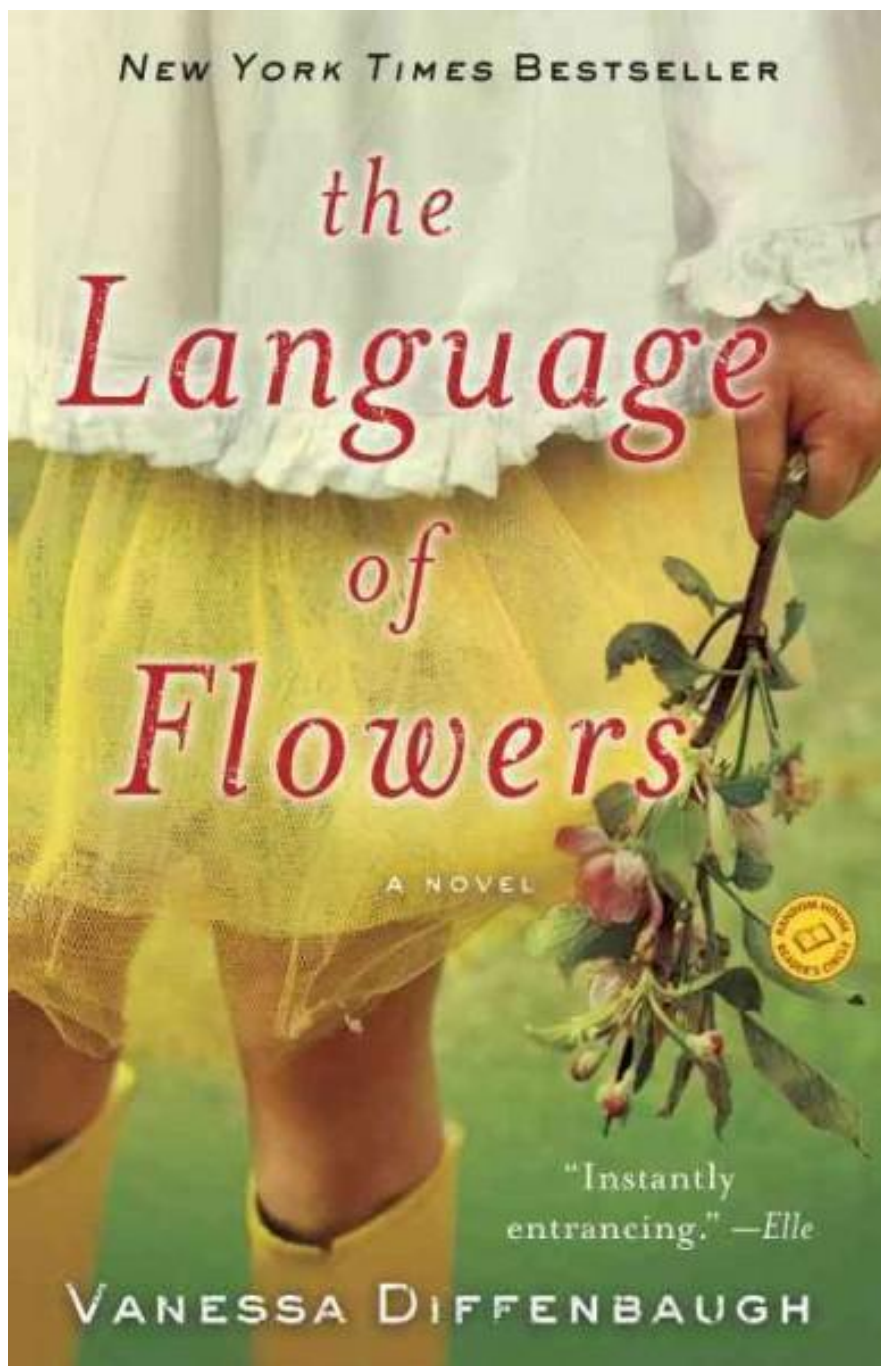


About the book...



