



The Book of Lost Friends

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION KIT

A Note from Lisa Wingate

Each time a new book enters the world, it seems as though the most oft-asked question is: How did this story come to be— what inspired it? I'm not sure what this process is like for other writers, but for me there is always a spark, and it is always random. If I went looking for the spark, I'd probably fail to find it.

I never know when it will come my way or what it will be, but I feel it instantly when it happens. Something consuming takes over, and a day that was ordinary . . . suddenly isn't anymore. I'm being swept along on a journey, like it or not. I know the journey will be long and I don't know where it will lead, but I know I have to surrender to it.

The spark that became Hannie's and Benny's story came to me in the most modern of ways—via an email from a book lover who'd just spent time with the Foss family while reading *Before We Were Yours*. She thought there was another, similar, piece of history I should know about. As a volunteer with The Historic New Orleans Collection, she'd been entering database information gleaned from advertisements well over a century old. The goal of the project was to preserve the history of the "Lost Friends" column, and to make it accessible to genealogical and historical researchers via the Internet. But the data-entry volunteer saw more than just research material.

"There is a story in each one of these ads," she wrote in her note to me. "Their constant love of family and their continued search for loved ones, some they had not seen in over 40 years." She quoted a line that had struck her as she'd closed the cover of *Before We Were Yours*:

*"For the hundreds who vanished and the thousands who didn't.
May your stories not be forgotten."*

She directed me to the "Lost Friends" database, where I tumbled down a rabbit hole of lives long gone, stories and emotions and yearning encapsulated in the faded, smudged type of old-time printing presses. Names that survived perhaps nowhere beyond these desperate pleas of formerly enslaved people, once written in makeshift classrooms, at kitchen tables, and in church halls . . . then sent forth on steam trains and mail wagons, on riverboats and in the saddlebags of rural mail carriers, destined for the remote outposts of a growing country. Far and wide, the missives journeyed, carried on wings of hope.

In their heyday, the "Lost Friends" ads, published in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, a Methodist newspaper, went out to nearly five hundred preachers, eight hundred post offices, and more than four thousand subscription-holders. The column header requested that pastors read the contents from their pulpits to spread the word of those seeking the missing. It also implored those whose searches had ended in success to report back to the newspaper, so that the news might be used to encourage others. The "Lost Friends" advertisements were the equivalent of an ingenious nineteenth-century social media platform, a means of reaching the hinterlands of a divided, troubled, and fractious country still struggling to find itself in the aftermath of war.

I knew that very day, as I took in dozens of the "Lost Friends" ads, meeting family after family, searcher after searcher, that I had to write the story of a family torn apart by greed, chaos, cruelty, despairing of ever again seeing one another. I knew that the "Lost Friends" ads would provide hope where hope had long ago been surrendered.

A Note from Lisa Wingate

Hannie began speaking to me after I read this ad:

Lost Friends

We make no charge for publishing these letters from subscribers. All others will be charged fifty cents. Pastors will please read the requests published below from their pulpits, and report any case where friends are brought together by means of letters in the **SOUTH-WESTERN**.

Mr Editor—I wish to inquire for my people. My stepfather was named George, and my mother's name was Chania. I am the oldest of ten children, and am named Caroline. The others were Ann, Mary, Lucinda, George Washington, Right Wesley, Martha, Louisa, Samuel Houston, Prince Albert, in order of age, and were all my mother had when separated. Our first owner was Jephtha Wooten, who carried us all from Mississippi to Texas, where he died. We were stolen from Texas by Green Wooten, a nephew of Jephtha, who brought us back to Mississippi, on Pearl River, where he sold us to a lawyer named Bakers Baken, who seems not to have

paid for us. My stepfather and oldest brother were stolen and carried off by him to Natchez, Miss., and there sold. The remainder of us were taken from him and put, for safe keeping, in the Holmesville, Pike county Miss., jail, after which we were put in the hands of another lawyer, John Lambkins, who sold us all. My mother and three children were sold to Bill Files, in Pike county, Miss; my sister Ann to one Coleman, in same county; she was foolish and dumb. My sister Mary to a man named Amacker, who lived in the vicinity of Gainesville, Miss. Lucinda was sold into Louisiana. Right Wesley was sold at the same time, but to whom or where to, I do not know. Martha was also sold to somewhere in the settlement near my mother, but I don't know to whom. I was sold to Bill Flowers, being quite a young woman. I am now 60 years of age and have one son, Orange Henry Flowers, preacher in the Mississippi Conference, located in Pearlington, Hancock county, Miss., on the Bay St. Louis charge. Any information will be acceptable and thankfully received. Write to Caroline Flowers, in care of Rev. O. H. Flowers, Pearlington, Hancock county, Miss.

