

by John Wilkins @CNS

"A Memoir of Life on the Run" by Mike O'Connor; Random House; 304 pages; \$25.

IDENTITY 'CRISIS' - A journalist's toughest story to unravel was his own family's tale. CNS Photo. On the last page of "A River Runs Through It," Norman Maclean's 1976 gem about fishing and family, the father says, "It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."

Mike O'Connor's story could be Exhibit A.

He grew up with parents who did everything they could to hide the truth - the truth about who they were, where they'd been and most of all why they kept running away.

O'Connor and his two sisters trusted their folks, as all kids do, at least in the beginning. Then they didn't, and their anger and resentment sent them spinning off into adult lives before they were ready.

Only after both parents were dead was O'Connor willing and able to piece together the puzzle of why his folks did what they did - and why he's the way he is. His search forms the backbone of the book, making it both a memoir and a mystery.

It's a poignant story, told achingly well in places by O'Connor, a former war correspondent. Personal insights yield universal messages about family and love, and whether the truth ever really sets us free.

The book starts with an early memory, from June of 1950, at the start of the Korean War. The family is in a car, in Mexico, staring at the border crossing at Laredo, Texas. Mom is sobbing.

"For some reason we didn't want the agents to know about us," O'Connor writes. "Dad said something about Mom's papers; it sounded as though she didn't have the right ones. I didn't know what papers were. Did I have the right ones?"

In a pattern that would become all too familiar, he didn't get answers to his questions. They crossed the border safely. "We had a nice ride home and didn't talk about what happened. We never talked about it again, ever. It happened. But it didn't happen."

Upheaval became a constant companion. On his 10th birthday, O'Connor went to a rodeo in Houston with his dad, but they had to leave early. His dad had seen someone in the audience looking at them.

The hard lesson the boy absorbed as they fled: "Whatever our trouble was, it could find us anywhere."

Several times during his childhood his dad came home from work and announced they were leaving, right then, pack the car. Back and forth across the Mexican border they went.

Kids are famously resilient, and on some level this must have seemed like a grand adventure, but the O'Connor parents were pushing their luck. Mike eventually pushed back, and it doesn't feel at all surprising when he leaves his family, at age 18, to live with his girlfriend and their new baby.

Adulthood brings its own challenges - another child, divorce, dangerous reporting assignments overseas - and it takes him awhile to realize first and foremost that he is his father's son. He can't stop running, either.

His new wife, also a reporter, helps convince him it's time to solve the family riddle, to figure out "why I felt that nothing in my life was settled or permanent."

Solving it unnerves him, makes him believe briefly that the truth is overrated, so when understanding and forgiveness finally do come, they feel sweeter, both to him and to the reader.

O'Connor's writing is spare, especially early in the book. The journalist in him wants to keep his distance. That makes him seem oddly unaffected at times, even cold, such as when his parents die.

But his folks were a mystery to him, in life and in death. His writing becomes more evocative and satisfying as he grapples with the source of that mystery, pursuing those he lived with and loved, and who eluded him - then if not always.

- John Wilkens

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