

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Lisa Wingate is the author of the #1 New York Times bestseller *Before We Were Yours*, which remained on the NYT Bestseller List Hardcover and softcover lists for 110 weeks and has sold more than three million copies. She has penned over thirty novels and coauthored a nonfiction book, *Before and After* with Judy Christie. Her April 2020 novel, *The Book Of Lost Friends*, became an instant New York Times Bestseller. The story follows an unlikely trio of girls coming of age as they embark on a perilous journey through reconstruction Louisiana and Texas... and a modern-day teacher in small-town Louisiana who rediscovers their story. *The Book Of Lost Friends* was inspired by the real-life “Lost Friends” ads, through which families separated during slavery sought to find their lost loved ones in the chaos following the Civil War. A reader and museum volunteer from the Historic New Orleans Collection connected Lisa with HNOC’s vast database of over 2500 Lost Friends ads, which chronicle the heart wrenching and hope-filled searches of separated families, and which inspired the story of eighteen-year-old Hannie Gossett in the novel. Lisa lives with her husband in North Texas.

- Author’s website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 Seviers 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?

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/before-we-were-yours/guide>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

Newly engaged Avery Stafford leaves her job as a federal prosecutor in Washington, D.C., to go back home to South Carolina, where she is being groomed to succeed her ailing father, a U.S. senator. At a meet-and-greet at a nursing home, she encounters May, a woman who seems to have some link with Avery's Grandma Judy, now suffering from dementia. The reader learns early on that May was once Rill Foss, one of five siblings snatched from their shanty home on the Mississippi and taken to the Memphis branch of the Tennessee Children's Home Society. The society seems too Dickensian to be true, except that it was, and its black-market adoption practices caused a stir in the mid-twentieth century. Rill's harrowing account of what befell the Foss children and Avery's piecing together (with the help of a possible new love interest) of how Rill and Grandma Judy's stories converge are skillfully blended. Wingate (*The Sea Keeper's Daughters*, 2015) writes with flair, and her distinctly drawn characters and adept use of the adoption scandal will keep readers turning the pages.--Mary Ellen Quinn.

Publishers Weekly

Wingate's tightly written latest (after 2015's *The Sea Keeper's Daughters*) follows the interwoven story lines of Avery Stafford, a lawyer from a prominent South Carolina family, and Rill Foss, the eldest of five children who were taken from their parents' boat by an unscrupulous children's home in the 1930s. With her father's health ailing, duty-driven Avery is back in present-day Aiken, S.C., to look after him. She's being groomed to step into his senate seat and is engaged to her childhood friend, Elliot, though not particularly excited about either. Though her dad is a virtuous man, his political enemies hope to spin the fact that the family just checked his mother, Judy, into an upscale nursing home while other elder facilities in the state suffer. At an event, Avery encounters elderly May Crandall and becomes

fascinated by a photo in her room and a possible connection to Judy. While following a trail that Judy left behind, Avery joins forces with single dad Trent Turner, with whom she feels a spark. This story line is seamlessly interwoven with that of the abuse and separation that the Foss siblings suffer at the hands of the Tennessee Children's Home Society, a real-life orphanage that profited from essentially kidnapping children from poor families and placing them with prominent people. Twelve-year-old Rill bears the guilt of not having been able to protect her siblings while also trying her best to get them home. Wingate is a compelling storyteller, steeping her narrative with a forward momentum that keeps the reader as engaged and curious as Avery in her quest. The feel-good ending can be seen from miles away, but does nothing to detract from this fantastic novel. (June).

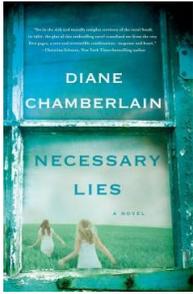
Library Journal

Christy and Carol Award-winning Wingate (*The Story Keeper*; *The Sea Glass Sisters*) weaves a complex tale about two families, two generations apart, linked by an injustice, based on a notorious true-life scandal. The story begins in 1939 when Rill Foss and her four younger siblings, who had been happily living on their parents' shantyboat on the Mississippi, are seized by strangers and taken to a Memphis orphanage. In present-day South Carolina, the Staffords, a wealthy and prestigious family deeply immersed in the political realm, takes center stage when Avery returns home to help her father recuperate from a health crisis. There she experiences a chance encounter with a resident at the nursing home, which leads to her investigating her family's history. As secrets are exposed, the question is raised: Are some things better left hidden in the past, or is it best to have everything out in the open? VERDICT Fans of Ann H. Gabhart and Tracie Peterson will be drawn to this quietly strong novel. The thought-provoking subject matter makes this at times a difficult read; although not graphic in content, molestation and abuse are two of the tough topics handled.—Shondra Brown, Wakarusa P.L., IN --Shondra Brown (Reviewed 04/01/2017) (*Library Journal*, vol 142, issue 6, p80)

Kirkus Reviews

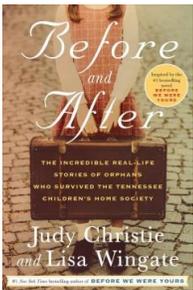
Avery Stafford, a lawyer, descendant of two prominent Southern families and daughter of a distinguished senator, discovers a family secret that alters her perspective on heritage. Wingate (*Sisters*, 2016, etc.) shifts the story in her latest novel between present and past as Avery uncovers evidence that her Grandma Judy was a victim of the Tennessee Children's Home Society and is related to a woman Avery and her father meet when he visits a nursing home. Although Avery is living at home to help her parents through her father's cancer treatment, she is also being groomed for her own political career. Readers learn that investigating her family's past is not part of Avery's scripted existence, but Wingate's attempts to make her seem torn about this are never fully developed, and descriptions of her chemistry with a man she meets as she's searching are also unconvincing. Sections describing the real-life orphanage director Georgia Tann, who stole poor children, mistreated them, and placed them for adoption with wealthy clients—including Joan Crawford and June Allyson—are more vivid, as are passages about Grandma Judy and her siblings. Wingate's fans and readers who enjoy family dramas will find enough to entertain them, and book clubs may enjoy dissecting the relationship and historical issues in the book. Wingate sheds light on a shameful true story of child exploitation but is less successful in engaging readers in her fictional characters' lives. (*Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 2017)

READALIKES



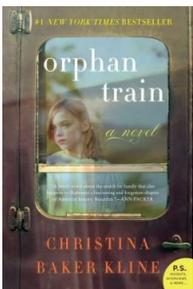
***Necessary Lies* by Diane Chamberlain**

Caring for her family on their mid-twentieth-century tobacco farm after the loss of her parents, Ivy connects with social worker Jane Forrester, who strains her personal and professional relationships with her advocacy of Ivy's family.



***Before and After* by Judy Christie and Lisa Wingate**

From the 1920s to 1950, Georgia Tann ran a black-market baby business at the Tennessee Children's Home Society in Memphis. She offered up more than 5,000 orphans tailored to the wish lists of eager parents—hiding the fact that many weren't orphans at all, but stolen sons and daughters of poor families, desperate single mothers, and women told in maternity wards that their babies had died. The publication of Lisa Wingate's novel *Before We Were Yours* brought new awareness of Tann's lucrative career in child trafficking. Adoptees who knew little about their pasts gained insight into the startling facts behind their family histories.



***Orphan Train* by Christina Kline**

Close to aging out of the foster care system, Molly Ayer takes a position helping an elderly woman named Vivian and discovers that they are more alike than different as she helps Vivian solve a mystery from her past.