

Love, Dad: Confessions of an Anxious Father

Laurie Steed

ABOUT THE BOOK.

A must-read for all new parents, *Love, Dad* explores what it means to be a father in the twenty-first century.

The father of two young boys, Laurie reflects on how his own experiences have defined the kind of man he is and the kind of parent he would like to become. His stories – triumphant, funny and sad – draw on Laurie's own childhood experiences and important relationships with family and mates, while managing and maintaining his mental health.

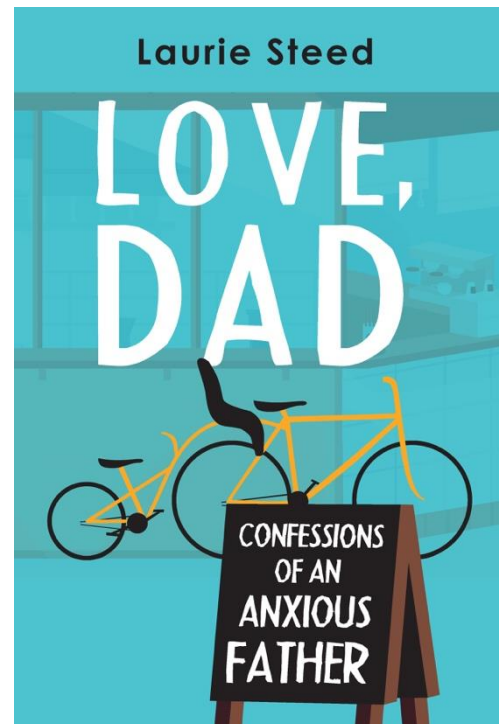
This memoir openly shares how Laurie strives to overcome challenges – from breaking generational cycles to maintaining joy in work and parenthood – and how others fresh to parenting can learn from this authentic story of a new dad and his family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurie Steed is a writer living and working in the Whadjuk region on the traditional lands of the Noongar people. His fiction has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and published in anthologies including *Best Australian Stories* and *Award-Winning Australian Writing*. He is the author of *You Belong Here*, published in 2018 and shortlisted for the 2018 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards, as well as *Greater City Shadows*, which won the 2021 Henry Handel Richardson Flagship Fellowship for Short Story Writing from Varuna – The National Writers' House and was shortlisted for the 2022 Dorothy Hewett Award for an Unpublished Manuscript.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the book is called *Love, Dad*?
2. The subtitle, *Confessions of an Anxious Father*, tells us that uncertainty and doubt are a big part of Laurie's parenting experience. In what ways did you relate to Laurie's anxieties in the narrative?
3. Anxiety is experienced by many people. Stressful environments – such as first-time parenting – might exacerbate these symptoms for some people. Can it be helpful to read other people's experiences when you are going through something similar yourself?
4. Do you think it makes a difference if one views their own anxiety as something to be lived with and managed or as something to be overcome?
5. Why do you think the author turned from fiction to share his story in a narrative non-fiction format?
6. In what ways might a desire to strive for perfection have an adverse effect on being a 'good' parent?
7. In *Love, Dad*, the author tells us you can't reach a life lived in love without first acknowledging past pain and suffering. Do you agree with this?
8. Some aspects of this memoir deal with the impact of disconnection and broken-down relationships. In what ways can past experiences adversely affect the present?
9. Do you think it is possible to move forward in life without addressing one's past unresolved issues?
10. The author returns several times to the subject of loneliness. What is the antidote to loneliness?
11. How do you think Laurie's own childhood affected his own approach to parenting?
12. Why is connection to others important in daily life? What forms might such connection take?
13. Even if it is not always possible to reconnect with someone, what are some alternative ways of finding resolution?
14. This narrative is structured around the arrival of the author's two sons. What difference do you think becoming a



father has made to Laurie? Would this have been a different kind of book if it were instead charting the arrival of two daughters?

15. Do you think that there are stereotypes that men are expected to adhere to or to resist?

16. What impact can the perception of such stereotypes about masculinity have on the way one moves through life?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to write a book about your experiences of early fatherhood?

