

# Before We Were Yours

by Lisa Wingate

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## About the Book

**Two families, generations apart, are forever changed by a heartbreaking injustice in this poignant novel, inspired by a true story, for readers of ORPHAN TRAIN and THE NIGHTINGALE.**

Memphis, 1939. Twelve-year-old Rill Foss and her four younger siblings live a magical life aboard their family's Mississippi River shantyboat. But when their father must rush their mother to the hospital one stormy night, Rill is left in charge --- until strangers arrive in force. Wrenched from all that is familiar and thrown into a Tennessee Children's Home Society orphanage, the Foss children are assured that they will soon be returned to their parents --- but they quickly realize the dark truth. At the mercy of the facility's cruel director, Rill fights to keep her sisters and brother together in a world of danger and uncertainty.

Aiken, South Carolina, present day. Born into wealth and privilege, Avery Stafford seems to have it all: a successful career as a federal prosecutor, a handsome fiancé, and a lavish wedding on the horizon. But when Avery returns home to help her father weather a health crisis, a chance encounter leaves her with uncomfortable questions and compels her to take a journey through her family's long-hidden history, on a path that will ultimately lead either to devastation or to redemption.

Based on one of America's most notorious real-life scandals --- in which Georgia Tann, director of a Memphis-based adoption organization, kidnapped and sold poor children to wealthy families all over the country --- Lisa Wingate's riveting, wrenching and ultimately uplifting tale reminds us how, even though the paths we take can lead to many places, the heart never forgets where we belong.

## Discussion Guide

**1. BEFORE WE WERE YOURS** alternates between the historical story of the Foss Children and the modern-day story

of Avery Stafford. Did you have a favorite between these story lines? Which one and why?

**2.** Many families have been touched in some way by adoption and foster care. Is adoption or foster care in your family history? If so, how did that affect your thoughts about the journey of the Foss children and about Avery's excavation of her family history?

**3.** When the sisters were originally reunited, they decided to keep their history to themselves rather than telling their families. Do you agree or disagree with this decision? What do you think the implications would have been if they had gone public? Do you think family secrets should remain secret, particularly after the people who kept those secrets have passed away? Or do family secrets belong to the next generation, as well? Have you ever discovered a secret in your family history? If so, what was it (if you care to share it, that is)?

**4.** "There was a little girl who had a little curl..." is a touchstone between Avery and her Grandma Judy. Is there a song or saying that reminds you of someone special in your childhood? Where does your mind travel when you hear it or repeat it?

**5.** Avery laments that the busy schedule expected of a Stafford has prevented her from spending time on Edisto Island with her sisters or Elliot. "Who chooses the schedules we keep? We do, I guess," she tells herself but excuses this with, "the good life demands a lot of maintenance." In our modern age are we too busy? Too preoccupied with accumulating things to actually enjoy what we have? Too dialed into media and social media? What are your thoughts on this? What would you like to change about your own schedule? Anything? What might you gain if you did?

**6.** While Rill sees her life on the Arcadia through the idyllic eyes of childhood, May in her old age seems to acknowledge that she wouldn't have traded the life she lived for a different one. Do you think she wonders whether Queenie and Briny's unconventional existence on the Arcadia could have been sustainable as times changed or more children were added to the family? Were Queenie and Briny responsible or careless in their choices?

**7.** May says, "A woman's past need not predict her future. She can dance to her own music if she chooses." How has your past made you who you are? What do you want to leave behind? Anything? What is the true "music" of your own soul? Are you in step with it or out of step? What helps you hear your own music and find balance in your life?

**8.** When fear of being caught threatens to prevent her from escaping Miss Murphy's house, Rill tells herself, "I shush my mind because your mind can ruin you if you let it." Does your mind ever ruin you? In what way? On what issues? May comments, "We're always trying to persuade ourselves of things." Are women particularly guilty of this? What do we tell ourselves that we shouldn't?

**9.** Child trafficking, abuse and economic disadvantage still imperil the lives and futures of children today. What can we as ordinary citizens do to prevent children from being robbed of safe, happy childhoods? What can society do to prevent people like Georgia Tann from taking advantage of the most helpless and vulnerable among us?

**10.** Did you search for more information about Georgia Tann and the Tennessee Children's Home Society after reading *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*? What did you learn? Based on what you learned, what do you think motivated Georgia Tann? Why were so many people willing to be complicit in her schemes when they knew children were suffering? Was Georgia's network a creature of the political corruption and societal attitudes of its time or could something like this

happen today?

**11.** Avery feels the pressure of being in a high-profile political family. Do you think famous families are held to a higher standard than others? Should they be? Has this changed in recent years or is it just harder to keep secrets in today's media-crazed world?

**12.** How did Avery grow as a result of her discoveries about the family's past? How did it change her view of herself and her family's expectations for her? Did your family have expectations for you that you didn't agree with? Who in Avery's family might struggle most to accept her decision to change her life plans?

**13.** Do you think there will be a happily-ever-after ending for Avery and Trent? In your view, what might that look like?

**14.** How would you describe Rill as she struggles through the abduction, the orphanage, and her decision to return to her adoptive family? Did you admire her? What changes did you see in her as a result of the experience? How is she different when she gets to the Sevier's house?

**15.** Avery struggles to come to terms with Grandma Judy's dementia. Her family wrestles with difficult choices about Grandma Judy's care. Has memory loss and elder care affected your family? In what way? What issues did it cause and how did you deal with them? Have you imagined what it would be like to be a victim of memory loss?

**16.** The Seviars seem to have adopted the Foss girls with good intentions. Do you think they were aware of or at all suspicious of Georgia Tann's methods? Should they have been?

**17.** What symbolism do you see in the picture of the sisters on the wall? How do you think the sisters felt during their Sisters Days? Do you have sisters you are close to or sister-friends you spend time with? What does that bond mean to you?

**18.** Did you wish all seven of the Foss siblings could have found one another in the end? In your opinion, would that have been realistic or unrealistic? Why do you think the author chose not to bring all of the siblings back together?

**19.** This novel has garnered worldwide interest in the publishing industry and is being translated for publication in at least fourteen countries. Why do you think the story drew international attention? What themes in it are universal?

**20.** Was the cover a factor in your book club's decision to read *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*? What reaction did you have to the cover and title?

**21.** Will you be passing the book on to someone else? Will it remain on your bookshelf? Will you give a copy to someone you know?

## **Author Bio**

Lisa Wingate is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*, which has sold more than

three million copies and been translated into over 40 languages worldwide. The co-author, with Judy Christie, of the nonfiction book BEFORE AND AFTER, Wingate is a Goodreads Choice Award winner, an Oklahoma Book Award finalist, and a Southern Book Prize winner. She was named a 2023 Distinguished Alumni of Oklahoma State University. She lives with her husband in Texas and Colorado.

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