HISTORY

What 1918's "Forgotten Pandemic" Can Teach Us About Today

For her new novel, the author dug deep into research about Philadelphia during the Spanish flu outbreak—never imagining that a new pandemic was on its way.

BY ELLEN MARIE WISEMAN

APRIL 24, 2020

Red Cross volunteers fighting against the spanish flu in 1918. FROM APIC/GETTY IMAGES.

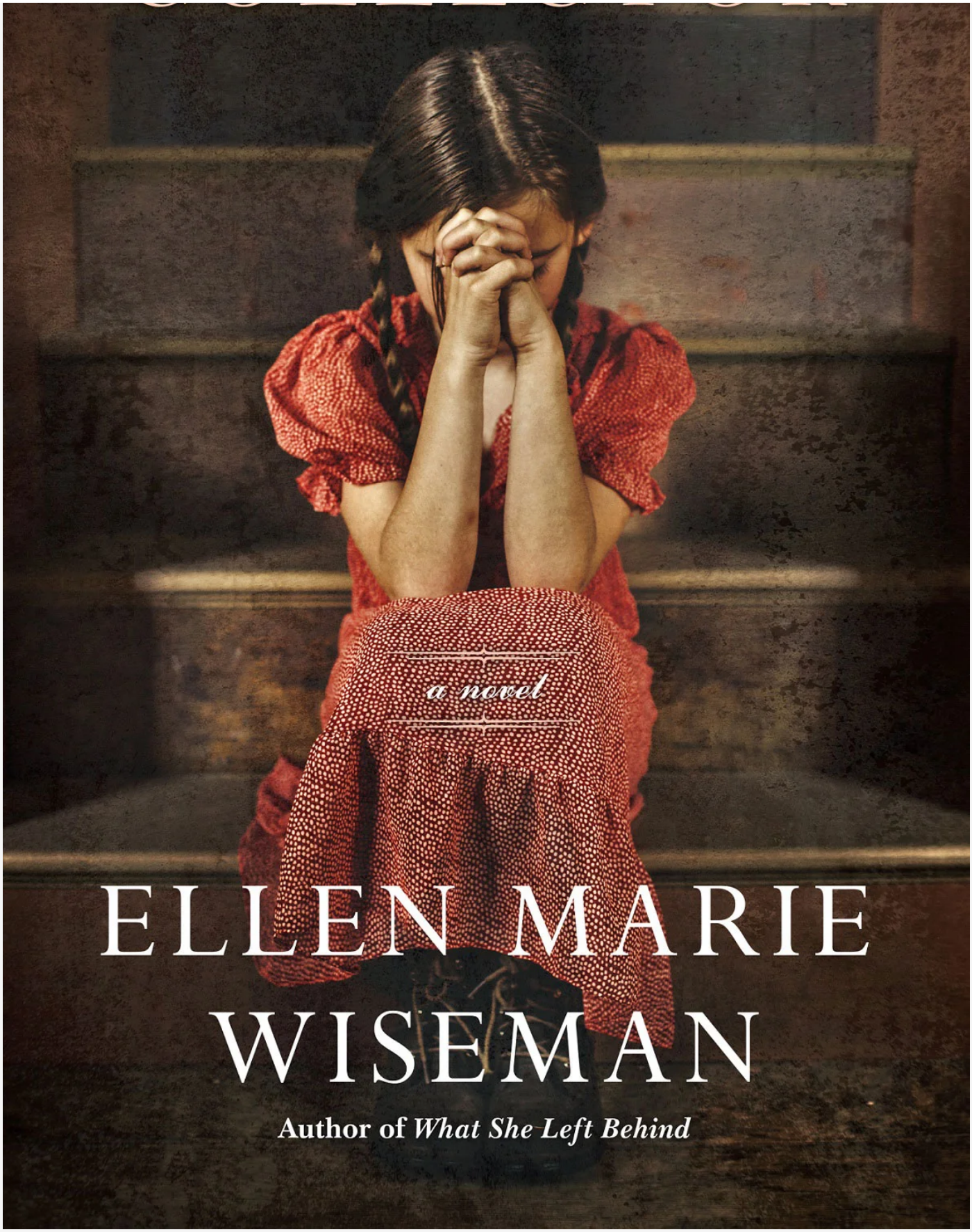
hen I visit my grandchildren, I wave through the window but I don't go inside. It breaks my heart not being able to hug and kiss them—but at least we can FaceTime later. During the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, nobody even had that.

