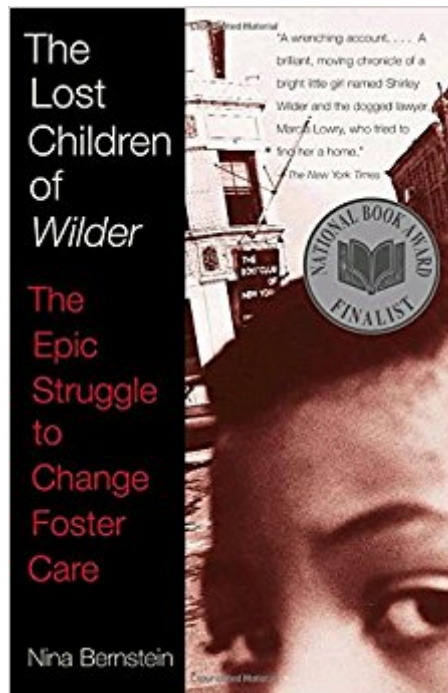




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# The Lost Children Of Wilder: The Epic Struggle To Change Foster Care



## Synopsis

In 1973, a young ACLU attorney filed a controversial class-action lawsuit that challenged New York City's operation of its foster-care system. The plaintiff was an abused runaway named Shirley Wilder who had suffered from the system's inequities. Wilder, as the case came to be known, was waged for two and a half decades, becoming a battleground for the conflicts of race, religion, and politics that shape America's child-welfare system. *The Lost Children of Wilder* gives us the galvanizing history of this landmark case and the personal story at its core. Nina Bernstein takes us behind the scenes of far-reaching legal and legislative battles, but she also traces the life of Shirley Wilder and her son, Lamont, born when Shirley was only fourteen and relinquished to the very system being challenged in her name. Bernstein's account of Shirley and Lamont's struggles captures the heartbreaking consequences of the child welfare system's best intentions and deepest flaws. In the tradition of *There Are No Children Here*, this is a major achievement of investigative journalism and a tour de force of social observation, a gripping book that will haunt every reader who cares about the needs of children.

## Book Information

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (February 5, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679758348

ISBN-13: 978-0679758341

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1.1 x 7.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 26 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #429,270 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in Books > Law > Family Law > Child Advocacy #336 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Elections & Political Process > Political Advocacy #451 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Children's Studies

## Customer Reviews

At age 12, Shirley Wilder ran away from an abusive home and landed in New York City's foster-care system. By age 13, she was named the plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit that challenged the city's 150-year-old system as unconstitutional. At 14, Shirley gave birth to a son, Lamont, who was soon swept up in the same system. This absorbing account by New York Times reporter Nina Bernstein

follows the threads of the tragic lives of Shirley and Lamont Wilder and the lawsuit that bears their name. In the process it illuminates the city's--and the nation's--dysfunctional social welfare system and its impact on the children it purportedly helps. The Wilder lawsuit was filed in 1973 by a passionate young lawyer who stuck by it through 26 years of litigation, without the case ever being fully resolved. The accusation: that New York City's system violated the First and Fourteenth Amendments for giving private religious agencies control of publicly financed foster-care beds. These mostly Catholic and Jewish agencies gave preference to white Catholic and Jewish children, while the growing numbers of black and Protestant children were sent to inappropriate institutions that left them with more problems than they had when they came. Such was the fate of Shirley, who, for lack of anywhere else to go, was placed in Hudson, a state reformatory for delinquents with no treatment services for abandoned or abused children. Hudson "looked like a camp from the outside and was unmistakably a prison within." There was rampant violence and sexual abuse, and girls were regularly punished by being put in "the hole," a 5-by-8-foot cell with no windows, furniture, or heat, which Shirley would later testify was like "Winter. Winter--all year round." But a case that named state and city officials, 77 voluntary agencies and their directors, and 84 individual defendants including nuns, rabbis, and clergymen, and that threatened to pit blacks and Jews against each other, was a case destined to enter a legal wilderness of avoidance and delay. Shirley and Lamont's unforgettable stories reveal the deep fault lines in a system that often does more harm than good. While reforms come and go with little success, Bernstein makes clear that the child welfare system will never really change until there is a coming to terms with the system's place as "a political battleground for abiding national conflicts over race, religion, gender and inequality" and the "unacknowledged contradictions between policies that punish the 'undeserving poor' and pledge to help all needy children." --Lesley Reed --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this first-rate investigation, New York Times reporter Bernstein explores the genesis and aftermath of the landmark 1973 legal case filed by young ACLU attorney Marcia Lowry against the New York State foster-care system. Known as Wilder for its 14-year-old African-American plaintiff, Shirley "Pinky" Wilder, the suit claimed Jewish and Catholic child welfare services had a lock on foster care funding and placements. Like Susan Sheehan in *Life for Me Ain't Been No Crystal Stair*, Bernstein illuminates broader social issues through the story of Shirley; Lamont, the son she bore at 14; and Lamont's young son Dall graduates of New York's hellish child welfare system. The tale is gut-wrenchingly Dickensian Dall the more so because, as Bernstein shows, the well-meaning

