

She's Come Undone: a novel

by Wally Lamb

New York : Harper Collins/Pocket Books
1992

Pages: 480 p

ISBN: 0671759205

Oprah's Book Club pick, 1997

NY Times Notable Book of the Year

LA Times finalist for Art Seidenbaum Prize

Translated into 18 languages

Summary

An extraordinary coming-of-age odyssey, *She's Come Undone* tells the story of Dolores Price, a dysfunctional, heartbreakingly comical young heroine, and her wild journey to love, pain, and renewal. A saga of moral liberation.

Description

Meet Dolores Price. She's 13, wise-mouthed but wounded, having bid her childhood goodbye. Beached like a whale in front of her bedroom TV, she spends the next few years nourishing herself with the mallomars, potato chips, and Pepsi her anxious mother supplies. When she finally rolls into young womanhood at 257 pounds, Dolores is no stronger and life is no kinder. But this time she's determined to rise to the occasion and give herself one more chance before *really* going belly up.

In this extraordinary coming-of-age odyssey, Wally Lamb invites us to hitch a wild ride on a journey of love, pain, and renewal with the most heartbreakingly comical heroine to come along in years. At once a fragile girl and a hard-edged cynic, so tough to love yet so inimitably lovable, Dolores is as poignantly real as our own imperfections. ***She's Come Undone*** includes a promise: you will never forget Dolores Price

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

In this engaging first novel, narrator Dolores Price recounts her life story from age four to age 40. The troubled product of a stormy marriage, she is already sipping Maalox in grade school. Then her father walks out on her mother, who suffers a nervous collapse, and Dolores moves to her repressive grandmother's house in Rhode Island. By the time she reaches eighth grade, she has only one friend: a boarder who eventually rapes her. Anesthetizing herself with junk food and soap operas, Dolores becomes an obese, isolated young woman who attempts suicide during her first semester in college and spends seven years in a mental institution. Oddly enough, this relentless parade of disasters makes for interesting reading. The author keenly evokes his protagonist's profound alienation and self-loathing, endowing Dolores with a bleak sense of humor that keeps readers rooting for her. Ironically, the book itself "comes undone" as its heroine develops self-esteem, at which point an absorbing portrait of a woman on a collision course with her problems turns into a disappointing series of clichés about love, forgiveness and Dolores's ticking biological clock. Nonetheless, this is a promising debut.

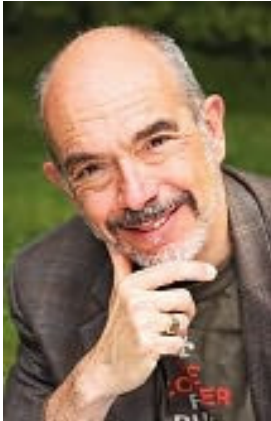
From Library Journal

Lamb's fine debut novel about the travails of a troubled young woman was originally published in 1992. After quietly drifting into obscurity, *She's Come Undone* today sits atop the best sellers lists thanks to Oprah Winfrey's on-air endorsement. Lovable loser Dolores Price bounces from one tragedy to the next, retaining only her cynical sense of humor. Abandoned as a child by her father (who later tries to make amends, only to be met with Dolores's stubborn rejection), raped by a trusted adult, and later married to a philandering husband, Dolores nonetheless evolves into a cautious, wry adult. Kathy Najimy's sprightly reading is particularly strong when the narrative hits Dolores's adolescent years.

From Kirkus Reviews

A tremendously likable first novel about the catastrophe-marked childhood, youth, and mangled adulthood of a tough-fibered woman who almost beaches herself in guilt and grief. Terrible things are about to happen to Dolores Price, only child of brittle, vulnerable Bernice and weak, randomly abusive Tony. Tony leaves Bernice sometime after the stillbirth of their son, and after a week playing with little Dolores in a new backyard pool, when the child expects a lifetime of floating with Daddy. Then Bernice completely flips out and goes to a mental hospital; Dolores is taken to live with Grandma in Rhode Island on Pierce Street (which "smelled of car exhaust and frying food. Glass shattered, people screamed, kids threw rocks"). Later, Ma returns and works collecting tolls on the Newport Bridge, while friendless Dolores attends a corrosive parochial school. But all welcome Grandma's new tenant, dazzling Jack, a radio DJ who, when Dolores is 13, rapes her in a dog pound. The person Dolores runs to is heart-of-gold Roberta, empress of the Peacock Tattoo Emporium across the street. In spite of the strangled but loyal love of Ma and Grandma, the palship of Roberta, and the kindness of a gentle gay guidance-counsellor, Dolores is about to go under. She becomes a mountain of fat, and soon is convinced that she's responsible for the death of Jack's baby--but also of Bernice, who's killed by a car. At a Pennsylvania college, Dolores knows that her destiny is to "kill what people love." There's some good psychiatry and a bad marriage before the peaceful and upbeat close. Lamb has a broad satiric touch with some satisfying fat targets (the warfare of Pierce Street, etc.). And in spite of hard, hard times and crazy coincidences, Dolores' career is a pleasure to follow, as she barrels through--with a killer mouth and the guts of a sea lion. A warmblooded, enveloping tale of survival, done up loose and cheering