It wasn't so much an idea as a compulsion. In late 2020, I won the Henry Handel Richardson Flagship Fellowship in Short Story Writing to work on my short story collection, *Greater City Shadows*, at Varuna – The Writers' House in New South Wales.

On the flight over, I wrote a short non-fiction piece about missing my boys. This was also the first time I'd been away from both boys for an extended period of time. So, in that respect, I guess my anxiety at being so far away played a subconscious but important part in sculpting the book that came to be.

Time away from my family had me asking fundamental questions about my identity. Having Noah and Josh brought many challenges, but as a family, we had survived each one. I believe that, in many ways, becoming a dad was the making of me as a person. While it's easy to say that now, I also know that during my early days of being a parent, I was stressed and anxious a great deal of the time. Knowing what I now know as a father, I wanted to write 'a postcard from the other side', as it were, to let other new dads (and by extension, all new parents) know they'd be okay, despite parenting being an at times relentless, and often particularly stressful, job.

Do you think that parenting might look different for different families?

Not only do I think parenting might look different for different families, but I also think it *must* look different if we're to better understand what works for different people at different times. My take on parenting is simple in the broadest sense: I think that being present – in whatever form that takes – is imperative to any solid parenting approach. Things get necessarily complex when others suggest that this approach only applies to only a certain type of family, however. Presence in a parent, and a willingness to meaningfully support a child's development comes from a compassionate, considerate soul, rather than from one's gender, identity or cultural background. As parents, we are all in this together, and anyone who says otherwise either hasn't done their research on what makes a good parent, or they've not yet grasped the importance of diversity, and of cultivating a kinder, more inclusive society.

Anxiety is such an important part of your memoir. Did the writing process bring up anything unexpected as you reflected on your journey through early fatherhood?

Absolutely. But then, that's a necessary part of the writer's journey, right? We begin a project with curiosity and hopefully, some sense of control. Only, in art and in life, things often don't go to plan. In my case, the anxiety I discuss is no longer a weakness – though during early parenting, I often thought it was, and so sought desperately to stay in control even in the midst of an anxiety spiral.

These days I'm much more accepting of myself and my needs. I see what makes things manageable, and what contributes to heightened anxiety. Certain contributors won't go away (parenting is, in many ways, an anxiety-inducing experience) and yet it's no longer about 'making things go away'. These days I accept myself as someone with anxiety and thus proceed with necessary self-care and awareness. When overwhelmed, I'm now surprised by how willing I am to hear that reality, and adjust things accordingly, rather than pushing myself to the point of exhaustion.

Once, I was a perfectionist, never seeing that my worth was inherently tied to other people's frames of worth. My anxiety, in a roundabout way, taught me that my needs matter too; that I deserve downtime, and rest, and, sometimes, to just *be*. It also taught me, though, that while my needs matter, I need not be so much in control of them. Somewhere in that is the idea of self-compassion; being kind to myself, and loving myself as I am. My boys have taught me a lot about love and kindness too. I hope in time I teach them just as much, and that they never know what it's like to live a conditional life, or feel so defined by what they do, as opposed to who they are.

What's next for Laurie Steed?

My short story collection, *Greater City Shadows*, was eventually completed. I plan to find it the right home and to honour those stories too. Some are thematic precursors to *Love, Dad*. Others take those themes into non-parental settings, which is vital if we're to look at kindness and compassion as available and accessible to everyone.

A year or two back, Melbourne artist Lisa Swards created artworks inspired by some of the stories in *Greater City Shadows*, and I found that process illuminating and exciting. I'd love to work on similar cross-platform collaborations in the future, and in time to see my published, full-length works adapted for other platforms, like screenplays and audiobooks, to share my work with new audiences.

Other than that, I continue working as a mentor and manuscript assessor in Western Australia. Doing this alongside my own work reminds me of the courage that is required by people who choose to be writers, and their willingness to go deep into complex and often challenging areas in search of a greater emotional truth. It's deeply rewarding work and there's nothing quite like launching a book by an author who you know has gone above and beyond to produce something special on the page.



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