

THE BOOKS

Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters
by Jennifer Wilson
(St. Martin's Press, 2011)

Halfway to Each Other: How a Year in Italy Brought Our Family Home
by Susan Pohlman
(Guideposts, 2010)

Big in China: My Unlikely Adventures Raising a Family, Playing the Blues, and Becoming a Star in Beijing
by Alan Paul
(Harper, 2011)

Pulling an Eat, Pray, Love—with family in tow

Flights of Fancy

BY MEGANNE FABREGA

A COUPLE of times a year I feel a little restless. I look around at our life, a full and fortunate life by any standards, and I feel the need for a big change. Friday night is pizza and movie night; every morning, like clockwork, my daughter's friend comes to pick her up for school; we're hamsters on a wheel that is too comfortable to hop off. Occasionally, though, my family has a conversation that goes a little something like this:

Me: I really think we should consider living in Amsterdam for a year.

My daughter: What? Would that mean we have to move? 'Cause I am not moving. [Cue tears.] Mom, we're not moving, are we?

My husband: How would we be paying for this trip? What about my job? And our house? I don't really see this happening.

And that's usually where it ends. Me, sitting glumly at the table. My daughter, trailing my husband out of the room saying, "We're not really moving, right, Dad? We're not going to Amsterdam, are we?" My husband on his way out the door to work, the conversation left behind along with the breakfast dishes sitting in the sink.

To be fair, I also have my reservations. What would happen if we had a major emergency, or my elderly in-laws had a serious health problem? The city I'd like to live in is an international hub,

so language wouldn't be an issue. But still I am awash in a flood of concerns—the dog, the house, the cars, the health insurance, all the paperwork—and so we stay in our quaint and entirely predictable New England life, for now.

But what about the families that make it past those initial conversations? The families that take a chance, financially and emotionally, and leave their friends, relatives, and, in some cases, their jobs behind in order to scratch that itch? Judging by the recent spate of memoirs on this subject, for every family that decides to stay in their safe place there is another family that decides to book that flight with a little hesitation and a whole lot of *chutzpah*. But do the seemingly endless challenges of relocating your family overseas make it all worthwhile?

