Martha Hall Kelly

SUNFLOWER SISTERS

BOOK CLUB KIT

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

It has been such a wild and wonderful journey writing *Lilac Girls* and *Lost Roses*, and finally being able to share *Sunflower Sisters* with you is a new treasured moment for me. Thank you for all the support you've shown along the way. Your outpouring of heartfelt messages and stories shared has been one of the best things about writing these books and I'm grateful for it every day.

Since that fated gray Mothers Day back in 2000 when I visited Caroline Ferriday's former home, now the Bellamy-Ferriday House and Gardens, I knew I wanted to tell the world about her Woolsey ancestors eventually.

As I combed through Caroline's archives while researching *Lilac Girls*, it was hard not to be inspired by her great grandmother, Jane Eliza, and her eight accomplished children. I found hundreds of their letters to each other, beautifully boxed and preserved—along with photos, trinkets, and mementoes. Over time I read every one, each a work of art, written in their lovely penmanship, and a portrait of an incredible family emerged. Living with the Woolsey women and researching their lives, including their abolitionist, pro-Lincoln work, was a joy. They were principled and hardworking, but with a sense of humor about themselves, and I grew to feel like I knew each one of them and saw where Caroline drew her deep love of helping others. I wanted to write a story that showcased the depth of the Woolseys' devotion to one another and the gifts they gave our country, somehow lost to time.

Like *Lilac Girls* and *Lost Roses*, *Sunflower Sisters* tells that story through the eyes of three women, this time making their way through the American Civil War. It's a story still so remarkably relevant—of a country torn in half by the terrible practice of slavery, and how women find love and survive terrible hardship, even when posed with heartbreaking challenges and choices.

If *Sunflower Sisters* resonates with you, I hope you'll recommend it to your friends and fellow readers. Your support means the world to me.

All the best,
Martha

P.S. If you want to know more about *Lilac Girls, Lost Roses*, and *Sunflower Sisters*, please visit marthahallkelly.com, and by all means drop me a line there and tell me what you thought of the books. I'd love to hear from you!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate the treatment and role of women in the novel. Discuss the various types of power (or lack of) that Georgy, Jemma, and Anne-May experience. What provides, or denies, each of them access to forms of expression?

2. How might your interpretation of the book differ if the author had chosen to tell the story from a single point of view?

3. Jemma and her sister Patience communicate secretly through letters. What did you think about their story of survival and escaping the brutality of slavery under the cruel Anne-May? How did Jemma, Sable, and Joseph continue their relentless pursuit of self and freedom in the face of such a brutal system?

4. Have women's achievements in history been lost or overlooked? What do you think it takes to be a pioneer today?

5. Has your understanding of slavery been changed by reading *Sunflower Sisters*? What did you learn about it that you didn't know before?

6. *Sunflower Sisters* takes the reader back to the roots of racism and a time of deep division in America. How has slavery left its mark in American life? To what extent has the wound been healed, if at all?

7. Are there ways in which Martha Hall Kelly's novel can help us see our own lives differently? How is this story relevant for us today?

8. The bonds of family—real or self-made—play an important role in the novel, inspiring and stymying the three characters at different points along their journeys. How does each character view family? What about their traits and histories make them feel that way?

9. All three women lost their fathers tragically; however, these losses draw Jemma and Georgy even closer to their families and force them to appreciate them more, whereas Anne-May never felt close to her sister and mother. How do you think tragedy shapes us? How do you think hardships shaped the several characters in the novel?

10. The novel is set during the American Civil War, a turbulent time in history. What did you learn about this time period that you didn't know before? Was there something that surprised you about the role and treatment of women?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

11. Georgy and her family play a large role in society and yet each has an innate calling to help others. What do you think about the trajectory of Georgy's life and the choices she made?

12. What did you think of Georgy's sisters and brother?

13. Was it unfair Mary Woolsey never received recognition for her work? Should her family have broken with tradition and revealed her as the author or was it better to let people think the poems were written by a man?

