

## ON MY NIGHTSTAND

# lee woodruff

The writer's favorite books have helped her weather the challenges—both everyday and unimaginable—she's faced as a mother.

INTERVIEW BY NELL CASEY

**T**hree years ago, when Lee Woodruff's husband, ABC News anchor Bob Woodruff, suffered a traumatic brain injury while reporting in Iraq, she went into survival mode. She nurtured her four children while also standing by her husband as he lay comatose, battling for his life, for more than a month. When the family miraculously came out the other side of this experience, the couple wrote a book about it, *In an Instant: A Family's Journey of Love and Healing* (Random House). This month, Lee publishes a collection of personal essays, *Perfectly Imperfect: A Life in Progress* (Random House), that describes her family's less dramatic, though no less compelling, home life in the wake of Bob's return. Here, she offers a list of her own favorite books, all of which speak to the privilege of being a parent, as well as its attendant challenges.

***We Are All the Same: A Story of a Boy's Courage and a Mother's Love***

by Jim Wooten (Penguin)

"This is an amazing true story that chronicles the relationship between a black South African boy born with AIDS and his white foster mother. It made me think, *By what stroke of luck was I not born a child with AIDS in Africa?* Wooten's descriptions get right to the heart of the matter. 'People were always arriving or departing from the village, moving in or moving on,' he writes. 'For one reason or another, they would awaken one morning and pack up, leaving nothing of

themselves behind . . . in search of some other inhospitable piece of African real estate that no one else would have, where no one else would live, where no one given a choice—including this boy—would choose to be born.’ You can’t live every moment fully embracing life, but reading books like this is the fastest way for me to see beyond my world and feel gratitude.”

**How Tough Could It Be? The Trials and Errors of a Sportswriter Turned Stay-at-Home Dad**

by Austin Murphy (Henry Holt)

“Murphy, a *Sports Illustrated* writer, blithely offers to switch roles with his wife—she’ll work while he stays home with the kids—for six months. This book is a result of that experiment: a laugh-out-loud representation of the difficulties men and women face in reconciling parenting and housekeeping styles. Every mother who wants to wipe that cocky smile off her husband’s face when he runs one load of laundry, this book’s for you!”

**Crossing to Safety**

by Wallace Stegner (Modern Library)

“This is simply the story of a couple and their dear friends and what happens throughout their lives. I read this novel for the first time when I was 28 years old, heading off to live in China with Bob after our wedding. My world was full of possibilities—the children yet to be born, the experiences yet to be lived. I read it again 20 years later. Lo and behold, there I was. I couldn’t have known when I first read it how much it would mirror my own life and marriage. Here were ordinary human beings battling back disappointment and encountering obstacles, coming to terms with the fact that the life they had envisioned for themselves was but a chimera. No one’s life can work precisely the way one wants it to. And yet couples triumph, too, not in dramatic ways, but making it through as each other’s companions.”

**Operating Instructions: A Journey of My Son’s First Year**

by Anne Lamott (Anchor)

“In Lamott’s famous, hilarious account of her son’s first year and her life as a single parent, she has an uncanny ability to capture an experience at a gut level. In one passage, she writes about having to leave

the room because her son, Sam, is crying so much. She needs to be alone, herself, to cry for a while. That was the real fulcrum of this book for me—it was so recognizable. Spend enough time sleep-deprived and depleted, and you will be ground down to the lowest common denominator of yourself. They don’t talk about *that* at the baby shower.”

**A Map of the World**

by Jane Hamilton (Anchor)

“When I read this, I’d just miscarried after having my first two kids, and I felt such searing grief. I needed to know that I wasn’t alone. That is when I picked up this novel about a woman who, momentarily distracted, loses sight of her neighbor’s 2-year-old daughter, and the child drowns in the pond behind their houses. This woman was going through 50 more kinds of hell than I was. And that was comforting to me, in some topsy-turvy way. I suppose it’s like stepping on the dead body in the quicksand to save yourself. I remember feeling numb until I started reading this book; it began my process of moving forward. I came to see how people do heal, even though they may be irrevocably changed. They may not feel joy as deeply—or they may even feel it twice as deeply—afterward.”

**Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic**

by Martha Beck (Berkeley Trade)

“In a marriage, there comes a time when you realize that you both have to put your oars in the water if you’re going to get past the really awful thing. This memoir is about the Becks’ experience as a couple when they were told, while she was pregnant, that their baby had Down syndrome, and their ultimate decision to continue with the pregnancy. In one scene, Martha and her husband, John, are divided about what to do, and yet at the end of their fight, they come together again. ‘John brought his arm around and folded me to his chest . . . I could feel his heart beating beneath the coat. For a moment, I . . . let myself feel utterly safe,’ she writes. ‘This is it, I thought. This is the part of us that makes our own brief, improbable little lives worth living: the ability to reach through our own isolation and find strength, and comfort, and warmth for and in each other.’” **T**