

Unplugged, by Paul McComas

reviewed by [Chris Bush](#) in the [April 19, 2003](#) issue

Many who recover from clinical depression compare regaining their mental health to a religious epiphany, albeit a slow-developing one. To experience joy and to be able to imagine a hopeful future after months or years of psychiatric illness is like having scales fall from one's eyes. These emotions are the theme of Paul McComas's first novel. The book chronicles the struggles of a young rock star, Dana Clay, to recover from a major depressive episode after a suicide attempt.

Clay's depression leads her to abandon her life as a successful musician with a hit album. She flees her Chicago home and arrives, by chance, in the isolated Badlands, where the beauty and severity of the natural environment provide her with her first taste of joy and peace in a long time. The land becomes her sanctuary as she learns to understand and confront her illness, as well as the abusive childhood and failed relationships that contribute to it.

A number of factors help Clay recover. She seeks medical help and begins a regimen of antidepressants; she spends time contemplating her beliefs and goals as she explores the Badlands. Finally, she begins to reconnect with humanity and risks developing new friendships and a romantic relationship with a young woman.

As part of her recovery, Clay also confronts some of her attitudes and feelings about God and religion. Early in the novel she's angry with both. She blames God for not preventing the abuse she suffered as a child or helping others who are similarly victimized. She is also distrustful of organized religion, which all too often condemns her bisexuality.

McComas's portrayal of Clay's religious ambivalence shows a deep understanding of the way alienated young adults can feel marginalized by the church and far from God. As Clay recovers she begins to feel that God may play a role in her life after all. She experiences transcendence through her immersion in the natural world, and her dismissal of religion is challenged by her new love, a committed Christian.

Depression can be a tough subject both to write and read about. The disease often causes its victims to act irrationally, to become self-absorbed and negative.

Americans, with their pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality, can find it especially hard to understand and sympathize with this illness. One of the strengths of *Unplugged* is that McComas presents his depressed character without depressing the reader. Clay's journey to recovery is absorbing, and her growing ability to confront and deal with her illness is admirable. Learning to trust and accept both her strengths and her weaknesses, she returns from the wilderness, both literally and figuratively, ready to embrace life again.