

This week's column is by Amy James, Kirkland Town Library staff member.

I've been looking for a little bit of hope and humor these days (who isn't?) and, although I'm a big fan of fiction, it's actually real human stories that I find most satisfying. As they say, truth is often stranger than fiction, and in my opinion it's ten times more compelling.

Anne LaMott's collection of essays, *Small Victories* with the subtitle, "Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace," may initially sound, well, sweet and new-agey and uplifting, and I suppose it is a bit of all of those things. But I often found myself laughing out loud as I walked along various local trails (yes, that was me in the Red Sox cap frightening your children) as LaMott - at her best reading her own work - shared tales of childhood, parenting, dating, hopes dashed, mistakes made, death... Her unique talent is not only in her excellent prose but in her ability to help us see that we are all very far from perfect and do a lot of dumb things, and that's okay. As in some of her other great works like *Operating Instructions* and *Bird by Bird*, she offers us all a chance at redemption - to laugh at ourselves and our very human foibles - and to get through the worst of times with humor and grace. I don't know about you, but these past months I've really needed that.

If you need a bit of hope, with a dash of droll humor, in the relationships department, I'd look no further than Calvin Trillin's *About Alice*. In Trillin's small compendium of essays about his late wife - who has figured prominently in much of his work - he displays so much frank admiration for her that one reader was prompted to comment about a boyfriend, "But will he love me the way Calvin loves Alice?" In piece after piece, Trillin paints us a picture of an intelligent, compassionate woman - a writer in her own right - who stood up for her beliefs and took on the role of wife and mother with a ferocity that was at once tender and direct, and often served up with sardonic wit. *About Alice* begins with the tale of the couple's first meeting, moves into young married life, time spent with their two daughters, travel, adventures with good friends, and Alice's lengthy, intermittent illness. But far from being an overly sentimental chronicle of a life (and death), *About Alice* feels like a celebration of all that's possible when we truly know and deeply appreciate each other, and when we are able to enjoy the comedy in small things..

For straight up and somewhat bizarre humor, I often turn to David Sedaris. Perhaps I became an instant fan because I'd had so many random adventures in my own life that I felt he was a sort of kindred, shambling spirit, or maybe it was his amusedly self-loathing manner, or his send-ups of family members. In any case, I've picked up book after book of his and am never disappointed. And even though I've said "straight up humor," there's some warmth behind the snark. In *Barrell Fever*, and *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* and other irreverent collections, Sedaris writes of his quirky, sometimes irritating, often difficult family. But there they are - always together again in spite of it all. Sound familiar? If you don't mind a bit of off-color humor, you may find some hope in that thought.

*Small Victories* and other LaMott works are available at the KTL and on Libbie, both as books and audiobooks, as are *About Alice*, other Trillin works, and several Sedaris collections.

