

TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

In March of 1918, a young soldier on a military base in Kansas went to the infirmary with the flu. By the end of the day, one hundred soldiers from the base were ill. So began one of the worst epidemics this country has ever experienced. Several months later, the Spanish influenza had claimed the lives of 657,000 people in the United States.

Like the Willow Tree: The Diary of Lydia Amelia Pierce is set in Portland, Maine, during the influenza epidemic. In this gripping piece of historical fiction, eleven-year-old Lydia records her anguish over the deaths of her parents and baby sister. While she and her brother Daniel are spared the deadly flu, they are orphaned and ultimately taken in by the Shakers in the nearby community of Sabbathday Lake.

Lois Lowry, the author of Newbery award winners *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*, introduces young readers to the world of the Shakers. In this story about the importance of love and family, Lydia and Daniel struggle to understand some of the “different and puzzling” Shaker ways. In the end, they come to appreciate the tenets of simplicity, equality, and hard work.

Like the Willow Tree

The Diary of Lydia Amelia Pierce, Portland, Maine, 1918

BY LOIS LOWRY

Ages 8–14 • 224 pages

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SUMMARY

“I had my birthday just twelve days ago. I am eleven years old. I feel one hundred.” These are the words of Lydia Pierce, whose entire world has been turned upside down. It is 1918, and on October 4, Lydia was looking forward to celebrating her birthday with her parents, older brother Daniel, and baby sister Lucy. Less than two weeks later, Lydia’s parents and Lucy are dead, victims of the Spanish influenza epidemic, and Lydia and Daniel must leave their Portland, Maine, home to live on their Uncle Henry’s farm.

Lydia is confused and sad; Daniel is sullen and angry. Life with the relatives offers little comfort. Aunt Sarah, overwhelmed with caring for her own six children, tells her husband that Lydia and Daniel “must go.” Reluctantly, Uncle Henry takes them to the religious community of Sabbathday Lake, run by the Shakers, where he says, “You’ll get good care and an education. You’ll get what I can’t give you.”

Life is “different and puzzling” at the community known as Chosen Land, for Lydia must adjust to being apart from Daniel, since the Shaker men and boys (brethren) and women and girls (sisters) “stay separate.” She must also give up her favorite book, *The Secret Garden*, and her treasured opal ring because, she is told, “all things belong to us all” and “we Shakers do not ornament ourselves.” Gradually, Lydia makes friends with the other girls her age. She starts school and is assigned to work in the laundry room. Daniel, on the other hand, resents being at Chosen Land, and is determined to leave. One day, during an arranged “meeting” with his sister, Daniel

presents her with a wooden box with this note inside: “I’m leaving soon. Please do not worry about me.” Not long after, Daniel runs away.

Lydia misses Daniel and worries about him. At the Shaker school there are several students “from the world.” Lydia hopes that one of them might be able to bring her news about her brother. She learns that he has been working for a storekeeper in a nearby town.

During a late spring blizzard, the farm animals, let loose earlier to graze, are trapped out in the fields. As the brethren try desperately to locate all the lost horses and cattle, they are helped by local farmers and townsmen. When all the animals have been safely returned, and the men and boys sit down to a meal, Lydia notices that Daniel has returned to Chosen Land. She is overjoyed and writes, “Who knows what he went through during the months he was gone? Whatever it was, it changed him. He no longer looks angry...and he walks with a different walk, no longer the stiff stride I remember.”

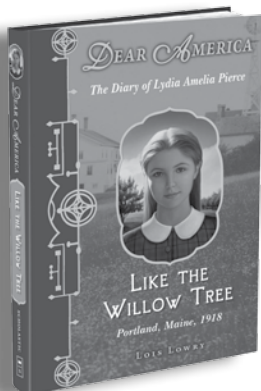
Easter Sunday comes, and after the Sabbath dinner, Lydia has time to reflect on her months at Chosen Land. She realizes that she, too, has grown and changed. Standing on the hill behind the orchard, looking down on the community, she says, “I took it all in, thinking of everything that had brought me here—the sadness, the losses, the fear, the loneliness, and even the things that had left me shaking with anger. All of that was part of me, the me I had once been. But most of me now was at peace.”

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Lydia hears her uncle and aunt talking about bringing the two orphans to Sabbathday Lake. What does she fear will happen to her and Daniel?
2. Who gave Lydia her first journal? Her second journal? Why did Sister Jennie allow Lydia to keep her journal when the Shakers were opposed to keeping personal possessions?
3. Why were the men and women who followed the teachings of Mother Ann known as Shakers?
4. It is hard for Lydia to adjust to some of the Shaker beliefs. What Shaker rules did she find most difficult to accept?
5. Why do you think Lydia's brother, Daniel, leaves the Shaker community but later returns and spends the rest of his life at Sabbathday Lake?
6. Why was Lydia's collection of stones so important?
7. There are many lessons that Sister Jennie tries to teach to Lydia. Reread Lydia's diary entry for December 15, 1918. She writes that needy is not the same as poor. What does she mean?
8. What does Lydia mean when she says she must learn to bow "like the willow tree"?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Lydia is only able to take a few things with her when she and Daniel leave their home to go with Uncle Henry. If you had to leave your home in a hurry and could only take three special things with you, what would you choose and why?
2. The Shakers spoke differently than people "from the world." What did each of the following Shaker expressions mean?
 - a. "retiring room"
 - b. "Shaker our plate"
 - c. "nay"
 - d. "opening one's mind"
 - e. "entering the spirit life"
 - f. "marking"
3. One of Lydia's tasks is to help the Shaker sisters make applesauce. Making applesauce in Lydia's time was an all-day process. You can make it much faster today. Try making some applesauce from the recipe at <http://www.kidsacookin.ksu.edu/Site.aspx?page=Recipe&Recipeid=11341> and share some with your friends.
4. See what you can find out about the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. Why was it so significant in Lydia's time?
5. The Shakers are credited with having invented the clothes pin and the electric washing machine. What other things did the Shakers invent? Go to <http://www.quiltersmuse.com/sabbathday-lake-shakers.htm> and share what you learn.
6. One of Lydia's favorite Shaker songs is "Simple Gifts." Try to find the music to this song and sing it. Lydia has included the words in her final diary entry.
7. Lydia loved books and mentions several in her diary. See if you can find some of the books she mentions and read a few pages. Which of these books do you think you'd like to read? Why?
The Secret Garden; Little Women; Five Little Peppers and How They Grew; Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with a Circus



