

# In the Stacks

## Exposing Themselves

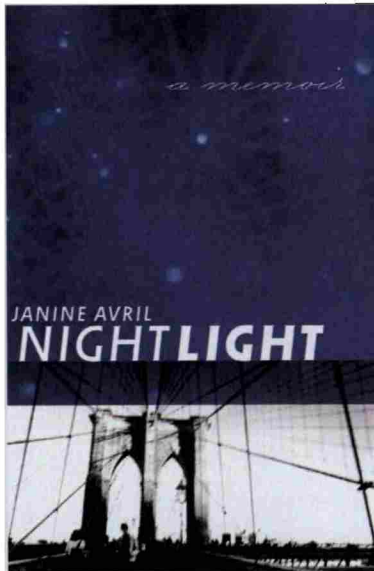
Three women reveal their lives in intimate memoirs.

| By Rachel Pepper

Three recent memoirs from female writers deal with overlapping themes of anxiety, depression, family secrecy, alcoholism, drug abuse and even attempted suicide. Two have lesbian narrators—Jennifer Storm and Janine Avril—while Terri Cheney is straight. All three women battle demons that rage quietly through their childhoods, then erupt in their early adolescence. But by each book's end, the three narrators come to understand, and at least partially deal with, the factors and conditions that have shaped them into the women they are.

**Nightlight, Janine Avril (Alyson):** In her spare but affecting memoir, *Nightlight*, Janine Avril deals with the terrible loss of both her parents at a young age, and the belated revelation that her father died of AIDS, possibly also causing her mother's death from an AIDS-related cancer. From an uncle previously sworn to secrecy, Avril learns that her father, a popular New York restaurant chef in the 1980s, had at least one secret sexual encounter with a man, and quite possibly was bisexual. In tones reminiscent of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Avril ends her book with her own bittersweet reckoning: She had come out as gay to her father before his death, but he remained closeted to her. "My anger subsided when I was able to link Papa's identity with my own. The fact that I was able to do something that he could not: live openly and freely as who I was gave me more compassion for his struggle."

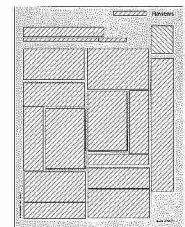
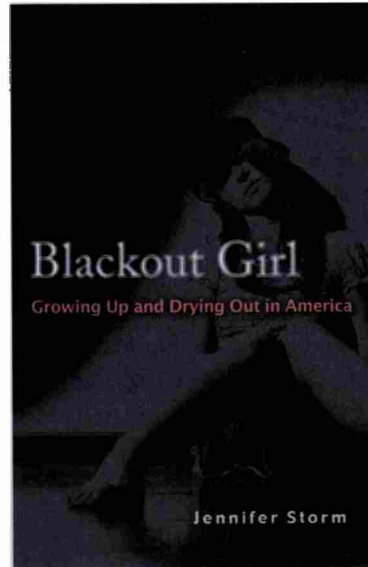
What works best in *Nightlight* is Avril's thoughtful yet determined research into her father's secret life, bound by her own sense of self to expose family secrets that others wished to remain hidden. She is also resolutely honest about her own bouts of depression, and readers will identify with her struggle to come to terms with the tragic death of both parents. What works less well in the book are the unexplained time lags, its



sometimes abruptly short chapters (most are one to three pages long), a few outmoded and potentially politically contentious terms such as "AIDS sufferer" and "AIDS patient," and the way openly gay Avril's teenage yearnings for other girls is detailed, but without much adult resolution.

