

In Search of the Owl

Jean E. Sidinger

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Jean E. Sidinger's poignant memoir *In Search of the Owl* is about the year she spent grieving after her father's death.

When Sidinger's ninety-four-year-old father Levi passed away, she was overtaken by grief. She spent the next year journaling and immersing herself in nature to honor her father, who was an avid birdwatcher and ecology pioneer. In the summer of that year, she welcomed a grandson, and the baby's growth was observed in the days leading up to the first anniversary of Levi's death.

In the book, domestic moments are mirrored by Sidinger's nature studies; the progression of seasons becomes a metaphor for how life changes, too. Sidinger keeps up her search for "the owl," or: for wisdom and meaning. Holidays without Levi, including Thanksgiving, New Year's Eve, and a birthday, are also approached with awareness of their strangeness and newness.

The book is organized into short vignettes that encapsulate single days or moments. In them, Sidinger is sometimes overcome with emotions; sometimes, elements of nature, a bird, or a person remind her of her father's positive attitude and calming presence. The harsh winds of Colorado's early summer buffet the trees; birds migrate in the fall. Every instance is, in part, a reminder of Levi's absence, resulting in tender, affecting moments: a V-formation of geese is observed in terms of the empty space between the lead and second geese on one leg of the V, as if the group is honoring a missing, fallen friend.

Sidinger's journal entries are included on occasion; they are engrossing, though their cursive font is sometimes difficult to decipher. Still, Sidinger's language is gentle and precise, honoring the minute beauty of curlicue locust pods and lichen-edged rocks, and is eloquent in illustrating the loneliness of loss and the bittersweet passage of time. Grief lifts as the book progresses, and happy memories begin to eclipse the sadness.

Detailed pencil drawings of the book's symbolic images are included. One features the geese formation, and another the tall stalks of the yucca plants that Levi associated with "home." These also function as pieces of a puzzle that is never quite finished. The search for the owl is neverending, and there are always new discoveries to be made about life, nature, and death.

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AIMEE JODOIN (May 5, 2021)

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