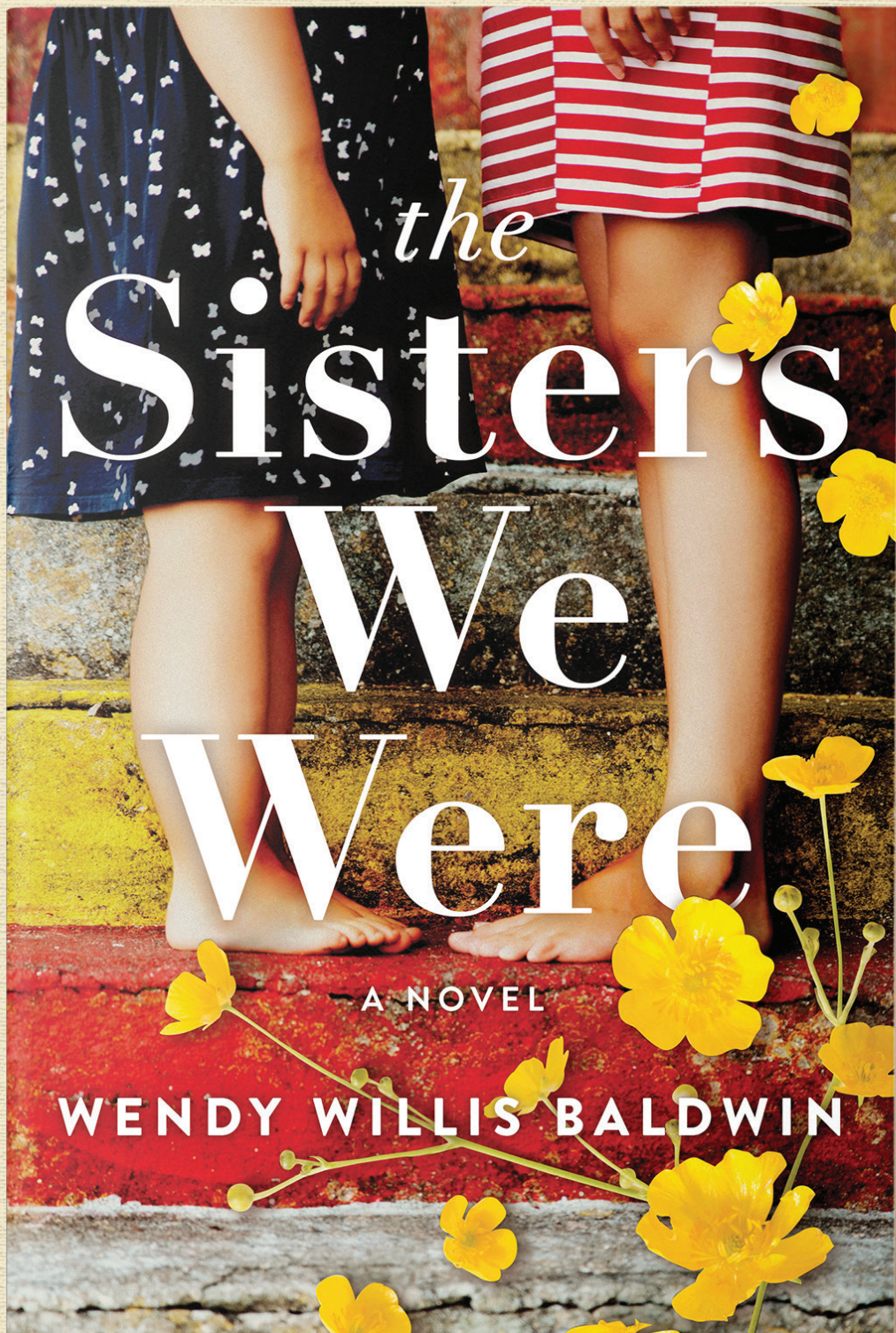


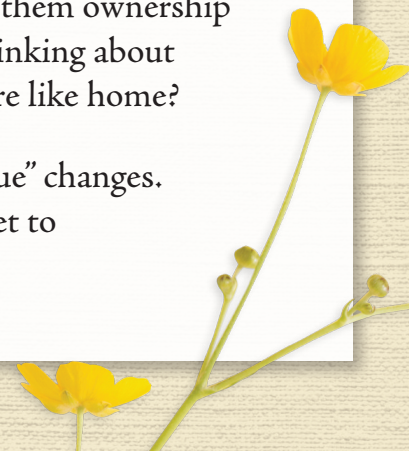
Reading Group Guide



the Sisters We Were

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Why does Pearl reach her limit and decide to make changes when she reaches 531 pounds?
2. Many people in Pearl's life assume that if she just tried one thing or another, she would be able to drop her weight. Why are acquaintances, and even strangers, so comfortable giving her unsolicited advice? What changes besides the surgery actually help Pearl?
3. At her heaviest, Pearl feels incredibly dehumanized in public spaces. How does our diet-obsessed culture moralize weight and work against positive health outcomes for everyone?
4. Pearl's childhood trauma manifests visibly in her weight. How did Ruby's manifest?
5. One thing Pearl and Ruby agree on is that Birdie gave Skip too many second chances. What do you think was the biggest factor that kept Birdie in that marriage? Why did she snap so completely on the night of the murder?
6. When thinking about their negative experiences as children, Ruby blames their mother and Pearl blames herself. What connection do you see between the person each sister blames and her coping mechanisms?
7. Toasting Pearl, Perry says, "We are all only one decision away from a totally different life." What was the last decision you made that really changed your life?
8. Compare Pearl's and Ruby's support systems at the beginning of the book and the end. How did developing those resources change their trajectories?
9. Renovating Birdie's house helps Pearl and Ruby bond and also brings them ownership over their lives. How does your environment shape your mindset? Thinking about where you live now, what one small renovation would make it feel more like home?
10. After their garage sale, Pearl and Ruby discuss the idea of "long overdue" changes. What conclusion do they come to? How would you apply that mindset to changes in your own life?



the Sisters We Were

A Conversation with the Author

WENDY WILLIS BALDWIN

What was the inspiration for *The Sisters We Were*? What was the first thing you did when you started writing the book?

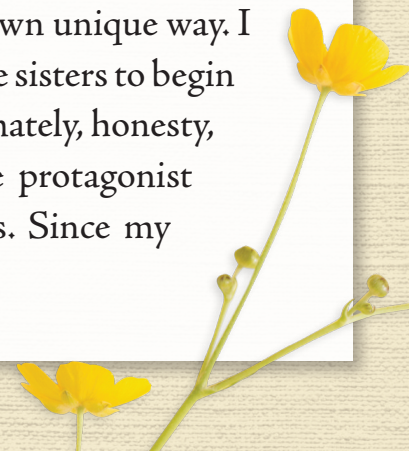
When the initial idea for this story began to germinate, my sister and I had just reconciled after a long period of estrangement. The polarity of our personalities and coping strategies had me reflecting on sisterhood in general. I've always been fascinated by the elasticity of sibling relationships—how they expand and contract over time. My own sister's dramatic weight loss was sort of symbolic of this. So naturally, she was the first person I consulted with my concept for this book. At the time, I was living in Middleburg, Virginia. My sister was visiting from Texas, and we were on a five-mile walk together along the bucolic banks of Goose Creek. That power walk on Crenshaw Road was the first time we had done something so physical and sweaty together since high school. It felt triumphant—both of us moving at the same pace. Once I had her blessing, I created the characters of Pearl and Ruby Crenshaw, and the story emerged from there.



