

Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters Study Guide

Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters by Wally Lamb

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Plot Summary

Couldn't Keep It to Myself, by Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Institution is a series of short autobiographical stories. Acclaimed writer Wally Lamb teaches a writing workshop at York Correctional Institution and he is transformed by the experience. Eventually, Wally and his students compile their best stories in this book.

The book is organized into thirteen chapters. The first chapter is written by Wally Lamb, and it provides the background information for the book. Wally does not want to volunteer at York at first, but after his first visit, he is continually drawn to the group. He learns the personal stories of the women in prison through their writing and is struck by the difference between common misconceptions of prisoners and the real women behind bars.

Wally is inspired by their writing and decides to use his own money to help them publish this book. However, when his publisher reads just one story, she offers to publish the book for mass distribution. Wally hopes that this book will help people abandon their biases. There are things that everyone should know about prisoners and prisons. There are hearts and minds around the world that need to be opened. That is his purpose for this book.

The next eleven chapters are autobiographical stories from prisoners who have taken part in his workshop. As the reader takes in each story, common themes of abuse, abandonment, and chaos emerge in the lives of these women. There is also another very strong thread, and that's hope. Each of the women is using her writing to build a stronger sense of self and to finally have a voice. Much of their lives have been filled with silence and secrets, and through their writing, they finally have a chance to speak out and tell the truth. This gives them a new sense of freedom, even behind bars.

The final chapter is written by Dale Griffith, who is one of the teachers at York School. She believes that it is a calling to work with these women, and she is the one who contacted Wally Lamb and talked him into coming to York to teach the writing workshop after a rash of suicides and suicide attempts rocked the prison. Dale could see that the women were hurting and she knew that writing could be a vehicle for healing. She believed that Wally Lamb's celebrity status might draw in more students. She was absolutely right. The writing workshop has grown in popularity over the years and women are healing themselves through their diligent writing.

Dale Griffith is a gift to her students and they are a gift to her. She feels incredibly lucky to get to work with the women at York every day.



Couldn't Keep it to Ourselves - Wally Lamb

Couldn't Keep it to Ourselves - Wally Lamb Summary and Analysis

Couldn't Keep it to Ourselves is an introductory chapter written by Wally Lamb that explains the premise of the entire book.

Wally Lamb starts by explaining that from the age of eight he wanted to teach. He tried out his skills on his older sisters first, but they weren't very willing students. Then, he jumps ahead fourteen years to his first teaching job as a high school English teacher. Wally Lamb describes how teaching becomes a calling for him, not just a job. He takes particular interest in working with tough students. He calls these students the walking wounded.

Nevertheless, in 1999 Wally Lamb really does not want to go to York Correctional Institution, a maximum-security prison for women in Connecticut, to teach. He promised Marge Cohen, the prison school librarian that he would come and speak to a group of women. There has been a recent epidemic of suicides and suicide attempts in the prison, and Marge hopes that Wally Lamb will inspire the women to use writing as a tool for coping.

Wally Lamb then backtracks a little and describes his own life. He never predicted that he would become a best-selling author. When he was thirty years old and on summer break from teaching, he started to write short stories, and those stories evolved into his first novel, *She's Come Undone*.

Wally Lamb grabs the attention of Oprah Winfrey with his first and then his second novel, and suddenly his entire life changes from an anonymous high school English teacher to a well-known author. Wally Lamb describes himself now as a family man, a fiction writer, a teacher, and a guy who can't say no without an index card.

It's true. Wally Lamb keeps an index card by his phone to help prompt him through scripted refusals to the many solicitations he gets to support different causes. Unfortunately, when Marge Cohen calls, he can't find his index card and ends up saying yes.

Wally's first visit to York Correctional Institution is a mediocre success. Most of the women want to know more about what it was like to meet Oprah and don't ask him much about writing. But at the end of the session, one of the prisoners asks if he will come back, and he says yes.

It takes several sessions for Wally's writing workshops to take hold, but thanks to one courageous prisoner named Diane Bartholomew, who reads two pages that describe her horrific life story, the "dam of distrust" bursts open, and the writing of the women starts to flow freely.

At the time Wally Lamb writes this chapter, he has been conducting the writing sessions for three years. He gives short previews of some of the women who are featured in the book and talks about their struggles as they tackle very personal and difficult memories of their lives through writing. Wally Lamb also discusses difficulties that the women have with the craft of writing itself and how to find their voice, rather than imitating other authors they have read.

Wally Lamb uses the workshops to guide the women through their writing and help them realize that the more personal and honest they can be the more people will relate to their writing. He talks about the transformation he sees in the women. Many of them have never had a voice. Abusive relationships and family secrets have forced them to remain silent. Now they can speak through their writing. When they do, Wally sees a change in their demeanor and a new hope kindle within them. There is no doubt that writing transforms these women.

When the women come up with the idea to make a compilation book of their stories, Wally Lamb intends to finance a small printing himself. One of the women comes up with the title "Couldn't Keep It to Myself" based on a hymn, and the artwork for the cover is a picture of an art project the women completed together.

A few months later, Wally Lamb is meeting with his publisher, Judith Regan, and he tells her about the book project and how the women at York have changed his life. She reads one story and suggests they publish it for mass distribution.

Wally Lamb explains that each contributor to this book is a "tough cookie," not because of her crimes but because she will not be defeated or silenced. The written word has helped every one of these women discover the power within her, and Wally hopes that this book will also help readers abandon their misconceptions of prisoners.



The True Face of Earth - Nancy Whiteley

The True Face of Earth - Nancy Whiteley Summary and Analysis

In "The True Face of Earth," Nancy Whiteley jumps back and forth from childhood to her teenage years to adulthood to string together the events that have shaped her life and her perception of herself. Nancy's story is a heartbreaking tale of striving to be loved and appreciated but feeling empty and alone most of her life. It is not told in chronological order but in random snippets from various memories of her life.

The story begins when Nancy is six years old. Her father has promised to take her flying in his airplane; her mother is making breakfast in the kitchen; her oldest sister is off to work at Friendly's; and her middle sister is at a horseback riding lesson. It looks like the perfect family, and the snapshot ends with Nancy's father taking her on a flight in his plane.

Then the scene abruptly changes to Nancy at fifteen years old and on a date near the airport. She is pretty, blonde, and blue eyed, but she doesn't have the self-confidence that should go with her beauty. Nancy knows that she needs to sleep this boy if she wants to keep him. She loses her virginity to avoid being dumped.

