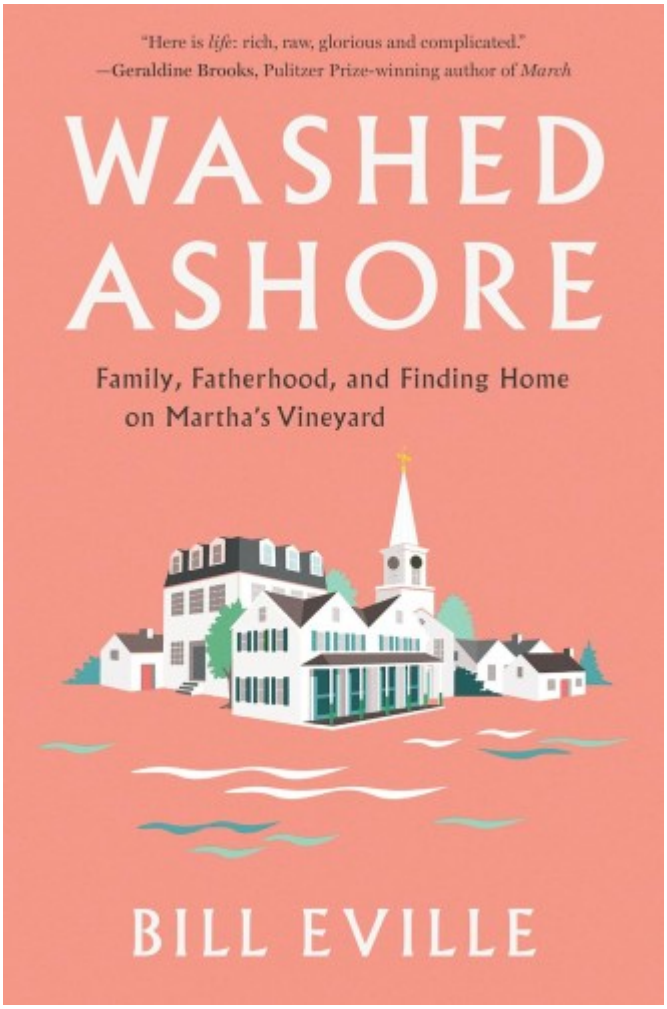
Memoir of a pastor’s husband

Washed Ashore is, at its heart, about a man growing up while raising children.

by Lawrence Wood in the December 2023 issue

In Review



Washed Ashore

Family, Fatherhood, and Finding Home on Martha’s Vineyard

By Bill Eville
David R. Godine

Buy from Bookshop.org ›

There aren't enough books about being a pastor's spouse, and most that come to mind are terribly old-fashioned. Here at last is a book about being a pastor's husband. As a bonus, it's about a stay-at-home dad who has to deal with his feelings of inadequacy. It portrays his foibles as a father and being jolted by his wife's cancer diagnosis. And it's set on Martha's Vineyard, a place so enviable as to recall *A Year in Provence* or *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

Bill Eville has long harbored dreams of producing a book, and one senses that a lot of stifled ambitions have gone into this one. Twenty years ago he left the film industry, where he had helped to develop scripts, for a start-up business that he thought would let him write. The business failed. Kids came along; his wife, Cathlin, stepped in as breadwinner and served as a pastor in Manhattan. Eville took a master's in creative writing. Then in 2008, Cathlin was called to the First Congregational Church of West Tisbury, and they exchanged one island for another.

To be "washed ashore," in island parlance, is to be a newcomer. Although Eville's ancestors had lived on Martha's Vineyard, he did not have standing as an islander. Nor did he have much of a history in church. In some of the book's best passages, he writes vividly of what it's like to love someone who happens to be a pastor while not sharing that person's faith.

Talking with rowdy strangers on a train, he downplays her piety: "She's not a fanatic. She's not even into God. It's more of a social justice thing." In return he receives a high five from a drunk who cries, "All right! This guy's banging a minister!"

Cathlin, the undoubted heroine of this memoir, lets him grieve the loss of his job before she helps him to find a new one. He confesses to a coworker in Manhattan that it's strange he's married to a minister and works with nuns, yet is not a religious man. ("And what makes you think you are not religious?" one nun asks him.)

As you might expect, his story becomes a faith journey. It involves time, lots of time: in Cathlin's general vicinity on Sunday mornings, at hospitals for her cancer treatments, on her sabbatical in Scotland. Eville quotes her sermons at length, giving us a sense of her skill as well as what has spoken to him. It's not exactly a conversion—more a long familiarization with faith.

Eville promises some drama in whether his family will be accepted on Martha's Vineyard, but from the start, especially after Cathlin's diagnosis, islanders prove to be very kind.

And it's a good thing, because those chapters are harrowing. She undergoes a double mastectomy and experimental proton beam treatments that take her away from the family for months at a time. Bill, the sole parent at home, must focus on the kids' fears while scarcely managing his own. He doesn't always do so with grace.

One has to credit Eville's honesty in recounting this blowup with seven-year-old Hardy:

> His behavior was so wrong that it was clear my son would grow up to be a horrible person. So I yelled. I yelled a lot. . . .
>
> My adrenaline was still high from my anger, but more so because I had frightened myself. I had become my son's torturer, even enjoying how much I scared him.
>
> I apologized to Hardy, and then we talked quietly.
>
> "When something bad happens," Hardy said, "I don't only think about that thing. I think about every bad thing that has ever happened or will happen. That's why I can't stop the tantrum."

The father readily admits that he has much in common with his son.

A third of the way through the book, as the family begins to put Cathlin's illness behind them, a theme emerges. More than about being a pastor's spouse or dealing with cancer, this story is about a man growing up while raising children.

Eville doesn't exactly spell this out—the reader has to do the math—but he has needed a few extra years for most of his steps into adulthood, such as becoming a dad. Even though he'd looked forward to fatherhood, he admits that "much of my life seemed to be spent delaying it." He parents his children on his own terms. For example, rather than listen to children's music, he insists that they listen to his music: the Sex Pistols, the Clash, Patti Smith. He says without irony that "punk rock got us through" Cathlin's cancer treatments. During one drive, his preschool-age daughter, Pickle, asks, "Is everyone who sings in the car dead?"

Any parent is bound to inflict some damage; I think Philip Larkin had something to say about that. Eville, who wants very much to be a good father, recognizes that “with parenting, you often end up being both the villain and the hero many times in the course of a single day.” Sometimes even tender words cause pain, as when he tells his daughter that she is the perfect age, and she cries to her mother, “Dad doesn’t want me to grow up, but I can’t help it!”

Indeed, while Eville grows up slowly, his kids grow up quickly. Before the book ends, Hardy leaves for college, Pickle asks to be called by her given name, and they both ask him to stop writing about them.

Stitched together from his occasional pieces over 15 years for the local newspaper, Eville’s long-planned book is episodic. The cumulative effect, with distractions and digressions, flashbacks, and leaps forward, certainly resembles the movement of real life. At the end, Eville is in his familiar pew on Gratitude Sunday—grateful to be a pastor’s husband, less insular, with gracious words for his island neighbors. Pickle is a teenager, and he still calls her Pickle. Spiritually he has washed ashore, a new arrival.