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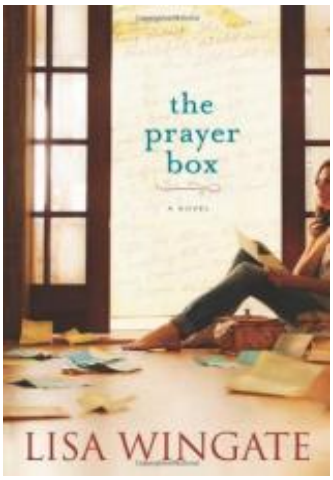
The Prayer Box

by Lisa Wingate



About the Book

When Iola Anne Poole, an old-timer on Hatteras Island, passes away in her bed at 91, the struggling young mother in her rental cottage, Tandi Jo Reese, finds herself charged with the task of cleaning out Iola?s rambling Victorian house.

Running from a messy, dangerous past, Tandi never expects to find more than a temporary hiding place within Iola?s walls, but everything changes with the discovery of 81 carefully decorated prayer boxes, one for each year, spanning from Iola?s youth to her last days. Hidden in the boxes is the story of a lifetime, written on random bits of paper --- the hopes and wishes, fears and thoughts of an unassuming but complex woman passing through the seasons of an extraordinary, unsung life filled with journeys of faith, observations on love and one final lesson that could change everything for Tandi.

Discussion Guide

1. Iola?s written prayers create a record of her life. Have you ever written down your prayers or considered writing them down? What advantages can you see to using a prayer box?

2. How do The Prayer Boxes change Tandi?s perspective on faith? Do you think the simple display of everyday belief can change people, even change a community? Have you ever seen it happen?

3. Tandi wants a better life for Zoey and J.T., but she struggles with figuring out how to make that happen. What did you think of her choices about how to care for them? How did you feel about her parenting at the beginning of the story? At the end?

4. Iola sees the kindness of friends and strangers as an extension of grace. Do you agree? Have you seen the ?grace water? in your own life or in your community?

5. It seemed to be easier for Iola to give help than to accept it. Why might that be? Is it easier for you to serve others or to accept the gift of service?

6. Before Isabelle leaves for college, she and Iola have opposite goals for their future --- Iola opting for a ?safe? life and Isabelle seeking adventure. Isabelle notes that ?fear builds walls rather than bridges.? Do you think Iola, as a young woman, made her choices based on fear? Which woman?s perspective is closest to your own?

7. Tandi finds herself so trapped by her past, by the need to replace the love she lacked growing up with *something*, that she consistently repeats the same mistakes with men. Yet when Ross comes into her life, she sees him as her ?knight in shining armor.? Why? Have you seen similar relationship patterns in your own life? What advice would you give to a woman trying to move beyond the wounds of her past and become fully whole?

8. Iola enters into her life as a WAAC and even into her marriage while keeping her heritage a secret. Have you ever maintained a family secret? Or have you ever discovered one in your family? Do you think Iola made the right choice when she ultimately decided to risk telling her husband the truth?

9. Tandi wonders how Iola could cast aside the word *anathema* rather than taking it on as a part of herself. How do you think Iola was able to do this? Is it possible to shed the labels given to us by others? How can we accept that one most important label --- *beloved?*

10. Tandi and Zoey struggle as mother and daughter, particularly as Zoey navigates her teenage years. Is the relationship between all mothers and daughters a battle in some ways, or is this a result of Tandi?s past mistakes? How can mothers guide their daughters without being overbearing? Do you think children can be prevented from repeating their parents? mistakes, or do they have to figure things out on their own?

11. Sandy seems to almost instantly recognize that Tandi has been sent to the Seashell Shop for a reason and quickly welcomes her into the sisterhood, yet Sandy?s reaction to Gina is very different. Why do you think that is? Have you ever had an intuition about someone that proved to be true? Or have you seen a first impression proven wrong?

12. Iola eventually desires to live her life ?in anticipation of the bridges to magnificence.? Some people seem to have a talent for doing this --- for always seeing the positive and looking at the future with anticipation. Where do you think that ability comes from? Does this reflect your outlook on life? If not, how could you cultivate a spirit of anticipation?

13. Even when the community shunned her, Iola didn?t reveal the truth about her relationship to the Benoit family. Why do you think she kept that secret all her life?

14. Despite the evidence stacking up to the contrary, Tandi can?t quite give up on the dream of having a real relationship with her sister. Why do you think the bonds of family sometimes hold us, even when everyone around us is advising us to cut the ties? Do you agree with Sandy that sometimes the family we find can be as powerful as the one we?re born with? Do you think Tandi and Gina will ever reunite?

15. What did you take away from THE PRAYER BOX? Did you relate more closely to Iola?s story or to Tandi?s?

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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