A mesmerizing, moving, and elegantly written debut novel, **The Language of Flowers** beautifully weaves past and present, creating a vivid portrait of an unforgettable woman whose gift for flowers helps her change the lives of others even as she struggles to overcome her own troubled past.

The Victorian language of flowers was used to convey romantic expressions: honeysuckle for devotion, asters for patience, and red roses for love. But for Victoria Jones, it's been more useful in communicating grief, mistrust, and solitude. After a childhood spent in the foster-care system, she is unable to get close to anybody, and her only connection to the world is through flowers and their meanings.

Now eighteen and emancipated from the system, Victoria has nowhere to go and sleeps in a public park, where she plants a small garden of her own. Soon a local florist discovers her talents, and Victoria realizes she has a gift for helping others through the flowers she chooses for them. But a mysterious vendor at the flower market has her questioning what's been missing in her life, and when she's forced to confront a painful secret from her past, she must decide whether it's worth risking everything for a second chance at happiness.

About the author...



Vanessa Diffenbaugh was born in San Francisco and raised in Chico, California. After studying creative writing and education at Stanford, she went on to teach art and writing to youth in low-income communities. She and her husband, PK, have three children: Tre'von, eighteen; Chela, four; and Miles, three. Tre'von, a former foster child, is attending New

York University on a Gates Millennium Scholarship. Diffenbaugh and her family currently live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where her husband is studying urban school reform at Harvard.

Vanessa Diffenbaugh is also the founder of the Camellia Network. The mission of the Camellia Network is to create a nationwide movement to support youth transitioning from foster care. The network's name emphasizes the belief in the interconnectedness of humanity: each gift a young person receives will be accompanied by a camellia, a reminder that the destiny of our nation lies in the hands of our youngest citizens.

A Talk with Vanessa Diffenbaugh

What is the language of flowers?

The Victorian language of flowers began with the publication of *Le Language des Fleurs*, written by Charlotte de Latour and printed in Paris in 1819. To create the book—which was a list of flowers and their meanings—de Latour gathered references to flower symbolism throughout poetry, ancient mythology and even medicine. The book spawned the science known as floriography, and between 1830 and 1880, hundreds of similar floral dictionaries were printed in Europe and America.

In *The Language of Flowers*, Victoria learns about this language as a young girl from her prospective adoptive mother Elizabeth. Elizabeth tells her that years ago, people communicated through flowers; and if a man gave a young lady a bouquet of flowers, she would race home and try to decode it like a secret message. So he would have to choose his flowers carefully.

Where did you come up with the idea to have Victoria express herself through flowers?

I've always loved the language of flowers. I discovered Kate Greenaway's *Language of Flowers* in a used bookstore when I was 16, and couldn't believe it was such a well-kept secret. How could something so

beautiful and romantic be virtually unknown? When I started thinking about the book I wanted to write, Victoria and the language of flowers came to me simultaneously. I liked the complication of a young woman who has trouble connecting with others communicating through a forgotten language that almost no one understands.

When Victoria begins working for a florist, she discovers someone at the local flower market who knows the language of flowers as well as she does—someone who understands the messages she has been sending into the world. In what ways does this become a turning point for her?

After Victoria receives mistletoe (“I surmount all obstacles”) from the mysterious flower vendor, she lies in the comfort of the empty flower shop, thinking about the meaning of the flower she has been given. In this moment it becomes clear to her that the language of flowers has become an obsession of hers not only because it is her last remaining connection to Elizabeth—the person who loved her the most—but also because speaking in a language that no one understands is emotionally safe. Passion, connection, disagreement, rejection—none of these are possible in a language that does not elicit a response. By choosing to continue her conversation with the flower vendor, Victoria is choosing to open herself up to an

entire range of emotions and experiences she has to this point spent years protecting herself from.

Why does Victoria decide to create her own flower dictionary, and what role does it come to play in the novel?

