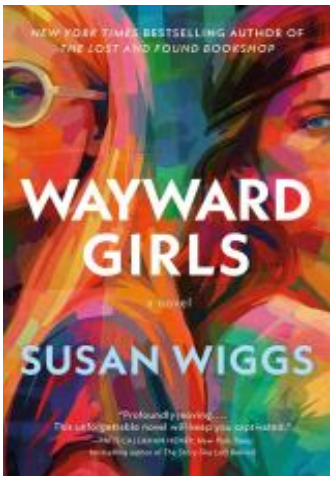
ReadingGroupGuides
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Wayward Girls

by Susan Wiggs



About the Book

From *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Wiggs, a wrenching but life-affirming novel based on a true story of survival, friendship and redemption. Set in the turbulent Vietnam era in the All-American city of Buffalo, New York, six girls are condemned to forced labor in the laundry of a Catholic reform school.

In 1968, we meet six teens confined at the Good Shepherd --- a dark and secretive institution controlled by Sisters of Charity nuns --- locked away merely for being gay, pregnant or simply unruly.

Mairin --- free-spirited daughter of Irish immigrants, committed to keep her safe from her stepfather.

Angela --- denounced for her attraction to girls, sent to the nuns for reform but instead found herself the victim of a predator.

Helen --- the daughter of intellectuals detained in Communist China, she saw her ?temporary? stay at the Good Shepherd stretch into years.

Odessa --- caught up in a police dragnet over a racial incident, she found the physical and mental toughness to endure her sentence.

Denise --- sentenced for brawling in a foster home, she dared to dream of a better life.

Janice --- deeply insecure, she couldn?t decide where her loyalty lay --- except when it came to her friend Kay, who would never outgrow her childlike dependency.

Sister Bernadette --- rescued from a dreadful childhood, she owed her loyalty to the Sisters of Charity even as her conscience weighed on her.

WAYWARD GIRLS is a haunting but thrilling tale of hope, solidarity, and the enduring strength of young women who find the courage to break free and find redemption...and justice.

Discussion Guide

1. At the start of the book, we learn that Mairin ?just wanted to be a person of consequence living a life that mattered. A person making her mark on the world.? What did that look like for a young woman in 1960s Buffalo? Do you think she?s achieved her dreams by the end of the book?

2. What did you make of the scene where Mairin?s mother and stepfather drop her off at the Good Shepherd? What about the sudden revelation that both Mairin?s mother and stepfather had done their own time in similar Catholic institutions?

3. When we first meet Sister Bernadette, Angela says, ?Imagine being here as an inmate, and then deciding to stay.? Why did Sister Bernadette choose to spend her life with the Sisters of Charity, even knowing what was happening at the Good Shepherd? How does she evolve over the course of the book? Do you think she regrets her choices? Should she?

4. Why do the wayward girls cut their hair? Does that act send them down the path that ultimately leads to their escape?

5. Sister Gerard defends her embezzling to Sister Bernadette by telling her, ?The diocese has enough we fail to secure our future, what will become of we?re old, no one will take care of us unless we act now to plan for our future.? Is that a valid justification? Are the nuns themselves also vulnerable within the Church?s power structure, even as they abuse the girls in their care?

6. At Heyday Farm, after escaping the Good Shepherd, Mairin ?realized there were all kinds of ways to be wayward. And all kinds of ways to be lost.? Does that realization help her move on? Do the many different people who wash up at the farm reflect something larger about American society in the Vietnam era?

7. When Mairin learns the truth about her mother?s past, she reflects: ?Now that she finally understood what had made Mam this way, she realized her mother was a wayward girl. Like her.? Did that revelation change how you felt about Mrs. Davis, or her choice to send Mairin to the Good Shepherd? What did it change for Mairin?

8. In the present-day storyline, we learn what?s become of each of the wayward girls in the decades since their escape. How were you affected by those discoveries?

9. Two of Mairin?s friends, Janice Dunn and Kevin Doyle, became a nun and a priest. Do they represent a different side of the Catholic Church than the one the wayward girls experienced at the Good Shepherd? Are they able to change from inside the institution?

10. Did the wayward girls gain anything by visiting Sisters Rotrude and Bernadette in their retirement home? How would you have handled that encounter if you?d been in their shoes?

11. Ultimately, do the wayward girls receive justice for what they suffered at the Good Shepherd? What else, if anything, do you think they and other victims deserved? Do you know of similar injustices that have come to light in your own community?

Author Bio

Susan Wiggs is the author of more than 50 novels, including the beloved *Lakeshore Chronicles* series and the recent *New York Times* bestsellers THE LOST AND FOUND BOOKSHOP, THE OYSTERVILLE SEWING CIRCLE and FAMILY TREE. Her award-winning books have been translated into two dozen languages. She lives with her husband on an island in Washington State?s Puget Sound.

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