Nancy's father is successful and kind, and she thinks of him as the Little Prince from the story he reads to her. Nancy's mother is an obese, sad woman who is verbally and physically abusive. When their parents' fighting gets worse, Nancy's older sister protects her two younger sisters by taking them out of the house to an all-night diner. They return hours later when they believe it's safe. Nancy is afraid at school that somehow the other kids will know what goes on at her house at night.

Nancy's parents fight often late at night, and her father spends less and less time at home. Eventually he abandons the family and sues for divorce. He has visiting days on Sundays, but he seldom shows up.

Men are Nancy's solace, and food is her mother's solace. Her oldest sister drops the role of protector and leaves home as soon as she's old enough. Then, Nancy's middle sister goes off to college, and Nancy is left alone with her abusive mother. At twelve years old, Nancy learns to defend herself, and the physical abuse abruptly stops. Nancy feels alone but powerful.

When Nancy quits school at age sixteen, her plan is to get married, get pregnant, and start her own life. Unfortunately, the boys she sleeps with are not interested in a long-term relationship. She does date a boy named Shane for awhile, but when she gets pregnant, Shane suggests she get an abortion. After her abortion, Nancy ends up sleeping with Shane's best friend, who actually treats her well, but she isn't really interested in him, and the relationship dissolves.



Nancy's father remarries and lives an opulent life, while she and her mother struggle to make ends meet. Eventually, Nancy gets her GED and moves into a small apartment with her friend, Paula. They take jobs as cocktail waitresses and attend community college.

At the end of the story, Nancy is reading "Wind, Sand, and Stars" by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. Her community college professor suggested it because she liked "The Little Prince," but Nancy dislikes the book. One sentence in the book transports her back to her plane rides with her father. It says, "The aeroplane has unveiled for us the true face of earth." Nancy disagrees. Everything she believed in the plane with her dad as a child has turned out to be a big lie.



Orbiting Izzy - Nancy Whiteley

Orbiting Izzy - Nancy Whiteley Summary and Analysis

Orbiting Izzy is another short story by Nancy Whiteley that delves further into her adult life. She is twenty-nine years old when the story begins and has been out of prison for a month. Nancy spent three years in prison, and now she is going to attempt to live an upstanding life. She gets ready for her first temp job by putting on a Liz Claiborne suit she stole years earlier. Even in this conservative outfit, Nancy thinks she looks slutty. She is assigned a one-man accounting firm.

The story then flashes back to Nancy's husband, Aldo, a "morally bankrupt and emotionally vacant" man who sweeps Nancy off her feet and leads her to a life of crime. They live like rock stars for five years, but the fun ends when they both end up in jail. After their release, Aldo wants to get back together, but Nancy refuses.

Back in the present, Nancy uses simile to describe herself as being like a meteor that crashed into planet Isadore. Isadore Weintraub is the man who owns the accounting firm where she is a temp. He doesn't have much for Nancy to do every day, so soon the two of them start to chat and reveal more and more of their personal lives to one another.

Nancy describes Isadore's life as one long, comfortable yawn. He's in a loveless marriage, and he inherited the small accounting firm from his father, who died five years before he hires Nancy.

Nancy and Isadore become unlikely friends. Nancy describes them as complete opposites. Isadore tip-toes around the office, and she crashes into things. Isadore beats around the bush, and Nancy chops the bushes down (a metaphor for Isadore's reluctance to deal with things head on versus Nancy's candor in every situation). Nancy continues the space metaphor by comparing them to the space alien and the earthling meeting for the first time. They are completely fascinated with one another.

As they spend more time together, Nancy talks Isadore into having a little fun and Isadore shows Nancy a little bit about what it's like to live a responsible life. Nancy describes the summer as the first time Isadore got to enjoy a real childhood and the summer she almost grew up.

Unfortunately, the friendship doesn't last. Isadore starts to fall in love with Nancy, and she resigns abruptly because of the awkwardness. Nancy goes back to her ex-husband, and soon she finds herself back in prison.



Thefts - Carolyn Ann Adams

Thefts - Carolyn Ann Adams Summary and Analysis

"Thefts," by Carolyn Ann Adams is organized into two chapters: The Right to Remain Silent and The Right to Speak. In The Right to Remain Silent, she describes her crime, trial, and conviction. In The Right to Speak, she finally tells a horrible family secret that she has kept for years.

The story begins outside a courtroom. Carolyn is about to face the Superior Court judge. She sees one of the people she assisted in her position as executive director of a mental health advocacy board, but he won't speak to her and passes by without looking at her. She has been embezzling advocacy board money for four years and gambling most of it away at nearby casinos.

Carolyn then backtracks to describe her humiliating arrest. She also uses many of the senses to describe the horrible conditions of the holding cell and how out of place she looks there in her yellow Chanel suit and matching heels. Carolyn ends up with a lawyer who could care less about her case, and she after nine months of court appearances, she is convicted.

When Carolyn waits to be processed into the Department of Corrections, she sees a goose wandering around outside. She actually envies the goose, waddling through the courtyard looking stupid, without a care in the world. Carolyn describes the other prisoners taunting officers and calling out to each other by nicknames. She puts her fingers in her ears to block out the noise.

Carolyn then goes through the shameful process of being admitted. She is interviewed, stripped naked, searched, deloused, and given a new set of tattered clothes that she will wear for the next five years.

In "The Right to Speak," Carolyn begins by describing that her crime and imprisonment is directly related to her mental illness. Her diagnosis is major depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and dissociative disorders.

Then, Carolyn inserts short glimpses of her childhood in italics. These pictures show a young life filled with fear and uncertainty. Her father is an abusive alcoholic. Her mother comes from a well-to-do family that refuses to help her financially because of her poor choice of a husband. She is left alone to care for seven children.

Carolyn uses these flashbacks to describe a horrific scene of being raped by her father. She is sent to a home to have her baby without anyone knowing. The baby is given up for adoption, and Carolyn returns home to start the eighth grade.



Hair Chronicles - Tabatha Rowley

Hair Chronicles - Tabatha Rowley Summary and Analysis

"Hair Chronicles" is a gritty autobiography that slaps the reader in the face with the tough life of Tabatha Rowley. She begins the story by simply laying out the inconsistencies of her youth: her mother beats her because she loves her; her grandmother drinks to help her blood flow; her aunt smokes pot so she can sleep; her uncle sticks needles in his arms to make his arms big. Everyone has an explanation for their deviant behavior, and they're all living a lie.

