

## Expand Your Horizons by Joining a Book Club by Cheryl Rambour

Book clubs are a wonderful way to keep you accountable with your reading goals. There are so many books I would never have chosen to read for myself that I have learned so much from. Here is a quick synopsis of one of my favorite books we read this year. “What She Left Behind” by Ellen Marie Wiseman is a story set in current times, about Izzy, whose mother is in prison for shooting her father. Izzy lives with her foster parents, who are researching and cataloging items found in a closed down insane asylum. While sorting through all the debris left in the asylum, they come upon a room full of suitcases. The suitcases, which belonged to former patients, are a glimpse into the lives of the people who were committed to the asylum. One suitcase catches Izzy’s eyes. It was full of unopened letters and a journal.

The suitcase belonged to Clara, 18 years old in 1929. She rebelled against her well-to-do parents by falling in love with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks. When she found out she was pregnant, her parents committed her to a mental hospital to give her time to think. After the stock market crash changed the social status of her parents, Clara was sent to the publically run Willard Asylum. What she endured there was unspeakable. Months later, Clara’s baby is born and taken away from her.

The Willard Asylum was an actual place, built in 1866, located in upstate New York. Up until the mid-1800’s, those people who were incapable of taking care of themselves or had a mental illness were placed in shelters which were overcrowded and understaffed. Most people never left—many lived out their days chained to their beds.

The Surgeon General of New York, Dr. Sylvester Willard, helped to build a state–run hospital that would offer rehabilitation services for the insane. The purpose was to try to help people be able to reenter society.

Willard served both men and women. Patients were free to walk where they pleased, but they could not leave. Willard had a bowling alley and a movie theater—but also had rooms designed for ice baths and electro-shock therapy. At one time, Willard had over 2,000 patients, making it the largest asylum in the country.

There was a morgue and cemetery at Willard with thousands of people buried in graves marked not by a name, but by a numbered metal plaque. In those days, it would have been shameful for families to have their names on a gravestone on the grounds of an insane asylum.

It was after Geraldo Rivera’s TV show in the early 1970’s exposed the terrible conditions at a different asylum, that asylum numbers declined. Willard finally closed its doors in 1995. That same year, hundreds of suitcases were found in the attic. These suitcases belonged to patients who never left Willard and were left unclaimed.

Back to the book, Izzy reads the letters and journals found in Clara’s suitcase and pieces together her life. Izzy eventually finds Clara’s child. Clara’s story is one of resilience, forgiveness and hope.

If you are ever in the area of Seneca Lake in upstate New York, you can tour the Willard Asylum and see some of the suitcases on display. The Willard Asylum for the Chronic Insane was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

