

A river's tale

A dark secret connects the muddy Mississippi to a wealthy family's long-hidden history

by JUDY GELMAN

Costco's suggested Book Club read provides insight into a selected novel, as well as an appropriate recipe to accompany your own book club's discussion.

Lisa Wingate's novel *Before We Were Yours* is based on a notorious scandal—the Tennessee Children's Home Society's black-market adoption ring—in which poor children were kidnapped and sold to wealthy families. Wingate interweaves the stories of Rill Foss and her siblings, taken from their family's Mississippi River shantyboat in 1939, with the modern-day story of attorney Avery Stafford, whose chance encounter with a dementia patient unveils terrible truths about her prominent South Carolina family.

A photograph of a shantyboat family—among the estimated 50,000 people who lived on small boats and traveled the Mississippi River during the Great Depression—inspired the characters of Rill, her parents and her siblings. “Rill and her four siblings sprang magically to life,” recalls Wingate, who found the photo early in her research. Riverboat families were among those whose children were abducted by the Tennessee adoption ring.

While immersing herself in the shantyboat people's vibrant culture, the Foss family's boat, the *Arcadia*, also came to life for Wingate. She imagined the covered front porch and wraparound



Lisa Wingate

WHITLEY LIND PHOTOGRAPHY

deck. “I smelled the little coal stove that drove winter's chill from the cabin, felt morning fog creeping ghostlike through rusted window screens, heard river kids counting lightning bugs flickering at dusk,” says Wingate. She imagined the Foss family “free-floating down the wide, muddy river, their lives controlled only by water and wind and seasons.”

“Because Rill and her siblings were struggling to find work and buy food, river families would have known that their watery home provided much of what they needed,” says Wingate. “The Mississippi River and the abundant wild-caught and wild-harvested foods it provided would have been a source of security and a point of pride to Rill's family.”

Shantyboat families often gathered in small communities to share news and food, find companionship, trade goods, and play homemade instruments and sing. A rare sweet treat would have thrilled Rill and her siblings. Wingate imagines that her own family recipe (at right) for apple bread pudding, an old-fashioned dessert popular during the Depression and created from ingredients on hand, would have been enthusiastically received: “It would have been savored to the last morsel and sticky fingertip ... and not soon forgotten.” ■

Judy Gelman is the author of *The Book Club Cookbook* and creator of the website BookClubCookbook.com.

Apple Bread Pudding

6 Tbsp butter, divided
¾ cup light brown sugar, divided
1½ tsp ground cinnamon, divided
2 cups apples, peeled, cored and sliced
½ cup chopped pecans
3 cups dried cubed bread
4 large eggs
1½ cups evaporated milk
¼ cup half-and-half
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 tsp ground cardamom
½ tsp salt
Vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce, for serving

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Spread 2 Tbsp melted butter in the bottom of a 13 x 9 x 2-inch baking pan. Sprinkle with 2 Tbsp brown sugar and ½ tsp cinnamon. Add apples, pecans and then bread.

Whisk together eggs, evaporated milk, half-and-half, vanilla, cardamom, salt and remaining brown sugar and cinnamon, and pour over top. Bake for approximately 50 minutes or until firm and a knife inserted in the center comes out clean.

Serve warm, with ice cream and caramel sauce. Makes 12 to 15 servings.

Recipe courtesy of Lisa Wingate.

COSTCO CONNECTION

Before We Were Yours (Item #2119698; 1/7) is available in most Costco warehouses.

