

The whiskey talked daily

by Paula Morris

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Nick Flynn and Augusten Burroughs are Americans around the age of 40 who grew up in dysfunctional families, lived apart from their alcoholic fathers, developed drinking problems of their own, and wrote a memoir (or two) about the whole terrible mess. Flynn is a poet only now venturing into diary-of-a-nobody-with-baggage territory, but Burroughs is an old hand at telling all: *Running with Scissors*, the story of his traumatic adolescence, was published in 2002, followed by *Dry*, his contribution to rehab lit, a burgeoning genre fuelled by attention-grabbing memoirs by Jerry Stahl, Elizabeth Wurtzel and James Frey.

Apparently, we readers can't get enough of other people's awful pasts, whether they're entertaining (David Sedaris), moving (Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* and Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*), shocking (*The Kiss* by Kathryn Harris) or just therapy with a smattering of social commentary (anything by -Wurtzel). Burroughs has a stab at all of the above: in *Running with Scissors*, absurd humour leavens an appalling and sexually explicit story (his mother abandons him in the home of a dangerously crazy hippie shrink, where he's ensnared by a paedophile); in *Dry*, he wrings laughs out of his overpaid job as an advertising copywriter in New York and the earnestness of AA meetings, without making light of his addiction or the story of his ex-lover's death from AIDS.

But now Burroughs is sober and in a stable relationship, and his dream that the "memoir about my childhood ... be a New York Times bestseller ... translated into a dozen languages and optioned for film" has come true. He is still "startlingly self-centred", he tells us, requiring "hours alone each day to write about myself". So what does he find to write about?

The answer is ... nothing much. *Magical Thinking* is a collection of short pieces – jingles rather than songs – many of which excavate other childhood episodes, or dish on ad clients and ex-boyfriends from hell, most too short to be more than entertaining anecdotes. Burroughs is most appealing when he makes fun of himself ("The only Hemingway I've ever been remotely interested in is Mariel"), but he's much too easily satisfied, unwilling to push beyond the punchline. He lacks David Sedaris's cool eye, and his attempts at dark humour often backfire. Burroughs's misanthropy has always been part of his charm, but when he jokes that "baldness is the male breast cancer, only much worse" (comparing it with women's breasts shrivelling into "wine-cork nubs"), the misanthropy has an entirely charm-free misogynist edge.

Flynn's *Another Bull-shit Night in Suck City* is the story of a fatherless childhood and an attempt to reconstruct his father's life during those years – alcoholism, grandiose dreams of writing the Great Unseen American Novel, jail time for bank robbery, correspondence with Patty Hearst. It's also a narrative of Flynn's job at the Pine Street Inn, a homeless shelter in Boston. His mother has killed herself, he's had accidents and a breakdown; he's dropped out of college, developed a drink and drugs problem, and can "see no end to being lost".

When Flynn meets his father for only the second time in his life, Flynn Senior is being evicted from his crummy rental. Soon his father is sleeping rough ("A bush. A bench. A bridge. The alliterative universe"), and then, to Nick's mortification, he's sleeping at the Pine Street shelter.

Writers like Burroughs and Wurtzel reconstruct long-ago conversations to give their narratives the pace and immediacy of fiction (and to let other people tell us how the author is really smart and attractive), but Flynn is faithful to the fragmentary qualities of memory. Instead of a chronological trudge, the book is a series of short, often impressionistic chapters, including a couple of mini-plays and one chapter of "thirteen random facts". This isn't as contrived as it sounds: it suits the way Flynn has to piece together his father's story, the way he navigates fact and fiction, madness and sanity, both in his own life and at the shelter. Flynn's prose is fluent and understated, and when he writes about the lure and despair of homelessness, he's especially eloquent. There's terrible sadness here, and dry humour, too: his grandmother jokes about strangling his older brother, and though Thaddeus "knew it was only the whiskey talking, he also knew that the whiskey talked daily".

Like Burroughs, Flynn goes through the AA programme ("sorry-assed people telling sorry-assed tales") and publishes two books, but Flynn's books are poetry, the subject he teaches in Brooklyn public schools. Another Bullshit Night isn't a self-indulgent journal intended to ride a publishing trend and prove that Flynn's childhood was worse than yours. It's as much a memoir of the "invisible" men at Pine Street as it is the story of Nick Flynn. It's the book his father – "Each year of his life is a chapter, the life itself is a book" – will never be able to write.

MAGICAL THINKING: True Stories, by Augusten Burroughs (Hodder, \$34.99).

ANOTHER BULLSHIT NIGHT IN SUCK CITY, by Nick Flynn (Faber, \$28).

Augusten Burroughs is at the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival, May 19-22.