Tabatha is raped from the age of four by a neighbor they call Uncle Wesley who babysits her and her brothers. At age twelve, her brother introduces her to pot and alcohol. Tabatha uses a variety of senses to describe the attic where family and friends do drugs. It reeks of reefer and spilt beer, and the floor is sticky to her sneakers. Then, she uses simile to describe her brother chugging a beer. His throat muscles flex "like a snake forcing rats down his gullet." The scene is ugly and brutal.

Tabatha's brother Pete teaches her how to be streetwise. Soon she is selling drugs, stealing, getting high all the time, and carrying a gun. Pete is shot in the head and killed when he's twenty. By age twenty-three, Tabatha is in prison for shooting her ex-boyfriend in self-defense.

Tabatha detoxes in prison and uses art, memoir writing, and songwriting to rediscover herself. Tabatha's mother used to tell her she had pretty hair for a black girl. In prison, she sketches her life in hairstyles.

As a young girl, Tabatha struggles to have control over her own hairstyle. Her mother fixes it one way, and she changes it before she gets to school. As Tabatha gets older, she uses her hair as a tool to experiment and find out who she is. By the time she gets to prison, she is sporting dreadlocks to look tough.

Five years into her prison sentence, Tabatha lets her hair go natural again. She comes to like her jet-black hair. It's healthier without all the chemicals—and so is she. Tabatha continues the hair metaphor by saying that in prison she dug up the roots of her low self-esteem, and now she is a strong woman, physically, mentally, and spiritually.



Three Steps Past the Monkeys - Nancy Birkla

Three Steps Past the Monkeys - Nancy Birkla Summary and Analysis

In "Three Steps Past the Monkeys," Nancy Birkla explains how recurring nightmares about the monkeys from "The Wizard of Oz" are connected to a very troubling part of her childhood. She begins by recounting that her family moved quite often as she was growing up, but somehow the dreaded monkeys hid in their suitcases, because her recurring nightmares lasted a very long time.

The nightmares resurface when Nancy is forty-three years old and has been drug-free for six years and out of prison for five. She is taking a film class, and they watch the famous flying monkeys scene from "The Wizard of Oz." She realizes she is going to have to confront the monkeys.

Nancy then goes back in time to describe in detail the day she is arrested, October 4, 1989. She is picked up as part of "Operation Barfly," a sweep of barroom drug traffickers. The arrests make headlines in local news. Nancy's parents bail her out, but they do not come and take her home. They have her sent directly to a substance abuse treatment center. She must stay there for thirty days, or she will be thrown back in jail.

Nancy puts her memories in reverse again and describes how she met her husband Bobby and the ups and downs of their abusive relationship that was aggravated by constant drug use by both of them.

Nancy includes journal entries throughout this short story to detail exactly how she feels at certain times throughout her recovery. The entries are painful—filled with anguish, depression, anger, and finally rays of hope, surrender, and recovery.

When she leaves the treatment center, Nancy gets a sponsor and diligently works the twelve steps. Despite her work to turn her life around, Nancy receives a stiff prison sentence.

Several years after her release from prison, Nancy makes the connection. Her memory is uncovered. Nancy and her friend Holly were both sexually abused by a neighbor. He told the girls that the witch would set their house on fire and the monkeys would come down and snatch them if they told anyone he touched them.

In a postscript journal entry, Nancy explains that she continues to follow the twelve-step principles of recovery in her life. She looks at the story of "The Wizard of Oz" much differently now. It is now a story of a lost little girl who travels through a spooky world but uses the compass of her inner strength to make it back home.



Hell, and How I Got There - Brenda Medina

Hell, and How I Got There - Brenda Medina Summary and Analysis

"Hell, and How I Got There" is a story in three chapters: My Mother's Secret; Family Values; and Dancing in Leg Chains.

In My Mother's Secret, Brenda Medina describes her family: two parents and nine children. One night when Brenda is playing Monopoly with her sisters, she discovers her mother's terrible secret. Her mother has episodes where something takes over her body. It is as if she is possessed by bad spirits. This is a shock to Brenda, because her mother keeps a number of religious icons all over the house to protect her from evil spirits. There is one incident where Brenda's mother is brushing her hair and suddenly she tries to choke her to death. Brenda's father saves her. He never speaks of the incident again, but Brenda hears him praying at night for God to keep his family safe from evil. As Brenda gets older, she comes to believe that there's something wrong with her mother's head, not her soul.

When Brenda is old enough to go to school, her mother insists on sending her to a Catholic school, because public school has turned her older siblings into troublemakers. Brenda hates it. She feels out of place as the poor, skinny, Puerto Rican girl in a school full of rich, white kids.

In Family Values, Brenda describes that drugs come in many forms. Her drug comes in the form of a boy named Manny. She uses simile to describe Manny as being like a good suspense book: after a few pages, you're hooked. He is a member of a gang and he is very controlling in their relationship. They play out a continuous cycle of explosive fights and reconciliations. Brenda eventually joins Manny's gang. She and her friend beat up a woman to prove their loyalty to the "family."

In Dancing in Leg Chains, Brenda describes her arrest for murder. The worst part of this memory is the look on her parents' faces when the detectives arrive at their home to pick Brenda up. Brenda and her girlfriends are all over the news as gang members and murderers.

Brenda maintains her badass status in prison, causing enough trouble to be one of only four inmates to earn a level five orange card. This means she is shackled in leg chains when she is outside her unit. Brenda prefers walking in shackles, then running, and finally dancing.

Brenda admits toward the end of this story that she is a frightened child behind the mask of a tough girl. Her parents continue to come and visit her every Sunday. Their



love is unconditional. A counselor in prison also helps Brenda realize that she is killing her own spirit every time she gets in trouble and defies authority. As she writes the final lines, she has served nine years of her twenty-five year sentence. Brenda has not received a disciplinary ticket for three years. Brenda continues to search for evidence of God, but she's skeptical.



Christmas in Prison - Robin Cullen

Christmas in Prison - Robin Cullen Summary and Analysis

Robin Cullen describes a very bleak holiday season in "Christmas in Prison." She begins her story on January 1, 2000. Pope John Paul has proclaimed it the Year of the Great Jubilee, so they are celebrating by having a Catholic mass in their makeshift prison church.

Robin gets up to read the same announcements she has been reading every week for the last two years. Then, throughout the mass she watches all sorts of negotiations going on among the attendees. One woman passes a "goodie bag" to a woman next to her. Lovers who live in separate housing units have a subversive rendezvous, con artists prey on new arrivals. Many things other than spiritual go on in these masses. Arguments break out, notes are passed, and contraband is exchanged.

