

Pour Me, a Life

By A.A. Gill

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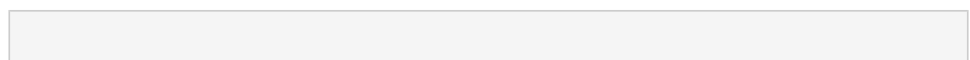
Serialized in *Esquire*, A.A. Gill's *Pour Me a Life* is a riveting meditation on the author's alcoholism, seen through the lens of the memories that remain, and the transformative moments that saved him from a lifelong addiction and early death.

“Pour Me a Life is an unapologetically honest, raw, and often harrowing account of the life of a man who, up until now, we only thought we knew. Here is A.A. Gill at his best. A real-life *Bright Lights, Big City*.” —**Eric Ripert, chef and co-owner of Le Bernardin, and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *32 Yolks***

Best known for his hysterically funny and often scathing restaurant reviews for the *London Sunday Times*, A.A. Gill's *Pour Me a Life* is a riveting memoir of the author's alcoholism, seen through the lens of the memories that remain, and the transformative moments in art, food, religion, and family that saved him from a lifelong addiction and early death.

By his early twenties, at London's prestigious Saint Martin's art school, journalist Adrian Gill was entrenched in alcoholism. He writes from the handful of memories that remain, of drunken conquests with anonymous women, of waking to morbid hallucinations, of emptying jacket pockets that “were like tiny crime scenes,” helping him puzzle his whereabouts back together. Throughout his recollections, Gill traces his childhood, his early diagnosis of dyslexia, the deep sense of isolation when he was sent to boarding school at age eleven, the disappearance of his only brother, whom he has not seen for decades.

When Gill was confronted at age thirty by a doctor who questioned his drinking, he answered honestly for the first time, not because he was ready to stop, but because his body was too damaged to live much longer. Gill was admitted to a thirty-day rehab center—then a rare and revolutionary concept in England—and has lived three decades of his life sober. Written with clear-eyed honesty and empathy, *Pour Me a Life* is a haunting account of addiction, its exhilarating power and destructive force, and is destined to be a classic of its kind.



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Editorial Review

Review

“Often amusing but always profound...It is Gill’s three decades of continuous sobriety that distinguish *Pour Me, A Life* from the legions of other alcohol memoirs out there...at its core, a remarkable and revealing book.”

—**Karen Brady, *The Buffalo News***

“*Pour Me a Life* is an unapologetically honest, raw, and often harrowing account of the life of a man who, up until now, we only thought we knew. Here is A.A. Gill at his best. A real-life *Bright Lights, Big City*.”

—**Eric Ripert, chef and co-owner of Le Bernardin, and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *32 Yolks***

“[A] brutally honest memoir.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“Gill’s story holds up a mirror with which to evaluate one’s own ugly and beautiful jaunts through life. His is not a tale told with a clear beginning, middle, or end; it is, however, chock full of wit and humanity, and enhanced by Gill’s striking gift for prose.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“Gill writes passionately and movingly about his struggle with dyslexia; disarmingly and defensively about his lifelong feelings of intellectual insecurity; evocatively about his relationships with his parents and the disappearance of his brother [and] stirringly about his love of journalism.”

—**Matthew Adams, *The Independent* (UK)**

“*Pour Me a Life* is alert, emphatic, mordant, unforgiving. It is often moving, but never tries to be likeable. . . . [Gill’s] gallows comedy gives a hefty kick, many sections are beautifully droll, and some scenes are hilarious.”

—**Richard Davenport-Hines, *The Sunday Times* (UK)**

“Gill is a brilliant raconteur, and a gifted satirist of place and person. . . . The baroque debauchery of his drinking days gives way to frank and often moving examinations of his growing up . . . [of] his loves and lusts and marriages, and his own efforts at fatherhood: the role that has done most to keep him sober.”

—**Tim Adams, *The Observer* (UK)**

“In this chilling, exquisitely moving book, Gill defines the seductive, addictive and destructive power of drink. . . . It is his honesty that accounts for the intensity of this haunting memoir.”

—**Juliet Nicolson, *The Telegraph* (UK)**

About the Author

A.A. GILL was born in Edinburgh. The author of nine books, including *The Angry Island*, he is the TV and restaurant critic and a regular features writer for *The Sunday Times*, a columnist for *Esquire*, and a contributor to *Vanity Fair*. He lives in London and has been nominated for more awards than he has won.

