

middle country

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*...to wish you well!*

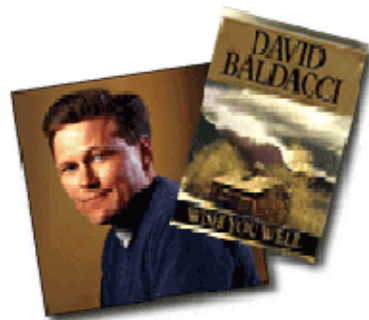
# Reader's Guide 2009

for

## *Wish You Well*

by

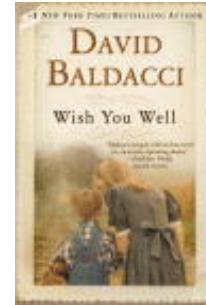
## David Baldacci



# Wish You Well

A Novel

by David Baldacci



## About the Book

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**Wish You Well** is the story of Louisa Mae Cardinal, a precocious twelve-year-old girl living in the hectic New York City of 1940 with her acclaimed but sadly underpaid writer father, her compassionate mother, and her timid young brother, Oz. Lou is completely unaware of her family's financial struggles. In Lou's uncomplicated view of the world, she is simply a daughter who idolizes her father and is in love with the art of storytelling.

Then, in a single, terrifying moment, Lou's life is changed forever, and she and Oz find themselves on a train rolling away from New York and into the mountains of Virginia. There, Lou's mother will fight a long, slow battle against death. And there, Lou and Oz will be raised by their remarkable great-grandmother Louisa.

Lou finds herself coming of age in a culture that could not be more foreign to her, but which pushes her to discover new meaning and beauty in the world. On her great-grandmother's farm, on the land her father loved and wrote about, Lou finds her first true friend. She learns lessons in loyalty, tragedy, and redemption. When a destructive force threatens their new home, Lou and Oz are caught up in a struggle for justice and survival that plays out in a crowded Virginia courtroom. This is where they finally learn the lessons their father spent his life trying to communicate – lessons about family, home, faith and love.

## Discussion Questions

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- 1.** How does the theme of wishing tie in to the book? What does it mean to make a wish?
- 2.** Diamond informs Lou and Oz that in order for their wishes to come true they must give up "the most grandest, importantest thing they got in the whole dang world." When he wishes for their mother's recovery, Oz chooses to leave his bear at the foot of the well. Later, Lou leaves a photograph of herself and her mother by the bear. What do these gifts signify for both children?
- 3.** Lou's father is famous for his novels about the Virginia landscape and culture. What does it mean to tell stories about a location? Is it possible to capture the essence of a place in a novel?
- 4.** Cotton asks Lou, "What do you think about . . . never coming back to your roots so you can be a great writer?" She replies almost immediately: "I think it's too big a price to pay for greatness." Why do you think Lou's father never returned to the mountains? Compare his decision to Lou's statement.
- 5.** "Every lick of coal and gas could disappear from this earth tomorrow, and electricity and phones too, and she'd be just fine," Cotton explains to the men trying to buy Louisa Mae's land. The economy of mountain life is divided between mining and farming. Discuss the exhaustibility of nonrenewable natural resources versus the sustainability of farming. Do we depend on natural resources too much today?
- 6.** Lou and Oz move from bustling New York City to a rural farmhouse without any luxuries. Discuss how their new lifestyle influences their growth.
- 7.** When Lou and Oz drop their mother's letters in the well, they wish for Louisa Mae to return to the courtroom. When Cotton calls for "Miss Louisa Mae Cardinal," Lou, her great-granddaughter and namesake, appears before the court. Do you think their wish came true? Why or why not?
- 8.** Discuss the difference between stories that are written and those shared orally. How do both types of stories shape the characters in the novel?
- 9.** Despite George Davis's cruelty, Louisa assists his wife in a life-threatening birth. She has likewise assisted many other women in the neighborhood. Later, many of the same people she delivered help rebuild her barn. Discuss the sense of community in the mountain town. How does it differ from your own surroundings?
- 10.** "From out of the mouth of babes . . . We should all be so wise," Cotton says of Lou and Oz. Both children are forced to deal with incredible grief at a young age. Is their wisdom linked to their grief? How do they deal with loss?
- 11.** David Baldacci's inspiration for this novel was his family history. What stories have been passed down through generations in your own family? How did your relatives' struggles differ from those of the present generation? How do stories extend through history and influence the present?

## Biography

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David Baldacci was born in Virginia, in 1960, where he currently resides. He received a Bachelor of Arts in political science from Virginia Commonwealth University and a law degree from the University of Virginia. Mr. Baldacci practiced law for nine years in Washington, D.C., as both a trial and corporate lawyer.

