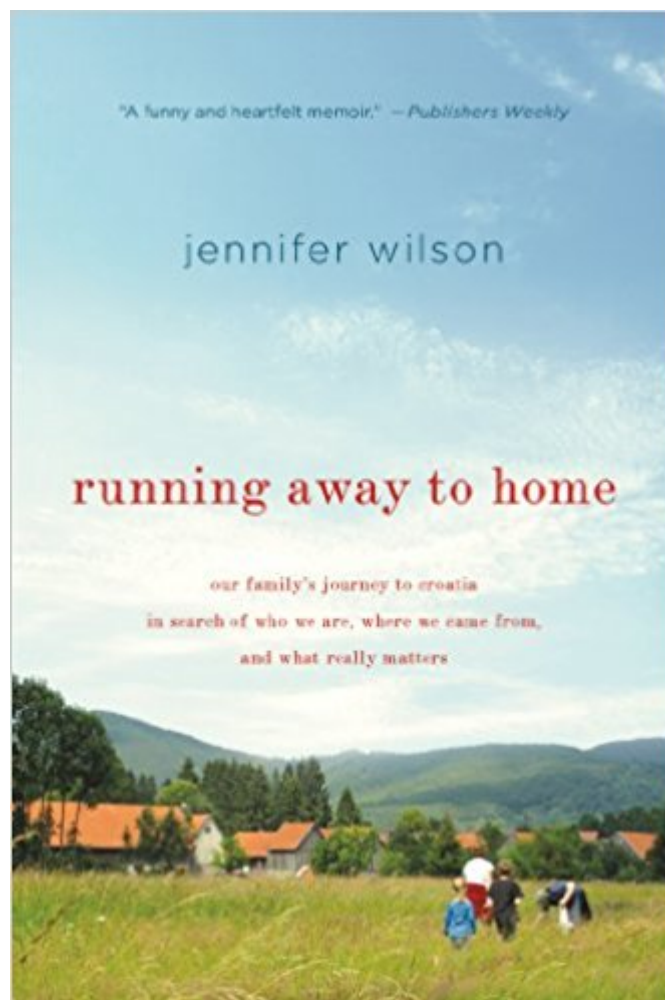




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Running Away To Home: Our Family's Journey To Croatia In Search Of Who We Are, Where We Came From, And What Really Matters



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

“Wilson’s memoir isn’t so much about assimilating to Croatian culture as it is about finding family and, therefore, acceptance in unlikely places. A fun-filled, revealing peek into the Croatian countryside nevertheless, it will be enjoyed by travelogue lovers and admirers of Peter Mayle’s *A Year in Provence* (1989) and Frances Maye’s *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996).”

Katharine Frank, *Booklist* “This thoughtful, amusing tale reads like a novel and will have wide appeal.”

Melissa Stearns, *Franklin Pierce Univ. Lib., Rindge, NH, Library Journal* “The author’s voice is consistently infused with an energetic spunkiness, complimented with passages of sage introspection” “[an] appealing travelogue of discovery and renewal.”

Kirkus Book Reviews “In her funny and heartfelt memoir, she packs up her husband and two young children from Des Moines, Iowa, with the plan to live a simpler, more connected life in the ancestral home in Croatia and to learn about her immigrant story.”

Janine Latus, *New York Times bestselling author of If I Am Missing or Dead: A Sister’s Story of Love, Murder, and Liberation* “Jennifer Wilson travels and writes with heart and pluck. With her husband and kids in tow, she pushes past all her comfort zone and shows us that adventure is a worthy and rewarding family pursuit. Filled with memorable characters and lovely epiphanies, her tale inspires us to rethink how we define ‘family’ and ‘home.’”

Jeannie Ralston, author of *The Unlikely Lavender Queen: A Memoir of Unexpected Blossoming* “I like the heart and good humor of Jennifer Wilson: she has given us a book about the ways sense of place is heightened by displacement and the most enlightening scraps of history must be coaxed from the darkest corners.”

