

Neda Ulaby's Lawrence Memories

I lived in four houses in Lawrence and I remember three. The first was a tiny yellow bungalow on Montana with a big scrubby yard. You could hear the faint whistle of passing trains from the bedroom and I'd fall asleep to the sound of evening drumming classes at Haskell. I'm a Lawrence kid, with formative years logged at the Community Nursery School and Small World. Before kindergarten, at Broken Arrow Elementary, we moved to a slightly bigger house on a street of old ladies. Like our neighbors, the house was unassuming, grey and respectable. This was back when Ohio Street ran through 23rd and you could walk to Rusty's for Sara Lee cake if you made good grades.

For a few years, my sister and I attended a hippie alternative school called the Open School out in the country—now, probably, the suburbs—and returned to Broken Arrow not knowing the rudiments of math, although we knew the pleasures of running shirtless through fields of wheat and doing sun salutations at the beginning and end of every school day. Then, a step up: the sprawling butter-colored house on Arkansas Street that seemed impossibly grand to us all when we moved in.

My fifth house in Lawrence was the public library. Does anyone else remember the sturdy, fabric mushroom-shaped stools in the children's book section? My favorite, the orange fungus stool-- blackened slightly with grime around the edges—seemed a perch perfectly designed for devouring old Tintin comics, Nancy Drew mysteries, books about alien invasions and guides to native reptiles. The Lawrence Public Library was where I saw my first foreign film-- The Red Balloon – at age six.

When my family left Lawrence, I was just old enough to have experienced a significant coming of age ritual: checking out a book from the adult side of the library. I still remember what it was—a collection of plays by J.M. Barrie. I was curious about his stage version of Peter Pan. There's a moment in the book when Peter poses to Wendy a question.

"Do you know why swallows build in the eaves of houses?" Peter asked. "It is to listen to the stories."

The Lawrence Public Library is where I went to listen to the stories. Perhaps it's not the fifth house—it's an eave to all the houses in my memories.