

A terrible swift exile

by [Eugene Kennedy](#) in the [June 16, 1999](#) issue

Finding Hope in the Age of Melancholy.

By David S. Awbrey. Little Brown, 255 pp.

In prose as lean and well defined as a tree on the Kansas plains, David S. Awbrey explores the seemingly endless, empty hallway one may enter after smashing down the door to success. Awbrey presents himself as an antihero who sets out to become a Kansas editor in the tradition of William Allen White, the "sage of Emporia" who once stood at the moral center of the journalistic universe. But when Awbrey achieves his goal, he finds himself in an abyss of emptiness.

The myth of Faust and his famous bargain with Satan structures Awbrey's book. Though raised in a tradition that emphasized giving something back to society, he nevertheless viewed himself as a tough, cynical journalist, and gloried in his reputation for being arrogant. His motto was that "95 percent of everything is crap."

For Awbrey, achieving success meant he had to stab an older mentor, George Neavoll, in the back. At 43, Awbrey had the job of his dreams, editor of the *Wichita Eagle's* op-ed page. But during a large party he gave to salute Neavoll's departure from the paper, Awbrey realized he had lost his own soul. He re-creates the theme cinematically: Awbrey's guests, Wichita's movers and shakers, filled his home. He entered the living room, where the season's first fire burned in the fireplace. Awbrey regarded the fine prints and paintings, the Frank Lloyd Wright furniture, the extensive collection of curios gathered from the far ends of the earth—the whole setting a tribute to and an advertisement for himself.

"'So this is success,' I thought to myself, nodding my head in agreement," he writes. His ego glowed as warmly as the flames in the hearth. "Then it happened. My body started to shudder . . . my breathing quickened. My chest muscles tightened. A chill began in my lower back. . . . My essence emptied into a hellish fury of flames."

Awbrey's inner voice tells him that he is a gross hypocrite. "You'd better be happy, because you've got to live with what you've done." The reader is struck both by the enormity of the moment and by the author's isolation as depression claims him. No

one in a house and garden filled with people is aware of Awbrey's inner suffering. Awbrey concludes that he is undergoing a midlife crisis. He sets himself to explore his situation intellectually, reading articles and listening to talks that offer him a way to identify and manage his experience.

Awbrey tells of his struggle with what he comes to regard as the American blues, an affliction of rootless baby boomers consumed by their own consumerism and spiritually deadened by their lack of religious faith. With the help of a sympathetic editor, Awbrey, by this time separated from his wife, arranges for a working sabbatical at the University of Kansas. There he mournfully visits the sites of '60s activism and plunges himself into the great works of the Western tradition.

Ever the keen journalist, he reports on the books and authors who crowd the shelves of social criticism. These range from Dante to Rollo May, with a good sampling of moralists as varied as Alexis de Tocqueville, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Leo Tolstoy and Christopher Lasch. This high-style bibliotherapy is a survey course on the literature of the declining spirit of the West. As one might expect from such a survey, it simplifies great issues and complex disciplines, as, for example, when Awbrey dismisses psychology as a dark angel furthering a superficial conformity. But this term-paper, summary style may not do justice to the integrity of his inner search.

Awbrey's conclusion is familiar: We have committed a kind of spiritual hara-kiri by rejecting our religious traditions and have undermined our sense of community and of the value of personal sacrifice for the good of that community. If these are unexceptional insights, they are nonetheless made interesting by Awbrey's reflective style, which, finally, infuses the book with a halo of reassurance and calm.

Nonetheless, for all his intellectual affirmation of the common good and of supportive human relationships, he seems as isolated at the end of the journey as he was at the beginning. The second great myth underlying this book is the story of the Garden of Eden. After eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, the author suffered a terrible swift exile beyond its eastern reaches. He knows what is wrong, but, like many of his generation, he cannot yet fully transform his loss into internal gain.