

Reading Guide: *Wish You Well* by David Baldacci

This guide is designed to enhance your reading experience of *Wish You Well* by David Baldacci. Whether it is the story of a young woman on the run in *The Winner* or a violent intrigue convulsing Washington, D.C., in *Saving Faith* David Baldacci has delivered great stories, authentic characters, and thought-provoking ideas since he burst on the literary scene with *Absolute Power*. Now this versatile writer sets his sights on a new field of fiction with *Wish You Well*. This compelling and touching tale of the human spirit, set in the southwest Virginia mountains, reveals the power of family, endurance, and personal faith.

Historical Context Statement for *Wish You Well* by David Baldacci

Wish You Well by David Baldacci contains historical references. The use of certain words and/or phrases reflect the time period being presented by the author and are used for literary and/or historic purposes. Although the words and/or phrases are not appropriate for use today, they are necessary for the historical context of this writing to instill a sense of accuracy to the time period and setting of the book.

Story Summary

Southwest Virginia, 1940. *Wish You Well* is the story of Louisa Mae Cardinal, a precocious twelve-year-old girl living in the hectic New York City of 1940 with her acclaimed but sadly underpaid writer father, her compassionate mother, and her timid younger brother, Oz. For Lou, her family's financial struggles are invisible to her. Instead, she is a daughter who idolizes her father and is in love with the art of storytelling.

Then, in a single, terrifying moment, Lou's life is changed forever, and she and Oz are on a train rolling away from New York and down into the mountains of Virginia. There, Lou's mother will begin a long, slow struggle between life and death. And there, Lou and Oz will be raised by their remarkable great-grandmother Louisa, Lou's namesake.

Suddenly a girl finds herself coming of age in a landscape that could not be more foreign to her. On her great-grandmother's farm on the land her father loved and wrote about, Lou finds her first true friend, learns lessons in loyalty, tragedy, and redemption; and experiences adventures tragic, comic, and audacious. When a dark destructive force encroaches on their new home, Lou and her brother are caught up in another struggle – a struggle for justice and survival that will be played out in a crowded Virginia courtroom.

In *Wish You Well*, David Baldacci has written a tale laced with touching passages of rural Virginia, imbued with graceful humor, and laden with unforgettable characters. The novel is a heart-wrenching yet triumphant story about family and

adversity from times past that resounds forcefully today. *Wish You Well*, is a breathtakingly beautiful achievement from an author who has the power to make us feel, to make us care, and to make us believe in the great and little miracles that can change lives – or save them.

Discussion Questions

- Baldacci's eloquent use of language in *Wish You Well* transforms readers to another time and place – a time when America's agrarian existence was beginning to transform into industrialization and a place where the land was the heart and soul of the community. What are Lou and Oz's first impressions of the southwest Virginia mountains?
- Louisa Mae Cardinal believed that one must be willing to listen and learn from the land. How does Louisa Mae help begin this process for Lou and Oz? What does Louisa Mae mean when she states that the mountains have "a lot of secrets?"
- Lou and Oz, both, make ultimate sacrifices at the wishing well. How does Baldacci use old letters from Jack and Amanda Cardinal to build the characters? What are the underlying meanings attached to the wishing well and the letters?
- Eugene and Diamond shared a unique relationship. Why would Eugene permit Diamond to refer to him as "Hell No" and be so adamantly opposed to others using the name? What similarities did the two share that might have given them a common bond?
- Social and or economic poverty was prevalent in the southwest Virginia mountains of 1940. What are the complex characteristics of Louisa Mae's "love-hate" relationship with the mountain? How does this affect the assimilation of Lou and Oz to their new environment?
- Injustice prevails in our society, past and present. What are some examples of injustice in the novel and how do they shape the many characters?
- Natural resources have always been valuable assets to any geographic setting. In *Wish You Well*, what does the mayor of Dickens mean when he hails that, "Coal is King?" What connections can be made to gaining prosperity through despair?
- Several scenes in the novel refer to the characters' actions and reactions that deal with human life and its value. What underlying story or stories do these references create?

- Children have difficulty sometimes learning to trust others when they have lost a loved one. How and why does Lou come to trust Cotton Longfellow?
- Baldacci makes several references to threats to the land. What are the references and how do the characters react to them?
- During the early part of the 20th century industrialization claimed various American rural landscapes for the sake of “economic gain and modernization.” What affects of industrialization did Baldacci express in this novel and how did the characters react to them?
- In the novel the mountains seem to be living beings. Why is that important in the overall context of the story? What point is Baldacci attempting to convey?
- The character of George Davis is, on one level, totally evil. Seen in another light what are some of his attributes that might be applauded by society today and what does that say about our priorities and the types of people who are richly rewarded under our economic system?
- What messages about organized religion and faith in God do you find in the novel?
- What does the outcome of the trial say about the legal system in this country?
- Is the courtroom battle at the end of the novel simply a fight for land rights or does it have more to do with competing ways of life? Is a similar fight and transition going on today?
- The novel makes a distinction between farmers on the mountain and those people making their living in the towns. This geographic grounding permeates the perspectives of the inhabitants in the story and finds them often at odds. Is there any way to reconcile these disparate views?
- Louisa Mae Cardinal believes she would never be as happy anywhere else as on the mountain even though she has never seen any other places. Can such a view be valid and rational, or must one experience other places before she can reach such a conclusion?
- The novel deals with prejudice and hatred at the individual rather than group level. Is that an important distinction?
- Southern Valley officials made the argument that the importance of preserving the mountains should not take precedent over using its

resources to ensure economic prosperity for people. At what point, if any, does that argument fail?

- Cotton Longfellow remarks that people often spend much of their lives chasing dreams they know will probably never come true, and also that that tendency may be part of what makes us human. Do you agree with that statement, and if so, why?
- Lou has great trouble believing that her mother will get better, while Oz's faith never wavers. Do you believe that the older we get, the less we believe in the possibility of miracles? Is that solely because of the accumulated failures most suffer in life and that chip away at the idealism of youth, or is there another reason?
- Diamond never attended school and yet seems to have a great deal of wisdom about life. From where do you think he principally draws that wisdom?
- Does living off the land make people more practical, or are practical people drawn to making a living from the land? What other lessons can be drawn from your answer to that question?
- There are repeated allusions to the *Wizard of Oz* in the novel. What is Baldacci attempting to convey with those references?
- Jack Cardinal wrote about the mountains though he never returned to them. Do you think his writing would have been enhanced if he had returned, or do you believe it better that his perspective was from his youth rather than as an adult?
- What do you think is symbolized by the recurrent screams from the woods when there is danger to Lou and Oz, and, finally, by the panther scene?
- Lou and Oz learned much about their family's past in the novel. The conveyance of such familial knowledge is a major theme in the story. Do people today care about the past as a guidepost to the future? Should we place more emphasis on oral histories, and lessons learned from our ancestors? Or is the future so different now that the past holds little value for us?

Other books by David Baldacci

Absolute Power
Total Control
The Winner
The Simple Truth
Saving Faith