

Literary Speaking

The Hour I First Believed

By Wally Lamb

HarperCollins, 2008, 723 pages

There was much ado about Wally Lamb in Oprah Winfrey's Book Club circles after the daytime mogul listed his first novel, "She's Come Undone" on her list of books not to miss. Shortly thereafter, came his sophomore novel "I Know This Much Is True." It took 10 years for Lamb to write his third novel, "The Hour I First Believed," but the finished product was well worth the wait.

I personally don't have a lot of time to read novels. I have four children and a full-time job and rarely find time to read much more than "Curious George" or other children's books, but when I do make time, I choose my fodder carefully. I read Lamb's first novel when I was in college and finished his second shortly after it came out — back in the good ole days when I had endless free time to read. When I saw this book on the clearance shelf — almost two years after it was first printed — I thought I'd give it a shot since I had enjoyed his first two books. One of the one-line reviews on the back said, "Too compelling to put down ... A richly textured story ... moving, funny and completely unpredictable." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch) I usually don't put much trust in quips like those, but after I finished all 723 pages in two days, I too believed.

"The Hour I First Believed" is narrated by high school teacher Caelum Quirk. Caelum and his third wife, Maureen, move to Littleton, Colo., in the late-1990s. Caelum and Maureen both work at Columbine High School. In April 1999, Caelum is called back to his hometown because his only living relative his aunt Lolly had taken ill. While Caelum is gone visiting his dying aunt, two students at Columbine enter the school and start shooting. Maureen finds herself in the library cowering in a cabinet and expecting to be killed. She survives but is unable to recover from the trauma. Maureen suffers from chronic post-traumatic stress disorder and the couple decides to move back to Caelum his family's farm in Connecticut to heal. The healing process takes longer than expected and Maureen takes a turn for the worse when she begins using prescription painkillers. One night while driving home from her job at a nursing home she hits and kills a high school student. She is incarcerated in the women's prison that Caelum's great-grand-

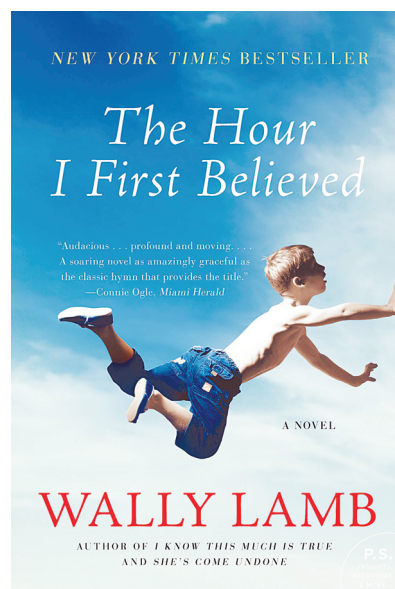
mother had founded adjacent to the family farm.

The plot line follows many twists and turns and there are several peripheral characters that enter and exit Caelum's life each changing his point of view or affecting his life in some manner. The best part of the book is that the characters are so vivid, even the one's involved in the novel's subplot, the reader can believe they are real people you might meet at the grocery store or the local pub. Lamb truly has a gift for creating three-dimensional characters that leave readers with the distinct impression that they actually know the people he has imagined onto the page.

I admired the amount of research Lamb had to complete to make this book believable. The story line jumps back and forth between Caelum's childhood to recent events including the Columbine tragedy, 9/11, and even Hurricane Katrina. There are several instances where he notes what song he is listening to on the radio or what current events newscasters or newspapers are covering. Lamb even goes back in history to the Civil War through the diaries of Caelum's great-great-grandmother. The detail of his descriptions and references to real-life historical events add dimension to the storyline and offer a chance for the reader to further investigate history.

In all, "The Hour I First Believed" is a very good book full of plot twists, rich, vibrant characters and vivid description. The book also includes a P.S. section offering a transcript of an interview with the author, an essay by Lamb about writing the book and an author's playlist noting songs that inspired the novel. I would normally skim these types of "bonus features" but I found the interview and essay just as interesting as the novel itself.

■ by Tera Schmidt



Helpful Homework Tips For Parents

- Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework.
- Make sure the materials your child needs, such as paper, pencils and a dictionary, are available
- Help your child with time management. Establish a set time each day for doing homework. Don't let your child leave homework until just before bedtime.
- Be positive about homework and reward progress.
- When your child does homework, you do homework. Show your child that the skills they are learning are related to things you do as an adult. If your child is doing math, balance your checkbook.
- When your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers. Giving answers means your child will not learn the material. Too much help teaches your child that when the going gets rough, some-

one will do the work for him or her.

- If homework is meant to be done by your child alone, stay away. Too much parent involvement can prevent homework from having some positive effects. Homework is a great way for kids to develop independent, lifelong learning skills.
- Stay informed. Talk with your child's teacher.
- Help your child figure out what is hard homework and what is easy homework. Have your child do the hard work first. This will mean he will be most alert when facing the biggest challenges
- Watch your child for signs of failure and frustration. Let your child take a short break if she is having trouble keeping with an assignment.

Source: U.S. Department of Education