

2022 Rapides Reads Schedule of Events

Rapides Reads Book Selection: *The Book of Lost Friends* by Lisa Wingate

"A dramatic historical novel of three young women searching for family amid the destruction of the post-Civil War South, and of a modern-day teacher who learns of their story and its vital connection to her students' lives. Bestselling author Lisa Wingate brings to life startling stories from actual *Lost Friends* advertisements that appeared in Southern newspapers after the Civil War, as newly freed enslaved Americans desperately searched for loved ones who had been sold away."

September 1 Free book distribution begins

Free copies of *The Book of Lost Friends* available at all Rapides Parish Library locations

September 1 – October 31 Reading & Exhibit Period

RPL scheduled reading groups and book clubs; Reading & Discussion Guides available at library branches; system-wide exhibits on view at all branches

Friday, September 16, 6:00 Rapides Reads Kick-Off Reception

Kress Theater, Downtown Alexandria - Food, music, exhibits, door prizes

September 17 – October 27 Coffee House and Café Book Discussions

Reading & Discussion Guides available at select area coffee houses and cafes for scheduled or impromptu book chats

Thursday, September 29, 6:00 The Book of Lost Friends Panel Discussion

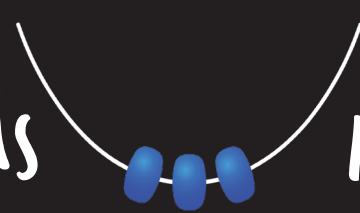
Live via Zoom. Live viewing at Westside Regional Library. Topic: "Lost Friends, Lost History"
Panelists: Lisa Wingate (author); Diane Plauche (volunteer researcher, The Historic New Orleans Collection); Naomi Carrier (historian, Texas Center for African American Living History)

Thursday, October 20, 6:00 *A Dream Deferred: The Lost Letters of Hawkins Wilson* Documentary Screening and Discussion

Martin L King Branch Library - Discussion topic: "Finding Our People Today" - Using the *HNOG* Lost Friends Database, Ancestry.com, and other resources.



Rapides Reads 2022

Lost Friends  Lost History

Reading & Discussion Guide



Rapides Reads!

Rapides Reads is a parish-wide program that encourages our entire community to read and discuss the same book and its themes. The goal is to broaden our understanding of our world, our neighbors, and ourselves through the power of a shared reading experience. The 2022 reading selection is *The Book of Lost Friends* by Lisa Wingate, selected in part because of its Louisiana setting and the historical significance of the Lost Friends ads that inspired it.

We've planned an exciting line-up of events and activities to generate widespread interest, engagement, and discussion throughout the community about the book and the Louisiana and American history it depicts. Gather your friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors and join us as *Rapides Reads!*



Deepest appreciation to the many individuals of the Rapides Parish Library who generously have given time, assistance, support, and expertise to develop this year's Rapides Reads program. Special thanks to Jessica Dorman and The Historic New Orleans Collection; the Friends of the Rapides Library; Diane Plauché; LSUA professors Holly Wilson and Bernard Gallagher; also students of LSUA English professor Ginger Jones (gjones@lsua.edu), Tia Malak, Yvette Guidry, and Marcy Cox who researched and wrote the *Lost Friends, Lost History Reading & Discussion Guide* questions. ●



This program is funded under a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Feed Your Interest!

Use this QR code to find links to these and other dynamic resources at the *Rapides Reads "Lost Friends Lost History" Resource Page* at www.rpl.org:



- [The Lost Friends Database](https://www.hnoc.org/database/lost-friends/index.html) Lost Friends ads that appeared in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*. Searchable by name, location, and year of posting. <https://www.hnoc.org/database/lost-friends/index.html>
- [Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery](https://informationwanted.org/) This searchable database recovers stories of families separated in the domestic slave trade. <https://informationwanted.org/>
- [Purchased Lives: Torn Apart and Stitched Back Together](#) – A four-unit lesson plan complementing The Historic New Orleans Collection's *Purchased Lives* exhibit. Unit 3 reviews primary and secondary source documents that describe the efforts of freed individuals to find friends and family after the Civil War ended.
- [Conversation with author Lisa Wingate on The Book of Lost Friends](#) - Author Lisa Wingate joins The Historic New Orleans Collection for an exclusive discussion of *The Book of Lost Friends*.
- [Lost Friends, 64 Parishes](#) - This article relates the surprising history and inspiration for Lisa Wingate's novel, *The Book of Lost Friends*.
- [A Dream Delivered: The Lost Letters of Hawkins Wilson](#) – Viewers of this documentary follow the incredible story of a family who embarks on a journey of discovery after a lost letter from a formerly enslaved ancestor is unearthed.

