

Analysis of Before We Were Yours

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Written by journalist Lisa Wingate and published by Ballantine Books in 2017, *Before We Were Yours* is a novel that focuses on an American adoption scandal in Memphis, Tennessee during the first half of the twentieth century. This historical fiction novel relates to a true story of an adoption scandal by Georgia Tann and the Tennessee Children's Home Society. *Before We Were Yours* provides a tale that explores the hardships children face as they were forcefully removed from their families and placed into wealthy families. The purpose is for audiences to have a better understanding of how the adoption scandal impacted children and families in society. Wingate addresses the consequences and aftermath of poor children taken from homes, placed for adoption, and being sold without parental consent. The novel reflects a real-life scandal by Georgia Tann, who made an infamous impact on the lives of children and families across many social classes and family structures.

Lisa Wingate's novel reflects the historical impact of Georgia Tann. Born in Hickory, Mississippi 1891, Georgia Tann had an interest in operating an adoption business where she can rescue poor children and find better homes for them. Her father, George Tann, was a Mississippi court judge who inspired her to pursue an education in social work. Georgia Tann also received influence from her father's duty of caring for children in neglectful families. Podcast host and producer Stinson Liles (2017) reported that Georgia Tann started her own adoption business to help children find safe homes rather than keep them in orphanages. After receiving a college education and worked in Mississippi's first orphanage for a few years, Tann became director of the Tennessee Children's Home Society in 1926. Tann's passion for rescuing poor children and

placing them into upper-class families inspired her to work in a nationwide adoption business in Memphis, Tennessee.

As a well-known director of the Tennessee Children's Home Society, she became politically influenced by Memphis governor E. H. Crump. She was intrigued by the significance of the Crump machine, which led to the beginning of the adoption scandal. Sinson Liles (2017) declared that the Crump machine ignored parents' legal rights and falsified children's birth certificates and medical information. Governor Crump's political machine led Tann to abolish children's legal information to prevent original families from receiving them back. Tann also cultivated celebrities and wealthy families after creating advertisements that describe children in need of a new home. Without knowing children's legal information, celebrities and wealthy families in the United States were satisfied with Tann's duty of having children available for adoption. With Crump's political authority, Georgia Tann started an adoption scandal with the ability to terminate children's information and sell them to upper-class families.

Georgia Tann was influenced by Crump's political ideologies, which persuaded her to participate in morally wrong actions. She convinced parents to sign falsified forms of medical assistance to give away their children. Author Linda Austin (1990) stated that Georgia Tann encouraged doctors to persuade unwed mothers to give up their babies in exchange for medical assistance (p. 91). Without parental consent, Tann stole poor children and gave them away to wealthy families without any legal information. Besides deleting children's information to prevent low-income families from finding them, she placed them in new homes or any unlicensed housing facility. As a director of a nationwide adoption business, Georgia Tann used illegal tactics to run her business in selling poor children for adoption.

While Georgia Tann was illegally placing children for adoption, she didn't provide the necessary support in the Tennessee Children's Home Society. Wingate declared that poor children were victims of Tann as they were kidnapped and mistreated. Not only were poor children treated disrespectfully by Tann, but they barely survived with little to no efficient care. In the Tennessee Children's Home Society, children were not fed enough nor had proper hygiene practices available. Children also didn't have medical care or education since Tann is looking for wealthy families to give them support. In the Tennessee Children's Home Society, poor children faced many burdens of unnecessary care from Georgia Tann.

Although children face difficult moments from the Tennessee Children's Home Society, many families never noticed Georgia Tann's illegal ways of kidnapping children. As Tann removes children's legal information in the adoption process, parents do not have access to understand where the children originally belong. Wealthy families also didn't acknowledge the conditions children faced in the nationwide adoption business. As a director, Tann illegally refused to follow health guidelines that help children build immunity toward any illness. Linda Austin (1990) proclaimed that Tann made little effort in sanitizing the facility, which led children to receive inadequate health conditions and increased death rates (p. 95). Despite the consequences of the Tennessee Children's Home Society, wealthy families were unaware of Tann's unnecessary work ethic. With Georgia Tann's immoral actions, adoptive families don't know the truth about poor children kidnapped from their families.

Georgia Tann had her secrets of running an adoption business without following legal standards. However, her criminal acts were soon discovered after her death from terminal cancer in 1950. Investigators, such as Governor Browning and Robert Taylor, discovered more

information about the adoption scandal and the nationwide adoption business. They found out that she had been engaging in adoption fraud as a director since the 1920s. As the investigators found more information about Tann and her illegal tactics, the Tennessee Children's Home Society was closed for business in 1951. After the shutdown of the nationwide adoption business, the adoption scandal ended. After Georgia Tann's death, the truth revealed that she was a child-trafficker with an adoption business that impacted children and families in American society.

