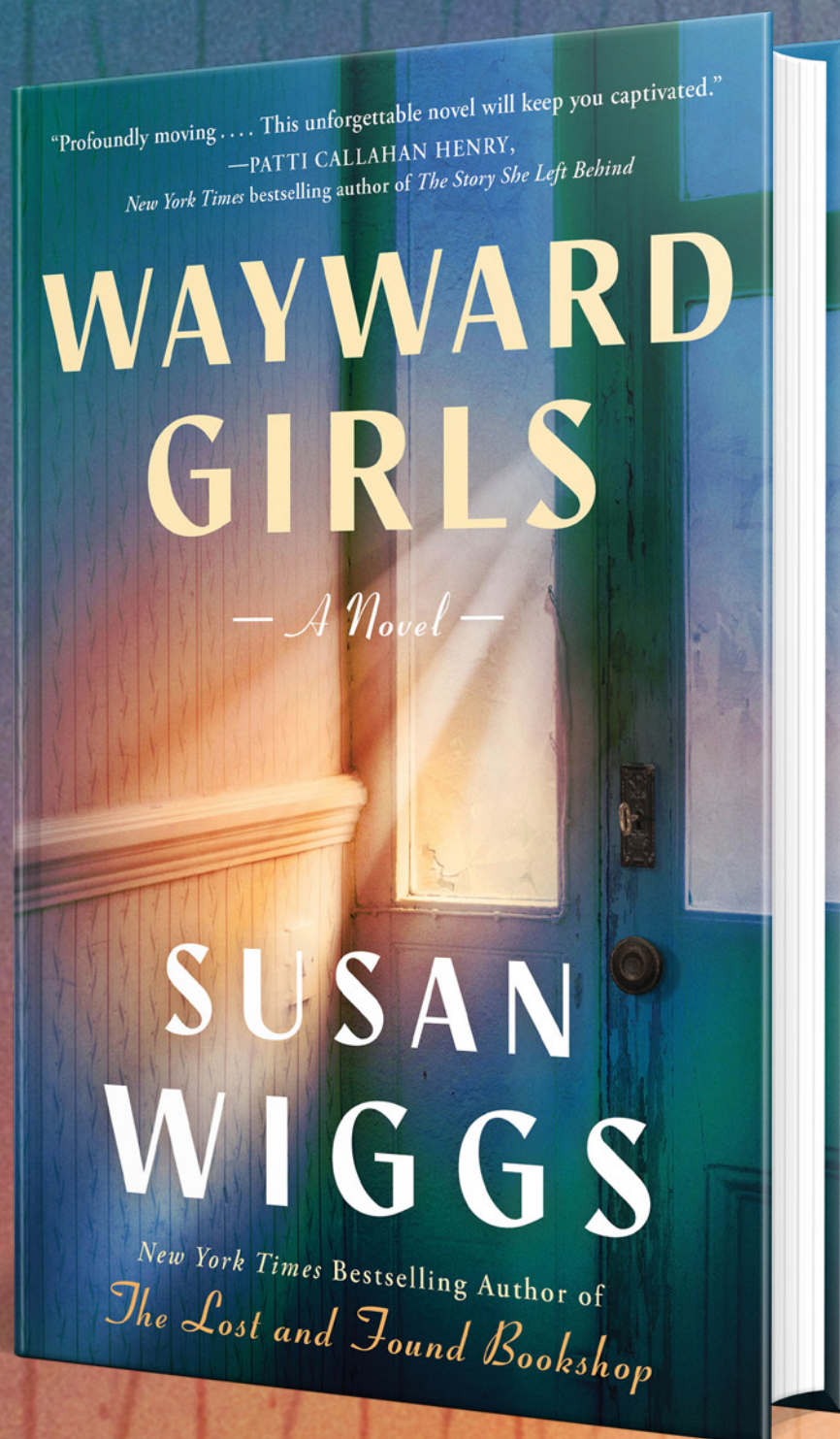


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"Profoundly moving . . . This unforgettable novel will keep you captivated."

—PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY,

New York Times bestselling author of *The Story She Left Behind*

WAYWARD GIRLS

— A Novel —

SUSAN
WIGGS

New York Times Bestselling Author of
The Lost and Found Bookshop

A NOTE FROM SUSAN WIGGS

I grew up in a small town in western New York, not far from Buffalo, but we moved overseas when I was a child. I never went back until 2021, when my big brother and I embarked on a journey to revisit our childhood haunts. Jon was facing a terminal diagnosis, and this nostalgic trip was an item on his bucket list.

When we visited the church of our youth, vivid memories of Jon as an altar boy flooded back—especially the time his sleeve caught fire from the incense thurible. You might notice a dramatized version of this incident early in the novel!

This moment sparked a deeper exploration into the impact of the Catholic Church in the 60's and 70's. My research led me to a forbidding stone complex at 485 Best Street in Buffalo that had once been a Magdalene Laundry—a place where “wayward girls” were sent to be “reformed” by strict nuns. Teenage girls were forced into slave labor and some delivered babies without proper medical care—babies that were stolen from them and put up for adoption. Though vaguely aware of the “laundries” in Ireland, I was shocked to learn they existed throughout the US as well.

As a child, I remember more than one babysitter who “went away,” a euphemism for girls sent into hiding when they became pregnant. The more I learned, the more deeply I felt the helpless pain and rage of these young women. Their stories ignited my imagination, and *Wayward Girls* became one of my most personal and involving novels to date. I hope my passion for this topic touches readers’ hearts and inspires important conversations about our past treatment of young women, and—as Jodi Picoult points out—is a cautionary tale for today.

When I published my first novel in 1987 (!!!), I came to understand that, although the writer labors alone while creating the work, her success depends entirely on a vital partner in the creative process—the reader. Because a story only comes to life once it makes its way into the reader’s hands. She brings her own experience, taste, and point of view to the story, completing the circle.

I can’t begin to describe the sense of validation that comes from knowing my book has been selected by a reader browsing in the bookstore or library. It’s humbling to know someone has chosen my novel from the overwhelming flood of titles, and that she’s given her precious time to read my story.

When a reader recommends a book to her book club, it stands out. A personal word-of-mouth endorsement carries more weight than a hundred algorithm-driven recommendations. That’s why book clubs are such a powerful and vital part of the life cycle of a book.

Wayward Girls is a book I’ve wanted to write for a long time. It’s a story of female empowerment, justice, and all the loves that enrich a woman’s life. It’s filled with nostalgia, music, danger, and the indomitable will of a group of women united by a bond that spans fifty years. I hope it inspires many lively conversations among readers.

Best wishes,
Susan Wiggs

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WAYWARD GIRLS DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. At the start of the book, we learn that Mairin “just wanted to be a person of consequence living a life that mattered. A person making her mark on the world.” What did that look like for a young woman in 1960s Buffalo? Do you think she’s achieved her dreams by the end of the book?
 2. What did you make of the scene where Mairin’s mother and stepfather drop her off at the Good Shepherd? What about the sudden revelation that both Mairin’s mother and stepfather had done their own time in similar Catholic institutions?
 3. When we first meet Sister Bernadette, Angela says, “Imagine being here as an inmate, and then deciding to stay.” Why did Sister Bernadette choose to spend her life with the Sisters of Charity, even knowing what was happening at the Good Shepherd? How does she evolve over the course of the book? Do you think she regrets her choices? Should she?
 4. Why do the wayward girls cut their hair? Does that act send them down the path that ultimately leads to their escape?
 5. Sister Gerard defends her embezzling to Sister Bernadette by telling her, “The diocese has enough we fail to secure our future, what will become of we’re old, no one will take care of us unless we act now to plan for our future.” Is that a valid justification? Are the nuns themselves also vulnerable within the Church’s power structure, even as they abuse the girls in their care?
 6. At Heyday Farm, after escaping the Good Shepherd, Mairin “realized there were all kinds of ways to be wayward. And all kinds of ways to be lost.” Does that realization help her move on? Do the many different people who wash up at the farm reflect something larger about American society in the Vietnam era?
 7. When Mairin learns the truth about her mother’s past, she reflects: “Now that she finally understood what had made Mam this way, she realized her mother was a wayward girl. Like her.” Did that revelation change how you felt about Mrs. Davis, or her choice to send Mairin to the Good Shepherd? What did it change for Mairin?
 8. In the present-day storyline, we learn what’s become of each of the wayward girls in the decades since their escape. How were you affected by those discoveries?
 9. Two of Mairin’s friends, Janice Dunn and Kevin Doyle, became a nun and a priest. Do they represent a different side of the Catholic Church than the one the wayward girls experienced at the Good Shepherd? Are they able to change from inside the institution?
 10. Did the wayward girls gain anything by visiting Sisters Rotrude and Bernadette in their retirement home? How would you have handled that encounter if you’d been in their shoes?
 11. Ultimately, do the wayward girls receive justice for what they suffered at the Good Shepherd? What else, if anything, do you think they and other victims deserved? Do you know of similar injustices that have come to light in your own community?
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THE WAYWARD GIRLS PLAYLIST