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LOIS LOWRY is the author of many acclaimed books for children. She is a two-time Newbery Award winner—for *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*. She is also the author of *Gossamer*, *Crow Call*, and *The Willoughbys*, among numerous others. She lives in Massachusetts with her family.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LOIS LOWRY

Of all the time periods and settings in American history that you could have chosen to write about, what led you to select Portland, Maine, in 1918 for the diary of Lydia Amelia Pierce?

I have an old farmhouse in Maine and have spent many happy summers there. Not far from me is the Shaker Village at Sabbathday Lake and I've always been fascinated by the history of that way of life. The Shakers took in orphaned children and raised them, so that seemed a logical way to tell their story, through the eyes of a child who had been brought up in such a community. At first I thought I would set it in the early 1860s since so many children were left fatherless and needy by the Civil War. But then I found myself fascinated by the later years, during which the Shaker population and its prosperity began to diminish. And I realized, then, that the 1918 influenza epidemic orphaned a great many children. So I turned my research and attention to that time period.

How was it different writing a novel in the diary format compared to writing your other novels?

I love the intimacy of the first-person narrative, but I had not written in a diary format before. Remembering my old childhood diaries—the little red leather books with brass lock and key—I cringed at my recollection of the entries, things like “*Me and Carol are never going to play with Nancy again, she’s so mean*” (or worse: today’s *wanna go 2 the mall with my BF*). It would have been impossible to tell anything of the history of the time through such a realistic child’s diary. But of course children of my mother’s generation, such as Lydia Pierce, were taught penmanship and formal essay-writing. They actually wrote in complete sentences!

In doing your research for Lydia’s diary, what did you discover that surprised you most about the Shakers? About the 1918 influenza epidemic?

Reading their old records (and I had access to the actual day-to-day journals from Sabbathday Lake), one detail surprised me—the Christmas tree. “We don’t ornament ourselves,” Sister Jennie says to Lydia at one point. And that was true. They lived uncompromisingly simple and undecorated lives. So when, in reading the records, I discovered that the children woke on Christmas morning to a decorated tree—and gifts—I was surprised, and touched.

What surprised me, learning the details of the flu epidemic, was the devastating form the illness took. We’ve all had the flu, and we remember the week or so of misery and the ensuing days of getting our strength back. But this was different. In 1918 a person might be quite well one morning, then very suddenly very sick, gasping and hemorrhaging, and dead 24 hours later. It was shocking to discover the magnitude of it—the number of victims—and the complete helplessness of the medical community.

What do you admire most about your main character Lydia Amelia Pierce?

I admire her amazing resilience following unspeakable tragedy, and her genuine desire to honor the memory of her family by becoming a good human being.

Lydia’s brother, Daniel, seems to count the minutes until he can leave the Sabbathday Lake community. After he runs away from the Shakers, why does he come back and stay with the group for the rest of his life even though his sister leaves?

Daniel needed to resolve his anger, to make his way through his grief, and to see things from a different viewpoint. It’s the Dorothy-at-Oz phenomenon, discovering that there’s no place like home; and Daniel needed time to perceive and appreciate Sabbathday Lake as home. It took time to become aware that his fantasies of an independent life were unrealistic: that he had no preparation, no skills, and 1918 was a very tough time for a boy to make his own way in the world. It helped, of course, that he had grown to love the animals he tended at the community. A boy like Daniel can find a lot of healing in that kind of love.

You’ve often said that the importance of human connections is a theme running through all of your books. Tell us about the connection you created between Lydia and Sister Jennie. Was this typical of the Shaker women toward the orphans they took in?

Of course the Shaker sisters each were individuals and there were wonderful hints of their personalities in the actual journals of the time—Sister Mamie Curtis, for example, who was so proud of her new false teeth! I loved reading about that because it made her so human. But I couldn’t really get a clear sense of what Sister Jennie Mather, the one who supervised the younger girls in 1918, was like. So I had to guess. I think it was fair to guess that she was firm and somewhat austere, but at the same time she loved those little girls and found ways to show them that. She would have been uncompromising in her devotion to the Shaker rules—in ways that might have seemed harsh sometimes, as when she takes Lydia’s ring away from her—but I think her inherent kindness would always have been there, and that Lydia would have come to see and appreciate it.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LOIS LOWRY

What is one question you'd like to ask children after they've finished reading the diary?

When a reader becomes absorbed in a story, I think he or she *becomes* the protagonist, in a way, and follows along the path the book character takes, weighing each choice the character makes...thinking, subconsciously, *what would I have done? How would I have felt?* I suppose that is what I would ask a child reader: What if you had been in Lydia's place? How would you have managed?

What is one thing you hope young readers will take with them after reading *Like the Willow Tree*?

I hope readers get from this book, or any in the Dear America series, a clear and keen sense of what it would have been like there, in that time, in that place.

Discussion guide written by Richard F. Abrahamson, Ph.D., Professor of Literature for Children and Young Adults, University of Houston, and Eleanor S. Tyson, Ed.D., Clinical Associate Professor, University of Houston, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Houston, Texas.

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