Plot Summary and Organizational Pattern

When Lou and Oz lose their father (to death) and mother (to concussion) in a car accident they are taken to their great-grandmother Louisa Mae Cardinal's farm in the mountain country of Virginia in the 1940s. As Lou and Oz adjust to the new lifestyle they learn about the hardships and wonders of mountain life, the prejudices of some (racial and otherwise), and the capitalist systems that greedily seek out and destroy the land for the rich resources found therein.

It is a story about growing up. The main focus is on Lou who steadily grows in her ability to work, to understand the world, and to adapt to the new people and circumstances in which she lives. In the middle of these growths there is the question between her and the other characters about hope. Will there mother come out of a concussion?

As the story continues on, Lou and Oz grow to love the land and the people with whom they associate, with the exception of George Davis. However, as the coal business is disappearing, in comes a natural gas company Southern Valley. Their snooping on Louisa’s land leads to an explosion that kills Lou and Oz’s friend Diamond Skinner (although this is not discovered until later). And in time an offer is made to Louisa Mae to sell her land to the company. She refuses and the locals become mad because they wish for the economic prosperity and jobs they see in the hope of the new company. People burn the Cardinal’s barn and Louisa suffers from a stroke as she watches it burn. Southern Valley then attempts to take advantage of Louisa’s post-stroke paralysis by taking the matter to court to settle the property dispute. Cotton Longfellow represents Louisa as her lawyer and advocate against Mr. Goode. He spends two brilliant days in court where he proves that Southern Valley’s actions killed Diamond Skinner. But when Louisa dies, the jury decides that it is in the “best interest” for the children to sell the land. After the passing of this verdict, Amanda Cardinal, awakened from her paralysis walks into the courtroom. In the epilogue we learn that the land was not afterwards turned over.
The book is divided into short chapters—many that are five pages or less. The progression of time in the book is linear within the course of around a year. This will make it easy for students to follow along with the story. Any narrative shift (i.e. focus goes from one character to another) is indicated at the beginning of a chapter and usually pulls out to allow the reader to know something Lou or other protagonists won’t discover until later. Because much of the narrative weaves in and out of the daily life and struggles in the mountains the novel doesn’t necessarily divide into neat nice sections. There are three general sections that can be defined: 1) Lou and Oz are brought to the mountain when the car crash, 2) they assimilate and learn to love mountain life through many connected and varied experiences, and 3) chapters 37-40 are the final court case with an epilogue tagged on at the end.

Big Question/Enduring Issue

David Baldacci’s Wish You Well embodies in form a “coming of age” story. It is about Lou’s development in her understanding about family, love, and life. The big question could be stated, “How are we students in the classroom of life?”

Background Knowledge

Due to how the setting plays a heavy role in the narrative students need to understand what makes the Appalachian Mountains different. If students are from other geographical areas of the country the plains, the beach, or even the Rockies, they may not be able to fully connect with the setting in the text. Looking at pictures and doing a compare and contrast may help students connect to the setting.

Students may also need to be taught about the collection of natural resources. As mining and collecting gas are major topics in the book students will benefit from an increased understanding of the nature of these venture: the dangers to workers, the defacing of the land, and the economic positives and negatives for communities that adopt the work for a time.

In the book, Lou defines herself and other characters in the novel by comparing them to characters in The Wizard of Oz. She connects her experience to the Lion, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow. Students may miss out on her connection to these characters if they are not at least somewhat familiar with the characters of the story.

Although not as important as the previous items there are references in the story to World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler, Walt Whitman, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Stonewall Jackson. While not major parts of the narrative, students will connect to the book more if they understand that they share a common history with the characters in Wish You Well.
Themes

Justice- the question of what is fair and right comes up in several contexts. Lou deals with the justice of the death of dad and the paralysis of her mother, she also learns about what is just in treatment of Billy Davis when his dad is abusive and gives him no food. The biggest context in which justice is a question is in the court case. Desperation and greed challenge the rights to property and protection of such.

Love- the theme of Love is developed through Lou's observations of other characters. Her loves grows from understanding others and suffering her own difficulties.

Death is a major theme in this book. Three characters die at the beginning, middle, and end of this book. There deaths define Lou's perception of the world. The death and loss of others frame Lou's learning and development of love and understanding.

Hope- is a theme in which logic versus faith are presented in competition with each other. Oz is hopeful and thinks if he believes enough that his mom will return from paralysis. Lou has her doubts and believes hoping is foolish in the event that her mom should just die anyway. Ultimately the mother comes back and Lou learns that we can and should have hope no matter the circumstances.

Determination (Tenacity)- there are many hard circumstances for the characters in this story. However, it is the characters determination and tenacity that reflect their hope. Because they hope, they do not give up.