David Baldacci has published fifteen novels: *Absolute Power*, *Total Control*, *The Winner*, *The Simple Truth*, *Saving Faith*, *Wish You Well*, *Last Man Standing*, *The Christmas Train*, *Split Second*, *Hour Game*, *The Camel Club*, *The Collectors*, *Simple Genius*, and in his young adult series, *Freddy and the French Fries: Fries Alive!* and *Freddy and the French Fries: The Adventures of Silas Finklebean*. He has also published a novella for the Dutch entitled *Office Hours*, written for Holland's Year 2000 "Month of the Thriller." Baldacci authored a short story, "The Mighty Johns," as part of a mystery anthology published in 2002. His works have been in numerous worldwide magazines, newspapers, journals, and publications. Baldacci has authored seven original screenplays. His books have been translated into more than 40 languages and sold in more than 80 countries. All of his books have been national and international bestsellers. Over 50 million copies of Mr. Baldacci's books are in print worldwide.

David Baldacci's books have been publicly discussed and/or read by everyone from Howard Stern and Don Imus to Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh, from George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton to Charlie Rose and Larry King. Baldacci has made many televisions and radio appearances and has been featured in numerous national and international publications.

David contributes to, and is involved in, several philanthropic efforts. His greatest efforts are currently dedicated to his family's own **Wish You Well Foundation**. The **Wish You Well Foundation**, established by Michelle and David Baldacci, supports family literacy in the United States by fostering and promoting the development and expansion of new and existing literacy and educational programs. Recently the **Wish You Well Foundation** partnered with Feeding America to launch "Feeding Body & Mind". Through "Feeding Body & Mind", hundreds of thousands of new and used books have been collected and distributed through area food banks, helping feed both body and mind. For more information, visit [WishYouWellFoundation.org](http://WishYouWellFoundation.org) and [FeedingBodyandMind.com](http://FeedingBodyandMind.com) or call 703-476-6032.

David Baldacci serves as a national ambassador for the [National Multiple Sclerosis Society](http://NationalMultipleSclerosisSociety.org) and participates in numerous charities, including the [Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy](http://BarbaraBushFoundation.org), the [American Cancer Society](http://AmericanCancerSociety.org), and the [Cystic Fibrosis Foundation](http://CysticFibrosisFoundation.org). He sits on the boards of the [Virginia Foundation for the Humanities](http://VirginiaFoundationfortheHumanities.org) and [Virginia Commonwealth University](http://VirginiaCommonwealthUniversity.edu). Baldacci also holds various honorary chairs.

## Interesting Things to Know About David

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How did you become a writer?

"I started writing very early, in high school. I continued through college and while I pursued a law degree at the University of Virginia. During my years as an active attorney, I wrote in the late evening and anytime I had a spare moment. It was my private passion."

Where do you get your book ideas and themes?

"I am always thinking about and seeking story ideas. As a writer, you can never 'turn off' your passion for the written word and love of a great story. So I watch life, listen intently, and basically drive everyone around me a bit crazy as I absorb every environment in which I find myself. And believe me, being naturally curious uncovers many possible storylines. Writers have to see the world exactly as it is, and then go a step further and realize the potential of what could be there."

Do you conduct your own research?

"For me, doing my own research is essential to the writing process. Until I am in the midst of a chapter, paragraph, or even dialogue between characters, I never know what my research can bring to the story. Bottom line - if I cut corners on being less than thorough with the research, the story will suffer."

What authors or books do you enjoy and admire?

"I admire many of the traditional southern scribes: Flannery O'Connor, Lee Smith, Eudora Welty, Harper Lee, Walker Percy, and Truman Capote. Since college I have been reading and re-reading works by Anne Tyler, and John Irving. I've also been reading Graham Greene and Patricia Highsmith. And I am never far from a well-read copy of Mark Twain."

For more information about David Baldacci and his books, go to his official website, [www.davidbaldacci.com](http://www.davidbaldacci.com).



