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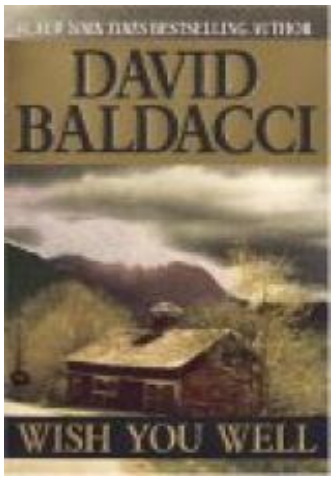
Wish You Well

by David Baldacci



About the Book

This guide is designed to enhance your reading experience of **Wish You Well** by David Baldacci. This compelling and touching tale of the human spirit, set in the southwest Virginia mountains, reveals the power of family, endurance, and triumph.

Southwest Virginia, 1940. **Wish You Well** is the story of Louisa Mae Cardinal, a precocious twelve-year-old girl living in the hectic New York City of1940 with her acclaimed but sadly underpaid writer father, her compassionate mother, and her timid young brother, Oz. For Lou, her family's financial struggles are invisible to her. Instead, she is a daughter who idolizes her father and is in love with the art of storytelling. Then, in a single, terrifying moment, Lou's life is changed forever, and she and Oz are on a train rolling away from New York and down into the mountains of Virginia. There, Lou's mother will begin a long, slow struggle between life and death. And there, Lou and Oz will be raised by their remarkable great-grandmother Louisa, Lou's namesake.

Suddenly, a girl finds herself coming of age in a landscape that could not be more foreign to her. On her great-grandmother's farm, on the land her father loved and wrote about, Lou finds her first true friend, learns lessons in loyalty, tragedy, and redemption; and experiences adventures tragic, comic, and audacious. When a dark, destructive force encroaches on their new home, Lou and her brother are caught up in another struggle-a struggle for justice and survival that will be played out in a crowded Virginia courtroom.

Discussion Guide

1. Baldacci's eloquent use of language in **Wish You Well** transforms readers to another time and place-a time when America 's agrarian existence was beginning to transform into industrialization and a place where the land was the heart and soul of the community. What are Lou and Oz's first impressions of the southwest Virginia mountains?

2. Louisa Mae Cardinal believed that one must be willing to listen and learn from the land. How does Louisa Mae help begin this process for Lou and Oz? What does Louisa Mae mean when she states that the mountains have a lot of secrets?

3. Lou and Oz, both, make ultimate sacrifices at the wishing well. How does Baldacci use old letters from Jack and Amanda Cardinal to build the characters? What are the underlying meanings attached to the wishing well and the letters?

4. Eugene and Diamond shared a unique relationship. Why would Eugene permit Diamond to refer to him as "Hell No" and be so adamantly opposed to others using the name? What similarities did the two share that might have given them a common bond?

5. Social and/or economic poverty was prevalent in the southwest Virginia mountains of 1940. What are the complex characteristics of Louisa Mae's "love-hate" relationship with the mountain? How does this affect the assimilation of Lou and Oz to their new environment?

6. Injustice prevails in our society, past and present. What are some examples of injustice in the novel and how do they shape the many characters?

7. Natural resources have always been valuable assets to any geographic setting. In **Wish You Well**, what does the mayor of Dickens mean when he hails that, "Coal is King?" What connections can be made to gaining prosperity through despair?

8. Several scenes in the novel refer to the characters' actions and reactions that deal with human life and its value. What underlying story or stories do these references create?

9. Children have difficulty sometimes learning to trust others when they have lost a loved one. How and why does Lou come to trust Cotton Longfellow?

10. Baldacci makes several references to threats to the land. What are the references and how do the characters react to them?

11. During the early part of the 20th century, industrialization claimed various American rural landscapes for the sake of "economic gain and modernization. "What affects of industrialization did Baldacci express in this novel and how did the characters react to them?

12. In the novel, the mountains seem to be living beings. Why is that important in the overall context of the story? What point is Baldacci attempting to convey?

13. The character of George Davis is, on one level, totally evil. Seen in another light what are some of his attributes that might be applauded by society today and what does that say about our priorities and the types of people who are richly rewarded under our economic system?

14. What messages about organized religion and faith in God do you find in the novel?

15. What does the outcome of the trial say about the legal system in this country?

16. Is the courtroom battle at the end of the novel simply a fight for land rights or does it have more to do with competing ways of life?

17. The novel makes a distinction between farmers on the mountain and those people making their living in the towns. This geographic grounding permeates the perspectives of the inhabitants in the story and finds them often at odds. Is there any way to reconcile these disparate views?

18. Louisa Mae Cardinal believes she would never be as happy anywhere else as on the mountain even though she has never seen any other places. Can such a view be valid and rational, or must one experience other places before one can reach such a conclusion?

19. The novel deals with prejudice and hatred at the individual rather than group level. Is that an important distinction?

20. Southern Valley officials made the argument that the importance of preserving the mountains should not take precedence over using its resources to ensure economic prosperity for people. At what point, if any, does that argument fail?

21. Cotton Longfellow remarks that people often spend much of their lives chasing dreams they know will probably never come true, and also that that tendency may be part of what makes us human. Do you agree with that statement, and if so, why?

22. Lou has great trouble believing that her mother will get better, while Oz's faith never wavers. Do you believe that the older we get, the less we believe in the possibility of miracles? Is that solely because of the accumulated failures most suffer in life which chip away at the idealism of youth, or is there another reason?

23. Diamond never attended school and yet seems to have a great deal of wisdom about life. From where do you think he principally draws that wisdom?

24. Does living off the land make people more practical, or are practical people drawn to making a living from the land? What other lessons can be drawn from your answer to that question? What is Baldacci attempting to convey with those references?

25. Jack Cardinal wrote about the mountains though he never returned to them. Do you think his writing would have been enhanced if he had returned, or do you believe it better that his perspective was from his youth rather than as an adult?

26. What do you think is symbolized by the recur-rent screams from the woods when there is danger to Lou and Oz, and, finally, by the panther scene?

27. Lou and Oz learned much about their family's past in the novel. The conveyance of such familial knowledge is a major theme in the story. Do people today care about the past as a guidepost to the future? Should we place more emphasis on oral histories and lessons learned from our ancestors? Or is the future so different now that the past holds

little value for us?

Author Bio

David Baldacci has been writing since childhood, when his mother gave him a lined notebook in which to write down his stories. Many years later, when David thanked her for being the spark that ignited his writing career, she revealed that she?d given him the notebook to keep him quiet, ?because every mom needs a break now and then.?

David published his first novel, ABSOLUTE POWER, in 1996. The feature film adaptation followed, with Clint Eastwood as its director and star. In total, David has published over 50 novels for adults; all have been national and international bestsellers, and several have been adapted for film and television. His novels are published in over 45 languages and in more than 80 countries, with over 200 million copies sold worldwide. David has also published seven novels for young readers.

A lifelong Virginian, David received his Bachelor?s degree from Virginia Commonwealth University and his law degree from the University of Virginia School of Law, after which he practiced law in Washington, D.C.

In addition to being a prolific writer, David is a devoted philanthropist, and his greatest efforts are dedicated to his family?s Wish You Well Foundation®. Established by David and his wife, Michelle, the Wish You Well Foundation supports family and adult literacy programs in the United States. In 2008 the Foundation partnered with Feeding America to launch Feeding Body & Mind, a program to address the connection between literacy, poverty and hunger. Through Feeding Body & Mind, more than one million new and gently used books have been collected and distributed through food banks to families in need.

David and his family live in Virginia.

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