Biography



Name: Wally Lamb

Current Home: Willimantic, Connecticut

Date of Birth: October 17, 1950

Place of Birth: Norwich, Connecticut

Education: B.A. in Education, University of Connecticut, 1972; M.A. in Education, 1977; M.F.A. Writing, Vermont College, 1984

WALLY LAMB's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Pushcart Prize XV: Best of the Small Presses*; *The Best of the Small Presses*; *The Best of the Missouri Review*; *Streetsongs 1: New Voices in Fiction*; *Northeast*

and *The New York Times Magazine*. He is the recipient of an NEA grant for fiction, and is a Missouri Review William Peden fiction prize winner. A nationally honored teacher of writing, Lamb lives with his wife and their three children in Connecticut.

Bibliography

She's Come Undone (1992)

I Know This Much Is True (1998)

Couldn't Keep it to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters (2002)

I'll Fly Away: Further Testimonies from the Women of York Prison (2007)

The Hour I First Believed (2008)

"*Wishin' and Hopin': A Christmas Story*" (2009)

About the Author (from LitLovers.com)

Wally Lamb's first novel *She's Come Undone* received rave reviews when it was published in 1992. The book was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Awards' Art Seidenbaum Prize for First Fiction and was named as one of the most notable books of the year by numerous publications, including *The New York Times Book Review* and *People* magazine. His second novel, *I Know This Much Is True*, was also an Oprah Book Club selection and *New York Times* bestseller. His most recent novel, *The Hour I First Believed*, was published in 2008.

A graduate of the Vermont College MFA in Writing program, Lamb is the recipient of an NEA grant for fiction and a *Missouri Review* William Peden fiction prize winner. A nationally honored teacher of writing, Lamb currently teaches at the University of Connecticut. HE also teaches writing at the York Correctional Institution. Lamb lives in Connecticut with his wife and their three sons. (*From the publisher and Wikipedia.*)

The desire to write fiction hit Wally Lamb comparatively late in life. He was in his 30s, living in Connecticut, working as a high school English teacher, and relishing his role as a brand new father, when he began his first story. As he worked his way through several drafts, he was suddenly struck by how little he knew of the writer's craft. Determined to improve his skills, he

enrolled in the M.F.A. program at Vermont College.

Lamb blossomed at Vermont, where he learned two important and liberating lessons from his teacher and mentor Gladys Swann: (1.) Never write with a particular audience in mind; write for yourself, and let the audience find you. (2.) There's no such thing as an original story; the writer's job is to recast a familiar tale in his or her own way. Acting on Swann's advice, he immersed himself in mythology and reread the works of Joseph Campbell and Heinrich Zimmer.

In 1992, eight years after completing graduate school, Lamb published his first novel. The story of a tremendously overweight woman who triumphs over a lifetime of misery, pain, and abuse, *She's Come Undone* became a surprise bestseller, and several publications, including *The New York Times*, placed it on their year-end "best of" lists. Then, in 1997, kingmaker Oprah Winfrey selected it for her prestigious Book Club, catapulting Lamb into the literary limelight.

/By the time he received Oprah's endorsement, Lamb was nearly finished with his second novel. Published in 1998, *I Know This Much Is True* garnered rave reviews for its sensitive portrayal of twin brothers, one of whom suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. To Lamb's surprise, Oprah beckoned a second time, praising his sophomore effort with these admiring words: "It's not just a book, it's a life experience."

Lamb is tremendously grateful for the boost the Oprah experience has given his career. "It opened me up to so many more millions of readers I might not have had," he told *USA Today*, "but it's also a double-edged sword." At best a painstakingly slow writer, he found himself crippled by writer's block, choking on the pressure to produce a worthy third novel. "I had all those Oprah readers with their expectations in my writing room. I had to open my office door and shoo everybody's expectations out of there." The process took nearly a decade, but finally, in 2008, Lamb published *The Hour I First Believed*, an ambitious epic that touches on a rich ragout of sociopolitical themes, including the Columbine killings, Hurricane Katrina, and the Iraq War.

