

NONFICTION

A perceptive writer rewards the reader who's patient

KRISTIN OHLSON Special to The Plain Dealer

I finished the essay called "Prelude" at the beginning of Anne Lamott's new book, "Grace (Eventually)," then snapped the cover shut, almost waking my husband. I was reminded of my son when I took him to a movie hailed as a clever comedy several years ago. He sat through it in grim silence, his arms folded. After it ended, he turned to me and said, rather bitterly, "I didn't laugh once."

I didn't laugh once during the Prelude piece, didn't even smile, and I wasn't especially engaged or moved either. I had a sinking feeling that millions of Anne Lamott fans — I among them — might be disappointed with her new book. "Grace (Eventually)" is the third volume in which Lamott tells stories about herself, her son and her friends, continuing to examine the difficulty of remaining sane, sober and true to her religious faith in a vexatious world.

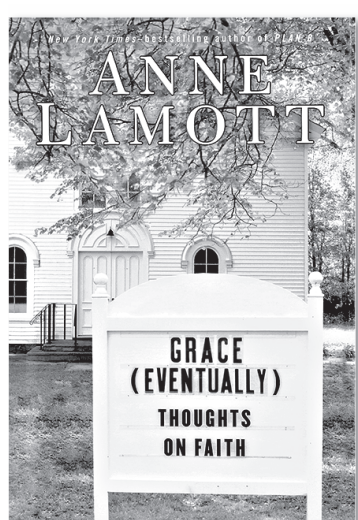
But at first, her prose seemed more tepid than in previous works. I worried that she had become so sane and sober that she had lost her edge. Or rather, that she was no longer writing from the edge, where she usually flings herself in brilliant prose and then talks herself back with a bracing blend of wit and candor.

The next essay, "Ski Patrol," didn't win me over, either. She writes about falling off a chair lift, suffering the further ignominy of feeling as if she would vomit into the snow and being escorted to a ski patrol hut that stank of kerosene. Inside, she says, "I had the old familiar feelings of separation: from myself, from God, and from the happy, pretty people outside." This sounded familiar, but not reassuring. It was as if she had to remind the reader that she was the same endearing neurotic.

But then, thankfully, the book began to take off for me — even the first few pieces. I'm happy to report that grace eventually animates most of Lamott's essays, about half of which are newly published here. She returns to familiar questions but with new insights and the perspective of a life that keeps moving on.

Grace (Eventually)

By Anne Lamott. Riverhead, 253 pp., \$24.95.



Lamott has a knack for describing something that seems paradoxically true and startling, because no one has put it quite the same before. In "Blink of an Eye," she writes of a day when she kept calling her son to get out of bed and attend to some chores. She finally marched to his room, where three teenage friends and he were "still sleeping, in what smelled like a cafeteria at an elk preserve." I was tempted to set off fireworks for that phrase alone.

Over 24 essays, she takes on the quotidian burdens — body loathing, political rage, jealousy, the terror of being broke, library closures, earnest deputies enforcing leash laws — and some that most of us don't face. In "At Death's Window," she writes about a beloved friend who turned down the aggressive chemotherapy that would have given him a few more bad months. When the life he wanted was over, he asked Lamott to help him end it. It's a beautiful essay — sad, tender and even funny in parts.

Some readers — and I'm one — might be discomfited by Lamott's frequent references to Jesus. Some might bridle at her Bush lamentations. Some might wince at the way she relentlessly peels back the layers of her own skin, metaphorically speaking. Still, I think that most will feel, at the end, captured by her big, fierce heart.

Ohlson is an author and critic in Cleveland Heights.

To reach Kristin Ohlson: books@plain.com



LYNN ISCHAY | THE PLAIN DEALER

Erika Little of Cleveland gets her praise on, assisting Belinda Haywood in teaching a gospel dance routine at New Community Bible Fellowship in Cleveland Heights.

WORKOUT

FROM E1

'Gospelcise' leader helps women stay fit

Slowly, more church doors have opened for Haywood, who studied modern dance in her youth at Cleveland Music School Settlement and Rainey Institute.

Through North East Ohio Neighborhood Health Inc.'s Women of Wellness program, she brings her class to local churches on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. And next month she'll become even busier, adding Friday and Sunday classes at the Multiplex in Cleveland.

