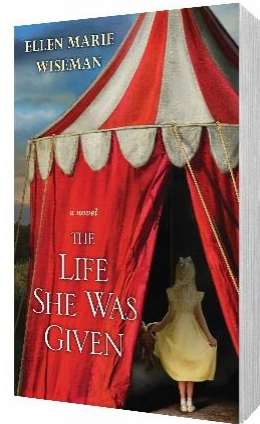


A READING GROUP GUIDE

THE LIFE SHE WAS GIVEN Ellen Marie Wiseman

The suggested questions are included to enhance your group's reading of Ellen Marie Wiseman's *The Life She Was Given!*



1. In the beginning of the book, Lilly has never stepped foot outside the attic of Blackwood Manor. Yet she dreams of escaping and exploring the outside world. What effect do you think being locked up for the first ten years of her life had on her? Do you think it's possible for a child in that situation to develop normally? When Momma finally lets her out, Lilly is frightened and wants to return to the attic. Why do you think she feels that way?
2. Julia was brought up believing bad things would happen if she didn't behave. What effect do you think that belief had on her relationships with other people? Do you think she was a people pleaser? Why or why not? How do you think she changed over the course of the novel? What were the most important events that facilitated those changes?
3. Momma is strict, cold, and physically abusive. But even after she sells Lilly to the circus sideshow, Lilly still loves and misses her. Do you think that's realistic? Why or why not?
4. Julia can't help but study the interactions between mothers and daughters. She is drawn to watching people who clearly love each other, especially parents and their children whose faces light up with affection and recognition of their unconditional love. She wonders what that feels like. How do you think that fascination with parental love effected her decisions concerning the horses at Blackwood Farm? What events revealed how she felt about them?
5. How much of a role do you think religion played in Momma's decision to keep Lilly locked in the attic? How much of a role do you think shame played? Have you ever heard stories of parents hiding their mentally or physically handicapped children in an attic or back bedroom? Do you think that still happens today?
6. Before she knows the truth, Julia briefly wonders if Lilly would have been better off if she had "gotten help". What do you think would have happened to Lilly if she had been sent away instead of locked in the attic? Considering the time period of the story, would she have been better off or worse? Why?
7. How long did it take for you to figure out what was "wrong" with Lilly? Were you surprised when you learned the truth? What do you think the real reason was behind Momma's decision to sell Lilly to the sideshow? Was it money, or something else?
8. When Momma takes Lilly out of the house the first time, she gives her a jacket despite the fact that she's selling her to the circus and it's a warm summer night. Why do you think she

does it? What do you think it means, if anything? What do you think would have happened to Lilly if she had been able to get away from Momma that night? Would she have survived? How?

9. Why do you think Julia was so determined to take good care of the horses and the farm? Why do you think she wanted to prove herself to Claude?
10. Lilly feels like she has a lot in common with the circus animals. Why do you think that is? What does she have in common with Pepper? What about Jojo? Is there a difference between what she has in common with each of them?
11. Both Momma and Merrick used fear to keep Lilly from trying to escape. In what ways did they use it similarly? In what ways did they use it differently?
12. Claude knew the truth about Lilly all along. Why do you think he kept it a secret? Do you agree with his reasoning? What would you have done if you saw Momma taking Lilly into the woods, then coming back without her? What do you think made Claude change his mind about telling Julia the truth? How did you feel about him in the beginning of the book? How did you feel about him at the end?
13. Lilly goes from being locked in an attic to performing in front of thousands of people. What fears did she need to conquer to make that transition? What other changes did she make to survive in the circus? What aspects of her earlier life do you think were hardest for her to overcome?
14. In the 1870's, P.T. Barnum was one of the first showmen to take a collection of oddities and human marvels on the road with his circus. Back then, the sideshow created quite a sensation and became a popular form of entertainment. In the heyday of the sideshow, human curiosities were respected as the bread and butter of the circus, and revered all over the world. The freaks were royalty, not victims or monsters. Certainly there was exploitation, as in the case of Daisy and Violet Hilton, Siamese twins who were kept in a cage, beaten, and passed down in their aunt's estate like a piece of old jewelry. But for the most part, the sideshow provided the opportunity for people who couldn't make a living in the traditional ways to stand on their own two feet, instead of slowly dying in institutions. Eventually the appeal of sideshows declined due to various factors, including increased medical knowledge, political correctness, and the belief that disease and abnormalities should evoke pity rather than wonder. Have you ever been to a sideshow? How did it make you feel? What do you think of people brave enough to expose their vulnerabilities to the world? If you were born with an anomaly or deformity, would you be willing to let people stare at you to make a living?
15. What did you think of Lilly's father when you first met him? How did your perception of him change over the course of the book? What could he have done differently? He attends the circus once a year to see Lilly, but she never knows he's there. How did you feel when he showed up in her tent? Were you surprised by his confession at the end of the story?
16. Pepper is based on a real elephant, Mary, who was hanged by the neck from a railcar-mounted industrial crane in 1916 for killing an inexperienced trainer after he prodded her behind the ear with a hook when she reached down to nibble on a watermelon rind. The first attempt to hang Mary resulted in a snapped chain, causing Mary to fall and break her hip as dozens of children fled in terror. The gravely wounded elephant died during a second attempt at execution and was buried beside the tracks. A veterinarian examined Mary after

