

Finding Our Way... Home

By Lynn Mendelsohn

Home, published in 2015, is the first of its kind for illustrator turned author, Carson Ellis. In this book, which is really a “happening” of the imagination rather than a story, Ellis invites us as readers to renew our investigation into the concepts of house and home. Many of us would concede that a house is composed of its physical elements like wood, stone, stucco, steel, brick and mortar. In our culture, we have also come to share a belief that our mental constructs of home are not simply characterized by our home’s physical attributes but primarily by ethereal, intangible qualities like love, security, acceptance, joy, sanctuary, identity, respect and inspiration to name a few. This allows “home” to be where our hearts are—in nature or anywhere a person experiences a sense of happiness, fulfillment and well-being!

Since early childhood centers are sometimes considered “second homes,” and since spring 2020, deemed essential, it will rest with early childhood providers, as it has in the past, to also create safe, loving and developmentally appropriate environments for the children and families on whom they depend and who depend on them. In this most difficult of times, many of us, children and family members alike, now have conflicted opinions about our houses and homes—even our national home. With the far-reaching social, economic and political effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and our fractured national discourse, the four walls of our homes, if we are lucky to have homes, have begun to close in, smothering us, and in some cases, to crumble, crushing our spirits. Family members feel unusual stress because they are unemployed, underemployed or simply overwhelmed with trying to cope and make sense of daily and overpowering changes to their schedules and routines. Our nation is also a “house divided” and on edge. Our once safe havens have begun to reflect the trauma we are experiencing collectively.

If escapism is a remedy, then a re-read of a book like *Home* may be exactly what the doctor will prescribe for our successful emergence from the pandemic blues and our ever-present social unrest. It is an opportunity to re-focus importance on one of many of our shared American priorities—family and home.

The title of Ellis’s book reads *Home* but the illustrations on the book jacket are those of concrete structures. Moreover, her artwork depicts shelters of diverse physical structures, a variety of houses made of a variety of materials; some are for people, some for animals and others for mythical or make-believe characters. She literally illustrates how important it is for all living beings, including humans, to have a unique place to call their own—that a house is a home, which is an embodiment of who lives there and how they have evolved together.

When *Home* came out five years ago, readers undoubtedly described it as a terrific “thinking” book for young children with colorful, enchanting illustrations. It is a thinking book because, aside from exposure to unusual and wonderful vocabulary words



from around the world, enhancing global perspective, children reading this story are exposed to rhyming words, antonyms and questions the author poses within the text about who lives where and why. Ms. Ellis encourages deeper exploration and understanding of the intertwined concepts of house and home, including a peek at our biodiverse world. In her story, she uses the words house and home interchangeably, revealing how all living things have a need for physical shelter and a special, nurturing place to call home where they can express themselves freely. In her story, she uses the words house and home interchangeably, revealing how all living things have a need for physical shelter and a special, nurturing place to call home where they can express themselves freely.

Flash forward five years to fall 2020 with our multiple, unresolved, national crises. Ms. Ellis’s book, *Home*, is still a delightful thinking book for young children. Additionally, it just might be a panacea for children, families and caregivers alike to address the trauma each of us has experienced in our personal and national lives. As an introspective read, *Home* is an opportunity to circle the wagons, pull in and reflect on who we are as individual families, school families and who we are and might be as a national family—a conglomerate of culturally diverse families and all uniquely American. *Home* introduces us to “Moonians” and “Atlantians.”



Ms. Ellis invites the reader to enter her realm of imagination and wonder, “Who in the world lives here? And why?” For young children, her imaginative plunge into all kinds of worlds is an especially important exercise in higher-level brain development—a push to think abstractly and then come back to Earth. Children, families and caregivers can bring those abstract concepts to bear on their real, concrete worlds of family and nation. Who lives here? Why? Maybe more importantly, where are we going and how are we going to get there? Reading *Home*, to young children allows them an opportunity to escape into the world of imagination and forget their own anxiety for a while.

It allows children to reflect on endless possibilities in the world and encourages all readers to recapture the essence of the houses and homes each of us has literally and figuratively lost since early spring, 2020. It is a positive, upbeat, quirky and amusing read and has the ability to calm and ground us once again.

Maybe it is time for all of us to re-read Ms. Ellis’s story, reconnect as family members and as a nation and reclaim our best selves who share more in common than we can remember. Covid-19 is in the air and love may not be; but it is time to rediscover those intangibles we desperately need in our own family lives and in our national family life—love, patience, understanding, acceptance, respect—our way back home!



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