In many ways, Victoria exists entirely on the periphery of society. So much is out of the scope of her understanding—how to get a job, how to make a friend—even how to have a conversation. But in the world of flowers, with their predictable growing habits and “non-negotiable” meanings, Victoria feels safe, comfortable, even at home. All this changes when she learns that there is more than one definition for the yellow rose—and then, through research, realizes there is more than one definition for almost every flower. She feels her grasp on the one aspect of life she believed to be solid dissolving away beneath her. In an effort to “re-order” the universe, Victoria begins to photograph and create her own dictionary, determined to never have a flower-inspired miscommunication. She decides to share that information with others—a decision that brings with it the possibility of love, connection, career, and community.

I understand Victoria’s impulse completely, and I included a dictionary in the back of the book for the same reason. If readers are inspired to send messages through flowers, I wanted there to be a

complete, concise, relevant and *consistent* list of meanings for modern communication.

How does The Language of Flowers challenge and reconfigure our concepts of family and motherhood?

One of my favorite books is Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. In it, Rilke writes: "It is also good to love: because love is difficult. For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation."

To love *is* difficult. To be a mother is difficult. To be a mother, alone, with few financial resources and no emotional support, is so difficult as to be nearly impossible. Yet society expects us to be able to do it, and as mothers, we expect ourselves to be able to do it as well. Our standards for motherhood are so high that many of us harbor intense, secret guilt for every harsh word we speak to our children; every negative thought that enters our minds. The pressure is so powerful that many of us never speak aloud about our challenges—especially emotional ones—because to do so would be to risk being viewed as a failure or, worse, a danger to the very children we love more than anything in the world.

With Victoria and Elizabeth, I hope to allow the reader a window inside the minds of mothers who are trying to do what is best for their children but who lack the support, resources, and/or self-confidence to succeed. The results are heartbreaking for so many mothers who find themselves unable to raise their children. It is my belief that we could prevent much child abuse and neglect if we as a society recognized the intense challenge of motherhood and offered more support for mothers who want desperately to love and care for their children.

When Victoria opens her own business called "Message," she quietly starts revolutionizing the bridal industry in the Bay area. Do you think The Language of Flowers might transform the way brides plan their weddings in real life?

I have no idea—we'll see! For me, once I discovered the language of flowers I could never look at flowers the same way again. I don't know how (or if) this knowledge will affect my readers, but I am very curious to find out.

The Language of Flowers sheds light on the foster care system in our country, something with which many of us are not intimately acquainted. Did you always know you wanted to write a story about a foster child?

I've always had a passion for working with young people. As my work began to focus on youth in foster

care—and I eventually became a foster parent myself—I became aware of the incredible injustice of the foster care system in our country: children moving from home to home, being separated from siblings, and then being released into the world on their eighteenth birthday with little support or services. Moreover, I realized that this injustice was happening virtually unnoticed. The same sensationalized stories appear in the media over and over again: violent kids, greedy foster parents, the occasional horrific child death or romanticized adoption—but the true story of life inside the system is one that is much more complex and emotional—and it is a story that is rarely told. Foster children and foster parents, like children and adults everywhere, are trying to love and be loved, and to do the best they can with the emotional and physical resources they have. Victoria is a character that people can connect with on an emotional level—at her best *and* at her worst—which I hope gives readers a deeper understanding of the realities of foster care.

Victoria's foster mother Elizabeth is single, and she makes some unusual decisions about Victoria's upbringing—to home school her, for example. Yet the more "traditional" families Victoria has been placed with seem far less qualified to care for her. How much flexibility is there in the foster care system with regard to

foster parents like Elizabeth?

Because each country administers foster care, rules and regulations vary greatly county-by-county and state-by-state. But a decision such as home school would be recommended by a social worker and approved by the juvenile court judge (although I decided not to include those details in the novel).

Victoria is such a complex and memorable character. She has so much to contribute to the world, but has so much trouble with love and forgiveness, particularly toward herself. Is she based on someone you know or have known in real life?