photo credit harper leigh

Though much less visible to the world, Ruby's anger is as toxic as Pearl's obesity. How did you approach healing each sister as you wrote? Was one more difficult than the other?

Healing is very much a process, and both sisters come at this in their own unique way. I liked the idea of using Pearl's very visible health crisis as a catalyst for the sisters to begin to heal the wounds we can't see. Through humility, empathy, and, ultimately, honesty, we get to see their sister bond restored and renewed. I wanted the protagonist to be Pearl because the world needs more big, unassuming heroines. Since my



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own personality is a bit more like Ruby's, it was somewhat harder for me to show her development because it forced me to look at myself in ways I would rather not.

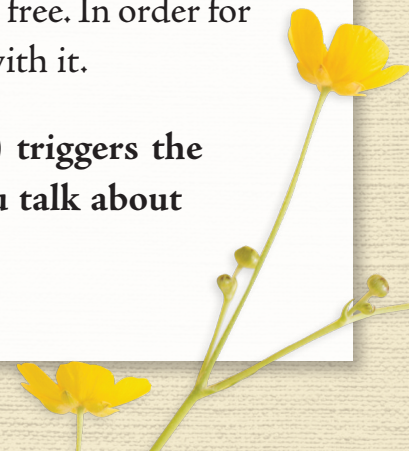
At the outset of the book, Pearl dreads asking Ruby for help because she's received such unhelpful advice from her sister in the past. What change allowed Ruby to see the help that Pearl actually needed and to rebuild her compassion for her sister?

Going home to the house on Cherry Lane for reasons she would rather not share with Pearl makes Ruby vulnerable. It's this vulnerability, both of them being unsure and afraid, that forces them to, once again, cling to each other. Initially, the level of disrepair in the house serves as a metaphor for Pearl's own dysfunction—but all of that is just symptomatic of what's really going on. Not until hidden truths are revealed is their sisterly intimacy reestablished. Ruby's compassion for Pearl grows as she begins to face the reality that their shared childhood secrets have taken such a physical toll on Pearl's health.

Pearl and Henry both correlate childhood trauma with adult obesity. What resources do you think could reduce that correlation?

Secrets are heavy. As victims of childhood sexual abuse, my sister and I understand the insidious nature of shame and how it can manifest in our lives and in our bodies. This story explores that topic and how, in the absence of their biological father and mother, Pearl and Ruby Crenshaw were left to cope as best they could. As a writer, I'm very intrigued by the wide variance that exists between how people respond to adversity. For Pearl, her disordered eating spiraled out of control, and her weight increasingly insulated her from facing her deepest wounds. There are several themes in this story, but certainly chief among them is the notion that truth really can set us free. In order for Pearl to let go of the stuff that weighed her down, she had to reckon with it.