Recommended for Further Reading

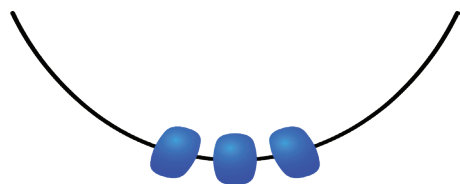
- [Help Me to Find My People](#) by Heather Andrea Williams
- [Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedman's Bureau and Black Land Ownership](#) by Claude F. Oubre

10. As a young, unmarried, and pregnant teenager with no support, Benny chose to place her baby for adoption. She made a conscientious decision and hoped her child would have a better life than she would be able to provide. Those who placed *Lost Friends* ads had not chosen to be separated from their family members, and there was scarce hope that their loved ones or children were headed to a better life.

Can adoption be compared to having a child sold off? Although these situations can be vastly different, what do any parents who have lost or been separated from a child have in common? ●

“There anybody here that goes by the name of Gossett? or did back before the freedom, even? You ever see anybody with three blue beads like these?
A colored woman? A girl? A boy?”

—Hannie Gossett, Austin, Texas, 1875



Rapides Reads: *The Power of Shared Experience*

Remember when the Alexandria Museum of Art presented *The Heart of Spain* exhibit in 2003? That exhibit came and went almost 20 years ago, yet it lives on in the “remember when” lore of Alexandria, as part of our parish-wide collective memory.

Every year or so, the Rapides Parish Library endeavors to create similar shared experiences by getting the whole parish reading and talking about one book. We encourage everyone to talk not only about whether they liked or didn’t like the book, but to discuss how the book made them feel, how it taught them something, helped them see another point of view, or broadened their understanding. Twenty years later, we want to hear you talking about “that time when Rapides Reads . . .”!

Our 2022 Rapides Reads selection, *The Book of Lost Friends*, offers that type of opportunity. Filled with drama, adventure, tragedy, and triumph, not only is it a captivating story, but it is a door through which readers might uncover lost or abandoned histories that can stir family and community stories even today.

The *Lost Friends* history that is central to the book offers perfect opportunities for discovery about historical events that continue to shape our community. The *Purchased Lives* exhibit panels on loan to us from The Historic New Orleans Collection provide a larger historical context for discussion. *Lost Friends* ads on view at all branches are images of actual artifacts of real people who lived in or sought family who had lived in our parish. Interactive databases, links to lesson plans, author interviews, and other dynamic resources are available on The “Lost Friends, Lost History” resource page at www.rpl.org. This *Reading & Discussion Guide*, developed by LSUA Professor Ginger Jones’ English students, will help you delve more deeply into the book and its themes, even if you aren’t able to read the book!

Author Lisa Wingate joins us live via Zoom along with researcher Diane Plauché of The Historic New Orleans Collection, and Texas Center for African American Living History founder Naomi Carrier, for a discussion about the importance of uncovering this long-neglected history and what we can learn from it today.

Finally, the documentary *A Dream Deferred: The Lost Letters of Hawkins Wilson* brings everything full circle as we witness how one man’s *Lost Friends* letters led to a reunion of his descendants more than a century after they were written.

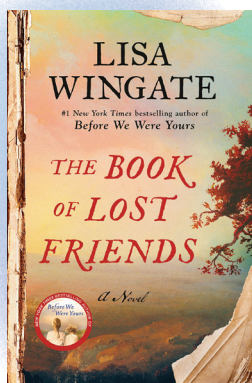
Shared experiences like these have the power to strengthen connections, create memories, and build community. Rapides Reads always gives us a chance to reach our community in powerful ways. Let’s make this year one of the most memorable! ●

About the Book: *The Book of Lost Friends*

In 1875, capable and determined Hannie, feisty and adventurous Juneau Jane, and shrewd and willful Lavinia couldn't be more different, but the girls share a common goal: to find William Gossett, Sr., the one man who holds their destinies—and their economic futures—in his hands. For half-sisters Lavinia and Juneau Jane, Gossett's legal heir and his heir by right of *plaçage*, their destiny is a matter of inheritance. Land ownership also is a concern for Hannie, whose sharecropper's agreement is jeopardized by Gossett's prolonged absence. But as their quest progresses, her journey takes on greater urgency as she realizes finding her lost family is more critical than locating her former enslaver.

