

BOOKS

Tragedy fuels quest for answers

Allison Moorer's 'Blood' is outlier in the realm of celebrity memoirs.

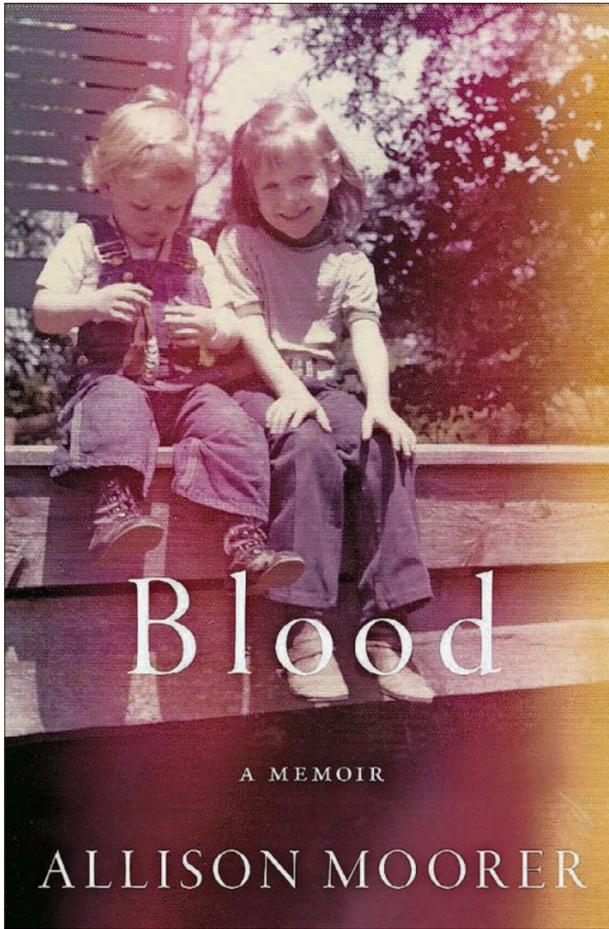
By Suzanne Van Atten
For the AJC

With the voice of an angel and a face to match, singer-songwriter Allison Moorer is a captivating performer, especially when she sings with her sister, Grammy Award winner Shelby Lynne. Their chill-inducing harmonies were honed from birth, an aural manifestation of the sisterly bond that sustained them through their horrific childhood, much of it spent covering in fear from their rage-filled father. Their terror ended early one summer morning in 1986. While his teenage daughters slept inside their Alabama home, their father killed their mother with a shotgun blast, and then he killed himself.

Moorer recounts those events in her literary debut, "Blood," an outlier in the realm of celebrity memoirs. It is beautifully crafted, often poetic and was written without benefit of a ghostwriter. (Moorer holds a master's of fine arts degree in creative writing from The New School.) And it's less about Moorer than it is about her parents. In fact, you could fill a book with what Moorer leaves out of "Blood."

She barely touches on her music career, omitting a reference to her 1999 Oscar nomination for her debut single, "A Soft Place to Fall," featured in the Robert Redford movie "The Horse Whisperer." It contains no mention of her 10-year marriage to country artist Steve Earle. And her current husband, singer-songwriter Hayes Carll, identified as "H," is only mentioned in passing.

Instead, "Blood" focuses squarely on Moorer's parents and her efforts to piece together shreds of memories



and facts in order to help her understand just who Vernon Franklin Moorer and Laura Lynn Smith Moorer were, and how their contentious union led to such a devastating end.

The couple met in Jackson, Alabama, where he was a high school teacher and she was a secretary. By the time they married in 1968, Shelby was on the way. He had musical aspirations; she had a beautiful voice. Playing records and singing together were common pastimes for the whole family. They called the

living room the music room because it contained a record player, a piano, guitars and amps. But he couldn't keep a job and was never without an avocado green tumbler filled with Jim Beam and water. Worst of all, he was mean and violent, and he vented his mounting frustrations mostly on his wife.

