

Finding Lilly/Baby is a 4-Letter Word

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Sometimes reading is a way to pass the time; sometimes reading is a way to spend time with a friend. I read to entertain myself, to learn things, to travel places I've never been and to celebrate life as chronicled by someone else.

I started this week's reading journey diving into an unusual book by Richard Clewes called Finding Lilly. His wife, Erin, who after many years of marriage and one of separation commits suicide. She battled manic depression or bi-polar disorder as it is now known. After her death, he leaves his life behind, taking a leave from work and traveling around the globe, looking for sense in her life and death and a way for him to continue on, accepting the unacceptable.

When anyone dies young, there is always a huge sense of loss for what could have been. When the death is by suicide, the pain is unbearable. What more could he have done, what else could he have responded to, how might he have saved her life?

The brutal fact is that as much as we don't understand yet about physical illness, we understand less about mental illness. As bad as a cancer diagnosis is, a diagnosis of a serious, mental illness can be worse. As hard as chemotherapy and radiation are on a body, so too are psychiatric drugs and many are meant to be taken for the rest of a patient's life. Dry mouth, for example, sounds trivial until you can't speak because your teeth are stuck to your lips and your tongue has been replaced by thick sandpaper.

On his journey, Clewes discovers that while the pain is a constant companion, his body craves the companionship of drawing and he goes back to sketching the world around him as a way of making sense of things that make no sense. The book is filled with these drawings and they really did become a comfort to him. We the readers are more the richer for them and they combine with his words in an amazing dance of emotion, healing and getting through the day by putting one foot in front of the other.

The second book I've been reading is one that I actually didn't want to review. Baby is a Four-Letter Word by new mother Dorianne Sager. Subtitled Surviving the First Two Years of Parenthood, I'm not sure why I initially didn't want to read this book. Now that I have read it, I think it is because I initially had a hard time believing that a new mother could also document those days. Once I started however, I realized that my initial reaction was only in response to my own journey as a writer and documenter of the life of my family, which didn't start until 1987, long after the births of the girls in 1983 and 1985.

And, while I have a hard time identifying with any young couple who would have a white couch, I can honestly say that Sager has given us a real glimpse into the life of a new mother, all the joys and all the doubts and frustrations mostly brought about by a world that doesn't understand that everything stops when babies need to nurse. To do this with such humor is a real gift.

Dorianne is the mother of a two-year old son and is currently pregnant again. Her son, Zach, the inspiration and perspiration of her Baby Steps column, from which this book is built, is one of those kids who never sleeps. A high energy child, he soon taught her that there are bigger things at play in life than any of us understand and the sooner we accept that, the easier life becomes. Having said that, there is nothing easy about a kid who doesn't sleep and like Sager, I am praying for a sleepy baby

number two.

How great for all of us that Sager was already an accomplished writer before she became a mother. Using her skills, she documents life with a baby – bringing us right into the chaos and bringing us out beyond the other side, where wisdom is hard won and tight fitting jeans are a distant memory. While times have changed since the early 80s, it was refreshing to read about an extended breast feeding relationship and the joys of play group. Some things never change.

Like Sager, I lived a long way from grandparents, although she again bests. Living in Vancouver her own parents are in Ontario and her in-laws are from New Zealand. She and her husband are now residing in Kingston, close to her family and are in the midst of a cross-Canada car trip with Zach this spring to promote her book before the arrival of baby number two. Let's hope that this trip goes better than the plane trips she has taken with him, especially as a car travel lasts so much longer!

Finding Lilly, A Memoir by Richard Clewes is printed in paperback by Key Porter Books and sells for \$24.95. Baby is a Four-Letter Word by Dorianne Sager is also published by Key Porter Books in paperback and sells for \$22.95. Having read the first, I'm so glad I also read the second. While I cannot do anything about Lilly's pain and the pain that Richard has worked through during his travels and writing this book, I can celebrate her life by reading his book. Reading the second reminded me that despite the pain, life does go on and a baby in the house is a joy to behold and an unparalleled source of inspiration.

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