As Robin walks back to her housing unit after the service, she enjoys the brief moment outside in the sun. Other than these short moments, her entire life in prison is gray. When she gets inside, she sees a sign that no Christmas presents will be delivered again this week, because there is a backup on money orders in the mail room. Robin explains that every Christmas in prison, the commissary sells overpriced Christmas baskets in a variety of sizes. Families and friends on the outside can send money orders to pay for those gift baskets. She can't afford to buy herself even the cheapest one.

Robin recalls the last three Christmases she has spent in prison. The first year, every woman on the maximum-security side of the compound found two bags of goodies outside her cell door on Christmas morning, and there were some decorations. They ate roast beef for dinner. The next year, there were no goodie bags, the decorations were a little more tattered, and they ate roast beef for dinner. This year, no presents, no decorations—but they did eat roast beef for dinner. Robin concludes her story on a very depressing note: the women can't get out, and Christmas is no longer allowed in.



Faith, Power, and Pants - Bonnie Foreshaw

Faith, Power, and Pants - Bonnie Foreshaw Summary and Analysis

Bonnie Foreshaw uses her uniquely "Jamerican" phrases and humor to describe her life and standing up for her rights in prison in "Faith, Power, and Pants."

Bonnie was born in Jamaica and raised in a black neighborhood in South Florida. She describes growing up in a place where people loved all kinds of music. Bonnie also describes how important good food was in her family. Celebrations always included lots of music, food, and drink. Funerals in Bonnie's family also include much music and food. She tells how over 200 family members show up for her aunt's funeral in Florida, and the celebration of her life goes on for days.

As she writes this story, she has been in prison for sixteen years and misses those family celebrations, even though the family life she describes later is filled with abuse and neglect.

Bonnie recalls that she arrived in prison firm in her Rastafarian faith. She doesn't cut her hair and wears long dreadlocks as a sign of humble obedience to God. She also eats fresh fruits and vegetables (Ital diet) and wears skirts instead of trousers.

Six years after Bonnie becomes a Rastafarian, she finds herself in the Niantic Correctional Institution convicted of first-degree murder. The situation that led her to take another's life was a surreal accident, but Bonnie is sentenced to forty-five years.

Bonnie describes the difficulties she faces in trying to remain true to her religious practices while incarcerated. She sees how politics outside of prison directly affect policies inside prison. She is persecuted for her beliefs and unable to practice her religion fully.

Bonnie knows from experience that it is unwise to challenge authority unless absolutely necessary, but she believes this is necessary. She defies authority and refuses to wear pants. She personifies the word abandonment by saying that during the days of silent punishment in segregation, abandonment crept into the cell with her. She finally gives in and wears the pants.

In the conclusion of Bonnie's story she explains that she has come to understand that actions speak louder than pants. When she arrived in Niantic in 1986, she was scared, and the elder prisoners comforted her and helped her survive. Now, she serves as a mentor and substitute mom to other frightened women.



Puzzle Pieces - Barbara Parsons Lane

Puzzle Pieces - Barbara Parsons Lane Summary and Analysis

"Puzzle Pieces" by Barbara Parsons Lane is divided into seven chapters: 1. The Visit, 2. Puzzle Pieces, 3. Cell Door Window, 4. The Threat, 5. Adam, 6. Rehabilitation, and 7. Six Years and Counting.

In the first chapter, The Visit, Barbara tells about her first visitors when she's in prison. They are her four beautiful children. Barbara uses simile to describe that watching them leave at the end of the visit and walk back into their lives is like losing parts of her own body. She is scared in her new prison surroundings, but the worst part of this punishment is being separated from her children.

In chapter two, Puzzle Pieces, Barbara uses simile again to say that childhood memories are like old puzzles. Some pieces are lost and some pieces no longer fit right. She describes a grandfather who is kind at first but then molests her. Barbara's mother commits suicide, and an aunt tells Barbara later that grandpa had molested her mother, too.

In Cell Door Window, Barbara's cell mate is staring out the window like a caged animal, and it triggers a childhood memory of Barbara visiting her mother in a mental hospital.

Chapter four, The Threat, describes Barbara's husband, Mark. She discovers two years into their marriage that he is a paranoid schizophrenic. The chapter details her frightening life with him. She tries to divorce Mark, but he threatens to kill her and she backs down. Mark makes it very clear that he can make Barbara disappear if he wants to.

Chapter five, Adam, is a heartbreaking tale of Barbara finding out in prison that her son was killed in a car accident. She is taken in shackles to view the body briefly at the funeral home before the funeral. She is supposed to have an hour with her son, but the unsympathetic officers tell her they're heading back after thirty minutes.

In Rehabilitation, Barbara talks a bit more about prison life. Many women at York ignore the boundaries of personal property. Obedient, respectful inmates like herself are often overlooked because they do not cause trouble. However, Barbara believes that she has been rehabilitated. After six years in prison, she has become better educated and more self-aware. Unfortunately, she has also become more suspicious, disillusioned, and bitter, too.

In the final chapter, Six Years and Counting, Barbara describes the rhythm of long-term incarceration as a strange mix of sadness, sameness, and explosiveness. Her most

precious puzzle pieces—her children—remain out of reach. She is saddened to see how her life has scarred theirs.



Motherlove - Michelle Jessamy

Motherlove - Michelle Jessamy Summary and Analysis

In "Motherlove," Michelle Jessamy uses autobiographical fiction to reveal difficult secrets from her past.

Shirley Shambly is a single, tired, overworked mother of two teenage girls. She can barely hold her head up when she gets home from her shifts at the nursing home. Fourteen-year-old Mo'Shay longs for more love and attention from her mother, but instead she is given orders for cooking, cleaning, and running errands. She resents her for not letting any joy into her life.

On the first day of summer vacation, Mo'Shay's mother has a list of items for her to get from the store as soon as she gets up in the morning. Mo'Shay grudgingly follows orders, and on the way to the store, she meets the man of her dreams, Reese. Michelle uses simile to describe the handsome boy's lips as being as soft and succulent as a just ripe peach.

The two immediately start dating, and their blossoming young love creates tensions between Mo'Shay and her mother. Shirley thinks Mo'Shay is spending too much time with Reese, and Mo'Shay dismisses her mother's warnings. What does she know about love? She only has time for work. She doesn't even pay any attention to her daughters.

Reese wants to take his relationship with Mo'Shay to the next level, but she is frightened to have sex. She consoles him by promising to give herself to him at end of the summer, and Reese waits patiently.