Setting

_Wish You Well_ is set in a rural mountain community in Virginia in the 1940s. The hopes, dreams, and lifestyles of the characters are all defined by their relationship with the mountains that surround them. The mountains define the characters through the challenges it presents, through its harsh and good conditions, and by the love the characters develop for the land that they work. The setting presents questions about city versus country and man versus nature. The main part of the plot takes place on Louisa's farm on the side of the mountain. It is a good distance from the nearest town.

Other important locations include a one-room school house that hosts students of many ages and the courthouse where the unfolding drama of the story unfold.

Though it doesn't play as big of a role, there are references to historical events to which students may or may not be familiar with.
Point of View/Narrative Voice

The story is told in a 3rd person omniscient point of view. The majority of the narrative voice focuses on how Lou is acting and perceiving her life. However, on a not infrequent basis, the narrative spends time focusing on the adults, usually for a very specific purpose in plot development. This allows the reader to be clued into facts that Lou doesn’t know and won’t know.

Characterization

Major Characters

- Lou Cardinal- 11 year old girl whose growth as a person is the main focus of the narrative. She is stubborn and smart. She prefers to think more than she talks. Her emotions and anger run high at times. She has a much harder time being hopeful than her younger brother.
  - “Don’t feel a thing. Shoot, they might be able to milk cows and plow fields, but mountain boys sure can’t hit worth anything.” (117)
- Oz Cardinal – is Lou’s younger brother. He is hopeful and optimistic about his mom’s recovery. He doesn’t always agree with Lou, but he looks to her for protection and guidance. He is also full of love
  - “Maybe necklaces and holy water won’t help mom, but me believing she’ll get will. But you don’t believe, so just leave her be.” (284)
- Louisa Mae Cardinal – is Lou and Oz’s great grandmother. She has lived on the mountain her whole life. She works hard every day and doesn’t take flack from anybody. She loves the kids and takes care of them.
  - “I made him go. Mountain no place for somebody like him. Got to share that boy with the world. And your daddy wrote to me all these years. And he give me money he ain’t got. He done right by me. Don’t you never think badly of him for that.” (206)
- Jimmy “Diamond” Skinner – is an orphan who lives by himself on the mountain. After his parents died he refused to be a part of anyone else’s system. He is full of folk wisdom and delights in sharing it with others.
  - “Shoot, that ain’t nuthin’. Bear chased me ‘cross that tree one time and I had Jeb and a sack of flour on my back. And it were nighttime too. And the rain was pouring so hard God must’ve been bawling ‘bout somethin’ . Couldn’t see a durn thing. Why, I almost fell twice.”(136-137)
- Cotton Longfellow – takes interest in the Lou and Oz as a fatherly figure. He is a local lawyer (though there are few court cases) and an avid fighter for the things he loves.
  - “I majored in American Literature in college. But I was also captain of the boxing team. If you ever raise your hand to these children again, I’ll beat you within an inch of your life.”(268)
- Eugene Randall – is an African-American who lives with and helps out Louisa Mae. They take care of each other as equals. Eugene has a limp. He, like Louisa, looks after the kids and helps them learn life on the mountain.
“Miss Louisa done taught me. And I right handy with nail and saw. I hepped many a folk on the mountain raise barns. You a carpenter, you got to know numbers. You cut a three-foot board to fill a four foot space, what ‘xactly have you done.” (350)

- George Davis – is one of the antagonists of the story. He is a mean neighbor whose greed and atrocious treatment of his family are disgusting. Despite his meanness, Louisa teaches Lou how to have some understanding of the enemy before them.
  - “You got that big nigger Hell No livin’ with you. God’ll strike you down for that. Must be that Cherokee blood. You don’t belong here. Never did, Injun woman.” (169)

- Judge Henry J. Atkins – is a good friend to Cotton Longfellow and Louisa Mae. He is helpful to Cotton during the court case.
  - “Cotton . . . we both know there’s a lot of interest in this case, and we both know why: money. Now, we got Louisa Mae laying over to hospital and we got most folks thinking she’s not going to make it anyway. And then we got us Southern Valley cash staring folks in the face.” (320)

- Mr. Thurston Goode- a Virginia Commonwealth attorney from Richmond who is arguing in favor of Southern Valley.
  - “As an officer of the Commonwealth I don’t have to explain to you why I’m here, Mr. Longfellow. Suffice it to say, that I am here.” (307)

- Hugh Miller- is the proponent for Southern Valley who is in town working to sell people on his ideas. He leads the secret search party onto Louisa’s land to uncover natural gas- this act results in the death of Diamond Skinner. He is interest in potential monetary gains and not much else.
  - “We have big plans for her property. Gonna level the mountain, put in a good road system, and build an extraction, production, and shipping facility. And the longest durn pipeline anybody’s seen outside of Texas. We’ve spent a while looking. This property is perfect. Don’t see one negative.” (260)

**Literary Terms**

Motivation – Key Ideas and Details #3 (Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.)

Tone – Craft and Structure #1 (Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).)

