



# The Willoughbys

*Lois Lowry*

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## **The Willoughbys** Lois Lowry

Abandoned by their ill-humored parents to the care of an odious nanny, Tim, the twins, Barnaby A and Barnaby B, and their sister, Jane, attempt to fulfill their roles as good old-fashioned children. Following the models set in lauded tales from *A Christmas Carol* to *Mary Poppins*, the four Willoughbys hope to attain their proscribed happy ending too, or at least a satisfyingly maudlin one. However, it is an unquestionably ruthless act that sets in motion the transformations that lead to their salvation and to happy endings for not only the four children, but their nanny, an abandoned baby, a candy magnate, and his long-lost son too. Replete with a tongue-in-cheek glossary and bibliography, this hilarious and decidedly old-fashioned parody pays playful homage to classic works of children's literature.

## **The Willoughbys Details**

Date : Published March 31st 2008 by HMH Books for Young Readers (first published 2008)

ISBN : 9780618979745

Author : Lois Lowry

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Genre : Fiction, Childrens, Humor, Middle Grade, Young Adult, Juvenile

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## From Reader Review *The Willoughbys* for online ebook

### **KC says**

A delightful and humorous tale of parents and their antics to rid their lives of their 4 children, an orphan left on the steps of a recluse baron, and a nanny who ties all things together.

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### **Clare Cannon says**

Esteemed writer Lois Lowry offers a humorous if irreverent take on old fashioned stories.

All the characters are conscious of being in an 'old fashioned story', so they try to do old fashioned things. The narrative is not subtle in featuring elements from Pollyanna, Heidi, Jane Eyre, Huckleberry Finn, Anne of Green Gables, A Christmas Carol, James and the Giant Peach, Little Women, Mary Poppins and The Secret Garden.

It is highly irreverent, and may only be suitable for well read children who are temporarily tired of old fashioned stories and need to laugh a little.

While all is told tongue-in-cheek the story does include:

- Four siblings who can't stand their parents, and their parents can't stand them either.
  - Each hatches a sincere (if wildly unrealistic) plan to get rid of the other.
  - Around the same time a baby is left in a basket at the family's front door with a note asking them to care for her. The parents will have nothing to do with another child, so the children take it to the front door of a melancholy rich man who lives nearby.
  - The parents leave for a fateful holiday (which was contrived by the children), after having organised a plump, old-fashioned nanny to look after the children.
  - They have also organised that the house be sold while they are away, in the hope of getting rid of the children.
  - The melancholy rich neighbour lives in squalor in spite of his great wealth (which came from his inventing a popular candy which rots children's teeth). He is sad because he believes he has lost his wife and son to an avalanche in Switzerland. After a year he gives up hope of their survival and stops opening letters sent to him from the rescue team. So when they are miraculously discovered alive 18 months later, he doesn't find out. Believing her husband to have ignored her letters, the woman marries again and remains in Switzerland with her son.
  - The son runs away from his mother and new stepfather in order to go off on an old fashioned, heroic and self-realising adventure to return to his father (of course, he makes it after much toil and suffering).
  - The two stories converge when Nanny and the four children are evicted from their house, and Nanny takes them off to the rich candy man who turns into a generous benefactor in the vein of Pollyanna. Nanny and the candy man eventually marry, and all the children form one big happy family.
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### **Gülay Cansever says**

hikaye olsun, karakterler olsun çok ilginç bir kitapt?. biraz kötülük ve hainlik ama çokça sevgi ve iyilik olan

bir eski aile hikâyesi. severek okudum. hem büyüklerin hem de küllerin okumas? gerek diye dü?üntüyorum.

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### **Mario says**

*The Willoughbys* is a short novel about a group of kids who decide to become orphans. However, their plans are interrupted when their parents leave and find a nanny to keep an eye on her.

I was quite surprised with how much I enjoyed reading this book. I've read it in a couple of hours, and I was left with wanting to read more about the adventures of these kids. A short and hilarious novel that brought me back into the days when I was a kid.