The fear that Mo'Shay has about sex is complicated. The idea of sex takes her immediately back to an ugly memory of a family friend who betrayed her. The scene flashes back to that horrible Saturday when Mo'Shay is eleven years old. Fred, a neighbor who has been friends with her family for years, comes to fix their TV when Shirley is at work. After he is finished, he asks Mo'Shay to help him carry his tools back to his car, and he molests her in the hallway of the apartment complex. Mo'Shay is so scared and embarrassed that she doesn't tell anyone.

When the end of the summer arrives, she decides to go through with her promise to have sex with Reese regardless of her fears. Mo'Shay is nervous at first, but Reese is gentle and the experience turns out to be wonderful for her, cleansing her of her previous shame.

Unfortunately, Mo'Shay ends up pregnant at fourteen years old. Reese is thrilled, but her mother is crushed. The three of them attend Mo'Shay's first appointment at the clinic together. As the word about Mo'Shay's pregnancy gets out, her friends abandon her but Reese remains by her side.



Mo'Shay's mother considers sending her away to her grandmother's until the baby is born, but in the end, she changes her mind. In the final scene of the story, Shirley tells her daughter that she can stay at home and they will raise the baby together. She finally tells her daughter that she loves her. Mo'Shay cries as Shirley holds her in her arms, rocking and hugging her like a baby.



Snapshots of My Early Life - Diane Bartholomew

Snapshots of My Early Life - Diane Bartholomew Summary and Analysis

In "Snapshots of My Early Life," Diane Bartholomew uses humor to make her rough life bearable. Her wry observations allow the reader to laugh when they want to cry. There are seventeen short chapters (or snapshots), beginning with Suppertime and ending with Dad's Dead.

Suppertime sets up Diane's childhood. Her father beats her often, and her mother, grandmother, and sister do not come to her rescue. Diane turns into a defiant child who bounces back and forth between stand offs with her father and yearning for his love and attention.

The family moves to Pennsylvania, and Diane has a rough time fitting in at her new school. Her observations of school are hilarious and heartbreaking. Diane turns into a "bad" kid at school to gain more attention from her teachers.

In I Learn to Hunt, Diane's father takes her hunting. Diane is tough and learns to load and shoot a gun to gain her father's approval. She knows they won't go home until she kills something, so she finally kills a squirrel, and her father makes her carry the bloody prize home inside her jacket.

The family has money troubles, and Diane's parents fight constantly. Soon, Diane realizes that something romantic is going on between her dad and their neighbor, Mavis. Eventually, he abandons the family and moves in across the street with Mavis.

In another brutal snapshot, Diane reveals her father's betrayal. She travels with her father on a trip to deliver a trailer to Chattanooga, and during the trip, her father rapes her. The feeling of shock and powerlessness is as thick as the stifling summer air that Diane describes in the frightening scene in the trailer. Diane also describes quite frankly the shame she feels when it's over. Her father acts as if nothing has happened.

Diane learns to hate her father. When he moves in with Mavis, he flaunts their relationship and never lifts a finger to help his children or his ex-wife. In one snapshot, he even steals the only clunker car they have and almost runs over his two daughters as he speeds away. When he gets sick and ends up in the hospital, he refuses to receive his children, ex-wife, or even his own mother as visitors.

Diane eventually starts dating a guy named Buzz. By their fourth date, he forces her to have sex, and when Diane gets pregnant, they assume they must get married. Buzz is not a great catch. He makes her laugh, but that's about it. Buzz cheats on Diane

throughout their relationship. He abandons her briefly for an old girlfriend when they've only been married two days. A few weeks later, Diane's mother-in-law throws a surprise wedding/baby shower for Diane. Diane doesn't tell her, but it's the first party she has ever had.

In the final chapter, Diane's dad is dead. The whole family goes across the street to Mavis' house for his funeral, whether they're invited or not. When Diane sees his body, she doesn't know why she's crying. She wants to stick him with a pin to make sure he's really dead and can't hurt them anymore.



Bad Girls - Dale Griffith

Bad Girls - Dale Griffith Summary and Analysis

"Bad Girls" is written by Dale Griffith. Dale is not a prisoner at York but a teacher there. She is the one who talks Wally Lamb into coming to York to conduct the writing workshops.

Dale first hears about Niantic from her mother when she is a very young girl. They are driving by, and her mother tells her not to act up or she will end up there. That's where they send the "bad" girls.

Over thirty years later, Dale is a forty-year-old single mother who is in dire need of a job. She applies for a teaching position at Niantic. On her first visit, she has second thoughts. She's not sure the good salary and great health benefits are worth the stress of working with thugs. But by the end of her first day, her fears are replaced by a feeling that she really belongs there. She sees that most of the women in prison have been through hell and back, and she can relate.

Over the years, Dale learns to work with a wide assortment of students at all learning levels. As she gets to know her students, Dale finds out that many of the inmates have known nothing but violence and domestic chaos since birth. Her students are the girls who fell through the cracks in public school. Dale believes that all of her students have treasures buried beneath piles of emotional and institutional rubble, and it is her job to help them unearth those treasures.

The women Dale teaches are the reason her work is more of a calling than a job. She describes a few of her students and the small victories they share when their writing skills and literacy improve. Dale believes strongly that the benefits of a writing life are available to any writer, whether they are a literary genius or not. There are emotional and physical benefits to the written word.

Dale then describes "Wally days," the alternate Thursdays that Wally Lamb comes to York to work with about twenty of her students. She explains that Wally has lost his celebrity status and is now part of the York School family. The group that works with Wally has dubbed themselves The Lambettes. The Lambettes are committed to constant revision of their stories, and each revision improves their work and teaches patience, which is an important quality to have in prison.

Now, Dale cannot believe her good fortune in finding her calling at York. Prisoners often receive a message that they are society's throwaways, but writing is a way for the women to fight back and regain a positive sense of self. Dale is thrilled to help facilitate this transformation in her students.



Characters

Wally Lamb

Wally Lamb is the reason this book came together. This best-selling author agrees to give a short talk at York Correctional Institution in Connecticut about the healing power of writing. The one-time talk turns into several years of writing workshops with women in the prison and results in this compilation of short stories.

Wally Lamb is a family man, a teacher, and a fiction writer. He becomes a very famous writer when he lands on Oprah's Book Club for his novel *She's Come Undone* and also for *I Know This Much is True*. He likes to work with the "tough cookies" in the school where he teaches. The women at York are also "tough cookies" because they will not be defeated or silenced. They continue to tell their stories through the written word. Getting to know them has transformed Wally Lamb's life.

