

The Story Keeper

Book Club Kit

"[A] story-within-a-story, penned with a fine, expressive style, [that] will captivate writers and nonwriters alike."

- *Booklist on The Story Keeper*



A Note from Lisa Wingate

Dear Reader,

I hope you've enjoyed *The Story Keeper*, and I hope Jen, Evan, Rand, and Sarra have made you at least a bit curious about Appalachia and its history. If you've never visited the area, please take the opportunity to plan a trip there. The peaks and hollows of the Blue Ridge and the Smoky Mountains whisper with history, with stories, with trickling brooks and teeming waterfalls waiting to be discovered by new eyes. While Lane's Hill, the Brethren Saints, Towash, and Looking Glass Gap are fictional, many of the places mentioned in *The Story Keeper* are real. Driving a loop along the Blue Ridge Parkway, you can visit Mount Pisgah, hike dozens of trails, and see incredible waterfalls (including Issaqueena, where Nathaniel and Anna disappeared through a time portal in Evan's book). You can marvel at the Stumphouse Tunnel, still frozen in time halfway through a mountain, and imagine yourself back in the days when men dug through mountains by hand. Appalachia offers so many incredible places to visit.

Go. Experience. Stay awhile and enjoy the slower pace.

You might also be wondering about the Melungeon people mentioned in the story and whether they are real. The answer to that question is yes. In 1654, the first English explorers to push into the Cumberland Plateau of Virginia, Kentucky, and the Carolinas reported the discovery of "blue-eyed, reddish-brown complexioned" people who referred to themselves as "Portyghee." The origin and meaning of that term and the word *Melungeon* have been long debated. *Portyghee* was thought to be a corruption of Portuguese, and *Melungeon* possibly a corruption of an African word meaning "friend" or "shipmate," but nobody really knows.

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In 1673, Englishmen James Needham and Gabriel Arthur, traveling with several Native American guides, reported meeting “hairy people . . . (who) have a bell which is six foot over which they ring morning and evening and at that time a great number of people congregate together and talks.” The dialect used by these “hairy, white people which have long beards and whiskers and weares clothing” was neither English nor any Native American language the guides recognized.

The Melungeons and their origins remain one of the world’s greatest cultural mysteries. Thought to be a tri-racial isolate of Anglo, African American, and Native American blood, they suffered under prejudice, discrimination, and misinformation. Their family stories were often lost or altered as later generations chose, in self-defense or shame, to hide their Melungeon roots. Both Abraham Lincoln and Elvis Presley were rumored to have been of Melungeon descent.

You can see, I suppose, why Evan Hall would have found these enigmatic, reclusive people a fascinating culture among which to set his novels . . . and why I have found them fascinating as well. Who were these people? Where did they come from? Were they the descendants of shipwreck survivors who, perhaps, pressed inland and intermarried with local indigenous populations? Does their presence in the Carolina mountains in some way solve the mystery of Sir Walter Raleigh’s 117 Lost Colonists, who were left on the Outer Banks in 1584 and never seen again?

Much debate has been given to the question, and while the mystery might never be solved, it is fascinating fodder for a series of stories, don’t you think? History’s mysteries have a way of sweeping us up and transporting us into our own family origins, and also far beyond them into places we’ve never seen and lives that never were.

Or perhaps, lives that might have been . . . once upon a time.

Happy reading,
Lisa Wingate





"It's strange
how one
person and a
handful of
stories can
alter a life."

- The Story Keeper

Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of the story, Jen feels as though she has finally achieved her dream, but the dream is about to take an unexpected turn. Have you ever stepped through an open door expecting one thing, then found something completely different?
2. Jen's adult life is in many ways a facade, in that it involves denying and concealing her past. Do you ever feel the need to conceal parts of yourself in order to fit in or advance in a career or social situation? What price do we pay for such choices?
3. When Jen finds the *Story Keeper* manuscript, she is compelled to read it, even though she knows it's both a personal and a professional risk. Why do you think she makes that choice? Describe a time when you were driven to take a risk personally or professionally. Did it pay off? What happened?
4. In Sarra's day, women were given far fewer options in life. Are there stories in your own family of women who faced difficult circumstances and survived or triumphed? How did they overcome their trials?
5. Faced with either helping Sarra or preserving his own safety, Rand chooses to take the risk. In the moment of crisis, he steps forward, even while imagining how a bullet would feel. Do you think we all have the capacity to become heroes? Have you had a heroic moment in your own life? Or can you identify a situation in your past for which you now regret not stepping up?
6. Evan finds himself limited by the persona that has been created by his success. Have others' expectations of you ever made you feel the need to "play a part"? How can we get real in front of the world?