I knew that Hannie's situation would, in some ways, be directed by the life of Caroline Flowers, who wrote the ad, but that Hannie's search would lead her to strike off on a quest. Her journey would be life-altering, an odyssey of sorts. It would change her forever, redirecting her future. For the purposes of Hannie's age and the particularly lawless, perilous postwar era in Texas, I reimagined history a bit, setting the story in 1875, ten years after the ending of the war. While separated families had been placing ads in various newspapers since the war's close, distribution of the "Lost Friends" column actually sprang to life in 1877 and continued through the early part of the twentieth century.

I hope you felt the connection to Hannie's and Benny's stories as much as I felt the connection to them while writing about them. They are, in my view, the sort of remarkable women who built the legacies we enjoy today. Teachers, mothers, business owners, activists, pioneer farm wives, community leaders who believed—in some large or small way—that they could improve the world for present and future generations. Then they took the risks required to make it happen.

May we all do the same in whatever way we can, in all the places we find ourselves.

And may this book do its part, whatever that part might be.

—Lisa Wingate

Discussion Questions

1. Lisa Wingate brings to life stories from actual “Lost Friends” advertisements that appeared in Southern newspapers after the Civil War, as newly freed slaves desperately searched for loved ones who had been sold away. Had you heard of the real “Lost Friends” ads before? What did you think of the words written so long ago? What did you learn about the Reconstruction era through this novel?
2. *The Book of Lost Friends* is a story of remarkable women who built legacies we benefit from today. There are many women from the past, like Hannie, who do not often make it into our history books. Who is one woman from history that you greatly admire and think that the world should know more about?
3. What lessons does Benny learn from her students? Do you think her students change her?
4. The town of Augustine is controlled by a powerful family with secrets. Have you ever learned of a secret in your own or someone else’s family? What was the reason for it, and what were the results of it coming out?
5. Hannie, Juneau Jane, and Lavinia are an unlikely trio when they start on their quest. How does their journey shape them as they come of age? How do Hannie and Juneau grow during their quest? What does each learn from the other?
6. Elam Salter is a character with a larger-than-life reputation. What is his role in the story? Why does Hannie find it hard to trust him?
7. Symbolism is used in this novel in a number of ways, including: the single ladybug, Hannie’s blue beads, and the church where the main characters hide. What do you think these symbols mean? Did you notice any other symbolism in the novel?
8. In what ways do Benny and Nathan help each other move forward?
9. What do you think Benny is going to do at the end of the novel?
10. A volunteer at the Historic New Orleans Collection sparked the idea for this novel when she wrote to Lisa about the Lost Friends database. Why do you think history, particularly that preserved in the voices of those who lived the experience, matters?
11. Visit the Lost Friends database. Choose one ad to share with another member of your book club.

Research for *The Book of Lost Friends*

At some point during the writing of each book, I do a location trip—even if I know the area well and the first drafts of the story are already written (as was the case with *The Book of Lost Friends*). When I study places through a character’s eyes, I see different details. The same phenomenon, by the way, occurs for readers. If you visit these locations after reading Hannie’s and Benny’s stories, chances are you’ll see things you might not have noticed before. —Lisa Wingate

The Old River Road



After a bit of time investigating the swamps farther north, the research trip found me in Hannie’s home country, on the Old River Road along the Mississippi River levee, where a squadron of dragonflies ushered me in. If you’ve read *Before We Were Yours*, you know that dragonflies carry a special meaning in that story, standing for sisterhood and family bonds.

Whitney Plantation



After some time on the levee, I crossed the road to Whitney Plantation, which is not the largest or the grandest of the plantations available for tours along the Old River Road, but it is the one exclusively dedicated to a different side of plantation history—the experiences of enslaved people.