Nancy Whiteley

Nancy Whiteley contributes two stories to this book: *The True Face of Earth* and *Orbiting Izzy*. She was convicted of conspiracy to commit credit card fraud in 2000. Nancy and her husband used stolen credit cards to live the high life for some time before they were both arrested.

Since her release, Nancy has kept a full-time job, and she is committed to a twelve-step program for alcohol and drug abuse. She says that for some reason she can put down on paper the things that she isn't able to say out loud. She wishes she felt the same compulsion to exercise as she does to write.

Carolyn Ann Adams

Carolyn Ann Adams contributes the short story *Thefts* to this book. She entered prison in 1998, convicted of larceny by embezzlement.

Carolyn Ann Adams struggles with mental illness and is an advocate for the mentally ill and a long-term consumer of mental health services. She has been diagnosed with a number of serious mental disorders and believes that her crime was a direct result of her untreated mental illness.

Carolyn Ann Adams was released from prison in 2001 and currently volunteers in a wellness center for battered women, CRIS Radio for the Blind, and Care Connection, which is a service for the elderly. Her goals are to continue to educate the public and reduce the social stigma of mental illness. She is devoted to helping others with mental disorders, especially those who have ended up in the criminal justice system.



Tabatha Rowley

Tabatha Rowley entered prison in 1996, convicted of assault in the first degree. She contributes Hair Chronicles to this book.

Tabatha was raised in the ghettos of Bridgeport, Connecticut. She dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and subsequently earned her general equivalency diploma through the Grafton Job Corps. She supported herself and her son as a fast-food worker, a nurse's aide, a musical performer, and a drug dealer before she was arrested.

Tabatha is a gifted singer and songwriter and popular with her fellow prisoners and the prison staff. She was released to a halfway house in 2001, and around that time her only surviving brother, Choo, was shot and killed.

Tabatha currently works at Friendly's and has been reunited with her son, Kevin, who is now ten years old. She hopes that her story will help other misguided young people change their lives and avoid ending up in prison.

Nancy Birkla

Nancy Birkla is the author of Three Steps Past the Monkeys. She entered prison in 1990 with a drug trafficking conviction.

Twelve-step recovery remains the most important thing in Nancy's life. She attends meetings faithfully, works with a sponsor, and attends a step study group.

Nancy graduated from Jefferson Community College in 2001 with an associate of science degree in human services. She maintained a 4.0 grade point average. Since then, she has worked for an Indiana agency that provides counseling, housing, and job opportunities to adults with developmental disabilities. She also tutors English for students with disabilities and international students.

Brenda Medina

Brenda Medina is serving a twenty-five year sentence without parole for homicide. She is the author of Hell, and How I Got There. Brenda has been in prison since 1993 as the result of a gang-related killing. She was present at the killing, but Brenda maintains that she did not commit the crime. She was surprised when one of her "sisters" stabbed and killed a victim during a fight. Brenda admits that she participated in violence, but she is innocent of felony murder.

Brenda obtained her high school general equivalency degree in prison and has earned thirty-six credits toward an associate's degree. She volunteers as a bilingual tutor with Literacy Volunteers of America. Brenda is also a reporter, photographer, and editor for the York Voice, an inmate newsletter.



Robin Cullen

Robin Cullen entered prison in 1997, convicted of second-degree manslaughter with a motor vehicle. She and her friend were driving home from a wedding, and she became disoriented and entered the wrong side of a divided road. When she tried to correct her error, her truck flipped over, killing her friend. She served three years of an eight-year sentence. She contributes the story Christmas in Prison to this book.

While in prison, Robin volunteered as a teacher's aide, a literacy volunteer, and a backup puppy trainer for the National Education of Assistance Dogs project. She also worked in data entry for the Department of Transportation and served as a lector for the Catholic Mass.

Robin became certified through the Amherst Writers and Artists Institute to teach therapeutic writing after she was released from prison. Today, she owns her own painting company called Color Outside the Lines.

Bonnie Foreshaw

Bonnie Foreshaw is serving a forty-five years sentence for homicide. She is not eligible for parole. Bonnie has been in prison since 1986, and she wrote Faith, Power, and Pants for this compilation.

Bonnie was the first person ever tried in Connecticut for the murder of a pregnant woman. To date, she has been imprisoned longer than any other woman serving time at York prison.

Bonnie has four children and four grandchildren. In prison, she serves as a surrogate mom to many women and teenage girls. She is active in York's chapter of Literacy Volunteers of America and support groups like Alternatives to Violence.

In 2002, prison officials reversed their earlier decision, and they now allow Bonnie to wear a skirt.

Barbara Parsons Lane

Barbara Parsons Lane contributed Puzzle Pieces to this book. She is serving twenty-five years for manslaughter, due to emotional duress.

In the fall of 200, Barbara earned an associate of science degree in general studies from Three Rivers Community-Technical College. She graduated with honors. Barbara is a certified tutor for Literacy Volunteer of America and helps math students prepare for their high school equivalency diplomas. She is a member of several support groups for survivors of abuse, and she is currently studying microcomputers, journalism, meditation, and yoga.



Barbara is very involved in York C.I.'s Prison PUP Partnership, a program in which inmates train dogs to assist adults and children with special needs.

Michelle Jessamy

Michelle Jessamy wrote *Motherlove* for this book. She entered prison in 1994 on a conviction of manslaughter.

Michelle was born in London, England. She is a mother of four, and she is currently serving a twenty-year sentence. Michelle maintains that her crime was an act in self-defence.

She has completed requirements for her high school equivalency certificate in prison and has gone on to study algebra, computer technology, and writing. Michelle also works in the counseling program for York's youthful offenders and as a teacher's aide.

Michelle believes that autobiographical fiction writing has helped her share with others and come to terms with her past. It has helped her release her spirit from its prison.

Diane Bartholomew

Diane Bartholomew entered prison in 1990, convicted of homicide in the first degree. She was released a few months before she died of cancer.

Diane was a Waterbury, Connecticut native and the youngest of four children. She was the mother of three daughters and was physically, emotionally, and sexually abused throughout her twenty-four year marriage. Eventually, she had a psychotic break and shot and killed her husband.

While in prison, Diane battled breast cancer and went through rigorous self-reflection through counseling and self-help groups. She earned an associate's degree and went on to pursue a bachelor's degree in social work. She wanted to become a counselor for victims of domestic abuse.

Dale Griffith

Dale Griffith is a writer who has taught at York School since 1994. Dale returned to college and earned undergraduate and master's degrees from Wesleyan University. She is a single mom, living in her childhood home on the Connecticut shore with her children and her cats.

