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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?

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?

https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/before-we-were-yours/guide
Interview with Lisa Wingate

I am thrilled to be able to present this interview with Lisa Wingate regarding her new book, Before We Were Yours. I've loved Lisa's books, but when I read the blurb about this one I couldn't buy it fast enough. I have a very personal connection to this story.

For readers of Orphan Train and The Nightingale—an engrossing new novel, inspired by a true story about two families, generations apart, that are forever changed by a heartbreaking injustice.

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 that the truth is much darker. 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.

My own mother grew up under the iron hand of Georgia Tann and the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. It wasn’t something Mother liked to talk about, but what she did tell us is completely consistent with this story, based on truth, that Lisa Wingate has portrayed with meticulous research and heart-wrenching story-telling.

Lisa, welcome. I can’t tell you how much this book has meant to me:

1. What was the inspiration for this story?

For me, every piece of fiction begins with a spark. From there, the story travels on the winds of research and imagination. Before We Were Yours had the most unexpected kind of beginning.

I was up late one night working on materials for a different story and had the TV playing in the background for company. A rerun of the Investigation Discovery: Dangerous Women cycled through at about two in the morning. I looked up and saw images of an old mansion. The front room was filled with bassinettes and babies. There were crying babies, laughing babies, babies who were red-cheeked and sweaty-faced and sickly looking. I tuned in and immediately became fascinated by the bizarre, tragic, and startling history of Georgia Tann and her Memphis branch of the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. One of the most shocking things about the story was how recent it was. Georgia Tann and her childrens’ home operated from the 1920s through 1950. After watching the segment, I literally could not clear the images from my mind. I couldn’t stop wondering about the thousands of children who had been victimized by Georgia’s system, who had been brokered in adoptions for profit. What became of them? Where were they now?
I couldn’t help but dig into the story. I was shocked by the scope of Georgia’s network, the fact that she affected so many children, and the tragic consequences of her cruelty and greed. An estimated five thousand babies and children passed through her hands. While in the care of her system of orphanages and boarding homes, many were neglected, abused, denied schooling, medical care, and food. They were separated from their siblings with no preparation or explanation. They were, quite simply, offered as products. Prospective parents could choose hair color, eye color, age, gender, religious background, and genetic predisposition for talents such as art and music. As long as prospects had the ability to pay, they could circumvent many of the normal barriers to adoption. There were rumors of family members procuring babies and children as gifts for couples who might have lost a child, or couldn’t conceive.

What, I wondered, could motivate someone like Georgia Tann? How could so many others – law enforcement officials, welfare workers, court workers, caretakers – be coerced into taking part, or at least turning a blind eye to the kidnapping and abuse of so many children? How could as many as five-hundred children have simply vanished from the care of Georgia’s Tennessee Children’s Home Society with no investigation of their whereabouts and probable deaths? How could ordinary people have failed question Georgia’s frequent newspaper ads, offering children as “Christmas presents” and “Yours for the asking?”

Writing Before We Were Yours was a means of answering those questions in a very personal way.

2. Tell us about the book’s cover and what makes it unique.

The cover actually went through many iterations before we landed on a combination that seemed just perfect for the story. I have to say, of all of my book covers on over thirty novels now, this one is my favorite. There’s just something about the posture of these two little girls that speaks to me. They represent twelve-year-old Rill, a little girl growing up on her parents’ Mississippi river shantyboat and her young sister, Fern. When they and their five siblings are taken from their parents one stormy night and placed in one of Georgia Tann’s orphan houses, Rill struggles not only to protect herself, but to keep her siblings together. That battle, to me is what this picture represents—the uncertainty of their situation, the strength of their sibling bond, and Rill’s determination to return to her free floating life on the river.

3. Tell us about the inspiration behind your characters. Where does it come from?

After researching the Tennessee Children’s Home Society scandal, my first question was, Whose story is this, really? Is it a story of parents—both biological and adoptive? Of greed, falsified records, and political corruption? Of one woman’s cruel and unconscionable actions?

In the end, though, the voices that whispered through my mind where the voices of the children. What was it like, I wondered, to be taken from everything you knew, with no explanation or understanding of what was happening, and placed in the care of someone like Georgia Tann?
That question gave life to twelve-year-old Rill Foss and her five young siblings, Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion. Growing up on their family's tiny Mississippi River shantyboat, the Foss children live an almost magical life, until, as was so often the case in reality, a random twist of fate causes their path to intersect with Georgia Tann's. Rill's story is like the stories of so many children who fought not only to survive and adapt, but to reclaim their lives, their family bonds, and their stolen identities. What I admired and treasured most about Rill in the end was her grit, her enduring love for her siblings, and her ability, against all odds, to cling to her sense of who she is.

4. Where do the truth and fiction in *Before We Were Yours* meet?

In the case of something like Georgia Tann and the Tennessee Children's Home Society, it's challenging and in some ways, haunting.

Rill and her siblings in the novel and their shantyboat life on the Mississippi river began taking shape as I combed through accounts of birth parents who'd searched for their stolen children for decades and adoptees who'd searched for their birth families. Survivors of TCHS care, desperately seeking their true identities, were confronted with systematic legislative roadblocks, altered paperwork, and closely held secrets. Because powerful families and Hollywood celebrities were involved in TCHS adoptions, and because many people felt that the children should be left where they were, there was pressure to legalize even the most irregular of Tann's adoptions and seal the records, which was exactly what happened. For years, adoptees and birth families fought for the right to see their records, but they were not successful in having the records opened until 1996. For many birth parents and family members, who'd grieved their lost little ones for a lifetime, that was simply too late.