Haywood's routines still have the sense of being imported from the club, because each is a series of memorized steps tied tightly to a song with an infectious hook and singalong lyrics. Yet the music has an uplifting flavor to it, and Haywood feels like she's in a new world, far away from the coarse language and sexual references that she once spent a lot of her energy trying to edit out.

"I am not forgotten. God knows my name, he knows my name," her class members sang along on Wednesday, as they added a catchy new song by Israel and New Breed to their dance repertoire.

Before class began at New Community, they prayed, holding hands in a circle. "Thank you for everything, Lord God. You know our struggles, you know what we have to deal with. Touch our jobs, Lord, touch our homes," said Brenda Vann, a "coach" provided by the church who makes sure participants get the spiritual help they need. Clearly, it's a sisterhood. Be-

fore they get started, the women share bad news of a bereaved member, and the good news that one attendee has lost 4 pounds and another has lost 3.

Haywood said she has had to tinker with the wording, since some churches think the term "line dancing" is too secular. To appease them, she changed the name to "gospelcise routines."

"I'll call it what you want me to call it," she laughed. "Exercise is exercise," she said, looking like a cheerleader as she bounded around the room, leading the steps to Martha Munizzi's "Glorious." Hands raised in praise, the class did an augmented electric slide, adding a hop and kicking high at the turn.

"Get to dancing, singing, jumping, leaping," the class sang along. "Get to shouting, make it louder, make it glorious. Start rejoicing, praising, lifting, raising. Get to shouting, make it louder, make his praise glorious."

When they heard "A Brighter Day" by George Huff, the women instantly separated into lines, eager to do their favorite routine. This dance used up the entire room as they shimmed backward, twisted, turned and then strode forward. It's a fun exercise because the choreography tests their memory, said Haywood, giving a quick lesson to a newcomer.

Once everyone has learned the movements, she adds more intricate steps to keep it interesting.

Study shows routines pay off

It's a fun but demanding workout, and participants work up a sweat while getting their praise on. Carolyn Murrock, a postdoctoral fellow at Case Western Reserve University's nursing school, last year arranged for Haywood to teach a church-based dance class and then documented that participants lost an average of 5 to 10 pounds while attending twice a week for eight weeks.

Ten weeks after the study ended, Murrock went back to survey the women, and found

they had decided to hire Haywood on their own and were still losing weight. The women also improved their aerobic capacity, she said. Her results, Murrock said, dispel the myth that you have to work out more frequently to get results: "Something is better than nothing," she said.

The survey results gave Murrock a new respect for the idea of bringing exercise directly to sedentary black women, who suffer disproportionately from heart disease, diabetes and other ailments that can be improved by working out. For them, church is a more comfortable place than a health club. They know the people and feel welcome.

"A lot of the needs that we go outside for can be met right inside the church," agreed the Rev. Kevin James, pastor of New Community.

Murrock's study also showed that 77 percent of Haywood's participants stayed with the class until the study was over — an unheard-of retention rate when it comes to exercise, Murrock said. "But when you're dancing and laughing and having fun, an hour goes quickly."

To cool the women down at the end of Wednesday's class, Haywood put on a gentle song by Munizzi called "Because of Who You Are."

"OK, ladies, this is time to focus on our Heavenly Father. We won't think about anything else but him and the words of this song. I want you to stretch and relax," Haywood said.

Class members lowered their heads and clasped their hands in a graceful bow.

"We're bowing before the Lord. I'm casting my concerns at his feet," said Stephanie J.W. Ford, a New Community member who said the class is a great opportunity to lose one's cares, if just for an hour.

"I can guarantee that somebody in this room tonight may need a light bill paid or may have trouble paying the mortgage," she said. "We just need this time with the Lord."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: mberstein@plain.com, 216-999-4876

SHORT TAKES

From staff and wire reports

MUSIC

Lupe Fiasco show is postponed

Monday's Lupe Fiasco show at House of Blues has been rescheduled to Monday, March 26. Tickets for the Chicago rapper's March 19 show will be honored. House of Blues is at East Fourth Street and Euclid Avenue, Cleveland. Tickets (\$20-\$28) are on sale at www.hob.com and at Ticketmaster centers, at www.ticketmaster.com or by phone at 216-241-5555 in Cleveland or 330-945-9400 in Akron.