People often ask me if I drew inspiration for the character of Victoria from our foster son Tre'von, but Victoria is about as different from Tre'von as two people could ever be. Tre'von's strength is his openness—he has a quick smile, a big heart, and a social grace that puts everyone around him at ease. At fourteen, running away from home barefoot on a cold January night, he had the wisdom and sense of self-preservation to knock on the door of the nearest fire station. When he was placed in foster care, he immediately began to reach out to his teachers and his principal, creating around himself a protective community of love and support.

Victoria is clearly different. She is angry and afraid, yet desperately hopeful; qualities I saw in many of the

young people I worked with throughout the years. Though Victoria is entirely fictional, I did draw inspiration in bits and pieces from foster children I have known. One young woman in particular, who my husband and I mentored many years ago, was fiery and focused and distrusting and unpredictable in a manner similar to Victoria. Her history was intense: a number on her birth certificate where a name should have been; more foster homes than she could count. Still, she was resilient, beautiful, smart, and funny. We loved her completely, and she did her best to sabotage it, over and over again. To this day my husband and I regret that we couldn't find a way to connect with her and become the stable parents she deserved.

The notion of second chances plays a major role in The Language of Flowers for many of the characters. Does this in any way relate to your personal advocacy work with emancipating foster youth?

As my four-year old daughter says to me on a regular basis: *Mommy, you aren't perfect.* We all make mistakes, and we all need second chances. For youth in foster care, these mistakes are often purposeful—if not consciously so; a way to test the strength of a bond and establish trust in a new parent. A friend of mine called recently, after a year of mentoring a sixteen year-old boy, completely distraught. The

young man had lied to him, and it was a major lie, one that put him in danger. My friend, in his anger, said things he regretted. My response was this: *good. Your response might not have been perfect, but it was real and your concern was clear.* As long as he was still committed to the young man (which he was), it didn't so much matter what my friend had said or done; what mattered was what he did next. It mattered that he showed his mentee, through words and actions, that he still loved him, and that the young man's mistake couldn't change that.

The last sentence of the book is: "Over time, we would learn each other, and I would learn to love her like a mother loves a daughter, imperfectly and without roots." In what way is this a metaphor for giving and receiving love?

About three quarters of the way through writing this novel, I was at a dinner party talking about moss and maternal love when a biologist friend of mine chimed in. *I love that, he said, because moss is the only plant that grows without roots.* I knew instantly that this concept would form the end of my book. The idea that moss (maternal love) grows without roots (separate from everything around it) felt freeing to me—almost revolutionary. Victoria believes the love she has for her daughter is not enough—that because she was not loved, she cannot love. It is a belief in our society that we mother as we have been mothered; that both love

and abuse pass through generations like plants draw water from the ground. But the truth is that love—like moss—is self-contained. It draws neither from our past nor our future; it is separate even from those we love. It projects out but stays whole within itself and does not attach. When we look at love this way it is possible to see that we are all capable of loving our children, deeply and completely, regardless of our past or our circumstances.

The Language of Flowers is one of those stories that will stay with its readers for a very long time. What lasting impression do you wish the book to leave them?

I believe that people are spurred into action when they both see the injustice of a situation and the possibility for change. With *The Language of Flowers* I tried to write a book that was honest and true, but hopeful enough to inspire people to act. Each year, nearly 20,000 young people emancipate from the foster care system, many of them with nowhere to go and no one to go to for support. I am launching a non-profit with the goal to connect every emancipating foster child to a community—a book club, a women’s club, a church group—to support them through the transition to adulthood and beyond. It is my hope that readers everywhere will read my book and become inspired to partner with emancipating young people in their own communities.

If you were to represent yourself with a bouquet, which flowers would you choose and why?

Heliotrope (*devoted affection*), Black-Eyed Susan (*justice*), Hawthorn (*hope*), Liatris (*I will try again*), Lisianthus (*appreciation*), and Moss (*maternal love*). These flowers represent how I am—devoted, affectionate, maternal, and grateful—and also how I want to be—hopeful, determined, and constantly working for justice.

