



Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters

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A middle class, Midwestern family in search of meaning uproot themselves and move to their ancestral village in Croatia

"We can look at this in two ways," Jim wrote, always the pragmatist. "We can panic and scrap the whole idea. Or we can take this as a sign. They're saying the economy is going to get worse before it gets better. Maybe this is the kick in the pants we needed to do something completely different. There will always be an excuse not to go..."

And that, friends, is how a typically sane middle-aged mother decided to drag her family back to a forlorn mountain village in the backwoods of Croatia.

So begins the author's journey in *Running Away to Home*. Jen, her architect husband, Jim, and their two children had been living the typical soccer- and ballet-practice life in the most Middle American of places: Des Moines, Iowa. They overindulged themselves and their kids, and as a family they were losing one another in the rush of work, school, and activities. One day, Jen and her husband looked at each other—both holding their Starbucks coffee as they headed out to their SUV in the mall parking lot, while the kids complained about the inferiority of the toys they just got—and asked themselves: "Is this the American dream? Because if it is, it sort of sucks."

Jim and Jen had always dreamed of taking a family sabbatical in another country, so when they lost half their savings in the stock-market crash, it seemed like just a crazy enough time to do it. High on wanderlust, they left the troubled landscape of contemporary America for the Croatian mountain village of Mrkopalj, the land of Jennifer's ancestors. It was a village that seemed hermetically sealed for the last one hundred years, with a population of eight hundred (mostly drunken) residents and a herd of sheep milling around the post office. For several months they lived like locals, from milking the neighbor's cows to eating roasted pig on a spit to desperately seeking the village recipe for bootleg liquor. As the Wilson-Hoff family struggled to stay sane (and warm), what they found was much deeper and bigger than themselves.

Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters Details

Date : Published October 11th 2011 by St. Martin's Press

ISBN : 9780312598952

Author : Jennifer Wilson

Format : Hardcover 336 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography Memoir

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From Reader Review Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters for online ebook

Ellen says

My rating is closer to a 3 1/2. I enjoyed this book but got a little long at the end.

Laura says

I can finally understand my friend's jokes about her Croatia in-laws! I really enjoyed reading about the author's struggles and joys in adapting to a different culture and stripping her family's life down to the core of what's important. It also made me really wonder for the first time what it was that drove my own ancestors to leave Germany, France, England, Canada... and what that has meant for me and this nation of immigrants.

Grace says

There was so much about this book that spoke to me. I was reading it during December, a time of year that typically finds me struggling to find good balance. There are so many pressures for our family's time and resources during this season that I find myself just wanting to drive our family to a little cabin in the woods where we can light a fire and play board games for hours on end. So in this way, I can relate to the author's desire to simplify her life-leave the soccer practices and business world behind in search of something more simple, more basic-her roots. I've always had a fascination with our family tree and the names and stories of my own ancestors. Do you know what I'd give to hear the stories untold by the still photographs that are my ancestors? I loved following Jennifer and her family as they arrived and settled in Croatia, I loved hearing the bits of language and imagining all the people they came to know. It was a fascinating group of people and a great country to explore through the author. I'd recommend this book to anyone who cares about their roots and wishes they could reach for the simple life we imagine our ancestors enjoyed.

Jill says

Enjoyable book. Author has an engaging, humorous style. I was never bored reading it, but it wasn't a page turner--kind of book you can put down for a few days then pick back up. Made you think about American life and what we have and don't have in comparison to Croatia. I was struck by how friendly and accepting the people were--how Jennifer's family got to know so many people and became part of the community so quickly. Was it because of the country, because it was a small town or both? I wonder if someone who moved from Croatia to a small town in America would feel equally connected and welcome. I would have liked to learn more about their subsequent travels in Europe and especially what it felt like to return to the states.

Jim says

I had been a fool to think that this trip was only about my family. It had been about the whole family—those who left, those who stayed, and all those connective tissues on either side of the journey my great-grandparents made. The journey that began with their parents. Mrkopalj had needed to tell its far-flung family its difficult story.

For Jennifer Wilson (and her family, Jim her husband, Zadie her daughter, and Sam her son) an idea born out of a deep inner reflection (Is this the American Dream? Because if it is, it sucks.) in an Iowa Starbucks, creates a 4 month journey for all of them that takes them literally back the village of Mrkopalj (MER-kop-pie) in Croatia, a nation (and region) known in recent times as a place of terrible war and ethnic cleansing, but for Wilson, the nation of her mother's ancestry.

Written in a first person narrative, *Running Away to Home* is reminiscent of another travel writer's work that I enjoyed in the early 1980's, William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*. (Wilson is an accomplished travel writer as well with published work in magazines such as *National Geographic*.)