the hanging and determined she had a severely infected tooth in the precise spot where the trainer had prodded her. When Pepper kills Merrick for trying to take Jojo, Lilly is devastated because she knows Pepper is going to be punished. She hates the fact that people get mad at animals for acting like animals. Her worst fears come true when the crowd wants Pepper killed and Mr. Barlow makes the decision to execute her. Do you think animals should be killed for injuring or killing humans? Does it depend on the circumstance, for instance, if an animal is being caged, forced to perform, or a human threatens the animal's young or encroaches on its territory? Do you think it's okay to kill an animal based solely on its potential to be dangerous?

17. What do you think Lilly's life would have been like if Momma had never sold her to the circus? How long do you think she would have lived in the attic? Do you think she would have eventually escaped? How? What would you have done if you were in that situation?
18. Besides honoring Lilly, why do you think Julia started the horse rescue?? What do you think Julia's life was like after she discovered the truth about her family?

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**Q&A with Ellen Marie Wiseman,
Author of *THE LIFE SHE WAS GIVEN***

1. How did you come up with the idea for *The Life She Was Given*?

Believe it or not, the idea started with the image of an old camera hidden inside a mansion. Then I imagined a little girl locked in the attic, which probably stemmed from my love of the book, *Flowers in the Attic*, and my fascination with stories about people hiding their “less than perfect” children in a back bedroom. After writing a little bit about a freak show in my third novel, *Coal River*, I wanted to explore that world further and came up with the idea of the girl in the attic being sold to a circus sideshow. Once those three things came together in my mind, the major plot of the story quickly took shape. When I told my editor the idea, I worried he’d think I’d gone off my rocker. Luckily, he loved it as much as I did.

2. Your first three novels tackled important issues; WWII in *The Plum Tree*, insane asylums in *What She Left Behind*, and child labor in *Coal River*. With *The Life She Was Given*, what looks like a story about child abuse ends up being about animal cruelty too. Did you set out to include the mistreatment of animals this time around?

Not exactly. And to be honest, I was a little worried I was going too far off my “brand” when I first came up with the idea. But during my research about circuses, I came across an article about Mary the elephant, who was hanged by the neck from a railcar-mounted industrial crane in 1916 for killing an inexperienced trainer after he prodded her in the precise spot where she had a severely infected tooth. I was shocked and heartbroken by her story and wanted to include it in the book because I’m passionate about the humane treatment of animals. And with the recent shooting of the rare gorilla in the Cincinnati Zoo, Mary’s story is still relevant today. Once I added it, along with the connection and commonality between Lilly and the circus animals, it almost felt like that part of the novel took on a life of its own. I always say we can’t be mad at animals for acting like animals, especially when we’re the ones who put them in positions where they feel the need to defend themselves. We’re shocked when we read about children being locked up and beaten, but we do it to animals all the time and don’t understand when they fight back.

3. Do you have a lot of contact with animals in your everyday life?

I have two dogs and four grand-pups. When our kids were growing up we had horses, goats, sheep, rabbits, barn cats, turkeys, geese, ducks, chickens, and numerous rescue dogs. I can’t imagine not having animals in my life.

4. What is your creative process like? Do you outline or write by the seat of your pants?

When I begin working on a new novel, I create a loose outline, partly because deadlines don’t give you the luxury of writing several chapters only to find out you’ve written

yourself into a corner. The other reason is that I like to know where I'm going, especially when it comes to the ending. Once I have a solid outline, I start researching the time period to get my facts straight and my timeline correct. I write page after page of notes and put dozens of sticky tabs in my research books in order to quickly reference important information as I work. Not only is research necessary to build a credible fiction world, but it helps me understand what my characters' lives might have been like, what clothes they may have worn, what food they may have eaten, what their hairstyles may have been, whether their homes would have included the latest inventions—electric lights, a telephone, a motor vehicle or an ice box. I put myself inside my protagonists' heads (so far all women) by determining their possible education level and taking into account the freedoms or constraints they might have been dealing with during their lifetime. I try to imagine what their hopes, dreams and struggles might have been according to what was important to the women of their time.

5. How is Lilly similar to, or different than, the main characters in your other books?

In *The Plum Tree*, *What She Left Behind* and *Coal River*, my protagonists are young women denied a normal life during a time of great social change. In *The Life She Was Given*, Lilly is denied a normal life because she's locked in the attic, but the outside world doesn't have a direct effect on her at first. Once she is sold to the circus, however, the economics and level of acceptance of those considered different during that time period affects her greatly. All four characters rebel against doing what is expected of them, Christine against the Gestapo and Nazi ideology, Clara against her father and the doctors at Willard Asylum, Emma against her uncle, the Coal & Iron Police, and the mine owner, and Lilly against Momma and Merrick. All four endure hardship at the hands of others who show little regard for human dignity, yet each refuses to give up hope and does whatever necessary to improve their situations.

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