Reviews

*Booklist/*Starred Review*/*

Abandoned as an infant, Victoria grew up as a ward of the California foster-care system and, abused and neglected, turned into an angry, uncontrollable child. Deemed "unadoptable," she gets one final chance at a home life when she is placed with Elizabeth, a single woman running her family's vineyard in the verdant hills outside San Francisco. Days before Victoria is scheduled to be officially adopted by Elizabeth, a terrible misunderstanding violently tears them apart, and she is sent back into the system. Though the emotional damage seems insurmountable, Victoria's time on the farm taught her that there were other ways of getting her message across. Finally forced to

support herself, Victoria lands a job with a florist and uses her knowledge of the hidden meaning of flowers to gradually and fitfully make her way back into the world—one that will include a career, motherhood, and the personal forgiveness necessary for her to love and be loved in return. Enchanting, ennobling, and powerfully engaging, Diffenbaugh's artfully accomplished debut novel lends poignant testimony to the multitude of mysteries held in the human heart.

Library Journal

Diffenbaugh's debut novel opens on Victoria Jones's 18th birthday, which coincides with her emancipation from California's foster care system. Abandoned at birth, Victoria has grown up in a string of bad foster homes, except for the one year she spent with Elizabeth, a vineyard owner who taught her the meaning of flowers. Alternating between Victoria's brief time with Elizabeth and her unsteady attempt to face life as an adult with little education and less experience, Diffenbaugh weaves together the two narratives using the Victorian language of flowers that ultimately helps shape Victoria's future as she grapples with a painful decision from her past. VERDICT Victoria might be her own worst enemy, but her defensiveness and self-doubt as a foster child and her desire to live beyond what she was thought capable of will sway readers toward her favor. Fans of Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* will enjoy this solid and well-written debut, which is also certain to be a hit with book clubs.

BookPage Reviews

“Fostering a life in full bloom”

Each year, nearly 20,000 young people “age out” of America’s foster care system, and many of them have nowhere to go. Writer Vanessa Diffenbaugh has transformed this sad statistic into an extraordinary debut novel.

The focus of a fierce bidding war among publishers, *The Language of Flowers* tells the visceral and deeply touching story of Victoria, a teen who has been discharged from foster care, leaving her alone and emotionally barricaded. It’s also a compelling story about spiritual hunger and the power of nature—and human connection—to help heal hearts.

“My book is helping to tell a story that needs to be told.”

“It came pouring out of me,” Diffenbaugh says of the six-month process of writing the book. “It was about a year and a half from the time I started it to the time I sold it. Pretty quick for a first-time novel and a bunch of kids in the house,” Diffenbaugh laughs, as she juggles a bit of background chaos, plus kids and a babysitter’s schedule, at home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Set in San Francisco and Napa Valley, *The Language of Flowers* draws heavily on Diffenbaugh's upbringing in Northern California, with its fertile farms and vineyards, as well as her experience as a foster parent. Born in San Francisco, she studied creative writing at Stanford and taught art and writing to young people in low-income communities before becoming a full-time parent. She and her husband, PK Diffenbaugh, have two biological children, and have fostered children throughout their marriage. They recently moved from California to Cambridge, first dropping their foster son Tre'von, 18, at New York University, which he is attending on a Gates Millennium Scholarship.

In the novel, Diffenbaugh takes two strands—nature and created family—and spins them into an absorbing story that is as complicated and exhilarating as any human relationship. But instead of reading like a polemic disguised as fiction, *The Language of Flowers* is full of startling and masterful dialogue, intense, emotional scenes that crackle and come alive as they unspool, and flawed yet sympathetic characters.

"As you can tell, I'm passionate about two things: writing and helping kids in foster care," Diffenbaugh says. "I could recite statistics that would blow your mind about what is happening to these kids, especially as they emancipate from the system—25 percent become homeless within two years—but you're not going to . . . feel empowered to do something about it

if you haven't had some kind of connection with a story that helps you feel on an emotional level. My book is helping to tell a story that needs to be told."