Dale has taught English classes at Middlesex Community College, and she has taught writing and a variety of other courses at York Correctional Institution since 1994. She believes that writing has healed her and it also heals her students.



Objects/Places

Raw Egg

In Nancy Whiteley's story, "The True Face of Earth," she decides as a teenager that she would like to get pregnant and start her own life with some guy. In ninth grade health class, they have an assignment to take care of a raw egg for a week without breaking it. It's supposed to show how difficult it is to be a parent. Nancy's partner takes very good care of the egg for most of the week, but when he turns it over to Nancy, she throws the egg into her purse and forgets about it. When she tosses her purse onto the kitchen chair when she gets home from school, the forgotten egg breaks in her purse. They flunk the assignment.

Fiery Red Porsche 944

In "Orbiting Izzy," Nancy Whiteley describes a fiery red Porsche 944 that her boss's mother keeps in the garage. She bought the car to console herself after her husband dies, but she never drives it. Nancy talks her boss, Izzy, into taking it for a joy ride. The Porsche symbolizes freedom and recklessness. Izzy is a very conservative, safe man. Nancy is the opposite. During the summer Nancy works for Izzy, she encourages him to break out of his boring life a little bit and have some fun.

The Goose

In "Thefts," Carolyn Ann Adams describes sitting in the holding room where she is waiting to be processed into the Department of Corrections. She looks out the window and sees a goose. At first she thinks she's hallucinating, but it's real. Carolyn actually envies the goose, just wandering around doing what geese do (eating, shitting, and looking stupid).

Dreadlocks

This hairstyle comes up in two different stories: "Hair Chronicles" and "Faith, Power, and Pants." This is a hairstyle that Tabatha Rowley sports to appear thuggish and tough. It is also a hairstyle that Bonnie Foreshaw wears and takes very seriously as part of her Rastafarian religion. Bonnie tells Tabatha that her hairstyle affects other people and is a testament of who she is. Bonnie warns Tabatha that dreadlocks can bring her persecution and prosecution by the system. People make assumptions about people who wear dreadlocks. Bonnie also says that dreadlocks can help a person have a full understanding of black rage.



Monkeys

In "Three Steps Past the Monkeys," Nancy Birkla describes her nightmares about the monkeys in "The Wizard of Oz." She is unsure about where her fear comes from until she unearths a frightening memory from her childhood. Nancy and her friend Holly were sexually abused by a neighbor when they were little girls. The neighbor threatened to send the witch to burn their homes and the flying monkeys to snatch them up if they ever told another person about what he did to them.

Roast Beef

The Christmas dinner every year at the prison is roast beef. Robin Cullen describes in "Christmas in Prison" that in the three Christmases she has spent in prison, the gifts and the decorations have dwindled, but they still have roast beef every year.

Puzzle Pieces

Barbara Parsons Lane describes childhood memories as being like puzzle pieces in an old puzzle. Some of them are missing and some no longer fit quite right. It's hard to piece the entire thing together correctly.

Yellow Baby Set

When Mo'Shay becomes pregnant in "Motherlove," her mother is very upset at first. But after thinking things over, Mo'Shay's mother offers her love and support. She opens the door of reconciliation by giving Mo'Shay a gift of a cute little yellow baby set—a sweater and matching booties and bonnet.

The Old Cat

In "Snapshots of My Early Life," Diane and her family call her father's new girlfriend "the old cat." Her name is Mavis, and she lives across the street. Mavis openly flirts with Diane's Dad. Eventually, he abandons the family and moves in across the street with her, flaunting their relationship. Diane has no idea what her dad sees in the old cat. She is not attractive, and her fat belly is usually protruding from underneath a halter top.

York Correctional Institution in Connecticut

This is the location of Wally Lamb's writing group. He conducts a writing workshop at the prison as a way for women to experience the transforming power of the written word. The stories in this book grew out of that workshop. York Correctional Institution is named after Janet York, who was a very highly regarded warden at Niantic from 1960 to

1975. York focused her efforts on education, vocational training, and addiction counseling. Her compound was a model for success in rehabilitation.

Themes

Abuse and Incarceration are Linked

As Wally Lamb writes in the introduction of this book, out of the eleven women who contributed stories, eight have been physically abused and nine have been sexually abused. Abuse is a common history of women in prison.

Dale Griffith, a teacher at York School also offers a shocking statistic. She says that according to current research, girls between the ages of twelve and sixteen who are convicted of violent crimes were, in most cases, physically and/or sexually abused by age two.

These statistics are backed up in very real ways by the eleven short stories written by prisoners in this book. Many of them share horrifying stories of sexual abuse at a very young age from a family friend, a neighbor, an uncle, a father, a grandfather. The early abuse sets up a prison for these women long before they enter York. They are frightened and threatened into staying silent, and they often end up acting out in inappropriate ways in retaliation. Some of the women simply crack under the pressure and finally retaliate with violent consequences.

Writing gives these women an opportunity to regain their power and their dignity. They finally have a chance to reveal the abuse and the abuser, and they are free of the terrible secrets they have been holding for years.

Writing Heals

Couldn't Keep it to Myself is a powerful book. It is often difficult to read, because the brutality of many of the stories is at times unthinkable. One weeps with the women when reading their stories; we get angry; we feel their powerlessness and frustration; we share their confusion and feelings of abandonment. We learn empathy when we get to know them better, and we start to throw away previous biases and old misconceptions.

But the most important message of this book is one of healing. Wally Lamb and Dale Griffith are helping women in prison to hone their writing skills and use them as a weapon against the injustices that have been forced upon them.

Writing heals these women, because they are allowed to reveal the secrets that have been making them sick. They have a voice through their writing, and they feel powerful. They are no longer insignificant throwaways in society. Their stories are important enough to be heard. When the women use their writing to heal themselves, they are able to begin a transformation into healthy, strong women.



The prisoners are not the only ones who are healed through this writing. Wally Lamb's hope is that the public will read these stories and become more empathetic and understanding. Then, as a community we can move toward greater overall healing.

Misconceptions of People in Prison

Another major theme in *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* is that there are many misconceptions about women in prison. The general misconception is that all women in prison are drug addicts, thugs, and lesbians who should be kept away from society. They are "bad" women who have no intention of becoming good.

Through each one of the eleven stories of prisoners in this book, the reader gets to know the women and how they ended up in prison. Often the truth is quite different than common societal beliefs.

The reader begins to realize that if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, they, too, might find themselves behind bars. Some of the women are in prison because they finally defended themselves after years of abuse. Others grew up in families filled with chaos and had little hope of a normal adult life. They were destined for prison or death. Mental illness and inadequate healthcare is another route to prison.

