



## Summary

— *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 the dark truth. 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.

— *Aiken, South Carolina, present day.*

Born into wealth and privilege, Avery Stafford seems to have it all: a successful career as a federal prosecutor, a handsome fiance, and a lavish wedding on the horizon. But when Avery returns home to help her father weather a health crisis, a chance encounter leaves her with uncomfortable questions and compels her to take a journey through her family's long-hidden history, on a path that will ultimately lead either to devastation or to redemption.

Based on one of America's most notorious real-life scandals—in which Georgia Tann, director of a Memphis-based adoption organization, kidnapped and sold poor children to wealthy families all over the country—Lisa Wingate's riveting, wrenching, and ultimately uplifting tale reminds us how, even though the paths we take can lead to many places, the heart never forgets where we belong. (*From the publisher.*)

## 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?
3. When the sisters were originally reunited, they decided to keep their history to themselves rather than telling their families. What do you think the implications would have been if they had gone public? Do family secrets belong to the next generation, as well? Have you ever discovered a secret in your family history?
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?
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. In our modern age are we too busy or too preoccupied with accumulating things to actually enjoy what we have?
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? 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? What is the true "music" of your soul?
8. Child trafficking, abuse, and economic disadvantage still imperil the lives and futures of children. 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?
9. 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? 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?
10. 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?

11. 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?
12. 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? How did you deal with the choices?
13. The Seviens 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?
14. What symbolism can be seen in the picture of the sisters on the wall? How do you think the sisters felt during their Sisters Days? Do you have family or friends you are close to? What does that bond mean to you?
15. 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?

*(Questions issued by publishers)*