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This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected copy proof

Wake up! You're at sea, it doesn't matter which sea, it's just the sea rising and falling. Sea-flavored, sea-shaped, wet sea. You're in a boat, a little boat—you're alone in a little boat. There is nothing else in the boat but you. The boat bobs. You bob. You have no idea how you got here. This, at least, is not unusual. You woke up in a boat on a sea alone. You look along the horizon, it's as sharp as a razor cut. There's nothing but sea and the cloche of the sky, the salty bobbing earth curving away . . . and then there is something just there, there where the sun makes the water flare and shimmy. There are two dots. Two things that aren't sea, they're boats. Now there are three boats in the sea. These other boats have a purpose, they have come for you and that is the nature of these things, these instructive fables. The inner narrator tells you that though they are coming solely for you, you can stop only one. And to help you choose which, the chorus adds that on the one boat there is a man who will give you food, fresh water, some oars and directions to get to land, and he'll even come with you if you like, but in the other boat there is only a bloke who if you ask him will tell you how you got here. So that's the dilemma—which boat do you stop?

We're back in a room in a private mental hospital in the west of England. They call it a treatment center. This is where you can get treatment. Really, it's a mental hospital—we're mental. That's why we need treating, we're dying. Everyone's dying, of course, but we know it, we can taste it, metallic in our sticky condemned stumpy mouths. We know we're close to the shuffling end of the coil and it's our fault, we caused it, we caused it on purpose, we chose the way of our deaths, we can smell it in the damp corruption, our breathless musty mortality. It lingers in our jackets, on the blankets, in our sad evacuee suitcases. This morning, the doctor holding a file said, "Have you stopped drinking?" Yes, I said. "Are you sure?" he said, giving me the look, the look of nonjudgmental disbelief that is the facial uniform of mental treatment. Yes, I said, yes. We say yes a lot—it doesn't mean yes, it means stop asking me questions. "Yes? Good. Because I've got your tests back . . . and if you go on, you probably won't see Christmas."

I'm thirty. Outside the window there is the sea of green lawn, with croquet hoops, rolling down past trees. I remember them as cedars, huge and lost, standing outside this white classically country house. How easily the architecture of the aristocracy lends its aspirations to the infirm and the insane. Perhaps I've imported cedars—maybe they're from some other rolling lawn. I get lawns confused. Lawns just lie there with a permanent ennui, a sickly languor. I wonder what the rest of nature makes of a lawn. Arrogant, snobbish, entitled, needy, effortfully polite, sober. Rebuke of the wild.

We're here because we're dying. Death presses up against the broken mirror, death stands in the corner of the bedroom, signals from the blood in the bog, the pus in the sock, the tingling in the fingers. It wasn't death that terrified us into this preposterously genteel bedlam with its contrite normal lawn. It isn't the winnowing flail of mortality that grabbed us by the scruff and dragged us all here. Understand this, it's not death that terrifies—it's life. Life is the horror, the unbearable living. We are suffering from life trauma . . . the miserable, sham-bling, boring, self-pitying lives we have fashioned for ourselves, alone, with shaking hands and a tearful despair.

"So which boat would you stop?" The counselor is a young man, a knowing public school compassionate man. I try to imagine his life but can't. Why would you be here if you weren't mad or carrying the dead weight of a chronic life? Why frolic in the bleak mere of others' troubles posing as a new-life salesman? We listen to him not because he talks compassion or sense but because he's plainly the captain of the boat with the stuff, the gear. We are the people who have run out of choices, run through choices and chances: second chances, last chances, simple choices, choices that were no choice at all. Always wrong, all desperate, always hopeful. Every cast of the bones was a loser. So here's the choice to finally give up on choice; the chance at the far end of choices. There is an infinitesimal lightening in the room like the blowing

away of a paper hat, and we choose all together, unanimously. We look at the man with his life so sorted he can spare the time to sell us a new one and we feel ourselves bobbing at sea on a lawn and we shout in our sour- salt tight mouths, “Throw us a line. Give us an oar. Tow us to the further shore, to the new land where we can be whole. Take us where we can wash away this life that we made with the sweat of our face. Relieve us of the dead burden.”

