

The Home for Unwanted Girls

Harper Perennial

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Introduction

Philomena meets *The Orphan Train* in this suspenseful, provocative novel filled with love, secrets, and deceit—the story of a young unwed mother who is forcibly separated from her daughter at birth and the lengths to which they go to find each other.



In 1950s Quebec, French and English tolerate each other with precarious civility—much like Maggie Hughes' parents. Maggie's English-speaking father has ambitions for his daughter that don't include marriage to the poor French boy on the next farm over. But Maggie's heart is captured by Gabriel Phénix. When she becomes pregnant at fifteen, her parents force her to give baby Elodie up for adoption and get her life 'back on track'.

Elodie is raised in Quebec's impoverished orphanage system. It's a precarious enough existence that takes a tragic turn when Elodie, along with thousands of other orphans in Quebec, is declared mentally ill as the result of a new law that provides more funding to psychiatric hospitals than to orphanages. Bright and determined, Elodie withstands abysmal treatment at the nuns' hands, finally earning her freedom at seventeen, when she is thrust into an alien, often unnerving world.

Maggie, married to a businessman eager to start a family, cannot forget the daughter she was forced to abandon, and a chance reconnection with Gabriel spurs a wrenching choice. As time passes, the stories of Maggie and Elodie intertwine but never touch, until Maggie realizes she must take what she wants from life and go in search of her long-lost daughter, finally reclaiming the truth that has been denied them both.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the prologue (or poem at the start of the book) frame the rest of the novel? How does it relate to the book's themes?
2. What would Elodie's life have been like if she hadn't been given up?
3. What would Maggie's life have been like if she hadn't had Elodie?
4. If you were presented with the same choice as Maggie, would you do the same?

5. Are Maggie's father's actions justified? Do you forgive him?
6. What draws Maggie to her first husband? What does her marriage to her first husband say about her relationship to her family and heritage?
7. What does "The Home for Unwanted Girls" mean? What does it mean for a child to be "unwanted" in this context?
8. How do Maggie's and Elodie's abusers justify their actions? How has this shaped both women?
9. What do you think of Gabriel? Do you understand his perspective? Is he a healthy partner for Maggie?
10. What are your thoughts on Maggie's mother? Is she another abuser, or a devoted mother who has made mistakes?
11. How does Maggie change from the start of the novel? From a teenager to an adult? Do you admire her at the end of the book?
12. The book shifts between mother and daughter. How does this change your understanding of the book? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story in this way?
13. How do you feel about the nun who kept Maggie and Elodie apart? How do Maggie, Elodie, and Gabriel cope with her cruelty?
14. What do you think of the ending? Do you feel optimistic about their future?
15. How do Elodie, Maggie, and Maggie's mother approach motherhood? How does motherhood change how they think of themselves?