The overwhelming truth is that none of these women want to be in prison. It is a frightening, brutal, horrible place. They talk of how difficult it is to be separated from children and loved ones. The prisoners also talk about their struggles to survive the boredom and sameness of prison. A large number of the women featured in this book have gone back to school in prison and take part in volunteer activities and mentoring to help other prisoners. They are not society's throwaways. They are women who want to contribute in a positive way to the world. They long for transformation, and they are changing for the better in spite of their tough surroundings.

Style

Perspective

The perspective in *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* changes in every chapter. Each author has a different story and a different way of telling it.

Wally Lamb's chapter is written in the first person, as are all but one of the subsequent chapters. Dale Griffith also writes her concluding chapter in first person. Wally and Dale are advocates for the women in prison, and they want to tell firsthand their experiences with the prisoners and how the women have inspired them.

For at least one prisoner, the truth is too hard to tell in first person. Michelle Jessamy chooses autobiographical fiction. She writes the story as a fiction piece in the third person from the perspective of the main character. This tool of distancing herself slightly from the truth of her real life makes it easier for Michelle to tell what really happened. She is protected behind a thin mask of anonymity.

For the most part, the women tell their stories in the first person. It gives them a sense of power to tell their truths to the world and begin to heal from secrets that they've kept for many years. Through their autobiographical writing, the women learn that they are significant, and they begin to have hope for a better life.

Tone

The tone throughout this book is not objective. It is very subjective and changes depending on who is telling the story.

Wally Lamb and Dale Griffith have a very inspirational tone. They are inspired by the women they work with in prison, and they believe that their writing is important. It helps the women heal, and it helps society more fully understand the truth about women in prison.

The tone of the other eleven stories written by prisoners varies wildly. Some of the stories contain a lot of humor; others are quite depressing. There are times when the writers have a combative or angry tone, and there are other parts of stories that are very defeated and sad.

In spite of the very difficult passages in the book, the overall tone is uplifting and healing. The writers find power in their words, and there is also a sense of peace and acceptance in a lot of the writing. There is a renewed sense of hope in the fact that their voices are being heard.

The women are using their writing as a tool to tell their stories. Those stories take on a wide variety of tones, from loving to hateful; from hopeful to desperate; from extremely

fearful to silly. Emotions run the spectrum, but they ultimately land on the positive, hopeful side.

Structure

The structure of *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* is a series of short stories divided into thirteen completely separate chapters. Each chapter is written by a different person.

Wally Lamb and Dale Griffith serve as "bookends" for the structure of the book. They are the two writing teachers of the prisoners. Wally Lamb sets up the book by giving background information on the writing workshops and how he became involved. He then describes how the book came into being. Dale Griffith provides a conclusion by talking about her years as a teacher and how teaching at York School is a calling. The women inspire her.

The meat of the book is the eleven chapters in the middle. These are personal stories of eleven prisoners who have taken part in Wally Lamb's workshop and are students of Dale Griffith. Each one of their short stories has a slightly different structure. One gives a series of short snapshots of her childhood. Another writer organizes her story in a group of journal entries with explanations to fill in the gaps in between. Another writer uses autobiographical fiction to keep a safe distance from her personal story. Several of the short stories are organized in short chapters with titles. Others are random memories that pop up, not in chronological order, but are strung together to ultimately form a complete picture.

Quotes

"The brave writers whose work is represented in this volume have acted in good faith, faced their demons, stayed the course, and revised relentlessly. And in taking on the subject of themselves—making themselves vulnerable to the unseen reader—they have exchanged powerlessness for the power that comes with self-awareness." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 5.

"Of the eleven contributors to this volume, eight have been battered and nine have been sexually abused, a statistic that reflects the norm for incarcerated women. Their essays, then, are victories against voicelessness—miracles in print." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 9.

"Often, I caught myself still looking up when I heard a plan overhead. I told myself I'd been an idiot to believe all that crap about princes and saviors. Little by little, I trained myself not to look up." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 48.

"God knows, he deserved better than me, the trashy temp who would love him only as long as she could shock him. 'You're ruined now,' Aldo had whispered that night under our plush, stolen designer quilt. I had neither the heart nor the stomach to ruin Izzy." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 62.

"I'm awakened by a heavy weight on top of me. I smell stale beer. When Daddy moves, I can hear my paper dolls tearing." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 82.

"From that time on, whenever I got mad enough, I would run away from home. And when I reached my destination—an aunt's house, a friend's—I would cut my hair and dye it a different color." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 109.

"Today, it amazes me to ponder the parallels between my childhood behaviors and my subsequent method of 'feeding the beast.' But addiction is addiction and the user is always financing the next fix." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 130.

"Hope and despair live side by side here at York prison. Goodness and evil live here, too. As for God, I retain my doubts about His existence, but search each day for evidence of His mercy and love." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 174.

"Politics outside of prison has a direct effect on the policies inside. In the sixteen years I've been here, governors have come and gone and prison administrations with them. At Niantic, the focus has shifted from rehabilitation to punishment." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 194.

"In my life, pain has always accompanied love. Whenever things are going well, I hold my breath and wait." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 225.

"Long-term incarceration is a strange mix of sadness, sameness, and explosiveness." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 239.



"By exploring my past through autobiographical fiction and sharing it with others, I am learning how to come to terms with the 'whys' of my past actions and how to release my spirit from its prison. Writing gives me a sense of peace." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 265.

"Then, without warning, tears spill from my eyes, too. But don't misunderstand, Dad. I'm weeping not from sadness but from relief. You bastard, Dad. I wish I'd brought a hat pin to jab you with—to make sure you're really, truly dead." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 332.

"According to current research, girls between the ages of twelve and sixteen who are convicted of violent crimes were, in most cases, physically and/or sexually abused by the age of two." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 343.

"My students' treasures are buried under piles of emotional and institutional rubble—yet the treasures are there, waiting to be unearthed and discovered." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 344.

"My body's still in prison, but my spirit's finally free." *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, p. 349.



Topics for Discussion

How does writing transform the women in this book?

What does Wally Lamb learn from his students?

What common themes do you notice among the women in this book?

Where do you see hope in the stories of these women?

What do you learn about prison life from these stories?

In what ways do the women in this book reveal that they were imprisoned before they entered York Correctional Institution in Connecticut?

How is Wally Lamb transformed by teaching this writing group?

Choose one woman's story and describe how she heals herself through writing.

What misconceptions did you have about prisoners before you read this book? Have you dropped any of those misconceptions after reading it?