In addition to his own work, Lamb has edited two bestselling anthologies of writing authored by inmates at York Correctional Institute, the maximum security women's prison in Niantic, Connecticut, where he began teaching in 1999. Lamb speaks lovingly of his students, some of whom have evolved into wonderful writers. The first anthology, *Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters*, was published in 2003 to great critical acclaim and earned for one of the inmates the PEN/Newman's Own First Amendment Award. It also became the center of legal controversy. Following publication, the State of Connecticut attempted to sue the women authors -- not for the modest earnings the book would net them after they left prison, but for the entire cost of their incarceration: \$117 a day! The suit was settled, thanks to the intervention of sympathetic officials, legislators, and journalists. In 2007, Lamb published *I'll Fly Away*, a second anthology of the York inmates' writing. (*From Barnes & Noble.*)

From Barnes & Noble 1998 Interview with the Author

Raised in a blue-collar corner of Connecticut, Lamb grew up in the looming shadow of Norwich State Hospital, a sprawling facility for the mentally ill. Now closed, the institution played a part in Lamb's family history. As an adult, Lamb learned that the grandfather he had never known had been locked up in the hospital for a violent attack on his wife. He later discovered that his grandfather had died of brain cancer and wondered if illness had provoked the violence. Unsurprisingly, the themes of incarceration and mental illness play important roles in his stories. (*From Barnes & Noble.*)

Q: *Anyone who reads She's Come Undone comments that it's amazing that a man could write so seamlessly about what goes on in a woman's head and heart. Now you write about identical twin brothers in an equally convincing way. How do you know so much about human nature?*

A: When I was a kid, I was surrounded by girls: older sisters, older girl cousins just down the street -- an entire "girl gang" neighborhood, except for an older boy named Vito who threw rocks. Each year I would wish for a baby brother. It never happened. So fairly early on, I became an observer of people more than a group participant. And I drew. My Uncle Dom was a printer and kept me well-supplied with scrap paper of all shapes, sizes, and colors from the shop where he worked. I probably spent half of my childhood with pencils and Crayolas in my hand. What I liked to draw, mostly, was people in conflict: A lion would escape his cage at the circus and panic would ensue; a tidal wave would roll ominously toward an unsuspecting crowd at the beach. Human behavior in the midst of hardship caught my attention very early on, and my first stories were all pictures, no words.

However far fiction writers stray from their own lives and experiences -- and I stray pretty far from mine -- I think, ultimately, that we may be writing what we need to write in some way, albeit unconsciously. When I was a kid, like Dolores Price in *She's Come Undone*, I needed to belong. And perhaps *I Know This Much Is True* addresses my desire for a brother. But as my early drawings warned me, where humans go, lions and tidal waves follow.

Q: *Is this book also a love story? How?*

A: As far as I can figure, this book, reduced to its lowest common denominator, is only a love story. Love stories are probably all I've ever been able to write or want to write. To me, it's the most breathtakingly ironic things about living: the fact that we are all—identical twins included—alone. Singular. And yet what we seek—what saves us—is our connection to others. Love comes in far more shapes and sizes than what the family-values crowd condones, of course. In the story, Pasquale Tempesta loves his monkeys, and the monkeys seem to love him back. Pasquale's brother Domenico is doomed not by a monsignor's curse, but because he cannot love.

Q: *What is the greatest lesson we can learn from I Know This Much Is True?*

A: Reading a novel is a highly personal experience, and I think different readers will take different things from it. As for me, the experience of writing the book has reinforced for me the truths that Dominick had to learn: that love grows from forgiveness, that "mongrels" make good dogs, and that the roundness of life's design may be a sign that there is a presence beyond ourselves. (*From Barnes & Noble.*)

From Novelist database

The Book Report's Senior Writer Judy Handschuh interviewed Wally Lamb. They delved into his love of writing and how he approaches his craft. Join us here and see what this bestselling author had to say:

TBR: I know that your characters are very important to you. William Faulkner once said that he didn't really write stories --- he just followed his characters around and took notes. Could you comment on this?

LAMB: This is exactly the way it is for me also. People always say, "But you're in control of what happens." That's not true. I start with a character's voice, and that voice leads me into the story. I never know where I'm going and getting into the character leads me into realizing the story. I don't love writing. I feel compelled to write. It's the characters. I develop them --- then comes the need to find out what is going to happen in their lives.

TBR: Do you live with your characters?

LAMB: Yes, I do. I live with them for some part of every day. I work in an apartment away from the house --- it's a place dedicated to writing. And for the time I'm there, I'm living with my characters, watching them and wondering what they will do next.

TBR: Do you worry about them?

LAMB: Very much so. And sometimes I try to put them on safer paths or have them make better choices. But whenever I do that, my writing becomes hollow. So I've learned to let them go their own way and just wait to see what happens.

TBR: Do you miss them when they're gone?

LAMB: No, not really. Finishing a book, for me, is sort of like sending children out into the world. I've gone along with them and have had an investment in their lives, but once they're gone, all I can do is wish them well.

