare they may make you uncomfortable, as in a letter to her niece Zoe, and another to her father. Others tackle newsy issues, like the Lewinsky-Tripp debacle that leads Knapp to larger issues of female friendship and trust. She also writes about her recovery from alcoholism, and ironically, has an essay written while she was still drinking, poking fun at AA meetings.

Knapp's social commentaries are precise. She keeps one eye on the big picture and one on herself—and keeps both on the reader as well.

## *from* **Andrea W. Herrmann**

As a university professor who has taught in Morocco and Iran, I selected these three memoirs by highly accomplished women raised within Islamic cultures for a graduate reading/writing course on the Middle East. Two were raised in Iran, one in Somalia—and all must struggle with the constraints of a traditional Muslim culture that affect their relationships with family and friends, their opportunities for happiness in marriage, and their abilities to achieve success in their chosen professions. Despite great hardships and