

JoCo Moms Blog

This blog for Johnson County (Kansas) moms is no longer active, but here are some of the posts I was paid to write for it.

Tips for the Long-Distance Mom

by Claire M. Caterer

I could count on one hand the number of times I've gone on a trip without my daughter. But last month I had the opportunity to attend a wonderful conference for kidlit writers in New York City. No way was I going to pass that up, even considering the fact that I have an anxious teen at home who worries when I drive home in a snowstorm.

If you have a worrier like I do, here are a few tips to make the time apart easier:

(1) Check in as soon as you can.

My worrier's first fear was that something would happen to the plane I was flying out on. So I kept her informed. As soon as the plane landed safely in New York, I texted: "Plane landed safe. Talk to you soon. x Mom." It made all the difference.

(2) Keep to routines—within reason.

My daughter is used to chatting with me on the ride home from school. That wasn't possible, but I did have a break between conference sessions that coincided with her dismissal time. We made a phone date and I kept it. She had nothing big to report, but it made her feel better just to check in.

(3) Preplan some fun while you're gone.

Let's face it, dads don't always think ahead. But you can. Come up with something fun for them to do, even if it's just a trip to McDonald's. My trip happened to coincide with an annual family event, the Chinese New Year's celebration at my sister-in-law's house. I was sad to miss it, but glad my daughter had something fun to look forward to.

(4) Don't forget the souvenirs.

Not that your kid necessarily needs a closetful of "I Heart NY" T-shirts, but do bring back a little something, like some cool candy bar you found or, in my case, a book signed by the author.

On the Home Stretch

by Claire M. Caterer

Spring Break is done: One quarter of the school year to go.

For many of us, this is a busy time: big projects, science fairs, spring plays, concerts, final exams—it all comes crashing down in this final race to the end of the year, and it comes when some kids are about ready to check out for the summer. Teachers will tell you the kids get more squirrely, and bus drivers face their toughest challenge of the year.

Our house is no different. True, I have a high schooler, so you'd think she'd be responsible for her own stuff and I'd be lounging in front of Netflix with my popcorn bowl, thanking the powers that be that I'm done with all that business. But we all know it rarely works that way. Here's what we've got going on:

- two choir concerts
- auditions for solos
- district ensemble & solo contest, and possibly state contest if she qualifies
- prom and after-prom
- several tests to come for her college math class
- finals

If previous years are any indication, stress will be high. How will we keep it together? Because my child is prone to high levels of anxiety, here's what we do:

1. Schedule plenty of downtime—keep outside activities to a minimum.
2. Organize early: if necessary, we print out a separate calendar to help my daughter figure out when projects are due and what work is needed ahead of time. We plan each step in advance so we're not caught unawares.
3. Control what we can: We keep laundry from piling up; we make easy, familiar meals; and we keep the home environment stable—a safe haven.
4. We plan small but tangible rewards for jobs well done—a trip to Dairy Queen, an afternoon at the bookstore.
5. Lots of exercise time, in the fresh air if possible—walks, hikes, trips to the dog park.

Not every kid needs a lot of hands-on attention, but mine does, and believe me—the preplanning will pay off. Steady breathing and careful planning until the last day makes everything go more smoothly.

Great Reads for Kids

by Claire M. Caterer

When I heard last month that the American Booksellers Association was getting ready to award their E.B. White Read-Aloud prize for Middle Readers, I set out to read the nominees before the prize was announced. I nearly made it—five out of six—and all were wonderful books! Here's a roundup of the four honor books and the two winners of this year's prize:

THE FLINT HEART by Katherine Paterson & John Paterson (Candlewick, \$19.99)

A whimsical story of an ancient stone that creates rage and havoc in the heart of whoever finds it. Young Charles and his little sister are charged with the task of ridding the world of this evil omen once and for all. The story will appeal to readers who love fairy worlds, and the humor and fine writing will appeal to adults as well. Illustrated with luscious color plates by Caldecott Award winner John Rocco (*Blackout*). Suitable for ages 7 and up; no objectionable language or gory violence.

LIESL & PO by Lauren Oliver (HarperCollins, \$16.99)

Master of YA Lauren Oliver wrote this charming story for middle-grade readers about a young girl who is befriended by a lonely ghost and an even lonelier boy. Liesl, the prisoner of her wicked stepmother, wishes to return her father's ashes to the family home; Will, the prisoner of a wicked alchemist, wishes to escape his master's wrath over an unforgivable blunder. A lovely tale of love and redemption with numerous illustrations by Kei Acedera.

THE CHESHIRE CHEESE CAT: A DICKENS OF A TALE by Carmen Agra Deedy & Randall Wright (Peachtree, \$16.95)

Charles Dickens, plagued by writer's block, spends his days in The Cheshire Cheese, a pub renowned for creating the finest cheese in London. But Dickens is only a side character in this funny story about a cat who makes friends with the pub's resident mice and helps them drive out an evil alley cat. A quick and enjoyable read with illustrations by Barry Moser and a glossary in the back for those who want to enrich their vocabulary.

BLUEFISH by Pat Schmatz (Candlewick, \$15.99)

Though judged in the Middle Reader category, this book straddles the middle-grade and YA audiences. The themes are more serious: An eighth-grade boy struggles to deal with his emotionally distant grandfather, his own learning disabilities, and the death of his beloved dog. Travis is coaxed out of his shell by a caring teacher and Velveeta, a girl who refuses to give up on him despite her own losses. A beautifully written, understated story.

... and the winners (a tie!):

WILDWOOD by Colin Meloy (Balzer + Bray, \$17.99)

Twelve-year-old Prue McKeel decides to venture into what Portland, Oregon, residents call The Impassable Wilderness: a deep, primeval forest shunned by all reasonable folk. Why? A murder of crows has abducted Prue's baby brother and carried him into the wood, and she

will stop at nothing to rescue him. Once she ventures in, Prue finds a world of talking animals, warring societies, and a ruler bent on destroying everything. This is a meaty story (560 pages) for fans of magic and fairy tales. Carson Ellis's illustrations bring the story to life.

THE APOTHECARY by Maile Meloy (Putnam Juvenile, \$16.99)

This novel takes Janie Scott across the pond with her family to flee the Red Scare in the States. In London, she befriends the son of an apothecary, and there the magic begins. Janie and Benjamin team up with a Dickensian street urchin in a tale of mystery, spies, and magic. Very well reviewed, but I confess this is the one book of the group I haven't gotten to yet (and of course it would be one of the winners!).