Research for The Book of Lost Friends

Whitney Plantation

This book, distributed by abolitionists to educate those in the North about the reality of slavery, needs no words added. This was the lived experience of tens of thousands of human beings. Their personal histories, recorded in the Lost Friends ads, the WPA Slave Narratives, and other documents written in the time period must never be lost. Books like this one were created with the goal of dispelling the myth of benevolent slavery, which remains the goal of the creators of the Lost Friends Database and places like the Whitney Museum. They seek to keep the truth out there, that the history not be lost or glossed over.



Back in the day, artists were hired to paint faux marble on the exterior of Whitney Plantation, so that passengers on passing riverboats might think the house grander than it was.



Pigeonniers, which were used to raise eating pigeons, signified wealth in the world of Louisiana plantation society. The more and fancier the pigeon coops, the wealthier the owner appeared to be.



The reality of life belowstairs—hot, dangerous, dirty, and hard.

Research for The Book of Lost Friends

Cane River Creole National Park

After my time along the Old River Road, I traveled north, stopping at Cane River Creole National Historical Park, where Matt Housch found me wandering near the gate and took me on an incredible tour of the Magnolia Plantation site. Kind strangers are among the great joys of research trips. I'm always amazed by people's willingness to jump in and help.

One discovery during my exploration of Magnolia Plantation with park ranger Matt: how many features of the house mirrored the images of Goswood Grove that had sketched themselves in my mind's eye as I was writing the first draft of the story. Matt and I started at the raised brick basement which (despite its present-day missing walls and doors) was so like the one I'd imagined Hannie hiding in—right down to the square brick pillars.



Matt even mentioned that, back in the day, there were hatches in the floor of this house that were used by enslaved people on the plantation to access various rooms from beneath. One led from a basement room to the nursery. The nurse or minder sleeping below was expected to scramble up to the nursery to feed or quiet babies.



Guess what that is over the table? A punkah, the antebellum version of a ceiling fan, like the one LaJuna mentions to Benny while sharing historical knowledge of Goswood House.

Enslaved children were generally tasked with standing in a corner of the room, pulling the attached rope to keep the punkah moving, the air circulating, and the flies away.

What did we find in the last room we came to at Magnolia Plantation? A 1940s/50s modernized kitchen so very much like the one at Goswood House. Matt was a bit bemused as to why I snapped photos of this room. The color scheme is different, but this is the sort of sleek, space-aged glory that would have greeted Benny as she made her way through the back door of the house with the little brass key garnered from Nathan Gossett. It's the strangest feeling when, in real life, you stumble across something so similar to what you've imagined within a story. It happens in our reading lives too, doesn't it?



Research for The Book of Lost Friends

Cane River Creole National Park



Here, too, there are pigeonniers . . . and a plantation store. Stores like the one Hannie remembers at Goswood Grove became the center of plantation economics as land transitioned to sharecropping and tenant farming. Terms offered to formerly enslaved people to persuade them to “stay on” after emancipation varied, depending on the landowner’s financial situation, the area, and undoubtedly the sentiments of those who had previously been forced to work the land. In most cases, sharecroppers soon found themselves financially bound to unfair contracts, hopelessly poor, and endlessly in debt.

The last leg of the journey was in many ways the best. I wound my way along the tree-shrouded dirt roads of rural Louisiana to meet Diane, the museum volunteer who had emailed me almost two years prior, after she read *Before We Were Yours*. She’d spent countless hours entering Lost Friends ads into the database created by The Historic New Orleans Collection. She thought I should know about the families whose histories had found their way from the dust of old file drawers to a medium of communication that would take them worldwide. Their stories inspired Hannie’s and Benny’s story.

Diane’s husband, Andy joined us for the visit, along with Jess from HNOOC. Our time together was filled with hands-on history, looking over Diane’s files.

Read about Diane’s work and the creation of the Lost Friends database here:

www.hnoc.org/publications/first-draft/lost-friends-ads-reveal-heartbreak-family-separation-during-slavery

Access HNOOC’s Lost Friends database here:

www.hnoc.org/database/lost-friends/

Visit Villanova University’s Last Seen database of ads from *The Christian Recorder* here:

<http://informationwanted.org/>

