

“Burning Sage by Jennifer Rieger”
Review by Kris McCormick

With the subtitle “*Collected Writings on Unconventional Motherhood, Unconventional Teacherhood, and Unconditional Love*”, author Jennifer Rieger’s debut essay collection, *Burning Sage*, attempts to warn you of her emotional journey to come, however, it hardly scratches the surface.

Dividing the collection into five sections by chronicling the life cycle of the titular sage plant, these 23 essays span Rieger’s life from her childhood in the small mountain town of Cresson, Pennsylvania, to her recent MFA experience at Rosemont College. Nothing is hidden as she chronicles her life as a young girl attempting to understand life, love, and loss before an unexpected pregnancy at 19 years old, which sets her on an unexpected but defining path. These essays speak to the heartbreak and happiness of motherhood in all forms, the struggle and salvation of teaching, the battle and blessing of being a woman, and the grind and grace of it all.

From the first pages, I felt an understanding and connection that echoed in my heart. Her naked vulnerability, relentless honesty, and self-conscious and unwavering devotion to her students brought tears to my eyes multiple times. Rieger has lived through unimaginable pain, however, she has never once regretted it or closed herself off from life in self-defense. The throughline of unvarying strength of self and love overwhelms the reader through each piece regardless of the tone or theme of the essay.

Rieger’s style ebbs and flows with the poetic tendencies that first drove her writing. Her gentle control over the pacing and weight of each piece eases you into the depths of her. Never once does she leave the reader to go through the suffering

themselves; she is always a steadying presence guiding you through until you reach the final essays in the collection that ring with peace, self-love and acceptance. Like only the best parents and educators can, she empowers you to find the tools and capacity to chart your own way through anything, no matter what awaits on the other side.



Bio:

Kris McCormick is a Philadelphia native, a freelance book editor and coach, and a current double-degree student in the Rosemont College Graduate Publishing and Creative Writing program. She serves as the current graduate assistant to the director and as a reader for the *Philadelphia Stories* Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction contest. When not studying or working (a rarity), she holes up at home to read way too many books and work on needlecraft to her old-lady heart's content.

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Jennifer Rieger is a public educator and college professor in the Philadelphia area. An advocate for her students and graduates, she dedicates her time to empowering others through reading, writing, and acts of love. Jen has been honored with the Franklin Institute 2020 Excellence in Teaching Award, the 2021 Philadelphia Phillies All-Star Teaching Award, and was a semi-finalist for the Pennsylvania Department of Education Teacher of the Year. Along with a nomination for the 2020 Pushcart Prize for Literature, she's also been published in Chautauqua Literary Journal, Wisconsin Review, BUST Magazine, Philadelphia Stories 15th Anniversary Anthology, among others. Jen holds an MA in English Literature, an MFA in Creative Writing, and spends her free time bragging about her son, students, and thousands of graduates. *Burning Sage* is her debut essay collection.