## Assorted Reviews

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**Publishers Weekly Review:** Baldacci is writing what? That waspish question buzzed around publishing circles when Warner announced that the bestselling author of **The Simple Truth**, **Absolute Power** and other turbo-thrillers--an author generally esteemed more for his plots than for his characters or prose--was trying his hand at mainstream fiction, with a mid-century period novel set in the rural South, no less. Shades of John Grisham and **A Painted House**. But guess what? Clearly inspired by his subject--his maternal ancestors, he reveals in a foreword, hail from the mountain area he writes about here with such strength--Baldacci triumphs with his best novel yet, an utterly captivating drama centered on the difficult adjustment to rural life faced by two children when their New York City existence shatters in an auto accident. That tragedy, which opens the book with a flourish, sees acclaimed but impecunious writer Jack Cardinal dead, his wife in a coma and their daughter, Lou, twelve, and son, Oz, seven, forced to move to the southwestern Virginia farm of their aged great-grandmother, Louisa. Several questions propel the subsequent story with vigor. Will the siblings learn to accept, even to love, their new life? Will their mother regain consciousness? And--in a development that takes the narrative into familiar Baldacci territory for a gripping legal showdown--will Louisa lose her land to industrial interests? Baldacci exults in high melodrama here, and it doesn't always work: the death of one major character will wring tears from the stoniest eyes, but the reappearance of another, though equally hanky-friendly, is outright manipulative. Even so, what the novel offers above all is bone-deep emotional truth, as its myriad characters--each, except for one cartoonish villain, as real as readers' own kin--grapple not just with issues of life and death but with the sufferings and joys of daily existence in a setting detailed with finely attuned attention and a warm sense of wonder. This novel has a huge heart--and millions of readers are going to love it. Agent, Aaron Priest. 600,000 first printing; 3-city author tour; simultaneous Time Warner Audiobook; foreign rights sold in the U.K., Bulgaria, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Holland, Turkey; world Spanish rights sold. (One-day laydown, Oct. 24) Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

**Booklist Review:** Baldacci, a popular writer of thrillers, now writes a more "literary" novel; the results, however, are mixed. Adolescent Louisa May Cardinal, called Lou, is living with her mother, father, and brother, Oz, outside New York City in 1940. An automobile accident results in her father's death, her mother's withdrawal into a catatonic state, and Lou and her brother's move to rural Virginia to live with their paternal great-grandmother. How different life becomes: Lou and Oz are not only answering to someone new but also leading day-to-day lives utterly unlike what they are used to. Food is heavy but all homemade; they learn to ride a horse; school is in a schoolhouse down the road, a long walk away; and chores involve rising early in the morning and turning brown in the hot sun. But Lou and Oz flourish. Then a crisis arises seemingly out of nowhere. The local coal-and-gas company comes sniffing around their great-grandmother's property,

conniving to seize it. Baldacci tells a moving story, and he certainly understands rural Virginia and the people who love living there. Unfortunately, his tale is marred by an overwrought prose style. Nonetheless, if readers can overlook the writing style (and that's a big if), the story might appeal not only to the author's fans but also to readers of coming-of-age fiction. ((Reviewed July 2000)) -- Brad Hooper

**Library Journal Review:** Baldacci (**Total Control**) turns from political thrillers to historical fiction in this affecting novel whose richly textured setting of southwestern Virginia in the 1940s draws on the reminiscences of his mother and grandmother. After a car accident kills their father and leaves their mother unresponsive, 12-year-old Lou Cardinal and her younger brother, Oz, go to live with their great-grandmother Louisa. Wrestling a living from the mountain farm is hard work, but slowly a love for the mountains seeps into Lou's being. The novel's villains are corporations that plunder the mountains' coal and lumber resources before seeking profits elsewhere. Louisa's refusal to sell her land pits her against her impoverished neighbors as well as a powerful company. Defended by a local lawyer and family friend, her case appears hopeless. The denouement may be too tidy, but readers won't object. Whether Baldacci's fans will enjoy this change of pace remains to be seen, but readers of historical fiction will welcome his debut in the genre. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 6/15/00.]--Kathy Piehl, Minnesota State Univ., Mankato Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

### What Other Critics Have Said About *Wish You Well*

"UTTERLY CAPTIVATING... what the novel offers above all is bone-deep emotional truth... Baldacci triumphs with his best novel yet... Its myriad characters - each... as real as readers' own kin - grapple not just with issues of life and death but with the sufferings and joys of daily existence in a setting detailed with finely attuned attention and a warm sense of wonder. This novel has a huge heart."

- *Publisher's Weekly* (starred review)

"REALISTIC AND READABLE... Baldacci's fans will enjoy this entertaining detour into his past."

- *Washington Post Book World*

"SUCCEEDS AS A DEPARTURE FOR BALDACCI... a tender... inspirational story... some wonderfully lyric prose."

- *Denver Post*

"A MOVING STORY... the focus is on young people, and the message about love is heartening."

- *Booklist*

"READERS WILL KEEP TURNING PAGES OF THIS DELIGHTFUL TALE."

- *Orlando Sentinel*

"BALDACCI PROVES HE CAN WRITE IN ANY GENRE with this wonderful book... a moving story... a must-read."

- *Southern Pines Pilot* (NC)

"AN EXCITING AND ENGROSSING STORY... a fine... rewarding book."

- *Mansfield News Journal* (OH)

"AFFECTING.... [The] richly textured setting of southwestern Virginia in the 1940's draws on the reminiscences of Baldacci's mother and grandmother.... Readers of historical fiction will welcome his debut in the genre."

- *Library Journal*