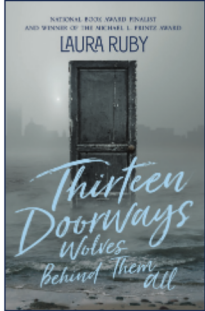


# Thirteen Doorways Wolves Behind Them all



## ABOUT THE BOOK

Growing up at the orphanage, Frankie, Vito, and Toni have learned to take care of themselves. Their father comes to visit occasionally, but he's busy with his new wife. Times are tough, with World War II on the horizon, and it's hard to make ends meet even in a big city like Chicago. With so many needy children, Frankie could easily be just another face in the crowd. But she stands out to Pearl, who watches over her. As Pearl narrates Frankie's life, she slowly starts to remember more about her own—which tragically ended under mysterious circumstances long ago.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "It doesn't matter which door you open, she said. Three or ten or thirteen doorways, there are wolves behind them all" (p. 192). What does Marguerite mean by her statement? What are some of the "doorways" each girl encounters in the novel?
2. "All of us wolves, all of us angels" (p. 358). What does Pearl mean when she compares herself, as well as Frankie and Toni, to wolves? What significance do wolves hold for Pearl, and what do they symbolize throughout the novel? What does it mean to be both a wolf and an angel?
3. How does Frankie feel about her father's visits to the orphanage? How does she respond when he leaves her behind? Do you think Frankie's father loves his children? What does their relationship reveal about family roles during that time?
4. What role do Frankie's, Pearl's, and Marguerite's mothers play in their lives? What sacrifices do they make for their children? How does Pearl's revelation about her own daughter change your perception of her?
5. In what ways does Pearl replay her own death throughout the novel? In what ways is she similar to, and different from, the other ghosts she encounters? Why do you think Pearl remains a ghost in this world? What do you think she would need to do in order to cross over as Marguerite does? By the end of the novel, do you think Pearl is ready to cross over?
6. How would you answer Pearl's question: "Why does the world demand girls be beautiful, but when they are, punish them for it?" (p. 268). In what ways are girls punished for being who they are in the novel? What parallels do you see between girls' experiences in the novel and your own or friends' experiences today?
7. Consider the various books that appear throughout the novel, including *Frankenstein*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Hobbit*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, as well as the poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. What does each book reveal about the girl who reads it? Why do you think the author chose each of these books to include in her novel?
8. "We are all our own devils, and we make this world our hell" (p. 347). Why does Pearl quote Oscar Wilde about hell? How do you think the quote applies to the novel's various characters—from Pearl and the ghosts to Frankie and the orphanage girls to Sister George and the nuns?
9. Why does Frankie choose to confess some things to Father Paul but not others? What role does Catholic confession play in Frankie's and Loretta's lives, and the lives of the other orphanage girls?
10. "Sometimes joy is the only defense you have, and your only weapon" (p. 126). What does Sister Bert mean by this? What are some of the ways that each character finds joy even in the midst of struggle?
11. How does Pearl experience hunger, and what is she hungry for? What are the ways in which Frankie, Toni, and their peers experience hunger—for food, for friendship, for love, for belonging? What would it take to satisfy these hungers?

Questions prepared by Laura Schick, a teacher at Jesuit High School, Portland, OR

# A NOTE FROM LAURA RUBY

## ON THIRTEEN DOORWAYS, WOLVES BEHIND THEM ALL



Laura Ruby's mother-in-law  
Frances Ponzo

My late mother-in-law, Frances Ponzo Metro, was many things: a self-taught pianist, a painter, a cook, a waitress, a card shark. But like the best poker players, she kept her cards close to the vest. I remember chatting over dinner at one of our early meetings, when she suddenly said something like “At the orphanage, we would sneak into the kitchens when the nuns weren’t looking, steal an egg, and suck out the insides.” I said, “Orphanage? Nuns? Eggs? What?” And she said, “Want another meatball?”

I had to ask an awful lot of questions to find out about the years she had spent at Angel Guardian, a German Catholic orphanage in Chicago, during the depression and World War II. The stories emerged out of order, little snippets here and there, about how her father brought her and her brother and sister to the orphanage after the death of their mother, about the abuse some of the orphans endured, about the fact that her father soon took her brother and the children of his second wife out of the orphanage but left Fran and her sister there till Fran was seventeen.

Fran endured my endless questions about her early life with bemused good cheer and characteristic generosity. She didn’t understand why I was so fascinated by her upbringing—“What’s the big deal?” she wanted to know. But when I told her I wished to write a novel based on her teen years, she did the best she could to help me. She didn’t consider her own story to be worth much, but if I wanted to write about it, well, then, that was okay with her. “Ask whatever you want,” she’d say, while beating me at rummy.

I interviewed Fran: her brother, Vito; her sister, Toni; and her sister’s husband, Guy, also an orphan. I interviewed other orphans and watched videos of the children available online. I also did a massive amount of research on the 1930s and ‘40s, reading books and transcripts, scouring wartime correspondence. And of course, I wrote.

And wrote. And wrote.

For more than ten years, I worked on this story, but I kept getting it wrong.

I couldn’t get it right until I understood that the orphanage, though a difficult place to grow up, was also a safe place in many ways. That the most painful betrayals were not those committed by nuns or priests, but rather by the family that was supposed to cherish and protect you. That making your way in a world that thinks so little of you takes a particular kind of courage, a kind not always obvious from the outside.

This is a story about Fran’s teen years. But it is also a story about girls. Girls with ambitions, brains, desires, talents, hungers. It is a story about how the world likes to punish girls for their appetites, even for their love.

Fran read and approved an earlier version of this novel, and I kept her up-to-date on my progress until her death last year. My only regret is that she never got a chance to hold the book in her hands.

Every word is fiction. And every word is true. I hope it honors her the way she deserves.



Angel Guardian Orphanage

—LAURA RUBY, 2019