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Point of View- Craft and Structure #6 (Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature)

Setting – setting plays a key role in the book. It’s role is so well defined that students may better understand in this text above others how setting can become part of plot, characterization, and everything else.

Characterization – the development of Lou as a character can be a major point of discussion from this book. Her growth and the methods by which Baldacci describes it are very effective and can be found in chapter after chapter.

Affective Issues

Tragedy and death are something all people have to face in some form or another. *Wish You Well* begins with a somewhat graphic depiction of a crash. Later in the story, Diamond Skinner, a young boy is mangled and killed by an explosion. These incidents and others have some strong emotional appeals that may connect students to their own experiences. The book’s outlook is ultimately positive.

Many students will be able to relate a life-changing move. Lou and Oz move into a community that is completely different from the one they grew up in. They have to adapt to people whose culture and background are a little bit different than what they are used to. Whether students have moved from one country to another, from one state to the next, or from one classroom to another, all students can relate to coming into a new situation and place – the loneliness, the desire to fit in, and feeling that the new situation and people are different.

There are racial conflicts that call into questions what it means to respect other people. Students may connect or be offended by the treatment of Eugene Randall, an African-American. Ultimately, the protagonists call for respect for Eugene and he reigns as one of the character triumphant in the trial. There are some less prominent racial issues due to Louisa Mae’s Cherokee heritage.

Students may also be able to relate to the internal battle of Lou as she faces the choice between acceptance and hope. She sees that others have hope but resists it because she doesn’t want to be disappointed. Students may be able to relate to times when they didn’t know whether it was better to hope for something better or just accept what it is.

Finally, there exists a thread of passion. In *Wish You Well* the characters have passion for life, for their home, and for their family. Cotton has passion for law, Lou for writing, and Louisa for the land. Student’s passions are often a consuming part of their life. They can relate to the passion of the characters.

Vocabulary Issues

Overall, the language in *Wish You Well* is not overly complicated. However, there is a lot of southern dialect dialogue. If students are not familiar with southern dialect in speaking or
in writing they made need some interpretations; but even then, the dialect isn't too hard to understand.

Another vocabulary issue for this book may be the discussion of coal mining. "Coke", a byproduct of the mining industry is one term used on a regular basis that students may need to be familiarized with.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

This book invites discussion on a number of levels.

In the book there is an African-American character named Eugene who lives with and helps Louisa Mae. Some of the characters refer to him as “Hell No” and use other derogatory racial terms such as “nigger”. However, the main characters love him and call him Eugene. Louisa Mae herself is Cherokee and is derogatorily treated as an “Injun” woman by George David. This perhaps engenders the compassion and understanding she has for other characters.

Besides racial diversity, there is diversity in the economic and education levels of community members in the story. Lou and Oz are ostracized in the beginning of the story because they come from the city. They have a friend, Diamond Skinner, who lives on his own, who doesn't go to school, and speaks with a heavy southern dialect. His education is in folklore and the mythos of the mountain people. They also have an enemy in the George Davis family where an abusive father rules over his family and doesn't provide them with the things they need.

**Gender Issues**

Wish You Well portrays strong female and male characters. The main character, Lou, is an 11 year old girl who reads as a girl of several years above her age making it possible for students to connect with her. She is easy to relate to because of her stubbornness and spunk. Louisa Mae is also a woman of determination and persistence.

Just as strong as the female characters are the male characters. Cotton Longfellow and Eugene always stand up for what they believe in. They, like Louisa, are ever quick to protect the children from any parties who might be harmful. They are honest and upright.
However, these strong male characters are contrasted with characters like George Davis who works his kids like slaves and treats his wife poorer than that.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**

Research Issues – for research projects students may be interested in researching about organizations and their effect on a community whether it be a company, scouts, an activist group, nonprofit organization etc. Or students may take interest in studying cases like that of Terry Shiavo. Or, as writing is a theme of the story, students could research writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Walt Whitman and theorize why Baldacci might have included them in his book.

Project Idea- Set up a reader’s theater in which the class becomes the courtroom for the final scenes of the book. Allow students to take the role of the various characters. After reading the reader’s theater, see if students can rationalize other outcomes for the characters they enacted.

**Text Sets and Enrichment Resources**

The Wizard of Oz (movie) – In *Wish You Well* Lou connects her character and others at various times to the protagonists of the movie. She often questions whether she has a heart. She knows Oz has courage and she never doubts that she has a brain.

*When I Was Young in the Mountains* – Cynthia Rylant is a children's books that can help students to connect to and understand rural life.

Newspaper articles on recent mining/coal/ etc. accidents.

Students may benefit from studying historical articles about WWII and the leaders of the time, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, etc.

Paula Deen Clips- Paula Deen is a classic southern home cook. While her food isn’t particularly important for the context of this book her accent and phrases reflect southern culture that might help students understand the dialect and sayings of the characters.