This is “Choice Theory.” It’s a real thing. It was thought up by an American, a psychiatrist called William Glasser who worked in a veterans’ hospital in Los Angeles in the ’60s. He got fed up with listening to people whine about their lives and regress through their sadness to find the germ of misery in some childish darkness. He decided that what you do is more important than what you did . . . you don’t have to scabble about in a cellar of nostalgia to discover the seed of your mad- ness, just get on with now, do the practical stuff: make your bed, make a list, brush your teeth, brush your shoes, mind your manners, tell a truth, get up, sit up, stand up, own up, call your mother. If your feet point one way, your head can’t face the other. They tell us that a lot. This thing is also called “Control Theory” and “Reality Therapy” and “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.” It’s a fireman’s therapy—a 911 therapy. It’s an ax and a ladder, a chance for people who are dying faster than they can talk, who don’t have the time or the honesty or the inclination or the words, who don’t need any more drugs. It’s a cut-to-the-cure therapy. If you behave like a normal nine-to-five guy, then sooner or later you turn into one. Fake it to make it, they say . . . fake it to make it. You don’t even have to believe. “Fake it to make it” is a particularly adroit one-size therapy for drunks and junkies because we’re already good at faking stuff and we need things to happen pretty pronto. We need a hit. We’re not feeling great at the moment. Bill Glasser also believed that there were five things that people needed in order to function properly, and the first and the greatest of these was love. It wasn’t an original thought. But they don’t tell us this, because frankly no one wants to be told that the answer to everything is love. No one wants the payoff of his tragedy to be the chorus of a pop song.

The night after the last-chance choice, I lie in the dark of a dormitory; there are six or seven of us, no one can sleep. I don’t mind sharing a room, I’d been to a boarding school, but the others, the hard boys with scars, they hate it and rant at the propinquity, rage against intimacy. We can’t sleep because we’re frightened of the dark; of sleeping; of crying out; of blurting; of wetting ourselves; of dreaming. We lie in the cold sweat with the stinking shroud blankets pulled over our faces and feel the self-pity pour into our mouths until we’re drowning in regret, and we gasp in panic and in turn tell one another war stories, our voices like distant radios. There’s this boy in his early twenties, he’s tall but he moves like an old, old man, painfully mistrusting gravity. He’s covered in psoriasis and bubbling sores, his nose is bust and his teeth are gone. His body is very close to worn dead. I watched him pack himself into the bed with the slow gentleness of a curator storing ancient porcelain. He has a thick Midlands accent: “I live rough. I’ve lived rough since I was sixteen. My dad was drunk, my mum didn’t like me. I beg and steal for gear. I live in a multistory car park in Birmingham.” “Why?” a voice asks from the dark. “Why do you live in a pissy car park? You’re a fucking tramp. You can go anywhere, that’s the only thing to be said for being a tramp.” “Oh yes,” the flat vowels answer, “I’ve got a place in the country as well, a telephone box outside Sutton Coldfield for the weekends.” And we start laughing, laughing and laughing and laughing with great wheezing guffaws; laughter that bounces and tumbles off the ceiling and jumps on the beds, billowing the blankets. The noisy, lumpy, hilarious breath runs through me like a great brightness. Mag- ical, free laughter that spins me back to being a child; a hiccuping, chorus-rolling, crashing, howling, sobbing laughter, so unexpected, so strange, like finding that all together we can sing. The tears swim down my cheeks and soak the pillow. Every time the wave recedes someone catches it, pulling us back, sighing, “Outside Sutton Coldfield,” not wanting to lose this moment, this marvelous noise. The black dormitory is raucous with small boys who had all their choices ahead of them. That was the moment I knew I had a chance.

Twenty-seven years later I realize that I stopped the wrong boat.

