

There's power in a book…

They call them wayward girls. Loose girls. Girls who grew up too fast. And they're sent to the Wellwood Home in St. Augustine, Florida, where unwed mothers are hidden by their families to have their babies in secret, give them up for adoption, and most important of all, to forget any of it ever happened.

Fifteen-year-old Fern arrives at the home in the sweltering summer of 1970, pregnant, terrified and alone. Under the watchful eye of the stern Miss Wellwood, she meets a dozen other girls in the same predicament. There's Rose, a hippie who insists she's going to find a way to keep her baby and escape to a commune. And Zinnia, a budding musician who knows she's going to go home and marry her baby's father. And Holly, a wisp of a girl, barely fourteen, mute and pregnant by no-one-knows-who.

Everything the girls eat, every moment of their waking day, and everything they're allowed to talk about is strictly controlled by adults who claim they know what's best for them. Then Fern meets a librarian who gives her an occult book about witchcraft, and power is in the hands of the girls for the first time in their lives. But power can destroy as easily as it creates, and it's never given freely. There's always a price to be paid…and it's usually paid in blood.

In Witchcraft for Wayward Girls, the author of How to Sell a Haunted House and The Final Girl Support Group delivers another searing, completely original novel and further cements his status as a "horror master" (NPR).

Other Resources:

Book Discussion Questions

Grady Hendrix web site

Video: Why I Wrote About Women and Power: Grady Hendrix (YouTube)

"Pregnant and Abused, These Young Women Fight Back with Witchcraft," New York Times article

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Programming Ideas:

Educational & Historical (The "Truth" Behind the Fiction)

Hendrix often roots his horror in real-world history.

- **The History of "Wayward" Women:** Invite a guest speaker to discuss the actual history of maternity homes and the "Baby Scoop Era" in America. It provides sobering context to the supernatural elements of the book.

Immersive & Social Events

- **The "Secret Society" Book Club:** Don't just sit in a circle. Hold the discussion in the dimmest part of the library (or after hours). Serve 1970s snacks—think "suspicious" Jell-O molds or Tang—and provide "confessional" prompts where members anonymously write down a societal expectation they wish they could "hex" away.
- **Retro Horror Movie Night:** Screen films that inspired the vibe of the book. Think *Suspiria* (the original 1977 version) or *The Blood on Satan's Claw*.
- **Vintage Vinyl & Tarot:** Set up a listening station with 70s psych-rock (Fleetwood Mac, Coven) and have a local tarot reader give mini-readings focused on "finding your path."

Book Display Ideas:

- Unputdownable novels
- Historical horror
- Books with female empowerment themes

Read-alikes:

- *The Girls Who Grew Big* by Leila Mottley
- *Rosemary's Baby* by Ira Levin
- *The Bewitching* by Sylvia Moreno Garcia

Reviews:

A Goodreads Readers Choice winner for Favorite Horror

Booklist (starred review)

Neva, 15 and pregnant in 1970, is brought in secrecy to the Wellwood House in Florida, a maternity home by name but a prison in practice, a stand-in for such homes that proliferated across the U.S. and Canada between 1945 and 1973. Once admitted, Neva is renamed Fern—to protect her from the shame, she is reassured, that ends after she gives birth. Abandoned, alone, struggling to access information about what is happening to their bodies, and angry at being told they alone must pay for their sins, Fern and her roommates—Zinnia, the only Black girl there; Rose, a hippie; and Holly, a molested 14 year old—are given a copy of How to Be a Groovy Witch by the bookmobile librarian, and their lives are changed forever. Told from Fern's perspective, this is an original and nuanced addition to the witch cannon. However, it is the clear, accurate, and intensely visceral body horror of pregnancy and birth laid bare that may catch readers off guard. Another stellar novel from Hendrix, a perfectly constructed story that has a strong emotional core, compelling plot, unforgettable characters, and 360 degrees of terror. For fans of horror that empowers the powerless as written by Gwendolyn Kiste and Gabino Iglesias and by Tananarive Due in The Reformatory (2023). -- Becky Spratford (Reviewed 10/15/2024) (Booklist, vol 121, number 4, p32)

Kirkus (starred review)

Hung out to dry by the elders who betrayed them, a squad of pregnant teens fights back with old magic.Hendrix has a flair for applying inventive hooks to horror, and this book has a good one, chock-full with shades of V.C. Andrews,The Handmaid's Tale, andFoxfire, to name a few. Our narrator, Neva Craven, is 15 and pregnant, a fate worse than death in the American South circa 1970. She's taken by force to Wellwood House in Florida, a secretive home for unwed mothers where she's given the name Fern. She'll have the baby secretly and give it up for adoption, whether she likes it or not. Under the

thumb of the house’s cruel mistress, Miss Wellwood, and complicit Dr. Vincent, Neva forges cautious alliance with her fellow captives—a new friend, Zinnia; budding revolutionary Rose; and young Holly, raped and impregnated by the very family minister slated to adopt her child. All seems lost until the arrival of a mysterious bookmobile and its librarian, Miss Parcae, who gives the girls an actual book of spells titledHow To Be a Groovy Witch. There’s glee in seeing the powerless granted some well-deserved payback, but Hendrix never forgets his sweet spot, lacing the story with body horror and unspeakable cruelties that threaten to overwhelm every little victory. In truth, it’s not the paranormal elements that make this blast from the past so terrifying—although one character evolves into a suitably scary antagonist near the end—but the unspeakable, everyday atrocities leveled at children like these. As the girls lose their babies one by one, they soon devote themselves to secreting away Holly and her child. They get some help late in the game but for the most part they’re on their own, trapped between forces of darkness and society’s merciless judgement.A pulpy throwback that shines a light on abuses even magic can’t erase. (Kirkus Reviews, December 1, 2024)