For others, the attainment of their records was only the beginning of a long, frustrating, and sometimes fruitless journey. Georgia Tann routinely altered names, ages, and family histories to prevent birth parents from finding their children. With the stroke of a pen, she also altered genetic backgrounds to satisfy the preferences of her clients. The children she brokered were often represented as products of accident pregnancies among "gifted college students" or "talented young ladies of good breeding" who could not, of course, keep them. Children were represented to Jewish adoptive parents as being of Jewish descent, when in reality, they were not. Children were represented as having genetic predisposition toward high intellect or skills in music and art. These kinds of nefarious practices often resulted in adoptions that went poorly when the children couldn't meet the expectations of their new parents.

As with most stories that are true or partially true, the dividing line between good and evil is murky in the case of Georgia Tann and her Memphis Tennessee Children's Home Society. The journey of the Foss children in the novel reflects this. Certainly, TCHS removed some children from unfit birth families and facilitated adoptions into safe, loving homes that provided great
opportunity. Sadly, thousands of others were left with lasting damage and questions that would never be answered.

I hope *Before We Were Yours*, in some way, tells their stories. Yes, it's fiction. Rill and her four siblings, growing up on their family’s shantyboat in the Mississippi River were figments of my imagination. But in a way, they existed. In a way, they are any one and every one of these children, taken from their families, torn from their lives with no explanation or understanding of what was happening, and deposited into an unregulated, unfit, and politically corrupt system that operated not based on child welfare, but on profit. Those were the stories I wanted to tell – the stories told in the smallest voices or never told at all.

As a mother of two boys (now grown), I experienced the writing of *Before We Were Yours* through a parent’s heart. I deeply felt the strength of the family bond and Rill’s desperate struggle to protect her siblings and reunite with her parents. I also deeply felt the children’s vulnerability as they search for safe haven among their new caretakers and have difficulty trusting new people in their lives. Who wouldn’t? As a parent, I couldn’t help seeing my own children in Rill’s position, imagining them in her situation. How would they survive? Would they manage to remain together? Would they, as so many TCHS victims did, fight to regain their identities later in life?

5. **How much research did you have to do for this book?**

The book was research-intensive. I took in nearly everything I could find about the Tennessee Children’s Home Society in Memphis and Georgia Tann. In large part, I found bits of the story here and bits there. The Discovery Channel’s Deadly Women feature and a 60 Minutes segment provided helpful information and visuals. Several books, including, *Babies For Sale* by Linda Austin and *The Baby Thief* by Barbara Raymond were particularly helpful in researching the adoption scandal. Harlan Hubbard’s Shantyboat Journal was a beautiful account of shantyboat life on the river. I also spent time in Memphis, researching locations, combing through the river museum, visiting the library and the university’s photo archives, and talking to people who remembered the scandal.

6. **The original manuscript of Before We Were Yours generated worldwide interest. Tell us about that.**

After the long months of reading, researching, imagining and writing *Before We Were Yours*, the sale of the novel took place in a wild rush. The novel went out to several publishers on a Thursday. By Friday, we’d received the first preemptive offer. On Monday and Tuesday, I talked with editors from eight or nine publishing houses, all of whom were incredible, talented people who had edited books I’d read and loved. The auction took place the following week on Wednesday. It was a whirlwind day. The bidding was brisk and the book finally sold to Susanna Porter (editor of *Loving Frank* and *The Paris Wife*) at Ballantine, a subsidiary of Penguin Random House. At the same time, preemptive bids were coming in from foreign countries.
Translation rights have sold in fourteen countries so far, including France, Spain, Israel, Germany, Holland, Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Italy, Bulgaria, Norway, and Portugal.

7. What are some of the most interesting things you found about this subject that you weren't able to use in the story?

Because Before We Were Yours is fiction, I was able to thread in what I felt were the most interesting pieces of the true-life history of Georgia Tann and her Memphis branch of the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. One interesting aspect of the true story that isn’t in the novel is the special investigation that was conducted as Georgia Tann’s operation was finally shut down in 1950. The original Report to Governor Browning was filled with information about Tann’s nefarious methods, the deaths of children in her system of unregulated boarding homes, and the sheer panic of adoptive families who were terrified that the children they’d raised for years would be taken away. There were also some wonderful newspaper stories written years later, telling the reunion stories of birth families finally reunited.

8. What do you hope the reader takes away from the story?

I hope readers take away the message that we need not be defined by our pasts. I hope Rill’s experience resonates with readers who have in some way surrendered to the wounds of painful past experiences. Rill faces that battle as she matures. As an old woman, she advises thirty-year-old Avery, “A woman’s past need not predict her future. She can dance to new music if she chooses. Her own music. To hear it, she must only stop talking. To herself, I mean. We’re always trying to persuade ourselves of things.” Living in a defensive posture is another form of allowing other people to dictate who we are and what we believe about ourselves. Letting go, dancing to our own music is a risk, but on the other side of that process lays light, freedom and fulfillment. That’s what I hope people take away from Before We Were Yours. Our lives have purpose, but to fulfill that purpose we must first claim ourselves.

I also hope that, in a broader sense, the story of Rill and the Foss children serves to document the lives of all the children who disappeared into Georgia Tann’s unregulated system. Only by remembering history are we reminded not to let it repeat itself. It’s important that we, ordinary people busy with the rush of every day life, remember that children are vulnerable, that on any given day, thousands of children live the uncertainty of Rill’s journey. We have to be aware. We must be kind neighbors, determined protectors, willing encouragers, wise teachers, and strong advocates, not just for the children who are ours by birth, but for all children.

Lisa, thanks so much for sharing this with us. My mom passed away in February. I’m not sure she ever shed the "defensive posture," but she did try to "dance to her own music." Before We Were Yours has helped me understand her a little better.