

# The Big Book of AA - Annotated Commentary Edition

# THE BIG BOOK OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

ANNOTATED COMMENTARY  
EDITION

*Line-by-Line Reflections on the 1955 Edition Basic Text. For Believers, Non Believers, and Everyone in Between*

**By Jude Barnes,**

**“I Needed the Big Book—But I Couldn’t Pretend to Believe”: A New Guide for Agnostics and Atheists in AA**

**The Big Book saves lives — but only if you survive it.**

If you’re atheist, agnostic, feminist, LGBTQIA+, carrying religious trauma—or just not like Bill W, a white heterosexual male from 1930s America—chances are the *Big Book* has already driven you out of the rooms at least once. Maybe more than once. Maybe for good.

The language is patriarchal, and the tone is moralising. *To Wives* reads like a 1930s sermon on passive endurance. *We Agnostics* dismisses disbelief and offers nothing but sentimentality to the agnostic or atheist. And the gendered pronouns can feel like death by a thousand cuts.

So why would someone like me—technically agnostic, functionally atheist, an inclusionary feminist who agrees with Nietzsche that God is dead, and someone who winced at nearly every chapter—end up writing a guide to the whole thing?

Because once I got past the harmful language, and started to read the *Big Book* critically—line by line—it saved my life. And I’ve watched it save others, too. Not because of what I believe, but because of the actions I take. I’d read it and thought I understood it—but I didn’t. I needed a sponsor who really knew what she was doing to show me beyond the words to the meaning.

[\*The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous-Annotated Commentary Edition\*](#) is my offering to those who need the Steps—but can’t, and won’t lie to themselves about what they believe.

It’s a rigorously faithful, line-by-line guide through the first 164 pages of the *Big Book* and *Dr. Bob’s Nightmare*. Every original paragraph is preserved. Every sentence is followed by commentary that helps uncover what’s really being said—beneath the old and sometimes offensive surface.

## What Sets This Book Apart

- **Line-by-line commentary:** The full text is presented in order—nothing skipped, nothing summarised. Each paragraph is followed by accessible, honest, often forensic commentary.
- **A detailed rebuttal of We Agnostics:** This chapter gets a full philosophical and logical takedown —fallacy by fallacy — without abandoning the power of the Steps it introduces.
- **A clear strategy for facing the language:** You’ll find a guide on how to deal with the sexist, religious, and moralistic tone of the original text without losing access to the life-saving instructions underneath.
- **A companion for the unwilling but desperate:** If you’re someone who hates the *Big Book*—but still hopes it might help—you are exactly who this was written for.