**Blackout Girl, Jennifer Storm (Hazelden):** Of the three books featured here, *Blackout Girl* reads the most like a confessional. Readers who have suffered the debilitating after-effects of childhood sexual abuse or faced a descent into addictions like the ones that Storm details, will find much to empathize with here. There is a lot of detail about her family: her empathetic but non-reactive father, her distant mother, and her enabling brothers, as well as the small town in Pennsylvania where she grew up, host to many adolescent tragedies. Similarly, there is a full sense of how traumatic assaults on Storm as a girl led to suppressed anger and helplessness, which then exploded into self-destructive behavior. She simply did not care if she lived or died, and given the amount of alcohol and drugs she ingested as a teenager, it's truly amazing that she survived. Eventually ending up in rehab after years of blackouts, self-loathing, and several suicide attempts, Storm finally made the decision to live. Today she works as a victim's rights advocate in Pennsylvania, assisting others who have shared her path. Although Storm's writing is not the most polished of this authorial trio, readers will be rooting for her right up until the book's final pages.

**Manic: A Memoir, Terri Cheney (William Morrow):** Terri Cheney suffers from bipolar disorder, a condition affecting more than 10 million Americans, and one that she captures well in *Manic: A Memoir*. A successful attorney who worked on high-profile cases, representing celebrities like Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones, Cheney secretly suffered from the debilitat-



ing depression and extreme mood swings common to bipolar people. Prone to seductive behavior and crazy stunts (like kite-flying in electrical storms, or playing at night in the ocean's dangerous riptides), she found herself increasingly unable to work, date, or live "normally." Her descriptions of her difficulties are vivid and moving, especially when she so accurately portrays what it's like to feel that she has turned "into something so foul and loathsome that even I have to drape towels over the

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towels over the mirrors until the worst of it passes." In one section, Cheney describes the agony of confronting her neighbor about noise, knowing that she will probably end up coming on to him in the process: "In retrospect, it must have been that dizzy, precarious moment when my chemical balance starts to topple, when almost stable

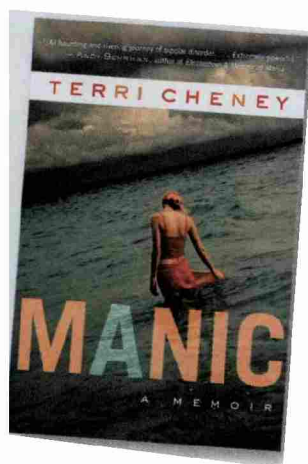
turns into almost

not. One minute

I was contemplating soundproofing the windows with Scotch tape, the next I was pawing through my closet, looking for the sexiest confront-your-neighbor outfit that I could."

In another chapter, a trip to Africa shows her clearly the divide between herself and others with more "normal" emotions: "It was the lions that finally did me in. They were so golden and glorious, it was all too much. Too much beauty. I started to sob and couldn't stop. ... Had I crossed the invisible line that separates me from 'normal' people?"

This idea of such a split—the seemingly successful and attractive woman we might see at a party, who then states that she's mentally ill, is a hard concept for most people to grasp. Cheney doesn't shy away from the harsh realities of manic depression—her own multiple suicide attempts are detailed here, and she can no longer practice law. But with this brave book, hopefully readers will come to see that although there is no cure for manic-depression, increased societal understanding can only help those it afflicts. ■



## EDITOR'S PICK

*Book of the Dead*,  
Patricia Cornwell  
(G.P. Putnam's Sons):

It's probably baffling to some lesbian lit-fic fans to see precious space wasted on a book as mainstream as Cornwell's latest blockbuster. After all, it shot to No. 1 in a week and is in every airport in the U.S. But whether or not the author is gay (or out), since her 1990 debut with *Postmortem*, one of her characters, Lucy Farinelli, has always been out. Lucy's aunt, the infamous forensics pathologist Kay Scarpetta, will go down in history as one of the most complex, modern, post-'90s women. This book tackles everything from exploited female celebs (à la Britney) to mysogyny to 'roid rage to Dr. Laura-esque media manipulation and friend-on-friend sexual assault in a world Agatha Christie could have never imagined. For that, Cornwell deserves accolades. (*penguin-group.com*) — Diane Anderson-Minshall

