

ONLINE RESOURCES

FROM THE AUTHOR

Orphan Train Book Club

A treasure trove of information and links relating to Orphan Train – from which many of the other links on this page are sourced!

<http://christinabakerkline.com/book-club>

AUDIO

NPR Interview

Seven minutes with the author discussing some of the historical intrigue and surprises during her research.

<http://www.npr.org/2013/04/14/176920218/after-tragedy-young-girl-shipped-west-on-orphan-train>

VIDEO

PBS Documentary: The Orphan Trains

Information about the American Experience documentary.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/orphan/>

90-Second “Book Trailer” for Orphan Train

A preview without spoilers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmgbE6l9Hnw>

Christina Answer the top 10 book club questions

A 15-minute video with questions about her process and choices for writing the book.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zVe698daTE>

HISTORY

“Orphan Train” Historical Background

A short personal essay from the author that explains the context of the book, as well as her own motivations and interests in exploring this topic.

<http://christinabakerkline.com/blog/my-next-novel/>

Children’s Aid Society History

A book review that gives a detailed explanation of the history and intentions of the group that put children on the trains.

<https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/o/oconnor-01orphan.html>

National Orphan Train Complex

Advocacy group preserving the history of Orphan trains.

<http://orphantraindepot.org/>

Orphan Train Rider Stories

Written testimonials from riders who were sent in the 1900's, 1910's, and 1920's.

<http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/>

PRINT RESOURCES

Orphan Train Historical Background

I am interested in exploring how people tell the stories of their lives and what these stories reveal (intentionally or not) about who we are. I am intrigued by the spaces between words, the silences that conceal long-kept secrets, the elisions that belie surface appearance. And I am interested in the pervasive and insidious legacy of trauma – the way events beyond our control can shape and define our lives. All of my books address these themes.



Children lined up to board an orphan train about 1920. (Patrick-Sheets-Trickel Collection, Trenton, Mo.)

Like my four previous novels, my novel *Orphan Train* is about cultural identity and family history. For the first time, however, I am undertaking a project that requires a large amount of historical, cultural, and geographical research. My novel traces the journey of Vivian Daly, a now-90-year-old woman, from a small village in Ireland to the crowded streets of the Lower East Side to the wide-open expanses of the Midwest to the coast of Maine. Her life spans nearly a century, encompassing great historical change and upheaval.

Change has been the defining principle of Vivian Daly's life, and from a very young age she learned to adapt, to inhabit new identities. For many reasons, she has told no one about her early life: her difficult



childhood in Ireland and the lies and secrets that propelled her, alone, toward a frighteningly open-ended future. She spent her entire adult life minimizing risk, avoiding complicated entanglements, and keeping silent about the past. But now, through a series of events, she encounters a stranger who wants to know her story. As Vivian begins to face the truth about what happened long ago, the past becomes more and more present for her. Vivian's recollections come in tiers: her turbulent adulthood in the Midwest; her early life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, living in a tenement; and finally, her childhood in Kinvara, on the western coast of Ireland.

Orphan Train is a specifically American story of mobility and rootlessness, highlighting a little-known but historically significant moment in our country's past. Between 1854 and 1929, so-called "orphan trains" transported more than 200,000 orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children – many of them first-generation Irish Catholic immigrants – from the

coastal cities of the eastern United States to the Midwest for "adoption" (often, in fact, indentured servitude). Charles Loring Brace, who founded the program, believed that hard work, education, and firm but compassionate childrearing – not to mention Midwestern Christian family values – were the only way to save these children from a life of depravity and poverty.

The children, many of whom had experienced great trauma in their short lives, had no idea where there were going. The train would pull into a station, and townspeople assembled to inspect them – often literally scrutinizing teeth, eyes, and limbs to determine whether a child was sturdy enough for field work or intelligent and mild-tempered enough to cook and clean. Babies and healthy older boys were typically chosen first; older girls were chosen last. After a brief trial period, the children became indentured to their host families. If a child wasn't chosen, he or she would get back on the train to try again at the next town.

Some children were welcomed by new families and towns. Others were beaten, mistreated, taunted, or ignored. They lost any sense of their cultural identities and backgrounds; siblings were often separated, and contact between them was discouraged. City children were expected to perform hard farm labor for which they were neither emotionally nor physically prepared. Many of them, first-generation immigrants from Italy, Poland, and Ireland, were teased for their strange accents; some barely spoke English. Jealousy and competition in the new families created rifts, and many children ended up feeling that they didn't belong anywhere. Some drifted from home to home to find someone who wanted them. Many ran away. The Children's Aid Society did attempt to keep track of these children, but the reality of great distances and spotty record-keeping made this difficult.



I became interested in the story of the orphan trains because my husband's grandfather, Frank Robertson, was rumored to have been a train rider. It was believed that he traveled on an orphan train from New York to Jamestown, North Dakota with his four siblings when he was ten years old. In the course of researching this family lore, I found that although orphan trains did, in fact, stop in Jamestown, and orphans from these trains were adopted there, the Robertson clan came from Missouri. But my interest was piqued, and I started researching this period in history.