## Who It’s For

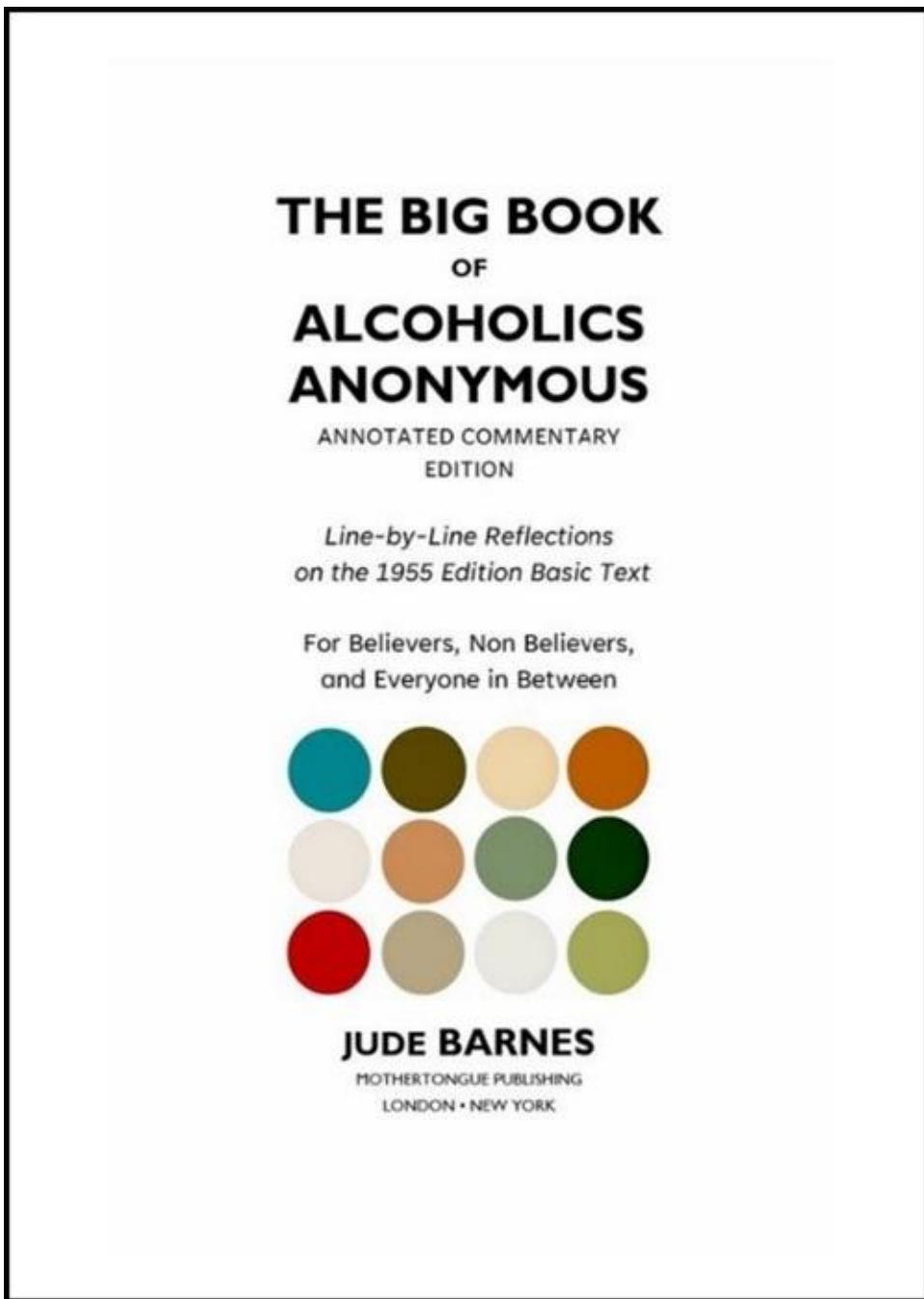
- Atheists, agnostics, and sceptics who want recovery without belief
- Feminists and queer folks who find the *Big Book* alienating or offensive
- Survivors of religious harm who still need a way out of addiction
- Anyone who’s tried to read the *Big Book* honestly—and couldn’t finish it without rage or despair
- Anyone that’s trying to make the *Big Book* usable for themselves or others, without pretending it’s perfect

## You Don’t Have to Like the Big Book—but You Might Still Need It

This guide doesn’t defend the *Big Book*’s flaws. It stands apart from them. But it also refuses to throw away what’s good. Because buried under the moralism, the misogyny, and the religious assumptions, there is still one of the most effective, spiritually transformative

technologies ever written for addiction. Even the word *spiritual* is secular for me—rooted in the Latin *spiritus*, meaning “to breathe.” I breathe differently these days. I am at peace.

I didn’t believe in God. I still don’t. I didn’t have a white light moment. But I did experience what William James described as the “educational variety” of spiritual awakening—an undeniable shift in how I relate to life. It came from doing the work, from taking the Steps exactly as they’re laid out in the *Big Book*, even the parts I didn’t understand or agree with.



I used to skip the prayers. I told myself they didn't apply to me. But without them, the programme didn't work. The alcoholic mind just stayed in charge—and that is a whole world of darkness and emotional pain. So, I had to find a way to "pray"—even though I don't believe in God. For me, prayer became the act of deliberately directing my thoughts—toward honesty, humility, or usefulness—as part of the entire 12 step process, rather than letting fear and self-will run the show. And when I did that consistently, something changed—and it's held, so long as I stay on top of my programme.

The word *prayer* still doesn't sit right with me, but really, it just means thinking or speaking aloud—and I do it, because half measures availed me nothing. With it, I get freedom. Alongside that, I get the privilege of working with others, which did in fact turn out to be the highlight of my life. I was sceptical about that part too.

I don't do the Steps exactly as they're laid out for any noble reason—I'm pain avoidant. I don't cope well with emotional disturbance or turmoil. I can't think straight when I'm in pain. I just couldn't find an easier way that works. And I've tried diligently. I've been very creative in seeing if there's a way around the Twelve Steps that doesn't require my full commitment—and it seems that, for me, there isn't.

Secular versions don't work for me. My thinking can't fix my thinking. What is broken can't fix what is broken and My Self just isn't able to fix my Self. I need the extra-ordinary (human) power when my ordinary human power doesn't cut it.

