

Book Review: Shelterwood  
By Lisa Wingate

Thanks to NetGalley and Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, for this advance reader's copy, in exchange for an honest review. "Shelterwood" is scheduled for publication in June 2024.

My introduction to author Lisa Wingate came from reading "Before We Were Yours," a phenomenal novel that has sold more than one million copies. And therein lies the problem. Everything I read by Wingate I compare to "Before We Were Yours," which, of course, is not fair. But I'm human.

As such, while I liked aspects of "Shelterwood," there was much I was disappointed with. The story focuses on the plight of the Choctaw Indians – specifically, the young children who were often orphaned – in Oklahoma 1909, and alternates with a 1990 timeline and the work of Law Enforcement Ranger Valerie Boren-O'Dell, a newly appointed member of the National Park Service and single parent.

At the outset, the skeletal remains of three young girls are found in a cave within the confines of the soon-to-be-opened Horsethief Trail National Park (fictitious). That sets up an interesting premise, especially as the 1909 timeline introduces readers to sisters Olive, age 11, and Nessa, age 7, as they flee into the woods from their malicious stepfather. Do some of the remains found in the cave belong to Olive and Nessa?

The problem, however, is that shortly thereafter the narrative bogs down within both timelines: the search for missing people in 1990; and the growing troop of orphaned children Olive and Nessa encounter while on the run in 1909. Together with some long-winded political speeches over the plight of orphaned children, it's easy to find oneself

wondering, where is this story going? When is it finally going to get there? And, what do these two timelines have to do with one another?

Wingate's writing is excellent as she depicts the forests and rugged terrain the band of orphans must traverse, but it becomes information overload at some points. While Wingate's research is thorough as always, there are parts that may be over-researched. It then becomes easy to forget about those skeletal remains found in the cave.

Of course, the two timelines mesh near the end as the crux of the story becomes clearer. But it's revealed in a retelling by an old Choctaw woman rather than the natural flow of the story, the latter of which (I think) would have made for more interesting reading. It certainly would have given me more of an emotional attachment to the children whose plight is truly tragic.

I give "Shelterwood" 3.5 out of 5 stars. I still enjoy Wingate's work, but once you've hit the top of the mountain ("Before We Were Yours"), there's only one direction to go from there.