My first wife left me in the middle of a dinner party. I can't remember what I said or what she said. I don't remember a row or a diagnosis of inoperable discontent. I don't think anything was thrown and I don't know who else was there. Not a single face or name comes back to me, though I remember the detritus, the stained glasses, collapsed napkins, the stricken Stilton; the evidence of a room full of people that remained for weeks like a crime scene or a Spanish still life, a memento mori, the corruption of earthly vanity and fleshly lust. I do remember that we served three sorts of eggs—goose, duck and quail. Why would we offer three eggs? Four if you count a hen's egg in the mayonnaise. Who did we think we were becoming? Offering up dinner parties with napery and Stiltons—it was like charades in the bunker. I suppose, along with goose eggs, it was a sort of married life manqué we hoped we might cobble together out of stuff and things and expectations; out of orphaned china cups and potpourri and Gollancz hardbacks with bacon bookmarks, old, bald velvet and sepia erotica, Charles Trenet and Wallace Stevens and cut flowers out of season in Arts and Crafts vases with broken handles and portrait gallery postcards on a Welsh dresser—did we actually own a Welsh dresser?—and the willful extravagance of a tissue-paper basement bohemianism.

It was never really us. We were us, once. We had been very us, but the life we made out of each other wasn't. So she left because there wasn't anything worth staying for and no prospect of anything worth having or becoming. I knew what she meant. I had every sympathy. If I could have gone with her, I would have—left the marriage behind with the washing up, left it to wilt in the vase, fester with the cheese, watched over by the judgmental curling faces of Christopher Isherwood and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

This story, this memoir, falls between these two events. The three eggs and the phone box outside Sutton Coldfield. It is the year between the end of the marriage and the end of drinking. I say it's a year, but I have no reliable chronology. It might be only six months, or eighteen; it is the space between two ends each looking the other way. To call it a memoir is to imply memory, a veracity, a recall, that I couldn't . . . can't put my hands on. None of this is hand-on-the-Bible fact. The one miserly charity of drink is that it strips away memory. You start by forgetting the last hour of Saturday night, a name, a conversation, how you lost your shoes, and then, as the life begins to tumble like an upended skier, so the avalanche of forgetting comes and sweeps up the evidence, burying the remembrance in a soft white darkness, a roaring silence. After time, you've forgotten more than you can remember. For me, out of a decade I have perhaps two years, perhaps three, of remembrances. Not consecutive, not related or correlated, just images . . . like fragments from sagas found stuffed in a mattress, torn photographs on rubbish heaps, strips of wallpaper painted over that make you wonder at the life that once flourished in your bedroom.

There is a hope, if not a reliable fact, that this is the best I can muster, this is a retrospective truth gleaned from the shards and tesserae. An attempt to reimagine something lost, an emotional archaeology sifting through the midden for a bone, a coin, a few words scrawled on a flyleaf. "My darling, will you . . .," an earring in a dinner jacket pocket. Without tools or skill, scheme or expectation, this is an attempt to reconstruct, resurrect the boat that was going the other way and its cargo, its log of how I got here. Because frankly the Choices thing doesn't work the way it used to. Choices beget choices like an infection. I have been sober longer than I was drunk, every day I choose not to drink is now no harder than choosing to wear my shoes on the prescribed feet and having my face point over my toes. It's not the all or the enough, it's not the answer. I am now closer to my last breath than I am to my last drink and I need to know.

But let's get one thing straight, this is no faith-infused pulpit tale of redemption. This isn't going to be my debauched drink-and-drug hell, there will be no lessons to learn, no experience to share, there won't be handy hints, lists, golden rules, you will find no encouragement for those who still stagger. I'm not shifting through this soggy tangle of a shredded life for your benefit, I have no message, no help. This isn't a book to give to your sister whose son is having too good a time, or the friend who struggles with his cravings like a randy fat girl squealing "No, no, no" as her hand shimmies up your shirt.

I met my wife in The Lindsey Club. A busted sign above a door that opened onto a thin, peely corridor. Under a pale bulb sat Renee. Old. Apparently made by workhouse orphans out of parchment, tannin-stained calico and chicken bones. She was a wisp of a woman who was sustained by cold tea and custard creams. She spoke in a genteel voice that sounded like the responses at Evensong. If she recognized you, she would give you a cloakroom ticket for 50p and you could go on down the stairs. Renee would spend her day comforting and confronting the drunk, the deranged and the damned. She was the most effective bouncer I've ever seen. So delicate and antique, so plainly breakable, that not even the most pugnaciously hammered thug would consider taking it to the mat. I've watched men grab their own collars and eject themselves, screaming that they would go quietly, rather than risk chipping Renee. Murderers would come back the morning after some psychotic outburst, blinking back tears, begging forgiveness, and she would be as stern as a remembrance wreath. Downstairs there was a bald half-size pool table on a tilt, an ancient jukebox that I only remember playing Sinatra crooning "My Kind of Town," a short bar and a mismatched collection of tables and chairs. There were yellow lights with red shades like flung knickers, and a carpet that had the texture of warm tar.