After reading newspaper clippings, I began searching the Web for more information. I found first-person accounts, orphan-train reunion groups, and historical archives. That research led me to New York Public Library, where I found original materials: lists of orphans from foundling hospitals, handwritten records, notes from desperate mothers explaining why they were abandoning their children. I found that approximately 145 orphan train riders are still alive in the United States; orphan-train reunions are still being held in towns across the Midwest. A novel began to take shape in my mind.

My own background is partly Irish, and so I decided that I wanted to write about an Irish girl who has kept silent about the circumstances that led her to the orphan train. "People who cross the threshold between the known world and that place where the impossible does happen discover the problem of how to convey that experience," Kathryn Harrison writes. Over the course of this novel Vivian moves from shame about

her past to acceptance, eventually coming to terms with she's been through. In the process she learns about the regenerative power of claiming – and telling – one's own life story.

In *Orphan Train*, Vivian Daly's first-person, past-tense account of her experience on the orphan train and her journey from Irish-Catholic immigrant to Protestant Midwesterner alternates with the present-day, present-tense, third-person-limited story of Vivian's life on the Maine coast. (I have quite a bit of experience with this kind of autobiographical narrative, and am intimately familiar with its quirks, subtexts, and possibilities. Some time ago I wrote a nonfiction book with my mother called *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism*, for which we interviewed, and created first-person accounts for, more than 60 women.) The present-day story takes place over six weeks; the narrative arc of Vivian's history encompasses 90 years.

Orphan Train Rider Story: Marguerite Thompson <http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/marguerite-thompson/>

The Larsons had two sons other than Teddy. My new Papa was a big man with a moustache and a kind face. The Larsons were of the upper class in that area. They had a lady that came and washed the clothes on a wash board. Another lady made all of our clothes except for our underwear. Mrs. Larson (Mama) would make all of our underwear.

My new home was a big two story house with 10 rooms, but we didn't have any electricity. The house was beautiful inside. I didn't have a bedroom of my own; I slept on the couch in the front room on a feather mattress Mama would take out of her closet every night. After a few weeks, she said I could do it myself. The boys had bedrooms upstairs. Teddy and I were not permitted to use the bathroom. We had to use the outside toilet, and on Saturday we would drag a galvanized bathtub from the back porch and put it by the cook stove.

Mama didn't like my New York accent at all. She wanted me to talk like they did, so I was slapped quite often in the mouth. Sometimes I would wonder what I had done wrong.

I had only been there a few weeks when Teddy brought out a china doll to play with. He said it was his and I couldn't play with it. Well one day I found it and took outside and broke it. I got my first whipping.

They rented out three of the bedrooms to salesmen. When I was six, Teddy and I started school. When we came home from school, we had to wash the dinner dishes from noon. Then we had to go upstairs and make the beds, dust mop the floors and clean the bathroom. We didn't dare use the toilet, she said it took too much water. By the time we got through with that, it was time to set the table for supper. I always only had one helping put on my plate. Teddy and Charles always had milk to drink with their dinner, but she said I couldn't have any.

They had two cows and a lot of milk, and Teddy and I would deliver it both morning and night. Charles (age 14) went with us a few times until we could do it on our own. Sometimes I went by myself, especially if it



Marguerite & Teddy

was cold. One morning on my way to school, it was so cold that the sidewalks were very icy, and I slipped and fell. One bucket of milk hit the sidewalk, the lid blew off, and half of the milk spilled out. Well, I got up,

put the lid back on, and set it on the porch where it was supposed to go. The lady called my foster mother and wanted to know why she didn't get a full quart of milk. When I went home at noon, my foster mother told me about it and wanted to know if I drank some of it. I told her what had happened, and she said I was lying. Then she got the rawhide whip and didn't even care where she hit me.

Between the ages of six and eleven I got many whippings. I can truthfully say I never got enough to eat. When I would come home from school and go to the pantry to get a piece of bread and butter, she said I was stealing it, because I didn't ask for it.

Once a year, Mr. McPhealy would come from the New York Foundling Home to see how I was getting along. I had to tell him fine. I would have to speak a piece for him, or poetry as it is called now. The name of it was "Looking on the Bright Side." Then I had to dance the Irish jig for him, and when I was through, I was excused. I would go outside and cry and wish he would take me back with him. I wanted to tell him the truth about how I was treated, but I couldn't. Still, she would whip me if she thought I was lying. I often wondered why Papa Larson didn't ever have anything to say about the way she treated me, but it seemed to me like she ruled the house."

There are a multitude of resources online, but these have been shortlisted for great content, ease of use, and most importantly for their entertainment value. Learning should be fun, right? These are just a few (and mostly free) sites that you can start with