

Book Review: The River is Waiting
By Wally Lamb

The opening chapters of “The River is Waiting” are vivid and intense. Buckle in.

It’s April 2017, and Corby Ledbetter’s life is caving in around him. He and his wife, Emily, have twin 25-month-old children: a boy, Niko, and girl, Maisie. Corby recently lost his job as a commercial artist (Emily teaches third grade) and is increasingly abusing both alcohol and prescription anxiety drugs. He’s supposed to be actively looking for work, but that’s not happening.

What *does* happen is a tragic accident (I won’t spoil it here) that tears the family apart and sends Corby to prison for three years.

It’s at this point, where at least two-thirds of the story centers on Corby’s prison life, that the pace slows and perhaps becomes even a bit redundant. I suppose that’s what prison life is like. Different day, same shit. It’s interesting seeing how Corby makes the adjustment to prison life and the inmates he’s surrounded by. It’s also painful and infuriating seeing how some of these men are treated by the guards and prison administration.

There are sections where it feels the author goes a bit too far in attempting to politicize what’s wrong with our country’s prison system. Granted, the system appears broken and in desperate need of repair. But the political statements distract from the storyline, albeit briefly, and the narrative would flow just fine without them.

Character development is a mixed bag. It seems the author hopes the reader will, at least to some extent, sympathize with Corby for his plight, attempting to paint him as a good guy who just ran into a streak of bad luck. But that’s hard to do considering the tragedy he created and his winey, self-serving attitude. It takes a while for him to look in the mirror and recognize that he has no one to blame but himself. And he’s helped by some of the positive relationships he

cultivates with his cellmate and the prison librarian. Some of the prison guards, however, are a different story. They're despicable, so it's easy to despise them, especially if you hate bullies.

The pacing picks up again over the last quarter of the book, and it's clear there are multiple victims in this family tragedy. We're human, the author seems to indicate, and we make mistakes, sometimes huge and costly ones. Old habits are hard to break. Inevitably, we end up paying the price. Even if we may ultimately be forgiven.

I enjoyed the read, but caution that some of the subject matter, as well as some scenes in the prison, can be disturbing. And regardless of your feelings toward the characters during the narrative, the ending will likely tug at your heart strings.

Four stars for "The River is Waiting."