

Reading Group Guide

1. How do you think Mary Davenport's disquieting upbringing—her mother's miscarriages and sadness, her father's coldness and Mary's isolation on the plantation—has affected her role as a mother and wife?
2. The Boy Scout movement that John Henry Davenport so admires was founded in England in 1908. Baden-Powell wrote *Scouting for Boys* for use by existing youth groups, but his book was an immediate success and people set up Boy Scout troops across the world. What, do you think, was it about the Scouts that so appealed to people like John Henry during this era?
3. At Sheriff and Mrs. Bird's house in Mobile, John Henry agrees when Mary declares the boy is theirs. Was he right to put his wife's happiness and health above the truth? Was that, in fact, what he was doing?
4. George Davenport was seven years old and Paul was six when their brother went missing in the forest. How would this episode in their lives change the type of people they become? How do you think they understand the choice their parents have made?
5. What was it about John Henry's deception in the library that spurred Esmeralda to take the enormous risk of travelling to the Pennys' farm at night: her sense of justice, concern for the boy, identification with the mother or some combination of those things? Would you have done the same in her position?
6. In real life, the Orphan Trains movement transported an estimated 200-250,000 orphaned and homeless children from crowded and dangerous East Coast cities of the United States to rural parts of the Midwest and South, from 1854 to 1929. While *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and *Pollyanna* (1913) offered up happy endings for rehoused orphans, the true stories weren't all as cheery. Do you think this was a good approach to housing hundreds of thousands of homeless children? Was Mason right to suggest the Davenports take in a train orphan?
7. Mary and Grace Mill meet for the first time in the hallway outside the Opelousas courtroom. Do you imagine that moment might have gone differently had there been no other people there?
8. Ned Mill won't be a child forever. Do you think that as a young man he might seek out his mother, despite what John Henry said about her not wanting him?
9. Do you think Grace and Sheriff Sherman might end up together? Would she be able to forgive him for not believing her earlier on?

10. At the end of the novel Tom decides he can do better—be better—and leaves the bar with a head full of steam. Where do you think he goes and why?
11. On April 6, 1917, America joined the Great War. How do you think that might affect the characters in *Lost Boy Found*? Would Tom, Eddie or the sheriff have signed up? How would it have changed the lives of the women, if at all?
12. In the true story of Bobby Dunbar, the lost boy's descendants conducted a DNA test in 2004. It revealed that the boy had been given to the wrong family. How would you react if you discovered your ancestors had effectively kidnapped another woman's son?

AUTHOR ESSAY

ON INSPIRATION AND RESEARCH

LOST BOY FOUND is a novel, but it was inspired by a true story I encountered on a podcast. *The Ghost of Bobby Dunbar* originally aired as an episode of NPR's *This American Life* in 2008. I didn't hear it when it first aired, but the episode was popular enough that they rebroadcast it in 2012. That was my introduction to the story of the four-year-old lost-then-found Louisiana boy who was claimed by two mothers in the mid-1910s.

The story is fascinating, but it raised questions for me: How could a woman not recognize her own son? Why didn't the boy tell them who he was? The podcast also delved into how the family's descendants were dealing with the discovery that, thanks to a DNA test in 2004, their ancestors had essentially kidnapped another woman's child, which raised both ethical and personal identity issues.

The NPR podcast creators Tal McThenia and Margaret Dunbar Cutright wrote a nonfiction book on the Bobby Dunbar story called *A Case for Solomon*. While I enjoyed it, it left me wondering. My head wanted to work with the gaps in the story to imagine what might happen if I put some extra characters in the mix, moved the story a little closer to the start of the First World War, and talked about some of the other issues that were important at that time. What I really wanted to do was combine fictional versions of the past and present stories—the vanishing, the rediscovery, a town divided over which mother was telling the truth, and the modern-day discovery of what had been willfully lost over the years...

I tried, and I failed. Annoyingly, everyone agreed that I'd failed. My agent didn't think it was working, a freelance editor didn't think it was working, and then a savvy American friend-

of-a-friend told me I had two books on my hands and that I should begin by telling the historic tale on its own. So, I took my braided 80,000-word manuscript and pulled it apart into two separate documents, strand by strand. I put the modern story (about 40,000 words long and smattered with song lyrics, photos, obscure pithy quotes) to one side and set about telling the historical story from the beginning, reading and researching along the way, reimagining the characters and the place, until it felt like its own novel. I hadn't set out to write a purely historical book, but the American reader's advice was right: This was its own story.

I made a conscious decision not to travel to Louisiana. *Lost Boy Found* begins in 1913, and I worried that seeing the modern-day Opelousas, New Orleans, and its surrounds would obscure the historical image I held so clearly in my head.

Instead, I researched intensively. The years from 1890 to the early 1920s are labeled the Progressive Era because so much changed. It was an incredibly significant time, with massive social and cultural shifts, the First World War (1914–1918, with the US entering it in 1917), the beginning of many technologies we now take for granted...

These things were invented during the Progressive Era: airplanes, crossword puzzles, stainless steel, zippers, bras, mousetraps, assembly lines, windshield wipers, electric blankets, parachutes, Formica, the Model T Ford, and traffic lights.

Music of the time included ragtime, Tin Pan Alley songs, the earliest versions of Jazz. There was a fledgling and overdue recognition of African-American musicians and gospel music in the South (though much of it was never recorded). It was an incredibly inventive time for traditional music including classical (the audience in Paris rioted when Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" was first performed there in May 1913) and opera.

I read widely about topics from the Civil War to the bird life of Louisiana, from Jim Crow laws to women's suffrage, from the early years of the First World War to Southern music and cuisine.

I read fiction from the time: Edith Wharton, D.H. Lawrence, Jack London, Beatrix Potter and Mark Twain. I also read plenty of nonfiction: *Scouting for Boys*, John Muir's nature tracts, and books about the era such as Florian Illies's *1913: The Year Before the Storm*. I read old newspapers and magazines that I found online, too. (I cannot recommend this enough, just for fun.)

Films of the time featured Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Buster Keaton, with directors including Cecile B. de Mille and D.W. Griffith. I watched more silent films than I needed to and revisited *Gone with the Wind* with freshly critical eyes.

And though I know the internet can be terrible, I can't imagine how much more difficult it would have been to research what people wore and drove in 1913 America, how much they earned, and what the laws of the day were without it. I spent hours learning about things that amounted to no more than a single line in the book, and I don't regret a minute of it.

I didn't give up on the modern story, by the way. There's something too interesting in the idea of discovering an entirely different version of one's family history and having to consider what it means for the here-and-now. Are we responsible for the actions of our forebears? Do their choices change who we are?

To my mind, the human experience makes no sense without exploring the stories from our past, imagining those from our future, and being clear-eyed and honest about our present.