19th-century Jewish and Catholic philanthropists, clerics and parents who founded and expanded the child welfare system in New York ultimately deprived huge numbers of children of their legal and human rights as the demographics of New York changed. It took 25 years and many more lawsuits before the reforms mandated by Wilder began to be realized. In the interim, Lamont endured the same excruciating experiences his mother had suffered, including physical and sexual abuse, homelessness, witnessing the deaths of other children in foster care and losing his own child to the foster care system. A crack addict, Shirley died of AIDS at 40. Despite these horrors, the book ends with the hopeful postscript that Lamont's son currently lives with his mother, Kisha, and visits his now self-supporting father on weekends. Ten years in the making, this viscerally powerful history of institutionalized child abuse and the criminalization of poverty, of civil rights and social change, is compelling and essential reading. Agent, Gloria Loomis. (Feb. 28) Forecast: Like Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, this book has the potential to jumpstart a national conversation about the failings of our social safety net for impoverished children. If it garners the review attention it deserves, it will find a solid audience among readers of Kozol's and Sheehan's books. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is an excellently written case study of three generations of individuals subjected to poverty and the recurrent nightmare of an antiquated foster care system devoid of personalization for children. Although it is nonfiction, it reads like a novel with interesting characters in whom I found myself becoming entirely invested. It left me longing for reassurance and follow up on the individuals. One can only hope that the two survivors might be doing well in the years following the end of the book.

Just because it's non fiction doesn't mean I can't use my imagination. What made Nina Bernstein think I'd be interested in the exact height, hometown and family tree of every person associated with the Wilder case? The book is written as a narrative which bounces around from one person to another multiple times within chapters which is extremely frustrating. Just as you are getting interested in the story or the course of events she does a quick change to some other character, some of which are not at all interesting. This style is often enjoyable, (mostly in non fiction) but this is not a good application of that method. Aside from my overall frustration with the book it is of course still compelling material. Reading it just feels like wading through a swamp of details. Unfortunately, this book could have easily been half as long and twice as compelling.

Excellent/depressing account of the Wilder case and the welfare system at large

There was lots of legal information that was over my head. Informative regarding the cycle of poor in the foster care system. As a Guardian ad Litem, I read to help families I work with.

This is a sad book. Shirley Wilder was smart, precocious and could have given the world so much. Why are people thrown away? This book was so unbelievably sad.

There's one word to describe this book: depressing. That doesn't mean you shouldn't read *The Lost Children of Wilder*, but it's so upsetting that the story will stay with you long after you've finished reading the book. In some true stories, you have the expectation of hope, even a small sliver, that things will get better. Without giving away the very moving details of the rest of Shirley Wilder's story, let me say that the story on page one is nothing compared to how sad her life becomes later on in the book, and the outrage you'll feel reading the first few chapters will not prepare you for how sad and angry the rest of her story will make you feel. The anger isn't at Shirley Wilder or her child. The anger is for a child welfare and foster care system that was hopelessly broken then and is a thousand times worse today. Ultimately, despite the groundbreaking class-action lawsuit, nothing changed, not for the tragic life of Shirley Wilder and her son. The system is just as broken today as it was thirty years ago.

I am a social worker. I have worked in the New York City public child welfare system since the mid-1970's, and have read about and studied the field pretty obsessively for the past 30+ years. If I had to name the single best book I've ever read on the New York City child welfare system, it would not be one of the many excellent books written by social workers, sociologists, psychologists, attorneys, or even by individuals who grew up in the foster care system. It would be this book, by a consummate journalist, who examines a case that drove child welfare practice in NYC for 20+ years with both exhaustive thoroughness and laser-like focus, weaving a compelling story that is both sobering and instructive. I believe this book should be required reading for all child welfare practitioners and policy-makers. A masterful piece of journalism.

"*The Lost Children of Wilder*" doesn't have much to do with racism. It's mostly about the attitude towards foster care and adoption in the USA. With a high birthrate among poor teenage girls, along with a lack of birth control, we have a big population of orphans. In countries like Sweden and Italy,

the foster care system isn't a mess because there are almost no kids needing placement. Shirley Wilder, the protagonist, was an adolescent whose father drove her out. In the early 70's, orphanages could pick and choose whom they got to take in at government expense, and since the best private homes were either Catholic or Jewish, the African-American Wilder had nowhere to go but the worst institutions. The lawsuit that bears her name ended the practice by which orphanages could pick and choose. But it didn't stop the problem. Shirley Wilder had a son named Lamont when she was 13, and this boy grew up in a series of foster homes that never lasted long. As a teen, he fathered a child, but remained present in the child's life (at least according to the book). Foster care is a problem in the USA. The number of kids put into foster care is too big, and we'd better do something. We need a massive surge in birth control, or our future is looking bleak. Better yet, we need to distribute vibrators to teenage girls. It's a better alternative to having unprotected sex with a stupid boy.

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