



# Lost Girls of Willowbrook

by Ellen Marie Wiseman

*Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:*

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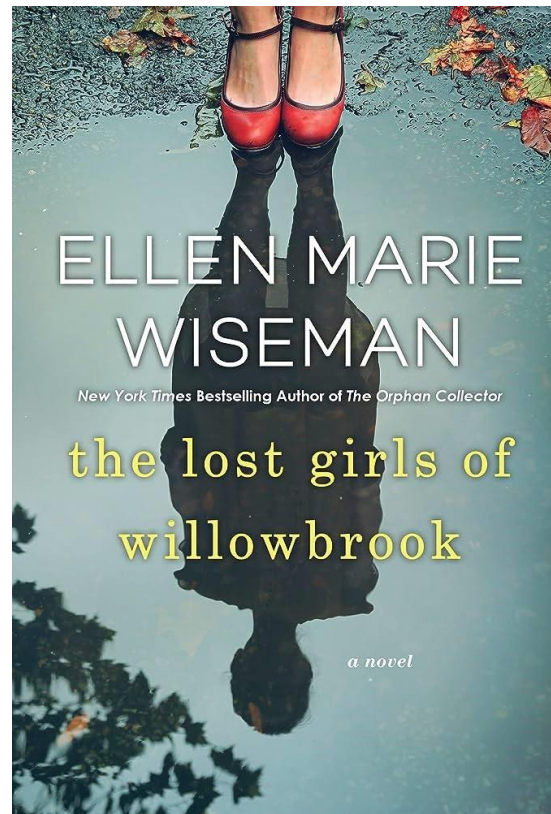
Included in the Kit:

- [Book summary](#)
- [Author biography](#)
- [Discussion questions](#)
- [Recipe suggestions](#)

Book Summary:

In her most powerful novel to date, *New York Times* bestselling author Ellen Marie Wiseman masterfully viscerally evokes the real-life Willowbrook State School, the infamous Staten Island, New York, mental institution that shocked a nation when exposed in the 1970s as a dumping ground for unwanted children. *Girl, Interrupted* meets *Shutter Island* in this gripping narrative of social injustice, survival, and a young woman determined to find her sister.

Sage Winters always knew her sister was a little different even though they were identical twins. They loved the same things and shared a deep understanding, but Rosemary—awake to



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every emotion, easily moved to joy or tears—seemed to need more protection from the world.

Six years after Rosemary's death from pneumonia, Sage, now sixteen, still misses her deeply. Their mother perished in a car crash, and Sage's stepfather, Alan, resents being burdened by a responsibility he never wanted. Yet despite living as near strangers in their Staten Island apartment, Sage is stunned to discover that Alan has kept a shocking secret: Rosemary didn't die. She was committed to Willowbrook State School and has lingered there until just a few days ago, when she went missing.

Sage knows little about Willowbrook. It's always been a place shrouded by rumor and mystery. A place local parents threaten to send misbehaving kids. With no idea what to expect, Sage secretly sets out for Willowbrook, determined to find Rosemary. What she learns, once she steps through its doors and is mistakenly believed to be her sister, will change her life in ways she never could imagined . . .

Source: Author's website (<https://ellenmariewiseman.com/>)



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## Meet the Author:

I was born and raised in a tiny hamlet in Northern New York, where I discovered my love of reading and writing while attending first grade in one of the last one-room schoolhouses in the state. My first stories starred heroic black horses and a beagle named Buffy the Rabbit Hunter. As I got older, one of my favorite things to do was walk to the general store to buy a nickel candy bar and a scary comic book. I had a vivid imagination back then, imagining terrifying creatures around every corner—kidnappers, ghosts, vampires, and monsters from the deep. I discovered the power of words during my teenage years while reading Stephen King, Anne Rice, and Dean Koontz. When I got married and became a mother, (which was all I ever wanted) writing became a hobby and thinking about getting published became a fun daydream. It wasn't until my son and daughter left for college that I decided to get serious about it.



I didn't realize it at the time, but the seeds for my debut novel, *THE PLUM TREE*, were planted during childhood visits to my mother's hometown in Germany, where I fell in love with the country's traditions and culture, and learned the heartrending details of my family's struggle to survive poverty and the unimaginable chaos of WWII. Somehow even as a young girl, I knew those trips were destined to have a huge impact on my life. But I had no idea they would inspire me to write a novel someday. When the entire plot came to me decades



# *Lost Girls of Willowbrook* by Ellen Marie Wiseman

later, I wrote the horrible first draft on a legal pad in three days. Of course after the initial excitement wore off and I read what I'd written, I realized I had a lot to learn. It took over four years of rewriting and research to turn that first draft into a readable manuscript, and another three years to find an agent to represent me. Then things got crazy and, much to my delight, *THE PLUM TREE* sold in three weeks.