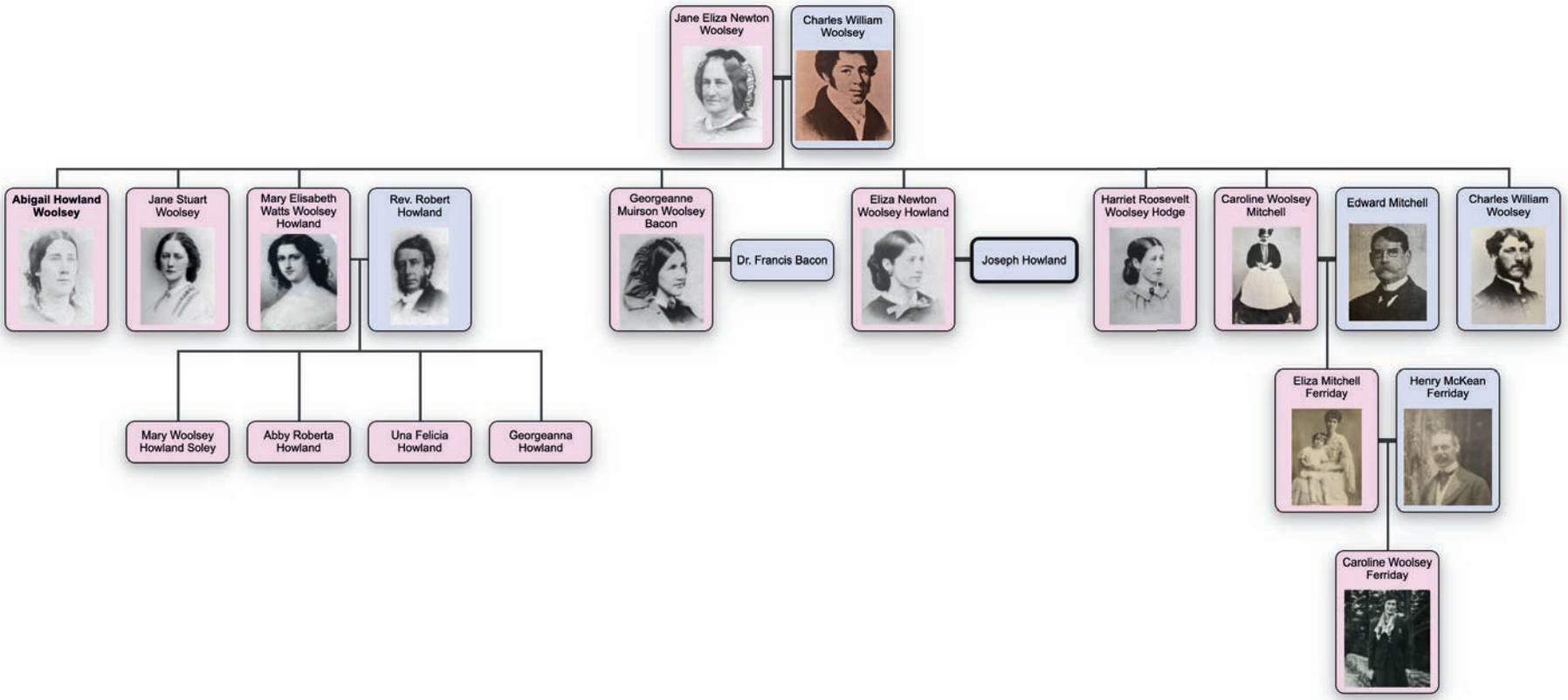
14. Anne-May was secretly working as a spy with Jubal. Were you surprised by anything in her storyline? What about her choices at the end?

15. Sally Smith was not Jemma's blood relative, but in many ways she ended up feeling like one. Why do some unrelated relationships turn out stronger than blood ones?

16. Sunflowers were used to indicate danger on the Underground Railroad. What is the effect of using something so bright and beautiful as a symbol like this?

17. Martha Hall Kelly weaves real-life letters from the Woolsey sisters into the narrative, and while Georgy is based on the Ferriday family's ancestors, the character of Anne-May is fictional. What is the effect of weaving together history and fiction? Why do you think the author chose to include some of these letters verbatim?

THE FERRIDAY/WOOLSEY FAMILY TREE



SALLY SMITH'S BUTTERMILK BISCUITS

Sally Smith's biscuits were sought-after at the Peeler Plantation and here is how I imagined them:

INGREDIENTS
2 cups flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
¼ teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
6 tablespoons shortening
⅔ cup buttermilk

DIRECTIONS
Sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Cut in shortening until mixture is the consistency of meal. Stir in buttermilk. Form mixture into a ball; place on a floured surface and knead a few times.

Pat out to about ¼-inch thick. Cut with a small biscuit cutter. Place on an ungreased baking sheet and bake at 450°F for 8 to 10 minutes. Cut open and spread with a little butter.

Source: nytimes.com/2011/09/21/nyregion/recipes-adapted-from-cookbooks-of-the-civil-war-era.html

THE PERFECT LEMONADE

"You've never seen such perfect, yellow lemonade. My mouth watered just looking at it." —Jemma

The characters imbibe many types of drink in *Sunflower Sisters*. Milk punch and beef tea on the hospital ships, and a lot of hot tea in general. Alcohol-wise, brandy cocktails, Barolo, and claret were popular with the Woolseys—and Eliza and Georgy toast each other one Christmas with jelly jars of port. But one drink that they *all* appreciated was lemonade.