TBR: So you don't envision a sequel to either SHE'S COME UNDONE or I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE?

LAMB: No, I don't think so. I've done all I can with them --- now they're on their own.

Write down everything that character says and does.

Characters count for Wally Lamb, far more than the plots or the settings of his novels. In a recent interview he said that characters are the engines that drive his work.

It is this focus on characters that sets him apart from most contemporary novelists. For Lamb, the characters' lives are the story --- as opposed to most novels which are driven by their plots and consign the characters to the back seat.

And, oh, the characters Lamb creates. Vivid, memorable people populate the pages of his novels. Interesting, temperamental, emotional human beings attach themselves to us like barnacles on the bottom of a ship. Characters that engage us --- have us laughing, crying, hoping and praying for them as they stumble through life --- trying to make sense of it all.

No one who has read SHE'S COME UNDONE will ever forget Dolores Price, sitting in front of her television set, stuffing her face with Mallomars and potato chips. But Dolores was not just a foodoholic. She wanted desperately to belong. She was confused about life. She made mistakes. Sometimes she learned from them, and sometimes she didn't. But we loved her for trying. And we worried about her as we turned every page.

Link on Harper Collins to Radio Interview with Wally Lamb

<http://www.harpercollins.com/author/index.aspx?authorid=5579>

Discussion Questions (from Reading Group guides.com)

1. How does Dolores' life parallel her mother's and how does she ultimately triumph and move beyond her tie to her mother's failures?
2. Discuss the significance of water in the novel - as a symbol of both Dolores' breaking points and eventual recovery.
3. How is religion, particularly Catholicism, treated in the novel? Is it a legitimate source of strength or simply another crutch to avoid dealing with the real problems in Dolores' family?
4. Death, in many forms, frequently occurs in the novel. What is the impact of death on Dolores and is she ever able to move beyond the initial tragedy of her baby brother's death?
5. Throughout her life, no matter where she is, Dolores always feels like an outsider. What perspective of reality dictates her actions - is Dolores misguided or is she a victim of her circumstances?
6. How is Dolores' sexuality used to reflect her voyage in society? Is her path in life guided by her dysfunctional relationships with men, beginning with her father, or are the men in her life simply potholes in her quest to search for her identity?
7. Dolores' earliest memory revolves around the day her family received their first television set. Discuss the prevalence of popular culture in the novel, both in the shaping of Dolores' identity and the world she lives in.
8. Whether talented or not, many characters in the novel express themselves through some form of art. Does "art imitate life" or does "life imitate art," and how is art used to give life to the characters and their emotions?
9. Dolores frequently encounters people in her life who mirror family members who have disappointed her over the years. What is the role of the family and how does Dolores ultimately compensate for her losses through her relationships with caring outsiders?
10. Dolores is both adored and loathed for her unconventional appearance. How is body image treated in the novel and how does it affect Dolores' growth and placement in society. Is her problem with social assimilation unique to her experience or a symptom of our society's definition of beauty?
11. Discuss the significance of Dolores' mother's flying leg painting. Her mother is killed before she really gets a chance to fly -- what facilitates Dolores' ability to finally accept her mother's failures and create her own wings to fly towards a better future?
12. Much of the attention of *She's Come Undone* has focused on a male writer's ability (or inability) to write authentically in the voice of a female character. What other male fiction writers of the present and/or the past have experimented with women's "voices"? What female writers

have written in the voice of males? Is it appropriate for fiction writers to give themselves such "gender-bending" assignments? Is it politically correct? Is it a more socially acceptable task for writers of one gender than for the other?

13. Wally Lamb has described "good literature" as writing that explores the imperfections of the world and "kicks readers in their pants, shakes them out of their complacency about a world that needs fixing." Do you agree or disagree with this definition? How does it apply to *She's Come Undone*?

Link to Oprah's Book Club discussion of *She's Come Undone*

http://www.oprah.com/article/oprahsbookclub/pastselections/obc_pb_19970122_about

For Further Reading

Bastard out of Carolina by Dorothy Allison

Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons

Midwives by Chris Bohjalian

I Know This Much is True by Wally Lamb

We Were The Mulvaney's by Joyce Carol Oates

Black and Blue by Anna Quindlen

The Pilot's Wife by Anita Shreve

A Map of The World by Jane Hamilton

The Book of Ruth by Jane Hamilton

Where The Heart Is by Billie Letts

White Oleander by Janet Fitch

Divine Secrets of The Ya-Ya Sisterhood by Rebecca Wells

Songs In Ordinary Time by Mary McGarry Morris

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold

The Deep End of The Ocean by Jacquelyn Mitchard

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

Cholesterol (Understanding) by Mike Laker

Vinegar Hill by A. Manette Ansay

Looks by Madeleine George

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

Fat Kid Rules the World by K. L. Going