

‘Stepping Stones’ is a memoir of addiction and recovery

Memoirist Marilea C. Rabasa has led a wide-ranging life. She grew up in Massachusetts. After getting married, she followed her husband to Nicaragua, Ecuador and Greece as he worked for the American diplomatic corps. They later divorced. Rabasa then built a career on the East Coast as a teacher to students learning English. Now retired, she divides her time between Camano Island and New Mexico.

Rabasa’s latest book, “Stepping Stones,” doesn’t focus on her travels as much as it does on her journey.

Rabasa has been shadowed by the specter of addiction for most of her life. Her dad was an alcoholic and her parents were emotionally distant. She turned to food, pills, cigarettes and alcohol as she tried to compensate for her own insecurities as a teen and, later, young adult.

As a single working mom, she didn’t have much time for her three children. Her middle child, a daughter, became addicted to heroin and methamphetamine.

So Rabasa knows a thing or two about substance use disorder. She shares her painfully earned wisdom in this collection of mini-essays, some of them only a page or two long. Each reflects a stepping stone on her long, tortuous journey toward sobriety.

Some of her reflections reveal unhealthy choices — whether it was being groped by a group of boys in seventh grade, bingeing on junk food, then purging it before her kids came home from school, or suffering a bad gash on her hand in her haste to cut the cork out of a bottle of wine.

“(L)ike many people with addictive personalities,” she writes, “I would find new and not particularly innovative ways to take the sting out of my pain.”

Eventually, a new romantic relationship with Gene, a fellow teacher and recovering alcoholic, exposes her to different, healthier approaches to coping with difficulties and frustrations.

But that doesn’t mean she quits her addictive behaviors cold turkey.

“Choosing self-care over self-abuse has never been a single light-bulb moment for me but rather an ongoing effort to educate and re-parent myself,” she writes.

She still struggles with depression and anxiety. She still deals with bulimia behind closed bathroom doors and she still tries to hide her drinking from her family.

An intervention by her son and daughter-in-law, exercised with loving questions and concern, provides her with “the giant mirror we all fear but at the same time require if we want to be our best in the world.”

Rabasa shares both the insidious, incremental grip of addiction as well as the halting steps on her road to recovery. She delivers these vignettes with humility and self-recognition. And ultimately, with gratitude.

Taken together, these pieces create not a map, but a mosaic — proof that broken bits can be pieced together to create a life that has meaning and beauty after all.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.

This Week’s Book

‘Stepping Stones’ by Marilea C. Rabasa
She Writes Press — 336 pp — \$16.95