But this book is a book about a 3-D journey, one that is geographic, one that is genealogical, and one that is an inner journey. All three merge together at various points as Wilson (and her family at times) wrestle with navigating the roads (and culture) of an ancient and diverse people; as she navigates the very trying journey of piecing together her ancestry with little information available to her; and as she journeys in her mind and heart through her own challenging relationship with her mother... and with herself as a mother and a post-modern American woman.

Yet on another level this book is a very delightful read of how challenging it is to navigate another culture, one which is little known by many, and which merely "reading about it" does not often help as one experiences it. Among the memorable events in the book (and I share just a few to whet the reader's appetite) are the experiences of their first pig's roast in which Zadie and Sam are brought face to face, literally, with the meat they usually saw wrapped in plastic and styrofoam containers.

Another delightful part of this book are the unforgettable people they meet and grow to love while in Croatia: Robert, Cuculic (with an accent mark on the second "c"), Ivana, Karla, and Roberta, as well as others. They become friends, they are family, they are part of the journey as Wilson works, in spurts, at finding the places, people, and graves, of her ancestors who stayed, lived, survived, fought, and died in Croatia. And the chapters in which she comes face to face with living relatives who would have known of her relations who came to America are priceless and moving.

I really enjoyed this book and Wilson's journey as it is a reminder of how much this nation is truly an immigrant nation even today. And though I read an advance copy of the book, it would have been nice to have some photos to view that would have helped better frame what I was reading. (And Jennifer, I would love to hear how you and your family have re-adjusted to life again here in the states and what lessons you took away from that time in Croatia.)

On my scale of one to five, with one being poor and five being great, I give *A Running Away to Home* a four, or good read. And believe that this text would be a great one to have in a course on contemporary American society or a writing course.

Note: I received a copy of this book via the Amazon Vine program in exchange for a review of it. I was not

required to write a positive review.

Allie says

This is a delightful book. I enjoyed tagging along on Jennifer Wilson's journey to her ancestral village in Croatia, learning some Croatian words, meeting many quirky characters along the way and seeing how the experienced changed the author and her family. This is a warm, funny memoir with beautiful writing.

Biblio-files says

Though I know this family personally, even strangers won't be able to resist their charms as each character unfolds on the page. I connected immediately with Jen's desire for something more at a certain point in her life. Something more for her and for her family. Told with a journalist's curiosity and a reporter's skill, the story of the foursome's adventure to connect with Jen's ancestors is packed with wit, surprise, and discovery. I recommend this book to anyone who is looking for a passenger-side seat next to this adventure-seeking, world traveling family who found that home--even as far away as Croatia--is a lot closer than they thought.

The book is out October 2011 and available for pre-order NOW! Run, don't walk, to your nearest indie bookstore to order your copy.

Elizabeth says

This is the kind of memoir that you hardly notice you are reading: this is because you instantly feel immersed in the story. Wilson has such a delicate touch with her use of details, so that reading is almost like watching the story unfold out your own personal, third-story dorm window.

One of my favorite parts of the execution of this story is the use of time: the way the author bends and stretches the four-month time period of their stay to convey her own experiences with that time: so that the first few weeks of the stay are more arduous read, more trying, and move back and forth in time with more strain. But as the second half of the book approaches, and the main characters in the book progress relax into their town life, the time moves more fluidly. This use of time in the book -- whether intentional or not -- seems to reflect her own anxiety level with her ancestral town at the moment she was living it.

There is a wonderful balance between the easy sentence-level writing of the book, and the complex structure, which appears on the surface to be chronological, but really is not. At the base it is chronological, but it is more organic than that, like any regular day of events, filled with neighborly interruptions, and memories.

There is a definitive breakthrough "moment" in the book for the main character, which involves a garden and weeds, that relieves some of the tension of the beginning of the story. However, the beauty of this book is there are no real "bombshell" revelations... it is the steady pulse of the unveiling of life so similar and different from "normal" Western life that makes this story riveting. It isn't really anything that can be explained, because it has to be felt to be understood.

This book is an intensely personal, yet is one that tells a rich, universal story about connecting with family

and with ourselves.

Roseyreads says

Enjoyed Jennifer Wilson's writing. Being an Iowan who has also been to Croatia, I appreciated what she and her family experienced. Many times found myself laughing aloud! "Is joke. Is Croatian joke!"

