

A Long-Awaited Book on A.A. Doesn't Satisfy

People in Alcoholics Anonymous, dedicated as they are to taking life one day at a time, have nevertheless been looking forward to a certain book by Nan Robertson. Its working title ("Alcoholics Anonymous") and the author's credentials (she is a Pulitzer Prize - winning reporter for the New York Times) suggested something sweeping and artfully authoritative. The only question was whether Robertson, a recovering alcoholic, should violate A.A.'s "traditions" by shucking her anonymity. The author discussed this with the widow of A.A.'s co-founder Bill Wilson - and Lois Wilson, 97, ultimately said that it was "high time" for the definitive study of the 53-year-old movement. Unfortunately, Robertson's book has arrived and it is high time still.

On the road to publication, by William Morrow, the book became

"Getting Better" a title that is bland, self-helpish - and, alas, appropriate. Robertson has produced a handbook for those new to the 12 steps. There are chapters on A.A.'s history, the "god part" of the program, and so on. These are useful, and "Nans story," in which Robertson tells of her own dealings with the disease is the kind of powerful tale that can help an active alcoholic overcome his feelings of denial. But most of the book is an ordinary mix of facts, quotes and one-dimensional historical figures. That's just not good enough for a subject like A.A., which is extraordinary to say the least, and - given that it has grown from two drunks to two million sober members worldwide - probably the closest thing we have to a modern miracle.

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