The place was coated with nicotine and despair. It was the most hopelessly sad and lonely room I've ever known. There were glazed windows with curtains, behind which was painted a Home Counties landscape, a wry trompe l'oeil that twisted the truth—we were in a cellar, a burrow, a tomb where the wounded, sodden, failed and frightened came to hide. On the wall there was a reproduction of a painting of eighteenth-century huntsmen enjoying a tale and a tincture in some amiable country hostelry. They were the bucolic English yeomen of yore, ruddy and true, loyal, jolly, prosperous and sturdy. The picture was a slap, a caution, a reminder of how far from the ideal of manhood and society I had fallen. All the coy sentimental attempts to cheer up the bar, tranquilize it with kitsch, the plastic flamenco dancers and china poodles, became the malevolent props of a horror movie.

You handed your ticket to Peggy behind the bar. Peggy was the opposite of Renee. Whatever it was that Renee hadn't eaten for the past fifty years, Peggy had. She was a gargantuan woman, comically, cartoonishly fat, her body apparently made from a series of boiled puddings piled precariously, sagging and falling over one another. She was always reluctant to disturb the distribution of her bulk once it had settled. She would arrange herself over a stool behind the bar and dispense the drinks she could reach—slowly, inexpertly and with prejudice. If forced to maneuver for a particularly unlikely order—a sweet sherry perhaps, or something nonalcoholic—she would breathe deeply through her nose, purse her carmine bow-shaped lips, fix her eye on the object to be retrieved and tense with the effort of propulsion. For a long moment nothing would happen, and then—like a landslide, a bit here and a bit there—she would begin to topple in different directions. Her head would settle like a gyroscope, an arm would wave for balance, and like an elephant crossing Niagara Falls on a unicycle, she would oscillate back and forth, making surprisingly elegant progress until the bottle was reached and she could retrace her trip backward until the safety of the stool would nestle, then gently disappear up her arse.

In the center of Peggy's pale, fleshy, suet-pudding head was a face of great sweetness and jollity. She had an infectious rollicking laugh and a sense of humor whose coarseness transcended its packaging. Aboveground in the daylight, Peggy had been an actress and most memorably the voice of "Weed" in Flower Pot Men, a children's TV puppet show that began in the '50s. Weed's role consisted of saying "Weeeeed" with a high-pitched voice in the manner of a daisy.

The third member of the Lindsey staff was Rita, who owned the club. She was also ancient, with a bony, sallow, disapproving face and severely neat hair. Rita was permanently disapproving; she despised her customers as failed, pathetic specimens. She didn't have much time for men if they didn't come with titles or horsewhips. Rita told me I should do better for myself than sit and drink in the Lindsey. She was really the least likely person to run a shabby, subterranean drinking club, but then the Lindsey hadn't always been like

this, it too had a past, had aspirations. Once it was a theater club, a soigné stage for amateur and professional rising talent. The young Dirk Bogarde had played the Lindsey, the yellowing poster was here to prove it. But as angry young men and a new realism and swearing claimed the stage, so the Lindsey withered, its bright jollity declining until only the bar remained solvent. And Rita and Renee and Peggy were set adrift in it like a lifeboat come to rest here, beached and broken on this reef of disappointing men.