Tim says

We all think about running away at times. We imagine leaving the stresses and obligations of daily life and embarking on a life enhancing adventure. It's doubtful, though, that Croatia tops the list of escapes for most people. Yet Jennifer Wilson, along with her husband and their two young children, left the comforts of home in Des Moines, Iowa, to take up temporary residence in Mrkopalj (MER-ko-pie), the mountain village in northwestern Croatia from which her maternal great-grandparents emigrated.

Wilson chronicles her family's sojourn in *Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters*. It is a journey of family discovery more meaningful than she envisioned and into a world far different from their lives in middle America. And although Wilson sets out to discover her past, she learns more about living in the present.

Running Away to Home takes readers inside Mrkopalj and its environs. Wilson gives firsthand accounts of her and her family's experiences. Although Wilson was the one in search of where she came from, her husband and children (six and almost four at the time) adapted more rapidly to village life and the cultural differences. One thing all of them learned is that life operates differently in a small mountain village. For example, the family agreed to rent the to-be-renovated second floor of the house of Robert Starcevic, who ran one of the town's "bistros." When they arrived, the remodeling had barely begun. Despite promises from Robert that it would be done in a day, a couple days, a week or two, the Wilsons never ended up living in the space they intended. Rather, they took over the smaller third floor of the house, which housed Robert's daughters' rooms. This was due in part to Robert often preferring to spend his days indulging in local libations and watching the world, a not uncommon activity in the village.

It may have been that approach that made a 21st Century American mother take the longest to acclimate. Rather than the constant motion of work and family activities back home, the 800 or so residents of Mrkopalj lived a slower pace. This doesn't mean no one worked hard. To the contrary, Wilson found that life in the village could be "bone-hard." There was no industry to speak of and many supported themselves by what they and their neighbors could grow, often on their own small plots. They would rise early to manually tend to their plots and livestock or to perform household chores. They would cut trees in the forest to gather firewood for the coming winter. Much of their work was done without the labor-saving conveniences most Americans would expect to use.

One major failing of the book, though, is that it contains no pictures, despite the fact Wilson's web site contains 128 photos in a gallery called "Life in the Village." Wilson says that was a conscious decision. She wants readers to come up with their own images of the village and its people in their minds. Yet virtually all readers have never taken such a step in location and daily life. Not sharing photographs in the book deprives them of actually seeing the people and sites that feature so prominently in it.

Although Wilson did not feel immediately accepted, she did catch up with her family in adjusting to and feeling the fabric of life in the village. Her search for her ancestors seemed less imperative and Wilson noted that she learned more about what their lives may have been like than about them personally. And, for her, that was perhaps the real lesson of their four months living in the village. Among other things, history and a sense of place seemed woven into the fabric of life. Croatia was far from immune from the political, nationalist and ethnic disputes that affected southeastern Europe and the Balkans. Yet while these fractures still lurked beneath the surface, they seemed far less important than the deep sense of community. This meant "they all lived together in messy harmony in Mrkopalj. In addition, for all our American advantages -- jobs, industry, good malls -- they felt sorry for me. No one in Mrkopalj could fathom what it must have been like *to not even know my great-grandparents.*"

Graced by an ability to increasingly turn a humorous eye at their acclimation process, *Running Away to Home* shows how the Wilsons seem to find themselves amidst a world much different than they knew. "Mrkopalj showed us that it didn't matter what we *had*," Wilson says. Instead, experiencing the small things that contributed to the life and culture of Mrkopalj stood in sharp contrast to and often felt more congruous than life in America, "a place where people had everything and appreciated so little."

As Wilson and her family discover, even when you leave home it doesn't mean you can't find a niche and fellowship in other places, and in ways you might least expect.

(Originally posted at A Progressive on the Prairie.)

Diane says

This book was a pleasure to read. Jennifer and her husband decided to take their two kids and leave their home in Iowa to move to Croatia for a year so she can research her ancestors. Their adventure helps them grow closer as a family and it reminded them of the truly important things in life.

I love travel writing, and Jennifer's writing style was very warm, funny and introspective. Plus, you can't help but learn some Croatian words. Zivjeli!

bookczuk says

The other day, I received a message from the author of this book, saying she hoped I was enjoying it and that she forward to my review. Now, try as I might, my answer to her seems the place to start my review: "There are some absolutely marvelous moments you've written, and I have had such obvious enjoyment reading that my husband is waiting to read it as soon as he can. I'm amazed you went with such little preparation about the history and genealogy, but think that perhaps that opened you up to the experience in a way that preparation might have prohibited. Will post a full review shortly. Thank you for letting me visit Croatia with you, Jim, and the kids."