Michael Perry, author of *Population: 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time*

JENNIFER WILSON is an award-winning writer who has chronicled her travels, both epic and around the corner, in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Gourmet*, *Esquire*, *Midwest Living*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Frommer’s Budget Travel*, *Parents*, and *Disney Family Fun*. *Running Away to*

Home was awarded Best Nonfiction Book of 2011 by the American Society of Journalists and Authors.

I loved this book and not just because I'm a Radosevich and have visited Mrkopalj looking for my family but this book would have captured my attention just because it gives such a vibrant description of the land and the people. I could feel that I was there and since I was at the same places I could picture everything Ms. Jennifer described. Croatia is a beautiful country and the people are so hard working, survivors, (and closed mouthed!) that I am proud to be one of them and this book tells this story brilliantly. The yellow church, the cemetery, the Konzum, the tourist bureau, the bars, the little towns nearby, the bear crossing signs on the roads, the Bastrop Hotel (my experience at the Bastrop was much better than hers even though we were the only two in the whole place when we stayed there), the ski slopes and on and on. This is a must read for anyone who has relatives from Mrkopalj or for anyone who just loves to travel. Excellent book!! Excellent. Dobro!

Great read for someone who loves to travel internationally and connect with the local versus tourist culture. I found myself not thinking of the author as "whiny," as someone had labeled her, but honest in how she was feeling through the journey - introverted or lacking confidence at times, having to push herself to live in the moment and have the courage to insert herself into other people's lives/experiences. I hated when she was hesitant, but not because it made me not like her, but because I wanted her to shed her insecurities, jump in, and have fun. I like reading books with someone who is relatable (read: not perfect) and triumphs in the end.

To my cousins (and any American who is of 2nd/3rd generation Eastern European descent), I recommend this book. It helped me to understand what we've been spared as well as what we've lost because of the journey taken by others before us. But mostly it left me feeling grateful for the sacrifices my own Croatian grandma and grandpa made to get here. Author Jennifer Wilson's warm writing style brings her experiences in the small village of Mrkopalj (MER-koe-pie) to life. The glossary of Croatian people, places, and words (with proper pronunciation) adds so much to the experience. Kindle readers, be aware that the glossary exists at the end of the book! You'll need it! By the time I came to the end of this family's visit, I felt a great deal more pride in my Croatian roots and had a better understanding of and appreciation for both my grandparents, now long gone. How grateful I am to the author for this wonderful book! I shall be thinking of all she wrote

during my first visit to Croatia this fall.

Interesting reverse immigration experience lived by an American family returning to Croatia, the country of origin of the mother's family. Cultural differences conveyed with good humor and insight. Adapting is fairly easy for everyone but the author, the mother, Jennifer Wilson. The family's experiences are entertaining. The glimpse provided into a way of life that is less hectic, less focused on material possessions, more focused on relationships, is the hook that keeps the reader engaged.

Midwest-based travel writer Jennifer Wilson was searching for family roots in a somewhat quixotic search for simple answers to the classic challenge, "Life should be better than this." Settling into Iowa family life during the Great Recession, they realized their life was unsatisfying. It just didn't have the zest they imagined. So, she and her architect husband Jim decided to leave Iowa with their two young children and take a year off to live in her ancestral home of Croatia. This book covers a portion of that year, spending the summer living in the tiny village in the mountains of northern Croatia that her forebears had left behind for America. We have traveled in the region and can attest to its beauty and wonderful people. But, like any people, you need meet them where they are, not where you want them to be. You are a guest in their home, and they are not Disney characters that present you with a crafted (un)reality. Jim and Jennifer had decidedly different experiences. She resented how easily her husband became "one of the guys." He met the villagers seemingly without preconceived notions, and so fit in with the villagers with little difficulty. Jennifer, on the other hand, dealt with self-imposed boundaries. She was searching for answers to inner questions, and had much more difficulty. Her story is one of breaking through. The book is not a travel book, but a story of an internal journey. It is more of a search for inner understanding that, to me, makes it so much more real. Life doesn't present simple answers to the big questions. As in all good books, it leaves you wishing for that satisfying finale. Life resists being tied up with a nice bow, and so does *Running Away to Home*.

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