"He didn't like women who spoke too much or showed an excess of personality. He didn't like competition. Everyone loved her. So he shrank her. He shrank her until she almost

NONFICTION

"Blood"

by Allison Moorer
DaCapo, 320 pages, \$27

other people's accounts and interstitial poems, vignettes and reveries that paint a multilayered picture of the family's history of dashed hopes and torment. There are accounts of a globe light fixture hurled through a kitchen window and dogs nearly beaten to death, juxtaposed with sweet riffs on the contents of her father's briefcase and a list of her mother's made-up words, followed by the emotional punch of a proclamation titled "What Happens When You Hit Your Daughter."

Among the quest for answers that fuels Moorer's narrative is whether the murder-suicide was premeditated or an act of impulse. Even more vexing, why did police find three spent shotgun shells when Moorer heard only two shots? Did one shot fail? If so, was it before the shot that killed her mother, or the one that killed her father? What were their thoughts in those final moments? The details of the last few seconds of her parents' lives grow potent with meaning for Moorer.

"Blood" dwells mostly in the past, but near the book's end, Moorer leaps to the present with a scene of the sisters performing a duet at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at an Everly Brothers tribute. It suggests a kind of healing that surpasses anything words alone could achieve. "The sounds of our voices blending as only those that belong to siblings can buzzed through (the audience) just as it did us. Our voices are like two halves of a whole, and when we sing together we make one thing."

She also introduces someone who has given her life new purpose, 9-year-old son John Henry.

The implication is that music and family continue to sustain her, as they did in her youth. Together they provide solace as Moorer comes to terms with the realization that some questions about her family's past will never be answered.



Allison Moorer

disappeared. She decided that she didn't want to disappear anymore. Then he disappeared her for good."

Moorer's protector was big sister Shelby, aka "Sissy." Her musical talent was apparent early on. She often joined her parents on stage at local bars to perform, triggering her father's ire when audiences wanted to hear her more than him. Fearless and defiant, she challenged her father's mistreatment of the family, and he responded by bloodying her face with his fists. Mother and daughters often fled to the safety of a relative's house, but they eventually returned, until the time they didn't. That time their mother rented a house just for the three of them. That time was different, and he knew it.

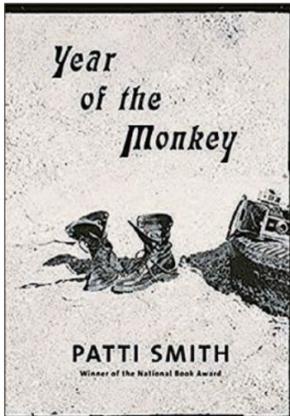
"Blood" begins with Moorer's memory of her parents' deaths told from her child's-eye view. What follows is a collage of memories, official reports,

Patti Smith reflects on pivotal year

By Bryan Reesman
Newsday

"The things that transport us can be so random," muses singer-songwriter Patti Smith in her autobiographical book "Year of the Monkey." She is referring to a moment when the simple observation of a waitress spontaneously morphs into a surreal daydream, allowing her imagination to transfigure the scene into something weirdly compelling. Indeed, the personal, cross-country odyssey captured by her prose and Polaroid portraits in this book finds her mining magical moments within even the most seemingly mundane of circumstances. Life really is about perspective.

A collection of ruminations, adventures and unexpected connections in the artist's life, "Monkey" transpires mostly during the titular year of the Chinese Zodiac. Taking place at the start of her 69th birthday at the end of 2015, this first-person account steers us through the author's world as she copes with her longtime friend Sandy Pearlman having fallen into a coma, aiding playwright Sam Shepard in finishing his final book, and coping with the jarring social implosion of



NONFICTION

"Year of the Monkey"
by Patti Smith
Knopf, 192 pages, \$24.95

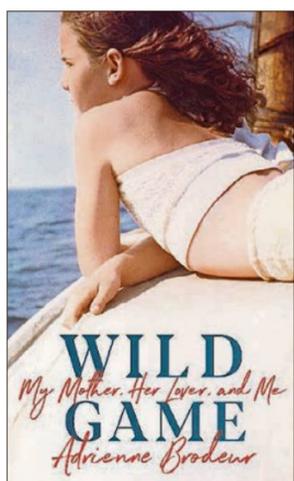
thread here is transformation. Smith is constantly grappling with the specter of change and the realization that many rich personal experiences will soon be shared only in personal memories. She tries to make sense of it all through artistic discourse, intense dream cycles and vivid daydreams.

An inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the winner of the National Book Award (for her 2010 memoir "Just Kids"), Smith has been heralded as the punk rock laureate who first rose to fame in the 1970s, and she brings that poetic elegance to her literary work. She is a true artist who carries herself with modesty and humility, which seems an anathema in this age of narcissistic, prefab pop stars.

If there is anyone capable of living in the past, present and future simultaneously, and occupying that space between reality and dreams, it is Smith. Her life seems to be filled with an aura of magical realism as art provides a gateway to a higher consciousness. It may not be easy to conveniently explain Smith's style or approach, but that is not the point. You simply need to surrender to it to be inspired by it.

America. It is a personal journey rife with longing, grief and cautious hope.

Throughout, Smith weaves threads of everyday experiences and warm recollections of the past together in the manner of a waking dream. The narrative



Opening Lines

'A buried truth, that's all a lie really is. Cape Cod is a place where buried things surface and disappear again: wooden lobster pots, the vertebrae of humpback whales, chunks of frosted sea glass. One day there's nothing; the next, the cyclical forces of nature — erosion, wind and tide — unearth something that has been there all along. A day later, it's gone.'

"Wild Game: My Mother, Her Lover, and Me" by Adrienne Brodeur
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 256 pages, \$27

Best-sellers

HARDCOVER FICTION

1. **The 19th Christmas** Patterson/Paetro
2. **The Institute** Stephen King
3. **Ninth House** Leigh Bardugo
4. **What Happens in Paradise** Elin Hilderbrand
5. **The Dutch House** Ann Patchett
6. **The Water Dancer** Ta-Nehisi Coates
7. **The Testaments** Margaret Atwood
8. **Child's Play** Danielle Steel
9. **The Giver of Stars** Jojo Moyes
10. **Bloody Genius** John Sandford
11. **Vince Flynn: Lethal Agent** Kyle Mills
12. **Cilka's Journey** Heather Morris
13. **The Oracle** Jonathan Cahn
14. **An Encyclopedia of Tolkien** David Day
15. **A Mrs. Miracle Christmas** Debbie Macomber

HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. **Blowout** Rachel Maddow
2. **Movies (And Other Things)** Shea Serrano
3. **Talking to Strangers** Malcolm Gladwell
4. **Tough Love** Susan Rice
5. **Witch Hunt** Gregg Jarrett
6. **The United States of Trump** Bill O'Reilly
7. **Debt-Free Degree** Anthony Oneal
8. **The Book of Gutsy Women** Clinton/Clinton
9. **Year of the Monkey** Patti Smith
10. **Inside Out** Demi Moore
11. **Shut Up and Listen!** Tilman Fertitta
12. **Call Sign Chaos** Jim Mattis
13. **Metahuman** Deepak Chopra
14. **Deep State** James B. Stewart
15. **Letters from an Astrophysicist** Neil Degrasse Tyson

PAPERBACK

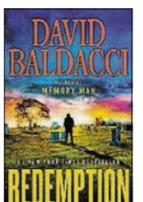
1. **The Great Alone** Kristin Hannah
2. **The 18th Abduction** Patterson/Paetro
3. **Redemption** David Baldacci
4. **The Walking Dead Compendium, Vol. 4** Robert Kirkman
5. **Nine Perfect Strangers** Liane Moriarty
6. **Before We Were Yours** Lisa Wingate
7. **A Well-Behaved Woman** Therese Anne Fowler
8. **A Spark of Light** Jodi Picoult
9. **Little Fires Everywhere** Celeste Ng
10. **Who Knew?** Physics James Lees
11. **Official SAT Study Guide (2020 ed.)**
12. **It (movie tie-in)** Stephen King
13. **The Paris Orphan** Natasha Lester
14. **Winter in Paradise** Elin Hilderbrand
15. **The Overstory** Richard Powers



Magic and murder follow an unlikely freshman at Yale



Insights from the former Ambassador to the United Nations



A detective tries to fix a mistake he made as a rookie