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### **Sesana says**

What an odd little book. *The Willoughbys* is a sort of parody of "old fashioned" children's books. The children are hoping that their parents will be killed in a dangerous around the world trip, and the parents are hoping to sell the home out from under the children and have them cast out into the street before they return. There's also an abandoned baby, a wealthy benefactor, and a nanny who whips the children into shape.

It's impossible to read this book without comparing it to Lemony Snicket and Roald Dahl. And if you are familiar with them, and with the greater body of classic children's fiction that Lowry draws from, it's a pretty funny read. But that does limit the audience quite a bit. Possibly the best part is the lengthy glossary at the end.

This isn't quite *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, but it is a fun little side read.

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### **Anna says**

A silly parody of classic or "old fashioned" children's literature. Fun in it's way but not my favorite type of book as I like to disappear into the book, which requires a suspension of disbelief, and a parody is always reminding you that it is a story. I also have mixed feelings about this poking fun at my favorite books, although I am sure it is meant to be gentle and it is pretty funny, I feel a little bit made fun of myself. I will give it an extra half a star for the wholly delightful glossary which is just the kind of silliness that I like.

3.5

Popsugar 2017: a book with pictures

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### **Gal says**

Very cute!

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## Marjorie Hakala says

I remember being told, perhaps six or seven years ago, that Europeans considered America to have no proper sense of irony. Things have changed since then to such an extent that our even our eight-year-olds can understand a well-aimed dry parody. Or at least I hope so, because otherwise there will be no audience for this remarkable little book. Lois Lowry, a master of children's literature in deadly earnest ( *The Giver* frightened me to death, and remembering it still does) has produced *The Willoughbys*, which is lighter than air and run through with a wicked sense of humor. I laughed out loud reading this and would probably quote the whole book at you if given the chance, but here's a random selection:

"The nanny turned and looked at them. Wearing her flowered apron, she was standing at the stove, stirring the oatmeal with a wooden spoon.

"I have fumigated my room with insecticide,' she told them. 'On the count of three, pinch your noses. Like this.' She demonstrated, pinching her own nose with her left hand while she continued to stir with her right. 'One. Two. Three.'

"The Willoughby children, startled by her command, all pinched their noses.

"She looked at them. 'Good,' she said. 'Now do that when you walk past my room. Otherwise you will breathe in phenolmethylcarbamate, and then you will die horribly. Writhing in pain.'"

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## Hafsa Sabira says

This has been a very fun read even though I can totally imagine some readers frowning and scowling while turning over the pages.

"The Willoughbys" is totally a satire of old-fashioned children's books, from its title to its characters and events. Moreover, you get references from all the popular children's novels' characters like Mary Poppins, Anna from *Green Gables*, Mary Lennox from *The Secret Garden*, Hansel and Gretel etc. It was amusing to notice the stark difference the writer has drawn. The novel is not only entertaining but also eye-opening. Even though it's written mainly for young readers, I think adults will also enjoy this book for its clever contents.

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## Jeanette says

Author Lois Lowry who gave us *Number the Stars*, *The Giver*, *A Summer to Die* and 30 + other children's stories has now given us *The Willoughbys*, a clever, tongue in cheek parody of "old fashioned" classic children's stories.

I loved the tag line for this book as soon as I saw it on the cover. "A novel nefariously written & ignominiously illustrated by the author." If that does not hook your attention then maybe the book description will: " 'Shouldn't we be orphans?' one of the Willoughby children suggests one day. The four are, after all, part of an old-fashioned kind of family, and their parents-well, their parents are not all that one would hope for. The Willoughbys concoct a diabolical plot to turn themselves into worthy and winsome orphans. Little do they know that Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby have already begun to formulate their own

thoroughly despicable plan inspired by another favorite bedtime story: the tale of Hansel and Gretel..."