Narrated by Victoria in flashbacks, the novel follows her life as she bounces from one foster situation to the next until she's emancipated from foster care at 18. Her most significant relationship is with Elizabeth, a gardener who grew up on a Northern California vineyard and is now estranged from her family. Elizabeth introduces her to the Victorian-era symbolism of flowers and their secret meanings, and Victoria embraces it as a way to express difficult emotions to the adults in her life. She describes the situations that led her to become an often abrasive young adult, the self-sabotage that left her homeless in a San Francisco park, and the twists of fate that lead to her work with a high-end city florist and her guarded relationship with a Napa Valley farmer who understands her secret language like no one else.

From the smell of warm summer fruit to the sounds of a busy farmer's market on a Saturday morning, every scene in the novel feels authentic and immediate. (Red Wagon Productions has optioned the book for a film adaptation.)

Diffenbaugh says the truth about foster care lies somewhere between the frequent demonization of

foster children in the media and the rosy picture of fostering a child portrayed in the film [*The Blind Side*](#).

“We’re all human and we’re all struggling. I didn’t want to end the story tied up with a ribbon, but it’s possible for people to change, it’s possible for people to overcome, it’s possible for people to reconnect even when they’ve been so hurt,” she says. “I wanted to show the whole picture.”

While she’s already working on her next book, Diffenbaugh is also launching a new organization, The Camellia Network, to help build support for young adults leaving foster care. “I think it’s one of the most pressing and most disastrous issues facing foster care right now,” she says.

“In the language of flowers, camellia means ‘my destiny is in your hands,’ and the idea is that we’re all interconnected. The destiny of our country lies in the hands of the youngest citizens.”

Kirkus Reviews

Cleverly combining tender and tough, Diffenbaugh's highly anticipated debut creates a place in the world for a social misfit with floral insight.

After more than 32 homes, 18-year-old Victoria Jones, abandoned as a baby, has given up on the idea of love

or family. Scarred, suspicious and defiant, she has nothing: no friends, no money, just an attitude, an instinct for flowers and an education in their meaning from Elizabeth, the one kind foster parent who persevered with her. Now graduating out of state care, Victoria must make her own way and starts out by sleeping rough in a local San Francisco park. But a florist gives her casual work and then, at a flower market, she meets Grant, Elizabeth's nephew, another awkward soul who speaks the language of flowers. Diffenbaugh narrates Victoria and Grant's present-day involvement, over which the cloud of the past hangs heavy, in parallel with the history of Elizabeth's foster care, which we know ended badly. After a strong, self-destructive start, Victoria's long road to redemption takes some dips including an unconvincing, drawn-out subplot involving Elizabeth's sister, arson and postnatal depression. While true to the logic of its perverse psychology, the story can be exasperating before finally swerving toward the light.

An unusual, overextended romance, fairy tale in parts but with a sprinkling of grit.

Publishers Weekly

Diffenbaugh's affecting debut chronicles the first harrowing steps into adulthood taken by a deeply wounded soul who finds her only solace in an all-but-

forgotten language. On her 18th birthday, Victoria Jones ages out of the foster care system, a random series of living arrangements around the San Francisco Bay Area the only home she's ever known. Unable to express herself with words, she relies on the Victorian language of flowers to communicate: dahlias for "dignity"; rhododendron for "beware." Released from care with almost nothing, Victoria becomes homeless, stealing food and sleeping in McKinley Square, in San Francisco, where she maintains a small garden. Her secret knowledge soon lands her a job selling flowers, where she meets Grant, a mystery man who not only speaks her language, but also holds a crucial key to her past. Though Victoria is wary of almost everyone, she opens to Grant, and he reconnects her with the only person who has ever mattered in her life. Diffenbaugh's narrator is a hardened survivor and wears her damage on her sleeve. Struggling against all and ultimately reborn, Victoria Jones is hard to love, but very easy to root for.