INGREDIENTS
1 cup sugar
6 cups water
Pinch of salt

DIRECTIONS
Combine the sugar and water in a pot. Bring the mixture to a boil and stir well to ensure all of the sugar is completely dissolved. Remove from the mixture from the heat and chill it for at least an hour in the refrigerator.

Once the mixture has cooled, combine the sugar-water mixture with a pinch of salt and lemon juice in a pitcher. Serve with ice.

Source: allshecooks.com/perfect-lemonade

MAKE THE RECIPES FROM EUPHEMIA WILSON'S HAMPER FOR THE CHURCH FAIR

"My poor sister had labored over her lunch for two, hoping to attract a male bidder, and had cooked it all herself: Mama's favorite Chicken Purlough, Sally Smith's yeast biscuits, chocolate bread pudding, cherry iced water, and Robert E. Lee's favorite gingersnaps . . ." —Ann-May

CHICKEN PURLOUGH

Anne-May's sister Euphemia tries to get some high bidders by offering a scrumptious picnic when they put the single ladies up for auction at the church fair. Here's what was inside:

INGREDIENTS
1 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup onion, diced
½ green bell pepper, diced
1 large carrot, diced
2 stalks celery, diced
2 cups long-grain rice
½ teaspoon salt, more or less to taste
¼ teaspoon ground pepper, more or less to taste
3 cups chicken broth
2 cups shredded chicken leftover, roasted or rotisserie
1 lb. smoked sausage sliced into rounds and then quartered
2 tablespoons parsley minced, mixed in plus a sprinkle as garnish

DIRECTIONS
In a large deep skillet or Dutch oven, heat the olive oil to medium-high heat and add the chopped onion, green pepper, carrots, and celery. Saute until the onion is tender. Add the rice and sauté, stirring, until lightly browned. Season with the ½ teaspoon of salt and ¼ teaspoon of pepper. Add the chicken broth to the skillet.

Cover and reduce the heat to a simmer over low heat for 15 to 25 minutes, or until the rice is tender and liquid absorbed. Stir the shredded chicken, smoked sausage, and minced parsley into the rice; allow to heat through, about 2 to 3 minutes.

Taste and adjust seasonings with additional salt and pepper, if desired. Garnish with additional minced parsley, if desired.

Source: kitchendreaming.com/lowcountry-chicken-pilau

CHOCOLATE BREAD PUDDING

This recipe for Chocolate Bread Pudding is from "Old Time Recipes to Enjoy" in *The Kentucky Explorer Magazine*, which publishes recipes that date back to the Civil War.

INGREDIENTS
¾ cup of breadcrumbs
2 cups scalded milk
¼ cup cold milk
3 squares melted chocolate
2 eggs
1 tbsp. butter
½ tsp. vanilla
¾ cup sugar
½ cup raisins

DIRECTIONS
Mix all ingredients in the order given. Pour into buttered baking dish, set into pan of hot water, then bake for one hour in a moderate oven, stir twice during baking to keep chocolate from rising to the top.

CHERRY ICED WATER

INGREDIENTS
35 frozen or fresh (pitted) cherries, cut in half
½ lime, sliced thin
60 oz./1.7 L water

DIRECTIONS
Add cherries and lime slices to the infuser cone of the 2-qt./2 L pitcher.. Fill pitcher with 60 oz./1.7 L of water. Attach infuser cone to pitcher top. Refrigerate up to 4 hours. Serve cold or at room temperature.

Source: allshecooks.com/perfect-lemonade

ROBERT E. LEE'S FAVORITE GINGERSNAPS

INGREDIENTS
¾ lb. butter, melted
½ cup molasses
2 cups sugar
2 eggs
4—5 cups flour
4 tsp. baking soda
2 tsp. cinnamon
1 tsp. ginger
1 tsp. cloves

DIRECTIONS
Beat together butter, molasses, sugar, and eggs. Add 4 cups flour, soda, cinnamon, ginger, and cloves. Refrigerate mixture for 2 hours. Work in additional flour if necessary. Shape into small balls (1") and roll in sugar. Bake at 350°F for 8 to 10 minutes.

Source: cooks.com/recipe/p38eu7ja/robert-e-lees-ginger-snaps.html

STRAWBERRY FIZZ

"It got me out of regular services and she had her girl make me a strawberry fizz every time I said Peter was my favorite apostle." —Jemma

INGREDIENTS
68 fluid ounces ginger beer, divided
2 cups frozen strawberries
2 tablespoons white sugar

DIRECTIONS
Pour 1 cup ginger beer into a blender; add strawberries and sugar and blend until strawberries are pureed. Pour puree into a pitcher or punch bowl and stir in remaining ginger beer.

Source: allrecipes.com/recipe/247357/strawberry-fizz