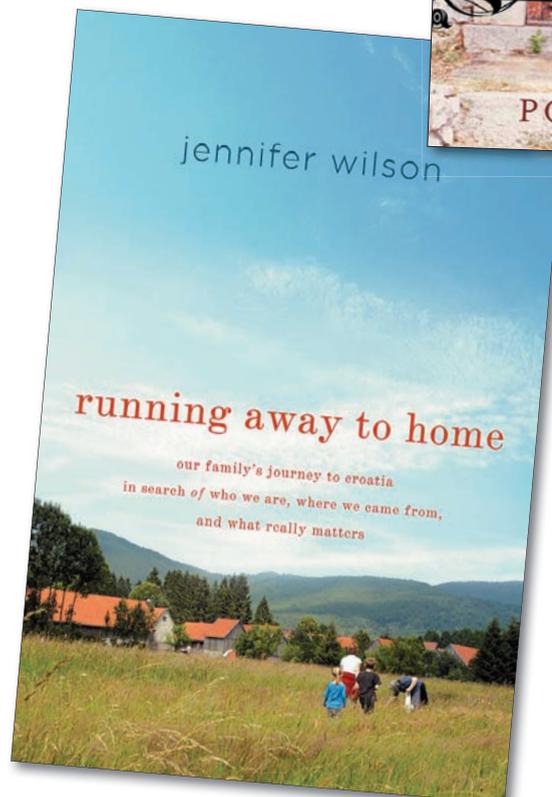
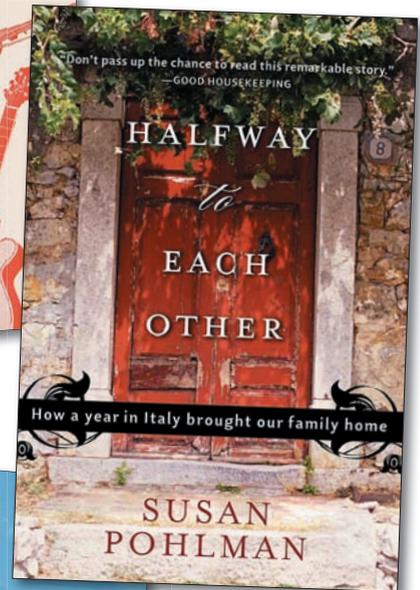
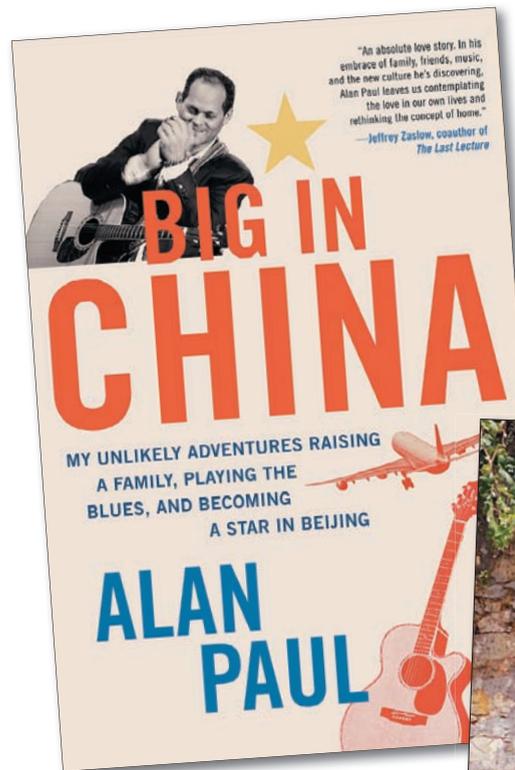
In *Running Away to Home*, freelance journalist Jennifer Wilson describes how she began her journey to Croatia, the homeland of her matrilineal relatives, with the contents of a small tin box that belonged to her great-aunt Paula. Among the faded photos, Wilson found a short autobiography, spurring her to search for her ancestors in a country she had never set foot in before. Wilson's need for a family history overlaps with her growing anxiety about her own family's life in modern Middle America. Although they lead a com-

fortable existence that includes regular trips to Starbucks, copious amounts of Legos, and a grill that also makes naan, she feels a nagging urge to escape the material life that they worked so hard to achieve but that is sustained at a cost to their well being. One day, while shopping at yet another superstore, it hits them. “Jim and I looked at each other across the shopping cart,” Wilson writes, “and asked ourselves: Is this the American Dream? Because if it is, it sort of sucks.”

The theme of escaping the American Dream runs strong through each of the books reviewed here. Each of these late thirty-something to early forty-something authors reach a point where a look around at their lives provokes an intense need to simplify, to escape—and not by de-cluttering or buying large plastic bins to store their stuff. They want their time back, and with it, the energy and hope of their youth. They long for the time when weekends were spent on life excursions, not shopping excursions. They need to break out of their quotidian life.

Wilson’s restlessness got the best of her, and fueled her need for change. “I’d begun the downhill tumble to midlife malaise and I hadn’t even noticed,” she writes. She’d been too busy planning for “after.” After the kids grew up, she would write her book. After they were older, she would travel with her husband. In the meantime she had simply, well, gotten older.

And while Wilson had travelled often for her work, travelling as a mother is a different story. It isn’t okay, she discovers, for her kids to sleep above a bar, or in an apartment under construction like the one they found themselves in the night they arrived in Croatia. Her adventurous spirit has to make peace with her mothering role, a struggle that slowly gets easier as she pushes through the discomfort of leaving her American