Since then, more than one million copies of my novels have been sold in the United States. They have hit the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly Bestseller* lists and have also been translated into twenty-two languages and sold around the world—*WHAT SHE LEFT BEHIND*, *COAL RIVER*, *THE LIFE SHE WAS GIVEN*, *THE ORPHAN COLLECTOR*, and *THE LOST GIRLS OF WILLOWBROOK*.

I'm beyond grateful to live on the beautiful shores of Lake Ontario with my husband and a spoiled Shih-Tzu named Izzy. When I'm not busy meeting deadlines, I love reading, cooking, gardening, watching movies, swimming, boating, and spending time with my children and grandchildren.

Source: Author's website (<https://ellenmariewiseman.com/>)





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## Discussion Questions:

1. Located on Staten Island in New York from 1947-1987, Willowbrook State School was a state-run institution for children with intellectual abilities that became known – tragically long before it was finally shut down – for its deplorable abuses, filthy conditions, and overcrowding. An estimated 12,000 residents died at Willowbrook from 1950-1980 due to neglect, violence, lack of nutrition, and medical mismanagement or experimentation. What was your awareness of Willowbrook State School before reading *The Lost Girls of Willowbrook*? Why do you think most people today are unfamiliar with the history of Willowbrook?
2. When Sage discovers her twin sister Rosemary has gone missing from Willowbrook, she takes a bus to the institution to help with the search. She goes alone because her stepfather is cold and indifferent, and she feels like her friends are unreliable. Do you think Sage’s lack of knowledge about the “school” influenced her decision to go there by herself? What would you have done in that situation? Would you have headed to Willowbrook alone?
3. Willowbrook State School first gained infamy after an unannounced visit in 1965 from Senator Robert Kennedy. Despite his vivid descriptions of it as “a snake pit” and his horror over the conditions of the children “living in filth and dirt,” the school continued to operate for another 22 years. In 1972, Geraldo Rivera filmed the Peabody Award-winning expose “Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace,” which aired on national television. This documentary brought widespread mainstream awareness of the institution’s abuses, overcrowding, deplorable conditions, and physical and sexual abuse of residents. Shockingly, it wouldn’t be shut down for another 15 years. Were you surprised that Willowbrook was allowed to continue operating for so long? Why do you think it took decades to shut down the institution?
4. How would you react if, after grieving a loved one for years, you found out they were alive but had been committed to an institution like Willowbrook?





# *Lost Girls of Willowbrook* by Ellen Marie Wiseman

5. Willowbrook was grossly overcrowded, underfunded, and understaffed, with one or two attendants per up to 125 residents, and over 200 residents living in houses built for less than 100. While this novel negatively depicts most of the staff members, there were in reality many good, well-meaning people who worked at Willowbrook. There were also wonderful doctors who truly cared for the residents, such as Dr. Mike Wilkins and Dr. William Bronston, who risked their careers and more to improve conditions and bring justice to victims. Do you think the staff and doctors at Willowbrook were just as much victims of the institution as the residents? Why or why not? What do you think were the biggest factors that contributed to the horrible conditions and abuses at Willowbrook?
6. Sage's stepfather says one of the reasons he and her late mother lied about Rosemary being committed to Willowbrook was because her mother wouldn't have been able to show her face in public without people whispering behind her back. At the time, ignorance of mental disabilities meant there was still extreme stigma and fear surrounding it. Since then, there have been some changes in the attitudes and treatment of those with disabilities, although we still have a ways to go. Why do you think that is? When did the change begin? What else needs to be done?
7. When Sage arrives at Willowbrook, the doctors and nurses think she is her missing sister. She tries everything to convince them that she is Rosemary's identical twin but nothing works. Is there anything else she could have tried?
8. Willowbrook State School is mentioned in the 2009 documentary "Cropsey" as reportedly having housed convicted child kidnapper Andre Rand, who previously worked there as an attendant. One of Rand's supposed victims, Jennifer Schweiger, was found buried in a shallow grave behind the grounds of the abandoned institution. Have you ever heard of the legend of Cropsey? Do you know of any urban legends centered in or around the area where you live?





