



MEMOIR

IN THE FAST LANE

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From liars to lit, Mary Karr bares it all

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

A petite, dark-featured woman stylishly clad in tailored jacket, jeans, and high-heeled leather boots plunked herself on a step near the podium of R.J. Julia Booksellers and, for a few minutes, chatted with the front row of a crowd of 150 on a brisk evening in Madison last month.

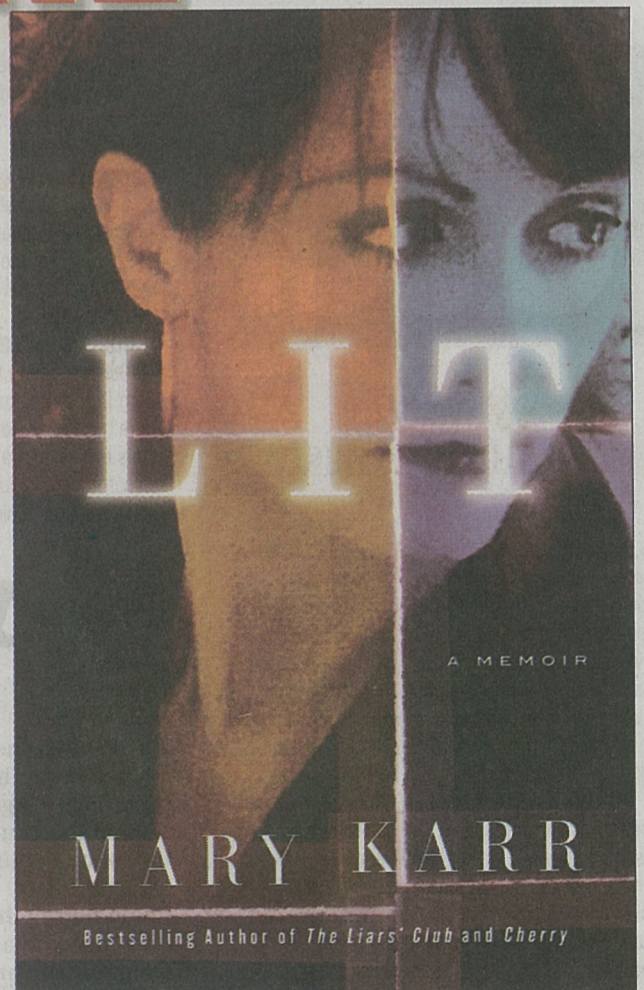
You'd never know that this seemingly inconspicuous figure had authored "Lit," a memoir that, according to the famously hard-to-please "New York Times" critic Michiko Kakutani, "lassos you, hogties your emotions, and won't let you go" and, a week after, was named among the Top 10 Books of 2009 by the "Times."

Until, that is, Mary Karr, 54, rose to the lectern and, while waiting for someone to turn off the background music, quipped, "I feel like a pole dancer without a pole," thereby revealing the sassy, profane, and searingly funny voice that has distinguished her work ever since she kick-started the memoir revolution with the bestselling "The Liars' Club" in 1995.

"Lit" is the third installment in a soup-to-nuts trilogy of memoirs recounting Karr's harrowing life. Raised in

Port Arthur, Texas by a hard-drinking oil worker father—a member of "The Liars' Club," a group of roughnecks who shot pool and told tall tales—and a flighty, unstable mother who, one especially dark night, was intent on killing her daughters with a knife, Karr bailed on her family when she was 17. In California, which she chronicles in "Cherry," she did menial work and learned to drink. Even then, she knew that writing was "humming through [her] like a third rail" and honed a style of poetry that stripped language clean in order to deliver taut, blunt stories.

Hence, the triple meaning of "Lit." Being lit, for the recipient of a 2005 Guggenheim genius grant, was, in one sense, simply a matter of faithfully following in her family's alcoholic footsteps. Karr had her first blackout at age 17 and by 21 knew that she had "an appetite for drink, a taste for it, a talent." That talent picked up when her mother fell off the wagon at her daughter's rehearsal dinner and shortly afterward got sober. "It's almost like our genetic code owed the universe some really wretched alcoholic," she deadpanned, "and I stepped



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stepped into the slot as she left it.”

Thus began her descent from the occasional binge to stashing bottles around the house and drinking lunch to downing a bottle of Jack Daniels a day. On the night she found herself driving around with duct tape and a garden hose in the trunk of her car, planning her suicide—“the lamest stab in suicide’s history,” she writes—she committed herself to McLean Hospital—“The Mental Marriott,” in Karr’s words—where Harvard spouses go when they crack up. It was at the asylum that she had her “nervous breakthrough.”

What resulted was her spiritual conversion, her escape from her “airless box” of a marriage, and her stagger toward the light of Catholicism, where she was “lit” into a new dimension of grace. Not that it came easy for a self-

confessed “black-belt sinner” and “devout Atheist” who “had her middle finger pointed at the sky 90 percent of the time.”

“I didn’t get the Jesus thing,” Karr admitted, a shrug in her ever-so-slight Texas drawl. “God was too big. I came into the Catholic Church on the Holy Spirit, this vague force for benevolence.” Nor does she consider herself “the Pope’s favorite Catholic,” allowing she likes the people in the pews more than the dogma. As for trying to explain her spiritual activity to anyone with a secular frame of mind, “it’s like doing card tricks on the radio,” she said.

And yet, even through the scrim of humor, Karr made clear that faith was vital to her survival and “a long time coming.” It was a byproduct of the alcoholism she finally faced down. It was also an offshoot of motherhood, a job she had a

hard time mastering, and not just because she was “blotto” a lot of the time. While growing up, “it was as if my sister and I were living in a terrarium and my mother would tap the side of the glass once a week to see if we were breathing,” she said. “I didn’t know how to do anything, so I just did the opposite of what my mother would do.”

It’s that kind of unflinching honesty that makes “Lit,” as writer Susan Cheever put it, “the best book about being a woman in America I have read in years.” And also illuminates the definitive meaning of the book’s title: Karr’s journey to literary superstardom through the writing and the superlative reception of the “The Liars’ Club.”

For all that, and the accolades that have come since, including Pushcart prizes for both her poetry and her essays, the Guggenheim, the Whiting Writer’s Award,

and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the tenured professor in literature at Syracuse University insisted that hers is “a very modest talent” and attributes her success to hard work, reading lots of books, and taking advice from writers who are a lot better than she is.

“The bar for me is very high,” she said, “and I don’t think I’ve done what I’d like to do as a writer yet. This book is as good as I can write it. I’d like to write a better book. Next year.”

And with that, she welcomed members of the audience to come on over to the other side of the book store so she could sign their books and meet them, her tone as intimate and friendly as if she were inviting them to a backyard barbecue, as pitch-perfect as her command of the American vernacular.