the reading chair

books we like



***Your Brain on Childhood: The Unexpected Side Effects of Classrooms, Ballparks, Family Rooms, and the Minivan*, by Gabrielle Principe** (Prometheus Books 2011). While we generally look forward with our kids—to the next word spoken, the next skill mastered, the next clothing size—developmental scientist Principe wants us to look backward. Way, way backward, to the beginning of human life. Principe's theory is that much of modern life is detrimental to children's development and learning; she reasons that our brains were never meant to be bombarded with electronic imagery or made to learn by rote in a typical classroom setting. She offers supporting evidence from a number of scientific fields, including psychology, neuroscience, biology, and anthropology. It's all made accessible by her breezy tone and a variety of interesting facts, like why the brain benefits from changes in venue and subject during a study session. Principe's argument is complex, but her message is simple: Relax, and don't try to make your kids smarter through the use of fancy toys, expensive lessons, or all-night cram sessions. Instead, allow them plenty of downtime, outdoor time, and knocking-around-with-other-kids time. It's an intriguing idea, and a breath of fresh air to hear an expert opinion that our kids' best success may lie in being average. —Elizabeth Roca

***Sister: A Novel*, by Rosamund Lupton** (Crown, 2011). This literary debut is mostly a mystery but also part family love letter. Beatrice is called home to London when her younger sister Tess, a twenty-one-year old art student, goes missing. Shortly after she arrives, police find Tess's body in an abandoned public restroom building; her death is ruled a suicide. While both the officials and Beatrice's family accept the cause of death, Beatrice sets out to uncover what's she sure is a murder. Is the culprit the married professor whose baby Tess was pregnant with? The sketchy friend/stalker with the politically powerful father? Is it somehow

related to the prenatal genetic therapy Tess was undergoing for her child? Or something else entirely? While the plot keeps you racing through the book until the last word, Lupton's prose entices you to linger. "I thought of her when she was three, wearing a fairy skirt I'd got her in Woolworth's and a policeman's helmet. Her wand was a wooden spoon," Beatrice and Tess's mother says. "On the bus yesterday I imagined holding her when she was two days old. I felt the warmth of her.... I remember the shape of her head and stroking her neck until she fell asleep. Other times, she's thirteen and so pretty that I worry for her every time I see a man look at her. All those Tesses are my daughter." —Jennifer Niesslein

***The Good Daughter: A Memoir of My Mother's Hidden Life*, by Jasmin Darznik** (Grand Central, 2011). Some lives seem to unfold in a straight line; others, like that of the subject of this book, seem to wind through endless, convoluted alleyways. Darznik grew up believing her mother's life had been a fairly linear, if arduous, journey from her childhood in Tehran to her marriage to a German engineer to escape to the U.S. in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Darznik knew nothing of her mother's tumultuous first marriage at the age of thirteen to an abusive older man or of her mother's first daughter, ripped from her forever following the divorce. It wasn't until she stumbled upon an old photograph of her mother with her first husband that she began to unravel the thread of Lili's life. Darznik skillfully evokes what Lili's days in Iran must have been like, from the saffron rice pudding and dates stuffed with almonds to arranged marriages, walled compounds, and elaborate wedding rituals. Like all good memoirists, she manages to write convincingly about the actions and motivations of people she's never met—her grandfather's beautiful lover, her long-suffering grandmother, her mother's original overbearing in-laws—better, perhaps, than she's ultimately able to portray her own relationship with her mother. The writing is rich and engaging. Here's hoping for a second volume to round out the picture. —Stephanie Wilkinson

way of life, and American way of parenting, behind.

In Croatia, and especially in the small town that they live in, it quickly becomes a ridiculous concept to watch her young children every minute. Wilson's husband homeschools the children every morning, and lets them run free with the neighbors' kids in the afternoons while Wilson researches her family history. Wilson is honest about the utter strangeness of having so much time with her husband, free of the daily distractions that surrounded them back in Iowa, and the double-edged sword of having too much time with your partner and your kids. "Yes, this trip had helped our family know each other better," she writes, "but sometimes it felt as if Jim and I were paying for it with our marriage. We were Mom and Dad all the time."

Despite Wilson's concerns about how her children would fare as strangers in a foreign land, she and her husband realize that, contrary to their kids' initial reactions to the prospect of living away from home (much like my daughter's), the children could handle a fair amount of uncertainty. They embrace their newfound freedom and foreigner status, they try new foods and make new friends, and they prove they are not the delicate hothouse flowers their parents had taken them to be. They are surrounded by people every day who don't guarantee that Johnny's milk is just the right temperature or that Sally has the perfect pair of shorts for soccer camp. Their new neighbors, much like Wilson's Croatian great-grandparents, "taught their children strength and sent them on their way," Wilson writes. She realizes that "it was okay that they were uncomfortable sometimes, or didn't get what they wanted, or lived in conditions that weren't perfect. They were learning, as I was learning, and together we were fine examples for each other."

