

EXCERPT



**Blood from a Stone**  
*A Memoir of How Wine Brought Me Back from the Dead*

October 11, 2022 | \$20, 272 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0088-5

“This is the story of how wine brought me back from the dead.” Join Adam McHugh as he ends one career and discovers a new life in wine among the grapevines of the Santa Ynez Valley of California. This memoir takes you on Adam’s journey from remaking his life to finding healing through the good gifts of wine, friends, and the beauty of wine country.

## Wine Happens

Wine in its rawest form isn’t made. *Wine happens*. Here is a little playful trickery, an intoxicating accident, a miracle tripped over. An elixir that can make a laborious life just a little bit easier. It would take a long while to figure out how to make and store good wine and how to recreate the miracle consistently. But over time the mystics, poets, and philosophers would come to celebrate wine for its ability to open the mind and free the body, to reveal the secrets of the heart, and to banish fear and worry. As the Roman poet Horace encouraged his friends, “Smooth out with wine the worries of a wrinkled brow.” Is it any wonder that wine became the centerpiece of religious tables and a core symbol of heaven’s love for earth that continues to this day? The ancient lyrics exult that “wine gladdens the human heart” and “cheers both gods and mortals.”

At the time these wine revelations were first taking hold of me, I was leading a life that needed a tall glass of gladdening. I lived thirty miles or so east of Los Angeles, that sunny megalopolis I had once heckled from my misty northwestern perch of Seattle, and I was driving the 210 to the 605 to the 10 to nursing homes and strange neighborhoods at all hours of the day and night. I was a hospice chaplain. If you are unfamiliar, hospice is end-of-life care, a service for the terminally ill, for when the doctor throws up his hands and says, “There is nothing more I can do.” And I was a chaplain, a minister working outside church walls, who showed up at death’s door to listen or pray or sit quietly at grieving bedsides. For a while I worked daytime shifts, and the sunshine illuminating my drives between nursing homes and shining in the windows of living rooms converted into dying rooms kept my spirits lighter. But then I was moved to the on-call night shift, when my work schedule became midnight to eight in the morning.

I was a hospice chaplain, working the graveyard shift. I was the Grim Reaper’s wingman.

When a patient was dealing with an emotional or spiritual issue after hours, I was summoned. I would get a call at three in the morning that a patient was threatening suicide, which wakes you up considerably faster than coffee, believe me. I would keep him on the phone as long as I could, urgently empathizing, asking questions about the specificity of his plan, with a second phone nearby if I needed to call 911.

Those were the extreme situations, but most of my work was what we called “death visits.” A patient on our service would die in the night, and Telecare would alert me to go help the family cope with their loss. Each night I slept, or tried to sleep, with a beeper next to my ear. Yes, a bona fide circa-1991 beeper. For the record, when you take a beeper to the City of Industry in the middle of the night, people will assume you are a drug dealer.

After that dreadful piece of retro-tech would scream me awake, making my heart beat out of my neck, I would gather myself and don a button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves and khaki pants, the outfit of choice for the casual, off-hours hospice chaplain. Then I would drive my black 2003 Honda CRV through the starless LA night, battling my grogginess with saccharine pop music, to the patient’s house to witness the death. I would walk in the door and everyone would clear a path. “Shhhh, the minister is here,” they would say.



Tara Burns, print and online publicity  
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews  
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com



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Adam McHugh is a wine tour guide, sommelier, and Certified Specialist of Wine. He is the author of *The Listening Life* and *Introverts in the Church* and a regular contributor to *Edible Santa Barbara & Wine Country*. He lives in California's Santa Ynez Valley.

Sometimes the family would want me to sound official, to make a "pronouncement," so I would put two fingers on the patient's neck for a few seconds and then summon my best primetime doctor impression to say, "Time of death: 4:40 a.m., January 23." Then I would close the patient's eyes. I would call the funeral home, flush the Morphine and Ativan and other meds down the toilet, and then, if they wanted, sit with the family until the men in suits and white gloves appeared with a gurney, usually ninety minutes later. Then I would never see that family again.

Those were hard nights. In the years I did that job, they never got easier. I played a meaningful role, and the families I passed in the nights were usually grateful for my prayers, yet I felt there was a certain futility to it all. Secretly, I wondered if I was doomed to wander the earth in the dark watches of the night like Jacob Marley, observing human misery, unable to do much of anything about it.

In my off hours, I was the only person I knew who could drain the life out of the most jovial cocktail party by simply mentioning what I did for a living. Here would be an unsuspecting accountant just trying to make a little small talk, reaching for a piece of smoked gouda, asking innocuously, "So, Adam, what do you do for work?"