Connections to the Course

Wingate's novel, *Before We Were Yours*, relates to the course by connecting with Annette Lareau's demonstration of social class parenting differences. Poor children had parents that focused on reaching basic needs, which is also known as the "accomplishment of natural growth." These children also had expectations to understand what the adults instructed them to do. In the Tennessee Children's Home Society, poor children felt like they needed to listen to Georgia Tann's directions to prevent them from getting in trouble. In middle-class families, parents use large investments of time and energy to help children cultivate their interests by using "concerted cultivation." Middle-class families adopted poor children from Tann, and parents helped them pursue their interests. This novel incorporates the idea of social class parenting differences between families.

Another way this novel connects to the course is by relating to the ideologies of childhood. During the first half of the 20th century, children were considered priceless. However, Georgia Tann treated children as economically useful while they were in the Tennessee Children's Home Society. For instance, children were considered vulnerable to their parents, but

Georgia Tann valued them as economic assets. Middle-class parents are more likely than working-class parents to view children as emotionally priceless in the first half of the twentieth century. When middle-class families adopted poor children from Tann, the children were loved and considered priceless. The novel illustrates the differences in how parents and adults perceive children.

Before We Were Yours also connects to the concept of intensive parenting. While intensive parenting is the dominant norm, parents view children as vulnerable and deserve to have parental protection. However, parents not watching their children at all times is a sign of neglect. Georgia Tann did not sacrifice her time with the children in her adoption business, which was a sign of neglect. Although she seemed neglectful toward children, lower-class families also didn't always have their eyes on children. Middle-class parents were likely to use intensive parenting because they find that children need supervision and protection to thrive. Once upper-class families adopted children, parents sacrifice amounts of time and energy to care for their children. Intensive parenting was an important connection with the novel by identifying each family's ability to care for and sacrifice time with children.

Personal Connections

After reading *Before We Were Yours*, I can connect the information with my childhood experience of a working-class family in Fountain, Michigan. Since Fountain is a small village town, I remember a working-class family living across from my household when I was young. While children were freely playing on the streets, I thought about going out there to join them, but my parents made a rule that I couldn't go out on the streets alone as a child. I was also aware of my father's words about the dangers of hanging out with kids on the street, such as practicing

bad habits or getting in trouble publicly. A few years later, I found out that the kids were no longer living across from me because their parents neglected them. As I think about my personal experience, this reminds me of the consequences lower-class children had to face with neglect during the adoption scandal. I also think about the outcomes of working-class children with neglect, such as low expectations of education and achieving their desires. My experience with a working-class family demonstrates the consequences of neglect in Wingate's novel.

Before We Were Yours also relates to my past observations in student teaching. When I was a senior in high school, I worked with a third-grader who belonged in a lower-class foster care system. I was reading stories with her to practice literacy skills. In the third grader's home situation, she didn't have many books available. Since she didn't have many books to choose from, I suggested to the lead teacher about having her take one or two books home for each week. Luckily, the lead teacher agreed with my idea of allowing her to take books home. This opportunity of helping a student in need reminds me of how poor children had support from upper-class families during Tann's adoption scandal. My past experiences with a student in the foster care system demonstrate an understanding of the conditions children faced in the Tennessee Children's Home Society.

Wingate's novel is significant for my professional life by understanding how foster care impacts children. After learning about the conditions children went through in the Tennessee Children's Home Society, I think more deeply about the influence of foster care in modern society. As I have met a couple of children from foster care homes, I find the conditions they face daily are consequential. However, the most influential theme I find in this novel is that there is hope in every struggle. With hope in mind, I believe there are ways for children to receive

positive educational outcomes despite the struggles they may face. I find that providing hope for those in foster care is beneficial to strengthen resilience and trust, which can also lead them motivated to learn. This novel inspired me to have hope in those who are facing burdens, including those in the foster care system.

Another way that this novel is significant for my professional life is by addressing how social class plays a role in family life. With working-class families, parents and children tend to focus on reaching necessary needs. As I learn about the unbearable conditions of the Tennessee Children's Home Society, lower-class children cannot reach basic needs on their own. Instead, they need care that satisfies their overall well-being, which results in positive health outcomes. In middle-class families, parents and children focus on cultivating their interests. Although middle-class families didn't face similar conditions as lower-class during Tann's adoption scandal, they are willing to support those in need. As middle-class families were caring for poor children by adopting them, I find that middle-class families have a special role in helping others in any community. In Wingate's novel, learning about the role social class has on family life is important for understanding the expectations in a family household.

References

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