Running Away to Home includes an extensive amount of information about the culture of Croatia and the author's family history, sometimes more than may interest the reader. However, Wilson's refreshing honesty about her quest to build a fulfilling life for her family, and herself, seamlessly weaves itself into the narrative and builds a strong case for leaping into the great unknown.

In 2003, Susan Pohlman was in the process of secretly seeking a divorce from her spouse. She had grown exhausted raising two children with a man that she didn't like, but she couldn't imagine herself without their family either. Much to her surprise, however, while on a business trip to Italy, her husband proposes that they sell their house in Los Angeles and live off of the proceeds for a year in a small apartment on the coast of Italy. Scared, Pohlman contemplates her choices: She could continue with the proceedings and have financial security, or take a risk with her husband and try to save her marriage. "Maybe we were drowning in the very life we had built for ourselves," she writes in *Halfway to Each Other*. "Something had to give. Either our lifestyle or our family. Our marriage, all of those years, might be worth at least this ... giving it all up for each other to see if our life was in the way of our love." With trepidation and fear, they return to the States to break the news to their understandably reluctant children, sell their house, and put most of their life into storage.

Pohlman, like Wilson, worries that her children would resent her for taking away the only life they had known. While Wilson's kids were young enough to be happy with new playmates and ice cream, Pohlman's kids are older (a son in middle school, a daughter in high school) and have bigger social issues to



"Do you remember when we used to think pasta salad with sun-dried children was so fancy?"

They embrace their newfound freedom and foreigner status, they try new foods and make new friends, and they prove they are not the delicate hothouse flowers their parents had taken them to be.

contend with. Their son is disappointed with his new basketball teammates, while their daughter's junior class at the "international" high school has a total of four people in it—a horror for a teenage girl. Coming from L.A., the kids had never ridden on public transportation in their lives; in Italy, the entire family adjusts (reluctantly) to taking the bus everywhere they need to go.

Pohlman applies the same firmness she uses to nudge her children forward to overcoming her own fear of change. In one scene, the family heads to an

Italian beach for a day in the sun and Pohlman spends an inordinate amount of time choosing an "appropriate" suit. She is used to the Los Angeles beach scene and feels self-conscious about her appearance, but as she crests the hill to the beach she realizes that she is probably the only one. As she is surrounded by men and women of all ages and sizes enjoying the sun and the ocean in swimsuits that would be barely legal in the States, she realizes that she could, in a way, shed her skin in this new country. "I found myself enchanted by the



unpretentiousness of it all. People here looked human. Women looked like women,” she writes. “Your body was your body, the vessel that held your spirit.” At home in L.A. she would have made any excuse to avoid the water, but in Italy Pohlman finds the strength to let go of her fears. “I wanted to be the one who ran with abandon to be the first to jump in the water instead of the last. Trembling, I closed my eyes and tried hard to swallow the doubt that I could ever be that person. Taking a deep breath, I jumped as far out into the clear blue as I could ...where I just might find the courage to be me.” Pohlman’s overly sentimental writing style throughout the memoir can be distracting, but in light of her enthusiasm, it’s easy to forgive.

In *Big in China*, Alan Paul writes, “There are countless motivations for traveling, but most people abandon ‘throwing yourself into the deep end to see if you can swim’ after they have

kids. It just seems too risky to set off on aimless wanderings into parts unknown with children in tow.” When *The Wall Street Journal* offered Paul’s wife, journalist Rebecca Blumenstein, a promotion to China bureau chief, their family had a major decision to make. As a freelance writer, Paul could work from overseas, but he still hesitated at the thought of moving so far away. In reply to her husband’s reservations, Blumenstein says, “We could spend the next three years in China, or we can spend them talking about kitchen renovation.” Shaken out of his “velvet-lined rut,” Paul and his family trade their home in the suburbs of New Jersey for one in the expatriate community of Beijing, complete with domestic help and the surprising gift of time for Paul.