More than a century later, in 1987, idealistic rookie teacher Benny Silva picks up the frayed threads of Hannie, Juneau, and Lavinia's long-forgotten adventure when she arrives in rural Augustine, Louisiana to teach English at a desperately failing local high school. Her efforts to engage her students through the power of history and storytelling reignite embers of dishonor and scandal in the town, long buried by secrecy, silence, and shame.

Masterfully interwoven, these two stories accomplish the literary feat of stirring a hopeful present while uncovering a painful past. Filled with drama, tragedy and triumph, *The Book of Lost Friends* is a door through which readers might be prompted to seek and discover their own lost or abandoned family histories and rejuvenate community connections. ●



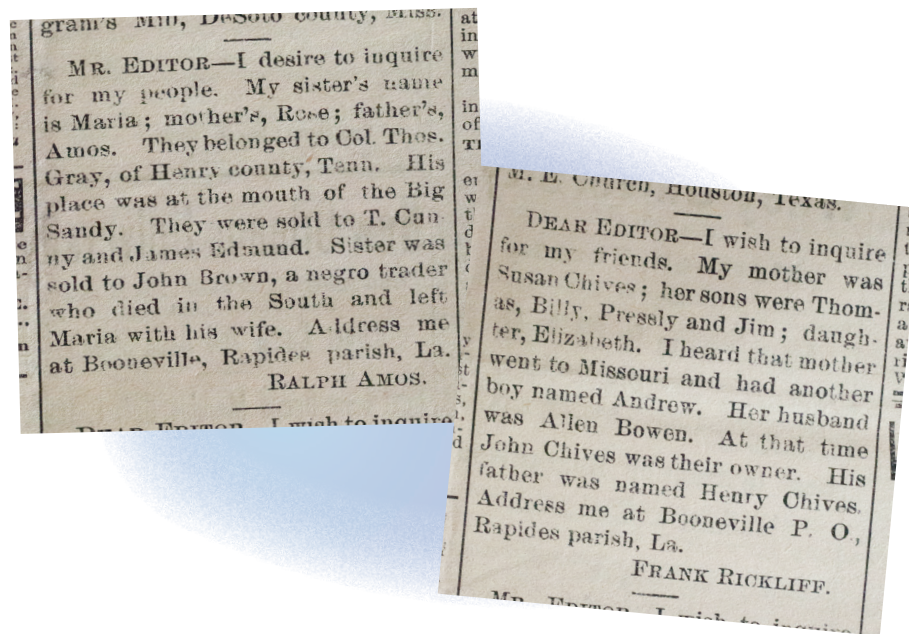
About the Author: Lisa Wingate

Lisa Wingate is the author of the #1 New York Times bestseller *Before We Were Yours*, which remained on the bestseller list for 54 weeks and has sold over 2 million copies. Her award-winning works have been selected for state and community One Book reads throughout the country, and have been published in over 40 languages, worldwide.

Lisa writes her novels at home in Texas where she is part of the Wingate clan of storytellers. Of all the things she treasures about being a writer, she enjoys connecting with people, both real and imaginary, the most. ●

they fear the cemetery's history—and the unmarked cemetery next door to it—could reveal. It is easy to forget how generational wealth and position are sometimes acquired through dubious or unjust means. Uncovering the history of the twin cemeteries and those buried within them caused the citizens of Augustine to face secrets, shame, and attitudes they had long suppressed.

The children at a neglected school were the catalyst for change and healing in Augustine. Can current generations atone for the sins of their ancestors? Can facing an uncomfortable past bring healing in the present? Is it enough to simply acknowledge past injustices, or should more be done? Who is responsible to make the future better?



Lost Friends notices ran well into the first decade of the 20th century. Author Lisa Wingate describes the listings as “the equivalent of an ingenious nineteenth-century social media platform.” Today, individuals continue to seek lost or long-gone family members via online genealogy and DNA sites. —Images courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection

record of their existence except that written by their families, often within a Bible passed down through generations.

LaJuna shows Benny the Gossett family Bible, pointing out that “this book, here. . . this is the only story most of these people ever got.” Family Bibles are often revered pieces of family heritage, but the Gossett family Bible had been hidden by the Judge because he feared his family would feel guilty for their ancestors’ actions.

