

Hello fellow readers. This week's column is by Kirkland Town Library staff person Amy James.

For those of us lucky enough to be sheltering at home with a few stocked bookshelves, these past few weeks have offered the chance to revisit old friends from volumes consumed years ago. I spent many evenings those first few unexpected weeks at home pulling out old books, cleaning shelves, and organizing by genre, likely to keep my mind off of more troubling things. "Oh, this book," I'd mutter, sinking down into a nearby chair and recalling the time I read Annie Proulx's "The Shipping News" in a tiny rented bedroom under the wallpapered eaves, while the ocean winds howled.

But like others I've spoken with these past few months, my concentration is a bit off; many days, a novel- even one I've already read - just feels like too much in the midst of all of the news-gathering and the Zooming, not to mention the baking. Enter the short story, where I've been finding my peace lately in John Updike, Lorrie Moore, Jhumpa Lahiri - all offering vividly drawn characters, intricate plots, social commentary, wisdom, and pathos packed efficiently into generally less than 40 pages of beautiful prose. And, all have collections available on Libby or Hoopla.

Re-reading Updike, it occurred to me in a way that hadn't when I was younger that many of the stories I love are populated by those leading lives of privilege – with summer homes and pool houses and generational wealth. I wondered if this would put me off, but these perfectly crafted stories share common themes that transcend social position – the loss of a love, the hardships of mid-life, the death of a parent. In "Killing," Updike skillfully paints a picture of a woman struggling to come to terms with end-of-life choices she's forced to make for her dying father, a remote but much-loved figure who she feels she never fully knew. In other stories, he writes of waning marriages, adult siblings, a mother's love and hard work recalled in later years. No matter the wrapping, Updike's stories strike a common chord.

Prior to coming upon Lorrie Moore's short stories, I read her novel, "Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?" a wise, moving, and often funny remembrance of adolescence. Her short stories are no less compelling – at turns humorous, poignant, and quirky, with character descriptions so detailed that it's unlikely any photograph could be as illuminating. In Moore's collection, "Birds of America," as in Updike, love, loss, and family are all themes, but are overlaid with sense of bewilderment or bemusement: How did I arrive at this place in my life? Who have I been, and who might I become?

Rediscovering Jhumpa Lahiri's story collections on my shelf was likely the biggest reward of all. Aside from her brilliant prose, her stories inspire us to consider the idea that we may not really "know" even those closest to us; their mysteries, their desires, and how the roles dictated to us may conflict with our most elemental sense of who we are. In the title story of her collection, "Unaccustomed Earth," a daughter gradually comes to know her elderly father in a way that is simultaneously unsettling and sad, and somehow strangely satisfying.

Also found on my shelf are collections by Alice Munro, Ellen Gilchrist, Russell Banks, J.D. Salinger, Lydia Davis, and others. Short stories provide us with a brief deep dive into other lives...perfect for those hummingbird days when all we can do is just flit from one lovely flower to the next...on to the next story, the next cast of characters, the next twist in the lives of people who may be just like us in their complex humanness.