

The Life She Was Given

by Ellen Marie Wiseman

Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of the book, Lilly has never stepped foot outside the attic of Blackwood Manor. Yet she dreams of escaping and exploring the outside world. What effect do you think being locked up for the first ten years of her life had on her? Do you think it's possible for a child in that situation to develop normally? When Momma finally lets her out, Lilly is frightened and wants to return to the attic. Why do you think she feels that way?

2. Julia was brought up believing bad things would happen if she didn't behave. What effect do you think that belief had on her relationships with other people? Do you think she was a people pleaser? Why or why not? How do you think she changed over the course of the novel? What were the most important events that facilitated those changes?

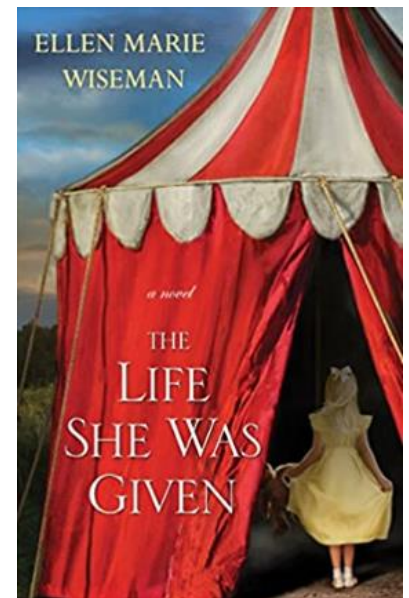
3. Momma is strict, cold, and physically abusive. But even after she sells Lilly to the circus sideshow, Lilly still loves and misses her. Do you think that's realistic? Why or why not?

4. Julia can't help but study the interactions between mothers and daughters. She is drawn to watching people who clearly love each other, especially parents and their children whose faces light up with affection and recognition of their unconditional love. She wonders what that feels like. How do you think that fascination with parental love effected her decisions concerning the horses at Blackwood Farm? What events revealed how she felt about them?

5. How much of a role do you think religion played in Momma's decision to keep Lilly locked in the attic? How much of a role do you think shame played? Have you ever heard stories of parents hiding their mentally or physically handicapped children in an attic or back bedroom? Do you think that still happens today?

6. Before she knows the truth, Julia briefly wonders if Lilly would have been better off if she had "gotten help". What do you think would have happened to Lilly if she had been sent away instead of locked in the attic? Considering the time period of the story, would she have been better off or worse? Why?

7. How long did it take for you to figure out what was "wrong" with Lilly? Were you surprised when you learned the truth? What do you think the real reason was behind Momma's decision to sell Lilly to the sideshow? Was it money, or something else?



8. When Momma takes Lilly out of the house the first time, she gives her a jacket despite the fact that she's selling her to the circus and it's a warm summer night. Why do you think she does it? What do you think it means, if anything? What do you think would have happened to Lilly if she had been able to get away from Momma that night? Would she have survived? How?

9. Why do you think Julia was so determined to take good care of the horses and the farm? Why do you think she wanted to prove herself to Claude?

10. Lilly feels like she has a lot in common with the circus animals. Why do you think that is? What does she have in common with Pepper? What about Jojo? Is there a difference between what she has in common with each of them?

11. Both Momma and Merrick used fear to keep Lilly from trying to escape. In what ways did they use it similarly? In what ways did they use it differently?

12. Claude knew the truth about Lilly all along. Why do you think he kept it a secret? Do you agree with his reasoning? What would you have done if you saw Momma taking Lilly into the woods, then coming back without her? What do you think made Claude change his mind about telling Julia the truth? How did you feel about him in the beginning of the book? How did you feel about him at the end?

13. Lilly goes from being locked in an attic to performing in front of thousands of people. What fears did she need to conquer to make that transition? What other changes did she make to survive in the circus? What aspects of her earlier life do you think were hardest for her to overcome?

14. In the 1870's, P.T. Barnum was one of the first showmen to take a collection of oddities and human marvels on the road with his circus. Back then, the sideshow created quite a sensation and became a popular form of entertainment. In the heyday of the sideshow, human curiosities were respected as the bread and butter of the circus, and revered all over the world. The freaks were royalty, not victims or monsters. Certainly there was exploitation, as in the case of Daisy and Violet Hilton, Siamese twins who were kept in a cage, beaten, and passed down in their aunt's estate like a piece of old jewelry. But for the most part, the sideshow provided the opportunity for people who couldn't make a living in the traditional ways to stand on their own two feet, instead of slowly dying in institutions. Eventually the appeal of sideshows declined due to various factors, including increased medical knowledge, political correctness, and the belief that disease and abnormalities should evoke pity rather than wonder. Have you ever been to a sideshow? How did it make you feel? What do you think of people brave enough to expose their vulnerabilities to the world? If you were born with an anomaly or deformity, would you be willing to let people stare at you to make a living?

15. What did you think of Lilly's father when you first met him? How did your perception of him change over the course of the book? What could he have done differently? He attends the circus once a year to see Lilly, but she never knows he's there. How did you feel when he showed up in her tent? Were you surprised by his confession at the end of the story?

16. Pepper is based on a real elephant, Mary, who was hanged by the neck from a railcar-mounted industrial crane in 1916 for killing an inexperienced trainer after he prodded her behind the ear with a hook when she reached down to nibble on a watermelon rind. The first attempt to hang Mary resulted in a snapped chain, causing Mary to fall and break her hip as dozens of children fled in terror. The gravely wounded elephant died during a second attempt at execution and was buried beside the tracks. A veterinarian examined Mary after the hanging and determined she had a severely infected tooth in the precise spot where the trainer had prodded her. When Pepper kills Merrick for trying to take Jojo, Lilly is devastated because she knows Pepper is going to be punished. She hates the fact that people get mad at animals for acting like animals. Her worst fears come true when the crowd wants Pepper killed and Mr. Barlow makes the decision to execute her. Do you think animals should be killed for injuring or killing humans? Does it depend on the circumstance, for instance, if an animal is being caged, forced to perform, or a human threatens the animal's young or encroaches on its territory? Do you think it's okay to kill an animal based solely on its potential to be dangerous?

17. What do you think Lilly's life would have been like if Momma had never sold her to the circus? How long do you think she would have lived in the attic? Do you think she would have eventually escaped? How? What would you have done if you were in that situation?

18. Besides honoring Lilly, why do you think Julia started the horse rescue?? What do you think Julia's life was like after she discovered the truth about her family?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)