Was the Judge justified in concealing his uncomfortable family history? Are family secrets helpful or harmful to later generations? Are family Bibles reputable sources of historical information? How can we trust that entries into family Bibles are accurate?

7. Nineteenth Century industrialist Andrew Carnegie donated \$40 million to establish over a thousand libraries in the early 20th century. The grants also funded separate Carnegie libraries in segregated southern states where African Americans were forbidden the use of public libraries. Hannie and Juneau Jane were founding members of the fictional Augustine Colored Carnegie Library. The women, along with other members of their church, applied for a Carnegie grant to build a library because Jim Crow laws denied them access to the town library.

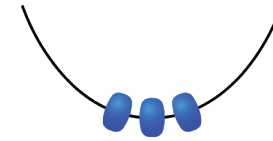
Why does Granny T call the Carnegie Library “a symbol of hope”? Are libraries symbols of hope in your community? In what ways?

8. What’s in a name? As they were bought and sold, enslaved people were often named and renamed. After emancipation, many African Americans kept and passed onto their descendants their slaveholder’s surname. Many others chose new names in freedom. To free herself from her father’s ties to Mussolini, Benny shortened her name from Benedetta, choosing a name for herself.

Does changing their name change a person? How can choosing your own name make a difference? How can a parent describe their adult son or daughter whom they haven’t seen since childhood? Can an adult child recognize a parent they have not seen since childhood? How does one begin to physically describe a person in an ad so that he or she could be found without a name?

9. The prominent and wealthy citizens of Augustine object to the school’s pageant being held in the cemetery because of a history of vandalism and a fear of desecration of their families’ resting places. It soon becomes clear that their reaction stems more from what

The Book of Lost Friends Reading & Discussion Guide



1. During enslavement, learning to read or write was illegal for African Americans in Southern states, so formerly enslaved people often had to dictate their Lost Friends ads and letters to others to post to newspapers or the Freedman’s Bureau. Wingate presents this example when Juneau Jane pens ads for people who cannot write. She gives Pete Rain the address for the Southwestern Christian Advocate, which will publish his letter.

Why do you think newspapers called the ads “Lost Friends” instead of “Lost Family”?

2. Half-sisters Lavinia and Juneau Jane head to Texas to find their father, William Gossett, who had traveled a year before to find his son, who was sent there to escape punishment for a crime. The senior Gossett’s lengthy absence has become a concern for everyone. As Hannie watches Juneau Jane write ads for other people they meet seeking lost loved ones, she decides she will look for her relatives, too.

Today, bulletin board posts and advertisements seeking missing loved ones proliferate following tragic events, as witnessed after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Genealogy and DNA sites are popular as people search for family members long dead or whom they have never met.

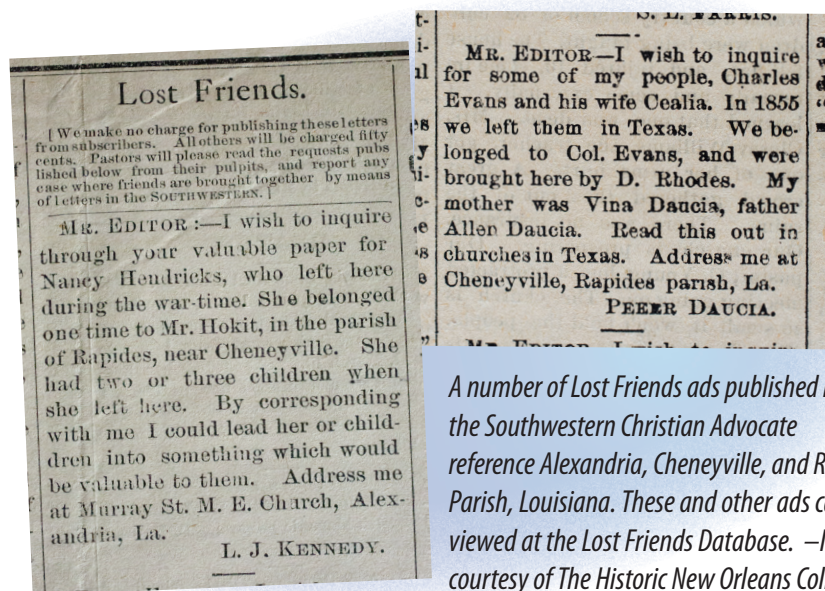
What inspires people to search for family members they may not have seen for lengths of time? Have you ever sought a loved one who was missing? Have you ever looked for or found a family member you’d never known before?