"Uhhh, well, I'm a chaplain and grief counselor in, um, hospice," I would stammer. The record would scratch, the room would freeze, and a Southern lady in the corner would faint. They would look at me like I just said, "I am a hitman, and you are my next target." It turns out that the only public topic more distasteful than religion is death.

In my work, I suffered regularly from what is officially called "compassion fatigue," and what unofficially feels like walking in ten feet of water. Everything is slow, exhausting, and a little blurry. I felt trapped in my best intentions to do good, flailing in a world that was slowly drowning me. Strangers always said, upon finding out I worked in hospice, "Oh, that takes a really special person." I knew I wasn't that special. At the same time, I did truly want to help people, to find genuine connection, to offer a teaspoon of comfort to these families on one of the worst nights of their lives. I was taking my shoes off to stand on holy ground night after night, sometimes holding hands with patients when they took their final breath. But then I would look down after a while and see that my naked feet were dirty and calloused and stained with blood. It was getting harder to walk. Sometimes I feared that my patients were not the only ones who were dying.

I gained a good twenty pounds during my hospice nights, a comfort-food layer of defense against the darkness. I would circle the Del Taco drive-thru or plant myself at the Claremont Village Grill counter regularly after death visits, less out of hunger and more out of late-night solidarity, just to encounter my brothers and sisters of the moonlight, anyone who was awake in those lonely hours while the world slept tight. My schedule and work were further straining a marriage that was slowly falling apart. I would stagger home at nine in the morning after an all-night bender of death visits, curl into the fetal position on my olive-green couch, and fitfully sleep through episodes of *Rick Steve's Europe* until dinnertime, not wanting to talk to anyone, dreaming of being anywhere else in the world other than here.



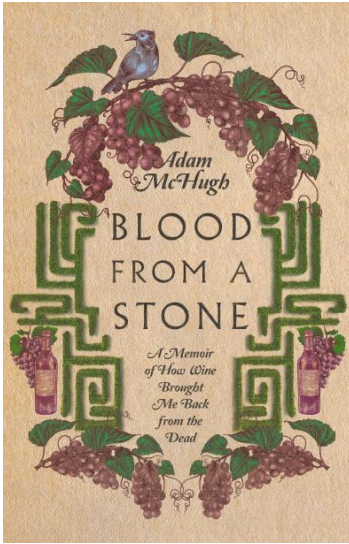
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While almost everywhere sounded better than my place of captivity, I was dreaming of a promised land, where the wine flows, the mountains climb out of the sea, and to my knowledge at the time, no one dies. A hundred and fifty miles north of my couch, the Santa Ynez Valley stretched like an accordion from the 101 freeway west toward the bracing Pacific and east toward Los Padres National Forest. It is a fairytale world where pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon are practically neighbors, with only syrah in between. In the heart of Santa Barbara County, Santa Ynez is the first great wine region you come to when accelerating north out of LA, which I did often and with increasing speed after I first discovered it.

On the western outskirts of the Santa Ynez Valley is a coastal, fogbound town called Lompoc, which was founded in 1874, in a tantalizing irony, as a temperance colony. If you bought land in Lompoc back then, you signed a contract that declared, "No vinous, malt, spirituous, or other intoxicating liquors shall ever be manufactured or sold upon any portion of the ranchos purchased by this corporation." The founding fathers of Lompoc kept the spirits at bay for twenty-five years, after which all its parched residents up and partied like it was 1899. Now Lompoc is home to some of the best pinot noir and chardonnay vineyards in the world.

Follow Route 246 east from Lompoc, and the average temperature climbs about a degree for every mile you travel away from the Pacific Ocean. Forty-five minutes later, you arrive at the eastern flank of Santa Ynez, to a sunbaked land called Happy Canyon, so named because during Prohibition this was where the moonshine was run. "I'm takin' a trip up Happy Canyon," you'd say in Santa Barbara in the Roaring Twenties when you were on the hunt for bootlegged hooch. The name stuck, and the canyon is still a happy one, as now kingly Arabian horses run free and thirsty visitors find the most prized sauvignon blanc vineyards on the California Central Coast and some upstart cabernet. In France, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon have to be planted an entire country apart in order to find the right climates for their flourishing. In the Santa Ynez Valley, pinot and cab are planted twenty-five miles apart.

