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NEWS

Jane Rohman & Associates

www.janerohman.com

Contact: Ellen Augarten, 413-586-6813, cell: 413-320-7234, ellen@ellenaugartenphotography.com or Susan Arpin, 413-848-1407, susan@janerohman.com

Psalms in Ordinary Voices: A Reinterpretation of the 150 Psalms by Men, Women and Children

Edited by Andrea Ayvazian

Photographs by Ellen Augarten

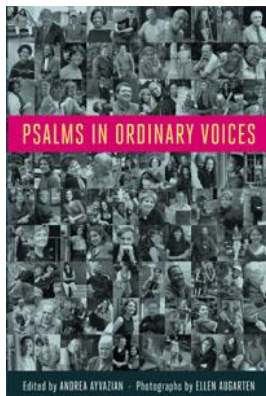
“...so moving... These writers have performed a great service, given a great gift. To hear these phrases stripped down and then restored in a tone we instantly recognize as real is, in a certain way, to hear them again for the first time.” —Bill McKibben

“Just as the original *Book of Psalms* gives voice to the human soul in its riotous variety of emotions, yearnings, intimations and insights, so, too, does *Psalms in Ordinary Voices*.... Hallelujah!” —Nancy Flam

A NEW COLLECTION REFRESHES THE *BOOK OF PSALMS*, TRANSFORMING ANCIENT VERSES INTO EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

All 150 Psalms Reinterpreted in *Psalms in Ordinary Voices*

For thousands of years, the *Book of Psalms* from the Bible has been a potent source of human expression and turned to by individuals and religious communities for daily inspiration, and for comfort during times of trouble. Now a thoroughly contemporary rewriting of these ancient psalms is available in a new book that originally grew out of one Sunday school teacher's exercise a decade ago with seventh graders.



[Psalms in Ordinary Voices: A Reinterpretation of the 150 Psalms by Men, Women and Children](#) (White River Press, \$21, January 2011) offers a wide cross-section of everyday voices —including inmates, salon owners, physicians, writers, and a school bus driver— and is an accessible, fresh iteration of this sacred text that includes a professional portrait of each contributor. Anyone who has ever found solace or inspiration in a Psalm will find this new book of interest.

Totally Awesome

In this new interpretation, all 150 Psalms have been wrestled with and written anew by ordinary Americans from all walks of life. Each contributor has made a few lines of the Bible his or her own, making the image and moods more accessible through today's language.

In thinking about the project, one college-aged contributor said wistfully, “someone might

actually...pray using my Psalm. That is totally awesome.” This book heartily concurs with her, drawing the reader in through its simple yet powerful black-and-white photos of individual contributors while beckoning the divine.

“God is Still Speaking...”

A collection of devotional poetry, hymns of praise, laments, songs of thanksgiving, blessing and curses, words of wisdom and instruction, the Psalms are the most loved and most often read part of the Bible. Martin Luther called them a “Bible in miniature” and John Calvin felt they lifted up our universal struggles.

As such an evocative part of the scriptures, they, like many parts of the Bible, have been reinterpreted many times over. *Psalms in Ordinary Voices* joins this proud tradition. By bringing the feelings, wisdom and guidance of these ancient scriptures into our 21st-century lives, the notion that “God is still speaking” to, in, and through us is brought to life.

Its Own Small Miracle – The Book’s Beginning and Making

Racking her brain yet again for a new way to engage her seventh-grade students in Sunday school, Andrea Ayvazian, the editor of *Psalms in Ordinary Voices*, thought to have her young charges rewrite Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my Shepherd”), the most famous Psalm. The young students nonchalantly put pen to paper and came up with new verses like this example by Andy Carbaugh, an athlete and a twin:

The Lord is my leader
So I do not want anything I don’t need.
He makes me rest peacefully in paradise.
He leads me to the peacefulness of still waters.
He restores my soul.
He points me in the right direction
For His sake and mine.

Realizing that something special was going on, Ayvazian delayed the class’s snack and quickly wrote down the students’ new verses and shared them with the congregation. They quickly spread and were greeted with interest.

From this initial spark, she then asked friends and family to contribute and set out from there to collect all 150 Psalms using the most diverse collection of writers she could imagine – something that hasn’t been done in other reinterpretations. Her goal was to represent all of God’s family, in its quotidian splendor and diversity.

A few years into the project, Ayvazian, who is a minister, teacher, singer and activist for peace and social justice, invited a well-known local photographer to capture each contributor in his or her context so the book would better portray the person. Ayvazian felt only photos could best demonstrate the diversity of the human family, something one picks up easily from the new book’s 150 photos, and she knew Ellen Augarten, a naturally warm person and an exceptional photographer who specializes in portraits, was the perfect fit for the task.

It took Ayvazian 10 years to collect all 150 Psalms and photos with Ellen Augarten. She asked 250 people to reach her goal. Some writers needed help selecting a Psalm but many picked one

that they had heard at a family event, knew of or had prayed with. Some wrote them easily, while others labored. Most wrote theirs on their own.

Old Truths Reborn on Video As Well

Ayvazian and Augarten have populated their new book's website (psalmsinordinaryvoices.com) with 10 videos of contributors reading their Psalms and hope that the book will inspire others to retell these Biblical stories and songs. *Psalms in Ordinary Voices* is an ideal group exercise or model for others who want to make this part of the Bible more accessible. With a nod to the college student noted above, Ayvazian says, "That would be totally awesome."

About the editor and photographer:



The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian (on left) is the Senior Pastor of the Haydenville Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Western Massachusetts. Andrea was formerly the Dean of Religious Life at Mount Holyoke College. A long-time activist for peace and social justice, Andrea is an anti-racism educator, singer and poet. She lives in Northampton, Massachusetts with her partner, Michael Klare. They have one grown son, Sasha.

Ellen Augarten (on right) grew up in Queens, New York and came to Western Massachusetts in the mid-1970s where her career in portrait photography began and grew. She received her Masters of Fine Arts degree from Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford. An active community member, she lives in Northampton, Massachusetts with her husband, Mark. They have two grown children, Libby and Noah.

Product Details:

[Psalms in Ordinary Voices: A Reinterpretation of the 150 Psalms by Men, Women and Children](#)

Paperback: 330 pages

Publisher: [White River Press](#)

Publication Date: March, 2011

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1935052314

ISBN-13: 978-1935052319

Product Dimensions: 8.9 x 6 x 1 inches

U.S.: \$ 21.00