

Stories of Family Trips and Summertime Capers

By Lenora Todaro

June 27, 2019

In one day, your life can be upended, spurring you on a journey you might not have taken — one that picks the scabs off family wounds, reconfigures relationships, leads you to a new home. For the tweens (and one wolf) in these middle grade novels, life is going along swimmingly — until it isn't.

One day Orion and his two sisters are tasting fried-chicken-flavored jelly beans created by their father, Fletcher, when a clown rings their doorbell and delivers news of their grandfather's death. In John David Anderson's **FINDING ORION (Walden Pond, 354 pp., \$16.99; ages 8 to 12)**, the Kwirk family return to Fletcher's hometown for a "fun-neral" — a celebration of the motorcycle-riding, pranksterish, Vietnam veteran grandfather they hardly knew. Hearing wonderful things from townspeople about Papa Kwirk, Orion feels acutely the estrangement from this colorful relative, and the burden of being "the normal one" in his eccentric family.

According to their Aunt Gertie, Papa Kwirk's will instructs the family to find his cremated ashes, a condition that turns into a macabre scavenger hunt involving mounds of ice cream, perilous tree climbing and a dangerous confrontation at a local museum. Reluctantly, Fletcher, who remains bitter about Papa Kwirk's alcoholic parenting, agrees that the family will fulfill this last wish. The trail of clues opens up a compelling mystery that reveals a more sympathetic side of Papa Kwirk, a man crushed by the loss of his wife more than his years in the war. Although forgiveness comes too late for this family to enjoy all that Papa Kwirk was, the journey helps recast Orion's relationship with his own father, one in which they resolve not to take each other for granted.

Anderson writes beautifully about sadness, as he did in "Ms. Bixby's Last Day," which shares the surprising tenderness of this book's characters. Here, however, he leavens a weighty story with humor. Twelve-year-old Orion is an amiable companion with a voice that is witty, world-weary, sarcastic and slouching toward wisdom. "You fall and they catch you," he says of parents, but sometimes they don't, "because they were falling themselves."

One day Cat and her younger brother, Chicken, are in the car riding east, eagerly anticipating a summer visit to friends in Atlanta, when their mother, Amanda, abruptly detours to North Carolina. She leaves them with grandparents they've never met, on a coastal island they've never visited. From the opening of Gillian McDunn's debut, **CATERPILLAR SUMMER (Bloomsbury, 295 pp., \$16.99; ages 8 to 12)**, we know that 11-year-old Cat is the de facto caretaker of her 7-year-old brother, a boy who is supersensitive to noise and prone to run off impulsively. She has embraced this role in the years since their father died, while Amanda, an artist, creates picture books (which appear throughout the novel as illustrated metastories about an actual caterpillar who selflessly cares for a chicken). "You're the glue holding the three of us together," Cat's mother says to her. Sometimes, though, Cat just wants to be a kid.

In Cat's family, forgiveness comes in time: Their grandparents' home will become "a soft place to land." Years ago, Amanda ditched medical school for art, got pregnant and eloped — triply angering her father, a workaholic surgeon. On the island, Cat gets to know him — and know her mother's own back story as an ace fisherwoman. Cat makes it her mission to heal her mother and grandfather's rift. Frustrated at one point, Cat confronts Amanda: "So he wasn't around a lot. But at least he was alive." Then Chicken runs off and disappears. This absorbing, heartfelt novel seamlessly blends the challenges of life with a neurodivergent child into a story of one tween's burgeoning self-awareness as she figures out how to reclaim her childhood. "I'm starting to get the idea that perfection might be overrated," Cat says. And we get the idea, too.

One day it's the last Monday in August before school starts. Cousins Otto and Sheed wish summer would never end. And then it doesn't: A diabolical, bendy creature named Mr. Flux drops into their Virginia town from another dimension, hands them a Polaroid camera and commands them to take a photograph. When they do, they unwittingly stop time. Their neighbors and family freeze midaction. What just happened? Otto and Sheed, legendary local tween sleuths, aim to solve the time-warp mystery.

Lamar Giles's **THE LAST LAST-DAY-OF-SUMMER (Versify/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 289 pp., \$16.99; ages 10 to 12)** pits good against evil in an interdimensional time war. A dreadlocked stranger from the future falls through the portal to lend a hand, while fantastical characters who personify different aspects of time wrangle for dominance — among them, the Golden Hours ("responsible for the best light of the day"), the Clock Watchers (who no longer have jobs now that time is still) and the Time Sucks (described as Platypus-type creatures that distract you, "running in galloping strides more suited for a racehorse than a furry, potbellied, face-licking thing"). Baffled, Otto and Sheed try to

determine just what is happening, jotting down their deductions — set off in the book with hand-style lettering — and shouting out choreographed and numbered “maneuvers” that they use to alter a situation, like No. 1, “run,” or No. 22, “duck and cover.”

Giles, a Y.A. novelist and a founder of We Need Diverse Books, has a phenomenal imagination, and it is thrilling to watch him do metaphysics for the tween set. His juxtaposition of oddball, affecting characters with the commonplace bickering between cousins grounds this topsy-turvy ride. Along the way, Otto glimpses a future without Sheed, and any simmering envy he might have felt dissipates in a swelling of love for his cousin, “a legendary bond that wouldn’t be broken. No matter what came their way.”

One day the idyllic mountain life of a young wolf cub and his family is upended when an enemy wolf pack attacks them. The family scatters; some die on the spot, and those that live are left homeless. Orphaned with his memories, Swift escapes, determined to live up to all he has learned about hunting, gratitude and family bonds.

In **A WOLF CALLED WANDER** (Greenwillow, 240 pp., \$16.99; ages 8 to 12), inspired by a true story, Rosanne Parry evokes the Pacific Northwest with lilting, sensory-driven ambient details: “He hears running water, the splash, grunt, huff of the bear, and the split, splat of the salmon hitting the stones on the side of the river.” Fresh compound words abound, evoking Swift’s emotions: crouch-freeze, play-hunt, look-sniff, yip-spin. These strong, strange verbs create the effect of traveling in terra incognita. Some clichés slip through — “darkness clears like a lifting fog” — but Parry’s choice to have Swift narrate his own perilous journey brings an on-the-ground intimacy to the story as the wolf describes unfamiliar things

through his own lupine filter: the “black river” (the highway), men who “throw lightning from their sticks” (guns). Lonely and grieving, guided by smell, he aches for his brother Warm, whom he tried to protect — “I curl my body around him and put all my hope in silence” — until a man’s lightning struck him down.

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Parry has written about being far from home before, recently in “Last of the Name,” about Irish immigrants, and “The Turn of the Tide,” about a boy sent from Japan to America after a tsunami; it’s a terrain she captures expertly in “A Wolf Called Wander.” By the time Swift survives injury, faces hunger and literally walks through fire, he renames himself with Melvillean flourish — “Call me Wander.” He persists in his search for a new mountain, and a companion with whom to make a new home.