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# Angelhead: My Brother's Descent into Madness

By Greg Bottoms



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**Angelhead: My Brother's Descent into Madness** By Greg Bottoms

*"My brother saw the face of God. You never recover from a trauma like that."*

So begins **Angelhead**, a taut, powerful memoir of the madness and crime that rips a family apart.

"I didn't see God, of course, but I saw my brother seeing God; I saw how petrified he was, how convinced."

Set in Tidewater, Virginia, in the 1980s and early 1990s, **Angelhead** documents the violent, drug-addled, schizophrenic descent of the author's brother, Michael. Commencing with Michael's first psychotic break at age 14 -- high on acid, seeing God in his suburban bedroom window -- through a series of petty crimes, bizarre disappearances, and suicide attempts to the shocking crime that landed him in the psychiatric wing of a maximum security prison, **Angelhead** enables us to witness firsthand, as never before, the fragmenting of a mind and a family.

"I knew, still know, that he saw, in some form, His or Her or Its face."

Bottoms shows, in pitch-perfect prose and with great empathy and dramatic tension, the psychological decline of his brother as he becomes obsessed first with heavy metal music, martial arts, and the occult, and then with the more bizarre aspects of Christianity. We not only see the effects Michael's odd and increasingly violent behavior has on the people around him, but also come to understand how the author, now a successful writer and journalist, used the power of language and storytelling both to save himself and to forgive his brother. With the fast pace and seamless structure of the best crime writing and the moral sophistication and depth of our finest literature, **Angelhead** will challenge what we know about mental illness and its impact on us all. It is a brilliant work of unusual intensity.

"In his room he was having his first of many psychotic breaks. It came in the form of crippling guilt, ruthless introspection. He was Jesus being scolded by an angry Father. He wore sin, all sin, heavy as lead shackles. God made him look at himself and he was a stone with a minuscule heart."



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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

When he was 10 years old, the author watched as his brother Michael lost his mind. High on LSD and screaming uncontrollably because God was torturing him, the 14-year-old smashed everything in his bedroom, his feet red with blood from broken glass. Michael collected snakes and let them slither around his naked body; he beat Greg nearly senseless, then smashed his own forehead into a sharp branch in repentance; he stayed up all night, watching Christian television or "puzzling over his strange and cruel distance from God." Their parents, preoccupied by the ceaseless work that had taken them from a dirt-poor Virginia town to an affluent suburb that they really couldn't afford, thought drugs the problem and throwing Michael out the answer. Not until 1977, when he was 21, did they learn that he was an acute paranoid schizophrenic, so severely mentally ill that he probably would never be healed, although medication might control his behavior. Michael became increasingly dangerous, but could not be institutionalized against his will; when he set their house on fire in 1993, the father's reaction was relief: "This was the best thing that could have happened.... He'll be put away." He was, and, Bottoms acknowledges, "We've all found a peace without Michael that we're not willing to give up." There's no false sentiment in this unflinching memoir of a family that's alienated, instead of united, by tragedy: "We all hid from each other," Bottoms writes with characteristic candor. "We shared a space, a roof, nothing else." There is, however, tremendous sorrow for a blighted life and the havoc that it wrought. Bottoms's finely crafted prose offers no consolation or easy answers--simply emotional precision and the satisfaction of hard truth. --*Wendy Smith*

### From Publishers Weekly

One of the most harrowing portraits of madness in recent memory, Bottoms's memoir documents the unraveling of his older brother in skillful, off-center prose. The chaos of mental deterioration, family denial, God obsession and terror begins in the 1980s, in the Bottomses' suburban home in Tidewater, Va. Fourteen-year-old Michael, high on LSD, believes he sees the face of God and briefly descends into a psychotic fit. From there, Bottoms follows his brother's fall from sanity in a series of misadventures that carve away Michael's humanity: homelessness; suicide attempts with Drano and hanging; sudden disappearances, sometimes to other states. The boy's parents watch his mental vanishing act with stoicism, more worried about the opinions of their prosperous neighbors than the health of their son. When Michael rapidly falls apart after a brutal trauma, the family's rage and frustration corrodes most of their remaining goodwill as he is jeopardizing their hard-won facade of happiness, destroying their hopes for normalcy. Throughout the book, Bottoms, whose work has appeared in the online magazines *Salon*, *Feed* and *Nerve*, candidly discloses his feelings of shame, fear and sympathy for his brother, as well as his disdain for his parents' handling of the crisis. Though the prose is occasionally flat in comparison to the crises it recounts, and bookstore browsers will have to get past the lackluster jacket, this memoir will rivet readers in their 20s and 30s who are interested in schizophrenia.

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### Review

"I am on record as believing that any day is better when I am not asked to read another memoir. But Greg Bottoms's book caught my attention immediately and drew me in. I read it all in one sitting. I glanced up once or twice to look out of the window and to clear my head, and then when I finished I looked at the window again but it was dark outside. Which, considering what I'd just finished reading, seemed appropriate. "I would feel foolish in saying that the book is powerful and well written. . . . That doesn't seem the point somehow. *Angelhead* is direct, inventive, clearly imagined, and packs a punch. It is a book people will talk about -- perhaps productively."

-- Ann Beattie

"Angelhead is a cleanly distilled story of a profound family anguish. On every one of its two hundred pages there are sentences like arrows. The whole work has the beauty of hard, painful truth, arrived at through intelligence, art, and compassion. This is one of the most moving books I've read in a long, long time."

-- John Casey

"From the Hardcover edition.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Steven Ward:**

Do you have favorite book? If you have, what is your favorite's book? Reserve is very important thing for us to be aware of everything in the world. Each publication has different aim or maybe goal; it means that book has different type. Some people really feel enjoy to spend their time and energy to read a book. They can be reading whatever they have because their hobby is definitely reading a book. Think about the person who don't like studying a book? Sometime, man feel need book whenever they found difficult problem or even exercise. Well, probably you will want this Angelhead: My Brother's Descent into Madness.

#### **Billie Luster:**

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#### **Carl Brinkley:**

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**Ron Taylor:**

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