Discussion questions

1. What potential do Elizabeth, Renata, and Grant see in Victoria that she has a hard time seeing in herself?

- 2.** While Victoria has been hungry and malnourished often in her life, food ends up meaning more than just nourishment to her. Why?
- 3.** Victoria and Elizabeth both struggle with the idea of being part of a family. What does it mean to you to be part of a family? What defines family?
- 4.** Why do you think Elizabeth waits so long before trying to patch things up with her long-lost sister Catherine? What is the impetus for her to do so?
- 5.** The first week after her daughter's birth goes surprisingly well for Victoria. What is it that makes Victoria feel unable to care for her child after the week ends? And what is it that allows her to ultimately rejoin her family?
- 6.** One of the major themes in *The Language of Flowers* is forgiveness and second chances --- do you think Victoria deserves one after the things she did (both as a child and as an adult)? What about Catherine? And Elizabeth?
- 7.** What did you think of the structure of the book --- the alternating chapters of past and present? In what ways did the two storylines parallel each other, and how did they diverge?

- 8.** The novel touches on many different themes (love, family, forgiveness, second chances). Which do you think is the most important? And what did you think was ultimately the lesson?
- 9.** At the end of the novel, Victoria learns that moss grows without roots. What does this mean, and why is it such a revelation for her?
- 10.** Based on your reading of the novel, what are your impressions of the foster care system in America? What could be improved?
- 11.** Knowing what you now know about the language of the flowers, to whom would you send a bouquet and what would you want it to say?

Readalikes

[Y](#) by Marjorie Celona (2012)

Author Marjorie Celona tells the story of a 16-year-old foster child on a journey to uncover her past and find her place in the world. Shannon was left outside a YMCA in British Columbia as a newborn. For the next several years, Shannon spends her life in foster care enduring mistreatment and indifference. At five, she finds a stable home life with a single mother, Miranda.

Although Shannon is happy with Miranda and her daughter, she can't contain her curiosity about her mother. The narrative of Shannon's mother, Yula, who was young and frightened when she abandoned her daughter, describes the events that surrounded the devastating decision she made 16 years ago.

[*Night Road*](#) by Kristin Hannah (2011)

In *Night Road* by Kristin Hannah, Jude Farraday has no idea that the new student her twin son and daughter have befriended is about to shatter their world. Lexi Baill has come to Port George, Washington, to live with a long-lost aunt after a stint in foster care. Her classmate, Mia Farraday, invites Lexi home where she is welcomed by Lexi's mother. Their new friendship is complicated by a romance that develops between Lexi and Mia's twin, Zach. With high school graduation and college on the horizon, Jude hopes her children will stay sensible and safe. But one night the three teenagers make a disastrous choice beyond Jude's control.

[*The Violets of March*](#) by Sarah Jio (2011)

Emily Wilson was once a best-selling novelist whose writing career was something to marvel at. That was a decade ago, however, and now she is beginning to lose it all as she struggles to come up with another novel while her husband divorces her. To help Emily forget

her troubles, Aunt Bee invites her to vacation at Bee's beach cottage on Bainbridge Island in Washington. As Emily begins to heal, she finds an old journal kept during the 1940s and begins to learn a little bit more about whom she is and where she came from.

[Finding Casey](#) by Jo-Ann Mapson (2012)

Glory Vigil, her new husband Joseph, and their adopted daughter Juniper, are settling into family life in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Glory is surprised to learn that--at 41 years old--she is pregnant, but the family is excited to welcome a new member. Juniper, however, remains haunted by the disappearance of her sister Casey many years ago. When one of her courses at the university requires fieldwork at a pueblo in the desert, new information comes to light regarding Casey's disappearance. Juniper suddenly finds herself caught up in her past as a foster child, but this time, Juniper is determined to find her sister, no matter what it takes.



Ann Arbor District Library