3. A review of Lost Friends ads reprinted in Wingate’s novel shows that almost all use the words “taken,” or “sold,” “belonged to,” “left with” or “left behind.” These words show that the depth of loss these individuals felt did not fade over years or even decades of separation. The very act of placing these ads reflects the endurance of their hope. The language in these ads further reveals the lack of agency enslaved people possessed over their place in the world. In fact, the only “place” they had was that granted by a

slaveholder or slave dealer. On page 13*, Hannie proudly observes that at the end of the Civil War, "Slaves could go where they pleased, now." Freedom included the right to move from place to place.

(All page numbers are from the 2021 Ballantine Books Trade Paperback Edition of *The Book of Lost Friends* by Lisa Wingate.)

What does the language in the ads reveal about the treatment of enslaved people? What else does it mean to be free?



A number of *Lost Friends* ads published in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* reference Alexandria, Cheneyville, and Rapides Parish, Louisiana. These and other ads can be viewed at the *Lost Friends Database*. —Images courtesy of *The Historic New Orleans Collection*

4. On their journey, Lavinia and Juneau Jane experience the worst type of danger women can face when traveling alone. Hannie, already dressed and posing as a boy, helps the other two dress as boys, too, explaining that, "If we do see anybody on the road, it'll be a whole lot easier to explain ourselves that way" (p. 181). Wingate reminds her audience that women of any skin color had no social rights if they chose to travel alone or meet men in informal situations.

All three girls are seeking signed documents that prove their inheritance or ownership of parcels of the Gossett land and ensure their legal rights and economic futures. As Gossett's daughter by his *plaçage*** , or common-law wife, Juneau Jane's claim recalls Louisiana's Napoleonic Code, which would not allow her to inherit from her father without written proof from him. As his daughter by his legal wife, Lavinia stood to inherit

alongside her mother, excluding Juneau Jane altogether, if her inheritance were not proven. Hannie seeks the contract (p. 42) Gossett signed upon her family's emancipation, promising land to them after 10 years of sharecropping.

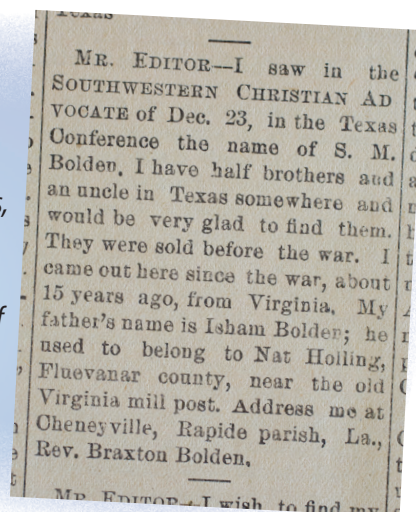
(**Wingate refers to the 19th Century *plaçage* system of common-law marriage between white planters and free women of color, many of whom lived in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. Juneau Jane, Gossett's younger daughter, lives with her mother in New Orleans (p. 33), where she is educated in both French and English. Though Gossett supports them and pays for Juneau Jane's education, the women were not economically free. In recent years, some scholars have questioned the "myth" of *plaçage* as an institution, citing a lack of validating evidence.)

How do women's economic rights differ now, compared to 1865? Do women enjoy greater security from threats of violence or harassment today? Did Wingate write a feminist novel?

5. Mentioned in the novel's prologue and epilogue is an old children's nursery rhyme, one version of which goes like this: *Ladybug, ladybug / Fly away home / Your house is on fire / Your children will roam. Wingate uses this version, but changes the words "will roam" to "are gone."*

Which version do you think better applies to the subject of this novel and the *Lost Friends* advertisements?

The *Southwestern Christian Advocate* was published between 1877 and 1929 in New Orleans by the Methodist Book Concern. The paper was distributed to nearly 500 preachers, 800 post offices, and more than 4,000 subscribers in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. —Image courtesy of *The Historic New Orleans Collection*



6. The question "Where do I come from?" precedes many inquiries into family history and genealogy. However, only in the early 20th century did birth and death records begin to be recorded by the government. For many people born before 1900, there is no written