As I struggled through my hospice nights, I couldn't stop thinking about Santa Ynez—this strange and beautiful valley stretched between a dry town and a wet canyon, a cool maritime climate giving way to its hot inland neighbor, that felt like my elusive promised land but somehow also like a timeline, etched in dirt and written in skies, of my life and spiritual wanderings. Somehow in that valley those fiery, teetotaling Southern Baptists who gave me faith are squared off in perpetual conversation with the Episcopalians who pour me the sacrament these days—and keep buying me drinks.

Some time ago, I left hospice and moved to the Santa Ynez Valley.

Now I work in wine. This has been far from a straight trip up Happy Canyon, believe me. Recently, a nosy woman on a wine tour I led peppered me with personal questions all afternoon, and at the end of the day she concluded, "Adam, your story is exhausting!" Tell me about it. This is the corkscrewing tale of how I got to Santa Ynez, eventually, and the questions that came up along the way. You and I are going to take a long wine tour together on our way there, and we will make plenty of stops for a glass and some local wine history. As you will see, I reached into the old, old story of wine in order to find my new story, which begins, as so many wine love stories do, in the French countryside.

Most stories about religion and drink are stories of recovery. I'm not sure if mine isn't a story about recovery too.

—From chapter one, "Wine Happens"

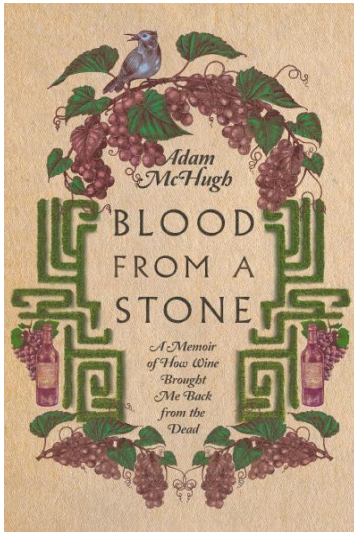


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## ENDORSEMENTS



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"This is the story of how wine brought me back from the dead." Join Adam McHugh as he ends one career and discovers a new life in wine among the grapevines of the Santa Ynez Valley of California. This memoir takes you on Adam's journey from remaking his life to finding healing through the good gifts of wine, friends, and the beauty of wine country.

## "Stunning Memoir...Brings a Sideways Beatitude"

"Adam McHugh is one of the most effortlessly funny writers I know. In his new work, *Blood from a Stone*, Adam combines his wit with a tender vulnerability to tell a story as poignant as it is funny."

—Susan Cain, author of *Quiet* and *Bittersweet*

"For an avowed introvert, Adam McHugh lets it all hang out in *Blood from a Stone*, a very personal, soul-searching tale about a dying career, difficult divorce, and ultimately, inspiring rebirth thanks to Santa Barbara County wine country. Along the way, McHugh educates the reader in an engaging, accessible manner about the great sagas of wine, both those from Old World antiquity and more recent stories from the Santa Ynez Valley. This book should entertain wine neophytes and experts alike, or just about anyone who's pulling for the underdog."

—Matt Kettmann, author of *Vines & Vision* and contributing editor, *Wine Enthusiast*

"A sparkling delight, laced with deep and earthy emotion but ultimately finished with notes of hope and love. In *Blood from a Stone*, Adam McHugh gives us a cultural history of wine alongside his own story, letting us taste the cycles of grief, darkness, and joy that mark every life. With good humor and hard-won depth, he coaxes us toward the attentiveness that great wine, and great writing, can foster—and the result is nothing short of wonderful."

—Alissa Wilkinson, author of *Salty: Lessons on Eating, Drinking, and Living from Revolutionary Women*

"Adam McHugh is a gifted storyteller and has created not only a wonderful tour guide through the rich history of wine but also a guidebook toward salvation and purpose from the depths of human misery and despair. As creatures with feelings, we can all relate by personal experience to his emotional love story. Anyone with an interest in wine, history, and culture will find his writing entertaining and provocative. Thank you, Adam, for baring your soul to remind us we are all pilgrims on the labyrinthine trail toward eternal and internal peace, love, and harmony, and thank you for bringing us back to the importance of humility, compassion, and sympathy in our daily living."

—Richard Sanford, winegrower, Sta. Rita Hills, California

"Adam McHugh's stunning memoir, *Blood from a Stone*, brings a sideways beatitude: *Blessed are the lonely, the detached, the fired, the tired, and the spiritually hungry. They will see God if they're paying attention and willing to be surprised.* Read, savor, and listen for the low hum of deep faith in this personal story of a man who writes with a keen awareness of grief and a self-deprecating honesty. You'll leave with a renewed longing for food and meaning, cheese and history, and wine you can't pronounce."

—Emily P. Freeman, author of *The Next Right Thing*



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