

Synopsis

In 2014, my family and I traveled to Germany to visit friends I made 30 years before as a 22-year-old lost in life, drunk and in the throes of untreated manic depression, and searching for direction. This family journey frames a larger memoir of people, international relationships, and my own personal development.

I search for the truth behind the most audacious moves I made as a young man—hopping a plane in a deep depression to find work in Germany’s vineyards. The book explores the dissolute, alcoholic life and mental illness that broke my ties with my hometown and made working in the vineyards of Germany’s Mosel Valley seem possible. It scrutinizes the ways manic-depressive illness influenced my decision making and the course of my life. I arrived in Germany with one contact and little money. I carried all my belongings on my back. Between flights of mania and bone-crushing depression, by accident and chance, I set myself up with a new life in Germany that held a real future for me—school, work, and career in winemaking. In the tale, I take the reader through the first, uncertain days of my new life in Germany and the enduring friendships I made over the next two years. In another manic episode, I threw it all away and returned to the states for the love of an American opera singer—a relationship that led to heartbreak, the depths of despair, and the promise of a new, sober life, and ultimately to my present existence as a level-headed writer, artist, and semi-stable family man.

To pursue this pilgrimage, I use the family journey. We visit friends near Trier, Koblenz, and Reutlingen in the Schwäbische Alb who have become sturdy and reliable friends. The travel frames biographies of the relationships my friends and I have built over three decades: a retired

Patrick Dobson, *Ferment: Wine, Vineyard, and Manic Depression*

couple who became closer to me than my own parents; their son—my best friend—who ultimately died of brain cancer, which induced grief so deep that, combined with depression, caused a suicide bout in which I nearly hung myself but went to a mental hospital instead; a stained-glass artist whose studio embodies his life as an artist; an art historian whose scholar-gentleman house makes a contemplative getaway from life's cares; and a painter whose struggles and work influence me as person and writer.

Throughout these visits and subsequent journey into the heart of Burgundy with the stained-glass artist in a campervan, I escort the reader through storied landscapes ranging from the picturesque vineyards of the Mosel to the great cathedrals of central France, the vineyards of the Champagne, and the streets of ancient cities. Throughout the tale, family relationships, foibles, and joys develop—while a breakout depressive episode lurks in the shadows. These highlight the way these associations influence us, give meaning and purpose to our lives, and make the present and future living things that change with the people and landscapes around us.