With time comes the spontaneity to explore avenues Paul hadn’t had the opportunity to take advantage of in New Jersey, where managing the schedules of three young children took up most of his days. While he is initially ashamed

of having a housekeeper, nanny, and driver—all positions that every expatriate is practically obliged to hire—Paul quickly fills his days with language lessons, and works on stretching his creative muscles in writing and music.

After the three initial extraordinary years of their posting come to a close, Paul and his wife struggle with the thought of returning to the States. They had travelled across Asia with their three young children, at least one of whom had spent almost half her young life in China. The couple had a built a home base from scratch and given their children, and themselves, the opportunity of a lifetime. And yet, as Paul talks with his father about the impending return stateside, his father says, “You’ve had your fun. Now it’s time to get back to reality.”

While in China, Blumenstein’s bureau won a Pulitzer Prize. Paul’s blog about living as an expatriate in China, begun in order to keep in touch with his friends and family, evolved into a larger community and eventually became an award-winning *Wall Street Journal* column. The band that Paul started on a whim with some Chinese musicians and an expat friend became a huge hit with Chinese and foreigners alike (it was voted “Band of the Year” by Beijing’s *City Weekend* magazine), while back at home Paul had rarely, if ever, played music in public. Would he have taken these kinds of risks back in Maplewood, New Jersey, or would he have been happy with the status quo?

For each of these families, once acclimated to a new country, personal growth was inevitable, whether intentional or not. When Pohlman agreed to go to Italy, she was resigned to the fact that she would continue her lifeless marriage, no matter the cost to herself or her children. But a fresh environment and daily challenges brought her and her husband together again, and

she relished the freedom of living in a community while blissfully unaware of its expectations. “To suddenly be free of shoulds and coulds for these last few months had been liberating in a way I never knew possible,” she writes. In Croatia, Wilson, too, is liberated from her own torpidity and, in anticipation of her return to the States, declares, “It was our time to live voraciously, rather than sit back and let life happen to us.”

And as Paul writes about his new-found music career, “None of this reinvention felt disorienting. Not in Beijing, where the whole landscape was being transformed. I would have had to spin a cocoon and emerge as a butterfly to match my surroundings’ pace of change. In this atmosphere, sitting still or staying the same would have been the strangest, most radical move of all.”

Here at home, my own cocoon is nice and warm. My happy family, our fresh sheets, my dependable neighbors are all things I can count on staying the same. It’s so comfortable in here. But some mornings I need to tear open a little peephole and see what lies beyond my safe place. I long to revisit my younger days, when I took a plane to a foreign land with a pocketful of lira and not the slightest idea of what lay ahead. This time I’d like to take my husband and daughter with me, just to see what beautiful creatures may emerge in the end.

MEGANNE FABREGA is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. Her reviews have appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Publisher’s Weekly* and *Library Journal*, among other publications. She has also written for *American Craft*, *Knitting Today*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Craft*. She is currently at work on her first novel. She lives with her family in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

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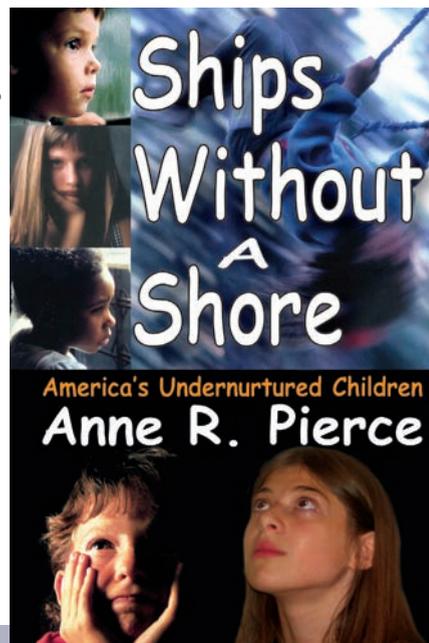
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