I've read *many* books about travelling abroad, but few have captured me as much as this one did. Perhaps because the author was so candid about how little she knew before going, perhaps because though I know

next to nothing about Croatia (horrible wars and beautiful beaches), perhaps because I somehow link it with Ukraine and my own heritage, I really felt right at home with Jenny, Jim, the two kids, and their journey into the small world of Mrkopalj. To go from anywhere in the U.S. to a village which mixes the old ways with a smattering of Nickelodeon would be culture shock enough, but to lack language abilities, and even minimal knowledge of heritage and history, and bring your kids along, takes courage. I think one of my favorite pieces of the book was how young Sam and Zadie adapted. It was no surprise that they mastered communications quickly. Sam's conversion to vegetarianism after seeing his meals on the hoof, then prepared on the spit, really endeared him to me. I also loved the discovery of language, and incorporation into the family canon of words: *smecer* (pronounced SMETCH-air; I can't type the c properly) for "the dump" reminded me of the inclusion of *mit schlag* into our family language after a trip to Switzerland/Austria/Germany one winter.

The people of Mrkopalj became my friends, too. Though the village is poor economically, it is rich in generosity of spirit and in strong hearts. Through their stories, I learned more of the land than I have in any history book or newspaper. Ms. Wilson brought them, and their world beautifully into mine. Thank you, for giving me the journey.

(My only complaint was that there were no pictures in the book, but in my conversation with the author, she clued me to her website <http://www.jennifer-wilson.com/>. Definitely worth a look, even if you haven't read the book. Some stunning photographs and a taste of the tales of the family.)

Many thanks to LibraryThing and the publishers for sending me this book via the Early Review program on LibraryThing.

Kwoomac says

Goodreads giveaway. The book is about the author's time spent in Croatia with her husband and two young children as she researched her ancestors and looked for remaining family. I was interested in this book because friends and I have talked about vacationing in Croatia. The author is a travel writer by trade and has traveled extensively so she was expecting this year long trip to run fairly smoothly.

Jennifer decides to take a two week trip ahead of her family to scope things out, get the lay of the land. Her first night: "I stuck it out at Hotel Jastrebo for the night, its one lonely inhabitant. It was through sheer force of will that I didn't fixate on the notion that my situation was the perfect premise for a horror movie: Cuculic (head of tourism bureau) showing up with an angry mob of drunken bears, screaming 'You are three hours late' as he bludgeons me with both a hammer and a sickle. Okay, maybe I was fixated."

In spite of this less than auspicious beginning, the author does move her family to Croatia to the small mountain town her great-grandparents left 100 years before. It's a really sweet story about the author's search for details about her family, while at the same time creating friendships with the townspeople. Wilson doesn't idealize either the setting or how hard the transition was for everyone, including herself.

Words of wisdom from Wilson's husband Jim, "If it were easy, everyone would be doing exactly what they dreamed of." Grandma Kate's words of wisdom, "You might be poor, but you have no excuse to stink."

Well written, at times funny, other times poignant story about a woman's search for family. Great characters. I loved their landlord and friend Robert, serious neighbor Mario, and even Cuculic, who turns out to be more

complicated than just a lazy bureaucratic worker. Impressive that Wilson was able to pursue this dream, moving her whole family (except the dog and cat, which I had a hard time with) from Iowa to Croatia. Bravo.

Brian says

What a terrific, inspiring and sometimes heart-breaking journey of a story! There was so much in this book I could relate to and was inspired by. Ms. Wilson is an incredibly gifted writer to convey the emotions and details so many of us can visualize and empathize with. For us as a military family, we are always believers that "home is always where the family is." It's not a place, or a house, but instead is the dependence and love of your family.

Being from central Iowa as well--and someone that has visited Croatia only VERY BRIEFLY (when the ship pulled into Split for a 4 day visit)--this story was such a treat for me as well. I felt I almost knew her personally from all the little details about Iowa.

Thanks so much to the author for sending me a signed copy as well. I enjoyed the journey!

Zivjeli!

Jennie says

I wanted to like this book more, and debated giving it 3 stars, but I really struggled getting through this otherwise easy read. I think the reasons for this are 1) told as a narrative, Wilson never really makes the other people in this story more than appendages to her account. Even her immediate family seem to be afterthoughts, so I didn't feel connected to any of them. At the same time I didn't ever really feel connected to her journey either. 2) For a travel writer and someone I expected to have realistic expectations regarding traveling and living in different cultures/environments, she seemed to be endlessly surprised by the culture and customs, and this was supposed to be her ancestral home - did she not exhaustively research it? 3) Her goal in this trip was to find her family's ancestral roots and to pull her family out of the suburban hamster wheel and while I think she achieved both of these, she did not express the results of each in her writing.