I loved it. I loved it because it was so perfectly tailored to me—a room I could look in the eye and know that it loved me right back. In exchange for the cloakroom ticket, Peggy would give you a sausage. The Lindsey existed in the crevices of the licensing laws—to drink, you had to eat, and because it was notionally a club, it could serve drink outside opening hours. The Lindsey only really existed between three in the afternoon and five-thirty, and then from eleven p.m. till midnight, which would stretch to one a.m. It was for those for whom the licensed day was not long enough to fit in the required pintage, for those of us who did alcohol overtime. The drink might kill you, but nobody risked eating the sausage: it went to my dog, Lily, a lurcherly mongrel who lived under benches and on sausages. Always ahead of me after closing time at the Elephant & Castle up the road was Alex Trocchi, the Scottish novelist and lifelong junkie. Alex, granite-faced, angry iconoclast, fearless nihilist, rager against the night, had managed to make heroin seem parochial, rather bourgeois. He'd done it for so long that it had become a pomade, a tonic, it never seemed to make any difference to his demeanor. I never saw him gouch or get scratchy. He had a small antiquarian book business and a massive immovable writer's block. Sometimes he'd buy my paintings. We'd sit in corners, him reading fast—a solace and a distraction and I imagine a torture—often with Kit Lambert, son of the composer Constant Lambert and manager of The Who. Kit had had a palazzo in Venice, which he lost or set fire to. He lost everything, including most of the things he tried to put in his mouth. The front of him looked like an abandoned gannet colony. Kit had been arrested for drugs and was convinced that his best defense was to make himself a ward of the court so that the official solicitor gave him pocket money out of his own considerable royalties. Kit looked like a furious French bulldog. He had a voice that sounded like someone continuously trying to start a lawn mower, and he was clownishly clumsy. He could clear a table simply by looking at his watch; it was all so immensely funny and clever and cultured when he wasn't incoherently drunk. He had an incandescent temper, and if I ever told him to stop setting fire to my clothes or tipping beer into my lap, he'd shout at the top of his mechanical voice, "Oh nanny, nanny, nanny, Gill . . . fuck off." His life had shrunk to a single Herculean tantrum at the parsimony of his executors. The madder he got, the more parsimonious they became. He would conceive ever more absurd ruses to get his money back. He died after being in a fight in a gay club and then falling down his mother's stairs. Alex died of pneumonia three years later. I still have a copy of his Cain's Book, inscribed "To Lily, instead of a sausage."

The rest of the Lindsey's customers were art students, diplomatic protection officers—one of whom once pulled his gun on me—mean little criminals, actors, Montenegrin jeans salesmen and Kensington's decrepit and fallen gentry. Men with stinking blazers and burst veins, women who had compacts and cigarette holders and who wet themselves on bar stools. And I seem to remember a statistically significant number of men with nonspecific wounds.

I was sitting under the window, looking out over the Home Counties reading *The Standard*, and a girl standing at the bar slid in opposite me. I'd noticed her because the room was small and there were so few strangers. She was gamine and preternaturally vivacious for the Lindsey. She wore corduroy shorts, lisle tights and a hand-me-down Fair Isle cardigan. She had clever eyes that dodged behind a faded fringe. She said I looked sad. I told her that the girl I was in love with was in New York and I couldn't afford to go to New York, and she couldn't be here, so I was sad. She agreed that that was sad, pulled a large glittering ring off her finger and pushed it across the table. "Take this, I'm sure it's worth a ticket to New York . . . No, really . . . you must take it, go now, go today. It was my great-aunt's engagement ring . . . she was marvelous, had masses of lovers and would simply insist you take it. What on earth are engagement rings for, if not to bring lovers together?" I said I couldn't possibly, but it was incredibly, brilliantly kind of her

and it had stopped me from feeling sad and at least I could buy her a drink. I don't even know your name, I said. "I'm Cressida Connolly," she said, sticking out her hand and cocking her head to one side with a grin that was half warm, half defensive, and that I would come to know well. Well, I'm . . . "Oh, I know who you are," she said. Six months later—maybe twelve—she tapped the shoulder of a man in a queue at a baker's and said, "I'm going to marry your son." The man looked askance and replied, "We've never met. How do you know who I am or that I even have a son?" And Cressida cocked her head and grinned: "You could only be Adrian's father."

A few months after that—or maybe weeks—I was lying in a morning bath and she brought me an orphan cup of warm milk and brandy and said, "You know, if we get married, I'll always make sure there's beer in the fridge."

Romantically we peaked too soon.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joseph Kidwell:

Book is actually written, printed, or highlighted for everything. You can know everything you want by a e-book. Book has a different type. To be sure that book is important issue to bring us around the world. Beside that you can your reading proficiency was fluently. A e-book Pour Me, a Life will make you to become smarter. You can feel a lot more confidence if you can know about every thing. But some of you think this open or reading a new book make you bored. It's not make you fun. Why they might be thought like that? Have you in search of best book or appropriate book with you?

Irving Wile:

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