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Discussion Questions

7. In Helen Hall, Jen sees the “quiet festering of a dream” that was sacrificed in favor of family and business needs. Are there any dreams in your life that have been shelved by necessity? What would it take to go after those dreams? Will you be able to pursue them at some point in the future?
8. Evan Hall’s fans have taken literary love to the point of borderline mania. Have you ever been so enthusiastic about a book that you wanted to visit the setting, contact the author, or “live the book” in some way? What characteristics captivate you and draw you into a story?
9. Because life among the Brethren Saints caused religion and abuse to become hopelessly tangled in Jen’s mind, she has pushed faith aside. Have you dealt with “wounded believers” in your life or been one yourself? How can we separate what we’ve been told about God from authentic truth?
10. Sarra lives in a world that is limited by abuse and prejudice, yet she remains hopeful, determined, and faithful. Rather than blaming God, she looks to God. Where does this attitude come from? Do you think Rand’s faith is “softer” because he has not been tested?
11. Despite the difficult history between Jen and her sisters, the ties of sisterhood still bind and tug. Are the bonds of siblings always lifelong bonds? When those bonds are broken and tattered, what are the results? Have you ever wished a relationship could be different from what it was?
12. The mountains are a touchstone to Jen’s childhood. Where are the touchstones to your childhood? What do they mean to you?

Thanks for choosing

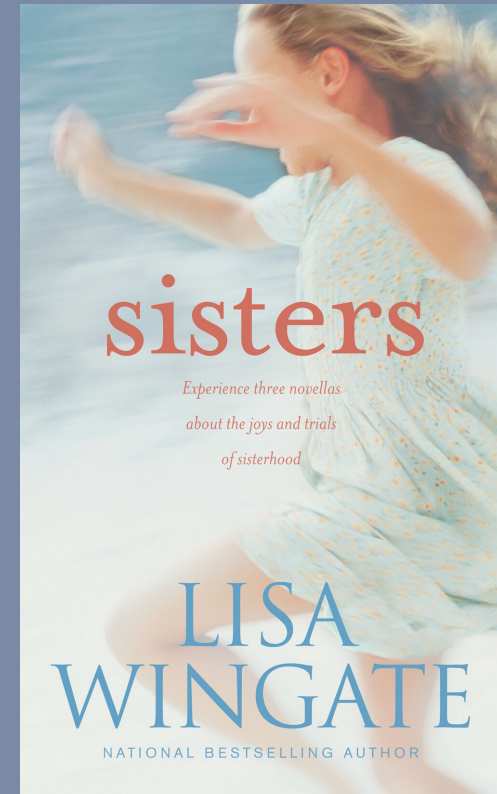
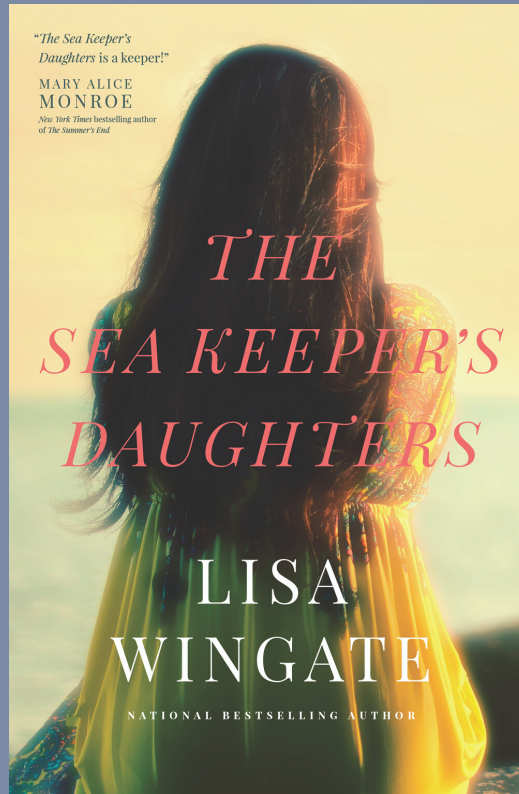
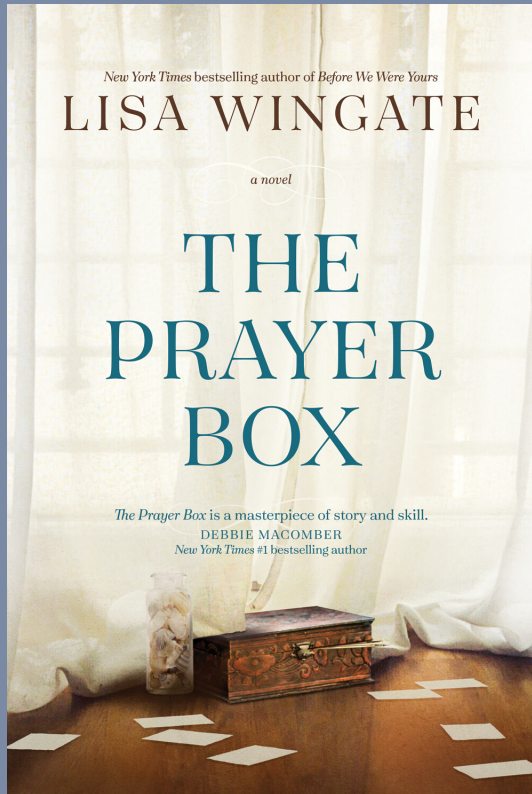
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