

An Empty Nest

By Laura Stoll

This August, we dropped our son off at college and came home to what is conventionally known as an empty nest. With our daughter in New York City and our son in Rochester, it's just my husband and me at home now. Some parts of it are nice; we spend a lot less money at the grocery store, for one thing. However, I'm finding that I miss my kids and the parenting that took up so much of my time.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling down, I turn to books. Stories bring comfort by showing me how other people have handled similar situations and made it through happily to the other side. So, when it was time to compose this column, I thought about writing about the books that bring me comfort during difficult times. I also thought about coming up with a list of both fiction and non-fiction books about an empty nest.

However, my mind had other ideas. Just like when it's it's time to do the taxes or schedule an uncomfortable doctor's appointment, I procrastinated, finding something fun to do to take my mind off of missing my kids. So, in honor of my two precious birds who have flown to their new nests, here are some books you can use to procrastinate or distract yourself when you are faced with something difficult.

"Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" by J.K. Rowling. I was a late-comer to the Harry Potter series. I tend to enjoy more realistic fiction and the magical elements of these kids' books scared me off. Eventually, I realized a million readers couldn't be wrong and dove in. While it's true there are spells and dementors and wands and brooms, there are also relatable characters who face the challenges of growing up and finding one's way. Since my kids had read them years before me, every time I finished a book, we watched the movie together so we could talk about it.

"Mockingjay" by Suzanne Collins. I read The Hunger Games series with my daughter when they were first published in 2008, 2009, and 2010 so this book makes me think of her. Although the second book in the series ("Catching Fire") is my favorite, "Mockingjay" gives a satisfying ending to the trilogy where good finally prevails over evil.

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou. While known for her moving and musical poetry, this book is a memoir about Angelou's coming of age and how the strength of character and a love of reading can help overcome racism and trauma. The lessons that Angelou teaches in her writing are hard to count. One of my favorite quotes of hers is, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

To end this list of ornithological books, it seems appropriate to write about "Bird by Bird" by Anne Lamott. In this guide to writing, Lamott describes how her brother felt overwhelmed trying to

write a long paper about birds. “Just take it bird by bird,” their father advised, breaking any big task down into smaller steps until it can be managed. Perhaps this is the trick to dealing with my empty nest: taking things day by day, dealing with the smaller details, until the larger picture falls into place.

If that doesn’t work, there are plenty more bird books and movies that I could borrow from the library: “The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle” by Haruki Murakami, “H is for Hawk” by Helen Macdonald, “To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee, Ken Kesey’s “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” “Gorilla and the Bird” by Zack McDermot, and many more. That should be enough to get me through until the kids fly home to the nest for a visit this fall.