While researching and writing the novel, I had to re-create the 60's for myself in order to build the world of Mairin O'Hara and the other girls of 1968 Buffalo. It was the era of a new style of music, the kind parents couldn't stand ("Turn off that noise!") and the kind young people embraced. 1968 was an incredible year for music. I was amazed at how many songs endure today. Here are a few samples:

"Mrs. Robinson" by Simon & Garfunkel—featured in chapter 1 of *Wayward Girls*, this song was originally written for the film "The Graduate." It's an affecting commentary on American values and nostalgia.

On page one of the book, we meet a woman named Everly, who explains that she was named for her adoptive mother's favorite singing duo—the Everly Brothers. **"All I Have to Do Is Dream"** is their most iconic song.

"Hey Jude" by the Beatles—Perhaps the defining song of the year, with its unforgettable "na na na" coda and McCartney's emotional delivery. It was written for John Lennon's son Julian during his parents' divorce.

"Angel of the Morning" recorded by Merrilee Rush was a song waiked into countless hairbrushes by countless little girls!

"Aquarius/Let the Sun Shine In" by the 5th dimension embodies the free spirit of the 60s.

"(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay" by Otis Redding - Released shortly after Redding's tragic death, this melancholic masterpiece became the first posthumous #1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100.

"Love Child" by Diana Ross and the Supremes hints at one of the themes in the novel.

"Born To Be Wild" by Steppenwolf—An anthem of rebellion that introduced the term "heavy metal," and the lyrics definitely apply to the girls in the novel!

"Astronomy Domine" by Pink Floyd featured Syd Barrett, who had to leave the group due to mental illness. But this song was like nothing people had ever heard before.

"Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd is a personal favorite. While writing *Wayward Girls*, I lost my brother—my first hero—to pancreatic cancer. This song was my anthem to him.

"I Heard It Through The Grapevine" by Marvin Gaye—The haunting vocals and iconic bassline inspired Odessa, a character in the book.

"White Room" by Cream—With its distinctive wah-wah guitar and psychedelic lyrics, this represented the peak of late-60s rock experimentation.

"Jumpin' Jack Flash" by The Rolling Stones—This marked the Stones' return to their blues-rock roots after their psychedelic period, with one of Keith Richards' most memorable riffs.

"Light My Fire" by José Feliciano—His cover of the Doors' song showed how a radical reinterpretation could create something entirely new.

"Crimson and Clover" by Tommy James and the Shondells embodies the sound of the early 60s.

"Let's Spend the Night Together" by the Rolling Stones can be heard in a key scene in *Wayward Girls*.

At the close of the novel, we hear a song from an even earlier time, **"Runaway"** by Del Shannon.

Here's a link to an expanded playlist that inspired me while writing *Wayward Girls*.



<https://open.spotify.com/>