I laughed and snickered my through this whole book. Lowry included a bibliography of "books of the past that are heavy on piteous but appealing orphans, ill-tempered and stingy relatives, magnanimous benefactors, and transformations wrought by winsome children." Books such as Anne of Green Gables, James and the Giant Peach, Heidi, Jane Eyre and Mary Poppins are included. The novel is full of literary allusions to and parodies of these tales as the Willoughby children strive to be old-fashioned, winsome orphans. The story is full of twists that kept me laughing and rooting for all the characters from the Willoughby children to their Odious Nanny and the Melancholy Tycoon but not for Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby. :-)

One of the most enjoyable and humorous parts of the book is the glossary. Here you will find such definitions as "Villainous means typical of an evil person. Very obnoxious. You could have guessed that, of course, since you already know the word villain. In old movies, villains almost always has mustaches. I don't know why." And "Meticulous means extremely precise and careful. Surgeons have to be meticulous. Some people think great cooks are meticulous, but they are wrong. Great cooks read a recipe, maybe, but they ignore the instructions and add extra garlic if they feel like it. Surgeons can't do that."

Unfortunately, I would not be at all surprised to see this book end up on a banned book list. I imagine there will be some people who look past the humor and wit and see only a book about kids and parents who are trying to do away with each other but to quote from Lois Lowry's website, "this is a humorous book, of course, and no one is recommending that real children do away with their parents. (Unless, of course—heh heh—their parents are as outrageously awful as Mr. And Mrs. Willoughby!"

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## Daisy says

This is one of the best things I've read all year. It is my new favorite book. So smart and funny, I read it with--I swear--a real smile on my face the entire time AND I laughed out loud. That might have had something to do with the small kitten I have who fell asleep upside down on my shoulder while I was reading it but not entirely. I want to own this book (mine came from the library) and to give it to everyone I know, especially any children I know. Hmm...

I was hooked when I read the author's little bio\* on the back flap before I read anything else. And then I was really smitten when I read one of many memorable lines, this one at the beginning, about the mother: *Once she read a book but found it distasteful because it contained adjectives.*

In the end, Lowry writes a glossary which includes an entry for the word "glossary": *GLOSSARY means an alphabetical list of terms and their meanings, usually at the end of a book. Hey! We are right smack in the middle of a glossary right now!*

I also appreciate the bibliography at the end of the book which serves of course as a resource but also honors many classic, *old-fashioned* children's stories which are referenced by the well-read Willoughby children.

*\*Influenced in her childhood by a mother who insisted on surrounding her with books instead of roller skates and jump ropes, Lois Lowry grew up lacking fresh air and exercise but with a keen understanding of plot, character, and setting. Every morning she opened the front door hoping to find an orphaned infant in a wicker basket. Alas, her hopes were always dashed and her dreams thwarted. She compensates by writing books. Today she is a wizened, reclusive old woman who sits hunched over her desk thinking obsessively about the placement of commas.*

(Lavender, Arpeggio, and Noxzema)

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## Jackie says

As a scholar of 18th and 19th century children's literature, I was immediately drawn to a book purporting to be a parody of "old fashioned" books. But I was unimpressed by Lowry's actual novel. Perhaps because I had in mind a definition of parody that means something beyond just a "funny" imitation; most parodies are written to ridicule or satirize the genre they imitate. Lowry's book doesn't imitate to critique, or to satirize. Or perhaps it is because Lowry's idea of "old fashioned book" is just a broad one, stretching from Dickens and Charlotte Bronte to Roald Dahl, that her "parody" doesn't really hold together. The book seems confused about just what it is making fun of -- mean parents? Sexist children? Improbable events? Latent sexual content? -- and the fact that it ends happily, as do all of the old fashioned books she makes fun of, seems to belie its parodic nature. Or perhaps it is just because many of the "old fashioned" books she draws upon would not be a part of many contemporary children's reading matter, making the audience for her book more of an adult than a child audience. All in all, I'd take E. Nesbit's *THE STORY OF THE TREASURE SEEKERS*, or Lemony Snicket's work, over this confused volume...