# *Lost Girls of Willowbrook* by Ellen Marie Wiseman

9. How do you think Sage changed over the course of the novel? Which events do you think were most transformative?
10. Sage remembers hearing rumors about scientific experiments being carried out on children at Willowbrook. This rumor turned out to be true. Some of the top virologists in the U.S. used the school as experimental hideout for developing vaccines for hepatitis, measles, mumps, shigellosis, and other diseases, and it was funded by the Defense Department. Other experiments involved hormone treatment, dwarfism, and electro-stimulation, among many others. In 1976, one Willowbrook administrator was quoted as saying he once counted seventy-three separate research projects going on at one time. More recently, vaccinologist Maurice Hilleman has described the hepatitis studies performed at the institution as “the most unethical medical experiments ever performed on children in the United States.” Did this surprise you? Have you ever heard of any other medical experiments being carried out in the U.S. on the disenfranchised, impoverished, orphaned, or ill?
11. At one point, Sage learns there are kids without disabilities in Willowbrook who were abandoned by parents and foster homes. Some were left in public places with signs that said, “Take Me to Willowbrook.” In real interviews, Willowbrook staff have stated that some well-to-do families got their child into Willowbrook because they couldn’t deal with the child’s behaviors, even going as far as having IQ scores altered to make them eligible for admittance. And virtually everyone who was examined got in. Why do you think the people in charge let that happen? Why would they commit non-disabled children? Have you heard of hospitals, schools, or centers for “troubled kids” that exist today? Have any of them been accused of neglect or abuse?
12. The idyllic campus of Willowbrook, with its expansive lawns, sweeping stands of trees, and brick buildings, belied the horror that was happening behind its walls. Do you think the citizens of Staten Island knew what was





# *Lost Girls of Willowbrook* by Ellen Marie Wiseman

really going on there? Do you think they could have done anything to stop it?

13. This publication of this novel coincides with the 35th anniversary of Willowbrook's long overdue closure on September 17, 1987. Even though Willowbrook no longer exists, do you think the issues it raises surrounding institutional abuse are still relevant today? Are there facilities currently operating that are or could become a "modern day Willowbrook?"

Source: Source: Author's website-Book Club Kit  
(<https://ellenmariewiseman.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Book-Club-Kit-THE-LOST-GIRLS-OF-WILLOWBROOK.pdf>)





Recipes:

White Chicken Chili

Seasonings

- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- ½ teaspoon each:  
ground cumin, dried  
oregano, salt, mustard  
powder
- 1/4 teaspoon black  
pepper, cayenne pepper
- 1 pinch red pepper  
flakes



Chili

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 1 large jalapeno pepper, seeded and diced
- 4 cloves garlic, diced
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 6 cups chicken broth
- 1/3 cup half and half, (half milk, half cream)
- 2 (15.5 oz.) cans cannellini beans, drained
- 1 teaspoon Hot Sauce
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 (4 oz.) cans mild green chilies
- 1 ½ lbs. bone-in skinless chicken breast, see notes
- Salt/Pepper
- 1 (15.25 oz.) can whole kernel sweet corn, drained. Can sub frozen corn.
- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened



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## Garnish Options

- Lime wedges, Diced Avocado, Sour cream, Tortilla Strips, Fritos, Monterey or Pepper Jack cheese.

Combine the seasonings and set aside. Melt the butter in a 4 1/2-quart pot. Add the diced onions and jalapeno pepper and cook for 5 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute. Add the flour and toss to coat. Cook for 2 minutes, until raw flour smell is gone. Add the chicken broth in small splashes, stirring continuously. Add the half and half in the same manner. Optional: Reserve 1 heaping cup of drained beans and combine it with ½ cup broth. Blend in a food processor, blender, or immersion blender. Add it to the soup along with the remaining whole beans. (This helps to thicken the broth. Otherwise, all beans can be added whole.) Add the seasonings, hot sauce, Worcestershire sauce, and green chilies. Bring to a boil. Let it boil for 15 minutes, uncovered, then reduce to a simmer. Season each side of the chicken with salt/pepper. Add the chicken and the corn to the pot and let it simmer gently for 15-20 minutes, uncovered. (Cooking too rapidly will make the chicken tough.) Stir throughout cooking to lift any beans that may have settled to the bottom. Remove the chicken and shred it once cooked through. Return it to the pot. Reduce heat to low and stir in the softened cream cheese. Stir continuously until the cheese is fully melted into the chili. Taste and adjust seasonings as needed. Serve with cornbread!

Source: The Cozy Cook (<https://thecozycook.com/white-chicken-chili/>)

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## Orange Julius

- 1 cup orange juice
- 1/4 cup milk
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1 scoop vanilla ice cream
- 1/2 cup crushed ice

Gather the ingredients. In a blender, add the orange juice, milk, sugar, vanilla extract, ice cream, and crushed ice. Blend until smooth. Pour into a chilled hurricane glass. Serve and enjoy.



Source: The Spruce Eats

(<https://www.thespruceeats.com/orange-julius-non-alcoholic-760370>)

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