Pearl's decision to have bariatric surgery (not the surgery itself) triggers the snowball of positive changes we see throughout the book. Can you talk about why it was so important for those changes to be mindset-driven?



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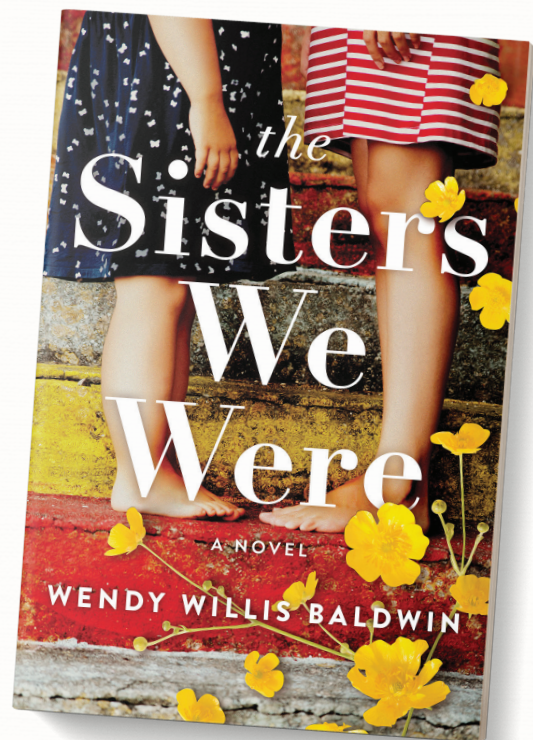
For Pearl, it took waiting until the stakes were extremely high, almost do or die, before she made up her mind to have such life-altering surgery. Because her weight had become such a disability, the very prospect of bariatric surgery forces Pearl to weigh her sense of worth. The grueling process she goes through to get to the surgery and beyond are glimpses of a young woman declaring her value. She decides she is, in fact, worth the effort. With each courageous step into the unknown, this is affirmed for her, and we see her life change well beyond the physical transformation. Pearl's decision to have bariatric surgery was never about making a change so that others might love her more, but rather it's about Pearl finally learning to love herself.

The Austin setting really comes alive as Ruby and Pearl dare each other to try new things. What drew you to set the story there?

As a native Texan and someone who grew up in Austin and Dallas, it was a natural canvas for me. Write what we know, right?

Who are your biggest inspirations as a writer?

I can't possibly name them all, but for a long time, my favorite novel has been Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—so short but so mighty. Beyond that, I savor the work of writers like Ann Patchett, Maria Semple, Barbara Kingsolver, Kiese Laymon, Wally Lamb, Dave Eggers, Junot Díaz, John Green, Kate Elizabeth Russell, and Susan Choi.



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Word Game

Nobody knows us better than our sisters—whether yours is biological or honorary, have some fill-in-the-blank fun!

1. You can't judge a book by its cover, but you can judge your sister by her _____ (article of clothing).
2. When we were young, I was like _____ (cooking spice) and my sister was like _____ (cooking spice).
3. Throwing fits is fine, just don't throw _____ (article of clothing, plural).
4. My sister's fantasy dream date is with _____ (celebrity).
5. Next to Texas and Indonesia, my sister's favorite place is _____ (piece of furniture).
6. The stuff we hold on to says more about us than our _____ (hairstyle).
7. My sister is a real gem when she _____ (activity, plural).
8. Secrets aren't good for your health but _____ (dance move, plural) are.

Go ahead, Sister! Spill some tea and post your silly reading guide on Instagram and tag @bookmarked and @awendyway!



the Sisters We Were

Pearl & Ruby's Playlist

Unwritten—Natasha Bedingfield

Barbie Girl—Aqua

Victoria's Secret—Jax

Good as Hell—Lizzo

We Are Family—Sister Sledge

Crowded Table—The Highwomen

The Dance—Garth Brooks

Sisters—Rosemary Clooney

She's Like Texas—Josh Abbott Band

Heavy—Bird talker

Patience—The Lumineers

Banks—NEEDTOBREATHE

The Climb—Miley Cyrus

Landslide—The Chicks

Just Breathe—Willie & Lukas Nelson

Turpentine—Brandi Carlile

Who Will Save Your Soul—Jewel

Bicycle Race—Queen

Scars to Your Beautiful—Alessia Cara

Rise Up—Andra Day

Perfect to Me—Anne-Marie

My Skin—Lizzo

Miles and Miles of Texas—Asleep at the Wheel

Older Sister—Carly Simon

When We Grow Up—Diana Ross

Better Together—Jack Johnson

Beautiful Thing—Grace VanderWaal

For Good—Kristen Chenoweth & Idina Menzel

Lean on Me—Joshua Radin

I Won't Let Go—Rascal Flatts

Listen here!