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## Betsy says

As in all good old-fashioned stories, this one involves the four Willoughby children. There is Tim, the oldest, who is very bossy. Jane is the youngest and has a hard time sticking up for herself. And then there are the twins A and B. The children are essentially good kids, but their parents are the worst sorts. Negligent and wasteful, they concoct a plan to leave on vacation and sell their house while they're gone (hopefully ridding themselves of the children in the meantime). To the young Willoughbys' aid comes a nanny of remarkable talents, a rich but sad benefactor, and a host of odd characters. In the end a happy medium is reached and everyone is happy, though perhaps not in the way you might expect.

When Lemony Snicket referenced works of children's literature from the past in his own books he did so with the express purpose of showing how orphans in dire straits are more appealing when they are miserable than when they are happy. He was eventually able to mold this into larger themes touching on ideas like "What does it mean to be good?" and "To what extent are you culpable when you engage in an evil act, no matter how pure your intentions might be?" "The Willoughbys" does not stretch so far and, in fact, takes an entirely different tactic altogether. I'll admit that for the first twenty or thirty pages of this book I felt that I was reading a slightly skewed Unfortunate Event. Then, all at once, it hit me. This wasn't a Lemony Snicket knock-off! This is a book that reveals the ludicrous nature of any classic work of children's fiction. It plays with the tropes like they were taffy in the hand. Orphaned babies, malevolent parents, sad rich benefactors, it's all here. There are more hearts of gold than you can shake a fist at, but all the while you get the distinct feeling that Lowry is playing with you. She is perfectly aware of what she is doing and whether she intends to or not, she's making a mockery of those current children's novels that purposefully try to invoke the staid seriousness and style of classic literature from the past.

If I were a person prone to predictions, I might say that this is precisely the kind of book that is going to divide people. Some parents are going to enjoy this book tremendously (particularly those that make it to the Glossary at the back). However, there are just as many people out there who are going to take one swift

glance at the Willoughby children's heartfelt desire for dead parents and flip out. Kids who cheer on the deaths of their parental units do not always charm the hearts and minds of readers everywhere, I am afraid. Even when the parents deserve it entirely it's still unnerving to hear a sweet six-year-old girl implore, "do let's wish for a helicopter-and-volcano disaster!" It's utterly silly but not everyone will get the joke.

If you stick with this book you're bound to enjoy it. And if children can enjoy the massive hoards of pseudo-Victorian/Gothic novellas currently being churned out then they'll probably get a lot of the jokes in this book. They'll love the boy who doesn't speak German but thinks that he can ("Schlee you later, alligatorplatz!"), and the nanny that disguises herself as an Aphrodite statue to scare off potential buyers of the Willoughbys' home. It's a great book for kids and adults alike. Perhaps it is not for all takers, but those with a keen sense of humor and a taste for the bizarre will enjoy this winsome tale of the beastly, the diabolical, the irascible, and the unkempt. An auspicious departure.

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### **Krista says**

This charming and witty book is a slight parody on "old-fashioned" children's stories. I enjoyed the tale of 4 siblings who wanted to be orphans and their parents who didn't want children. I loved the nanny who came to save the day and the grieving millionaire who becomes the benefactor of a baby left on his doorstep. I laughed out loud many times and loved all the outright references to children in other "old-fashioned" stories such as Pollyanna, Heidi (yes, the Swiss Alps do play a part in this tale), Jane Eyre and many more. It was a fun read, but at the same time I don't see myself rereading it or even remembering it for long. It's a solid 3 star for me.

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### **Audrey says**

Not at all what I would've expected from Lowry. Personally, I'm a fan of many of the "old-fashioned" books that she parodied. This is a children's book (at least, it's shelved that way at my local library) but kids won't get many of the references or humor here, which means that it's really a book for adults masquerading as a children's book. When I first started reading, I felt it reminded me quite a bit of the Lemony Snicket books, so young readers might relate a bit more if they've read those novels. Anyway, it was a superquick read. And while I appreciated what the author was doing here, I couldn't get into it completely because I feel awfully protective of my old-fashioned favorites. The best part (and funniest, in fact) was the glossary -- some of those statements did make me chuckle out loud, something the main story failed to do.

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