CIM faculty member to take new post

Mark George, a faculty member at the Cleveland Institute of Music, pianist with the Cleveland Chamber Symphony and president of that ensemble's board of directors, has been named director of the Hartt School Community Division of the University of Hartford, a community arts school in Hartford, Conn. He will take up the post this summer. In his position, George, 46, will head an institution with nearly 2,700 students and a faculty of more than 150 members that offers programs in music, dance and theater. A native of Pittsburgh, George is a music-theory instructor and director of distance learning at CIM. He holds degrees from CIM, Indiana University and Case Western Reserve University.

PHILANTHROPY

Winfrey charity opens new school

Oprah Winfrey opened her second school for poor South African youth Friday, an innovative, environmentally friendly institution she hopes will be a model for public education. The Seven Fountains Primary School was funded by Winfrey's Angel Network, a public charity that supports organizations and projects focused on education and literacy. The talk-show host danced and sang with teachers and children who lauded her with cries of "Long live Oprah, long live!" at the formal dedication of the school outside the remote town of Kokstad in eastern KwaZulu-Natal province. Winfrey first visited the school in 2002 when it was on a farm, bringing gifts, clothing, books and teacher-training materials for its 1,000 students and staff. The school was forced to move to a building with no windows, little electricity and running water, and only four toilets. During a visit in 2004, the Angel Network committed itself to building a new school. The \$1.6 million school has 25 classrooms, three multipurpose rooms, a library, computer center, landscaped playground and two fields. The area's water supply is irregular, so the school has an innovative system to recycle rainwater and uses seesaws and merry-go-rounds to pump water. It uses solar power and has landscaped vegetable gardens.

"FUNNY AND ENCHANTING!" Thelma Adams, US WEEKLY

hughgrant drewbarrymore musicandlyrics PG-13

AUDIENCE AND CRITICS ARE FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE YEAR'S MOST ROMANTIC & ENCHANTING FILM. RENÉE ZELLWEGER EWAN MCGREGOR miss potter

NOW PLAYING! CLEVELAND CINEMAS CEDAR LEE Cedar & Lee Rds. 440-964-2000 Daily 2:15, 4:30, 7:00 & 9:15

ACADEMY AWARD WINNER BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM "SUPREMELY INTELLIGENT!" THE LIVES OF OTHERS

NOW PLAYING! CLEVELAND CINEMAS CEDAR LEE Cedar & Lee Rds. 440-964-2000

MARCH 23-APRIL 15 I-X INDOOR AMUSEMENT PARK We've got the fun covered! PAY ONE PRICE RIDE ALL DAY!

COME MEET THE TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES MARCH 23 ONLY! Q104

THIRD ANNUAL LA FIESTA LATINA PRESENTED BY JULIA DE BURGOS Celebrate the Latino community March 24 & 25 Live Bands, Family Fun and More!

COME MEET UNIQUA & TYRONE FROM THE BACKYARDIGANS DORA THE EXPLORER GIVEAWAYS!

GENERAL ADMISSION \$19 CHILDREN UNDER 48 \$16 SENIORS 60 AND OVER \$9 (FREE MONDAY - FRIDAY) CHILDREN THREE AND UNDER ARE FREE

Bring in a Mountain Dew can Mon-Fri after 5pm and get a \$10 ticket. BUY DISCOUNT TICKETS AT MARC'S OR AAA FOR JUST \$16

CHRIS ROCK I THINK I LOVE MY WIFE

"CHRIS ROCK'S FUNNIEST MOVIE YET. A MUST-SEE LAUGH-OUT-LOUD COMEDY. HILARIOUSLY FUNNY." "OUTRAGEOUSLY FUNNY!" "TWO THUMBS UP."

Check the movie clock for theatre and showtime information. Your Next Car is Parked Here. Read Your Car Every Thursday & Saturday in The Plain Dealer.

SEE THE MOVIE THAT'S MAKING HISTORY!

300 MOVIE THEATRE LISTING: Regal Cinemas digital COBBLESTONE SQUARE 20, AMC Cinemas digital CROCKER PARK STADIUM 16, Regal Cinemas digital HUDSON CINEMA 10, Regal Cinemas digital MAYFIELD HEIGHTS 10, Regal Cinemas digital MIDDLEBURG HEIGHTS 16, Regal Cinemas digital MIDDLEBURG HEIGHTS 16, Regal Cinemas digital MIDDLEBURG HEIGHTS 16.