And I learned the hard way what happens when I cut corners. I didn't drink—but white-knuckling is a torment I cannot undertake ever again. I am finished learning what doesn't work. I won't pay that price these days.

### **So What Did the Big Book Do for Me?**

My defects were removed — not all at once, but in the way it promises they will be: when I honestly want them gone and humbly ask. If you're a believer, it feels like divine intervention. If you're not, it feels like a deeply effective cognitive shift—like your internal wiring starts to clear. The noise drops. The reactivity fades. I get to make rational and considered decisions (*imagine that...*). And in its place is peacefulness that feels like freedom.

The *Big Book* in Appendix II says I get in touch with my "unsuspected inner resources"—and that's what I found. Not something outside myself, but something I'd never been able to reach on my own. And still cannot reach on my own if I don't deal with my fears and resentments in Step Ten and enlarge my life with Steps Eleven and Twelve. The Steps gave me access to something inaccessible. I still have to earn it daily. But it's real.

If you've been pushed to the margins of this programme — if you've felt unseen, misrepresented, or shamed—please know this: you are not alone, and you do not need to change your identity or your beliefs to recover.

You only need to take action.  
The rest can stay yours.

## Preview the Book

I'm offering the full preview PDF [please click on this link](#)

## Questions, Feedback, or Just Want to Say Hi?

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## Buy Now on Kindle

“This is a complete, unabridged, and fully annotated edition of the 1955 second edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*—commonly known as the Big Book. It includes the entire basic text (the first 164 pages), plus *Doctor Bob’s Nightmare*, presented line by line with modern commentary. This edition of the Big Book is in the public domain.

This edition is for anyone who wants to understand and apply the Twelve Steps—whether you’re a lifelong believer, a committed atheist, a questioning agnostic, or simply someone seeking change. The commentary offers practical reflections, spiritual insights, and real-life guidance—all woven directly into the original text.

Author Jude Barnes is a devout non-believer whose commentary speaks to those who have struggled with the original text—whether because of its religious language, moral tone, or culturally narrow perspective. This edition acknowledges the historical limitations of the 1955 Big Book and provides a way to engage with it more fully, offering a clear path through the language to the life-saving message beneath. It includes a thorough analysis of Bill Wilson’s blind spots around belief and non-belief—especially in the chapter *We Agnostics*—so that atheists and agnostics can make progress with the Steps without needing to accept faulty reasoning. The programme still works, even where the author’s argument does not, and this book helps clarify that distinction. It preserves the depth and integrity of the original Twelve Steps while opening them up to anyone who has felt excluded or overlooked—as well as to those with a strong understanding of God, those exploring spiritual ideas, or those who feel no connection to spirituality at all. Once understood, the Twelve Steps welcome everyone, and this book was written to help make that understanding possible.

## Inside, you’ll find:

- The complete original Big Book basic text (1955 edition, public domain), fully preserved
- Modern, line-by-line commentary that follows every sentence and paragraph

- A spiritual yet not dogmatic tone that respects all belief positions
- Practical help applying the Twelve Steps in real life—without changing a word of the original
- Thoughtful guidance for believers, atheists, agnostics, and the spiritually curious alike

#### **This edition is for:**

- Anyone who wants to take the Twelve Steps but isn't sure what they actually mean
- Those who sense there's something powerful in the Big Book but can't quite access it
- Readers who find the original language difficult, moralistic, or disconnected from their experience
- Believers, non-believers, agnostics, and anyone who can't find themselves in the God-language
- People drawn to recovery but unsure how to engage with the Big Book as written
- Newcomers seeking a clear, honest guide through the Steps
- Long-time members revisiting the Big Book from a new perspective

This is not a summary or study guide. Nothing is paraphrased or modernised. The original is preserved in full and accompanied by commentary to help the reader unlock its meaning—especially when the language feels dated, moralistic, or confusing.

Whether you're new to the Big Book, returning with fresh eyes, or trying to work the Steps without pretending to believe—this edition offers a clear, inclusive path through the foundational text of recovery.”

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*Jude had her last drink on 13 March 2000 after hospitalisation and a three-month rehab that took her to AA meetings every night. She is forever grateful to her first sponsor, who guided her through the Big Book exactly as it was written, without imposing her own beliefs, allowing Jude to maintain her own — agnostic in theory and atheist in practice, as it remains today. In her tenth year, she started an agnostic AA meeting in London. Now, with twenty-five years sober, she is part of both the mainstream and secular AA communities and lives a life richer than she could ever have imagined.*

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