As a novelist who recently spent two years researching and fully immersed in the lives of everyday people during the 1918 pandemic, it's impossible not to compare that crisis to today's.

Before I began my research, I knew little about the Spanish flu until a reader told me about the nurses who visited the sick at that time, many of whom found entire families dead, or both parents deceased and the children starving. I was shocked to learn that the Spanish flu infected roughly one third of the planet's population and killed an estimated 50 million people over the course of two years, with a particularly cruel wave during the fall of 1918. Some estimates say the virus killed twice that many.

Death was quick, savage, and terrifying. The virus turned victims bluish-black, and drowned them with their own body fluids. The victims would be fine one minute and incapacitated and delirious the next, with fevers rising to 104 to 106 degrees. The poor suffered the worst, with the largest loss of life happening in the slums and tenement districts of large cities, but it also infected Walt Disney—then a teenager training with the Red Cross in Chicago—and killed **Donald Trump**'s grandfather.

When the flu hit in 1918, some newspapers reported that influenza posed no danger because it was as old as history, the kind of thing that was usually accompanied by foul air, fog, and plagues of insects. Advice to citizens for preventing illness included keeping their feet dry, staying warm, eating more onions, and keeping their bowels and windows open. Phonographs were advertised as machines guaranteed to drive away influenza, because by passing the time listening to records, you'd never know you had to stay home at night. Even more curious were some of the remedies used: garlic and camphor balls wrapped in cheesecloth and tied around the necks; sugar cubes soaked in kerosene; formaldehyde tablets, morphine, laudanum, and chloride of lime. Whiskey and Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup—which contained morphine, alcohol, ammonia—were even given to babies and children. The American Medical Association called the syrup a "baby killer" in 1911, but it wasn't removed from the market until the 1930s.



World War I was still ongoing, and wartime restrictions on communication had deadly effects. There were limits on writing or publishing anything negative about the country, and

posters asked the public to "report the man who spreads pessimistic stories." In Philadelphia, doctors convinced reporters to write about the risk posed to the public by the Liberty Loan parade on September 28, which would gather thousands of people who could potentially spread the flu. Editors refused to run the stories, or any letters from the doctors. More than 20,000 Phildelphians later died of the flu.

In some cities, it wasn't long before hospitals and morgues became overcrowded, with bodies piling up by the dozens, and many left for days in the streets. Hospitals were forced to turn large numbers of the sick away and carts traveled the streets and alleys, their drivers calling for people to bring out their dead. Makeshift morgues were established to deal with the deluge of corpses. Relatives were persuaded to give up their loved ones with promises that the bodies would later be retrieved and reinterred, but most were never recovered. Parish houses and armories were turned into makeshift infirmaries, and with the shortage of medical staff due to the war, volunteers were called from religious and civic organizations, and medical and nursing schools. Any of the preventive measures used back then are also being used today. In what we now call social distancing or sheltering in place, people were told to stay home and to keep away from crowds.

Posters went up that read: "When obliged to cough or sneeze, always place a handkerchief, paper napkin, or fabric of some kind before the face," or "Cover your mouth! Influenza Is Spread by Droplets Sprayed From Nose and Mouth" and "Spitting Equals Death." Some cities ordered all citizens to wear gauze masks in public. Signs read: "Obey the laws and wear the gauze, protect your jaws from septic paws." Schools, churches, meetinghouses, movie theaters, saloons, and all places of gathering, even factories were ordered closed. Trollies would forbid anyone not wearing a mask to board, and funerals were not allowed.

Initially people complained about the disruption to their lives, and newspapers clamored angrily over canceled sporting events. But as the death toll rose, fear and desperation set in and people were afraid to even speak to each other. Some even starved to death because no one was willing to bring them food.

There were some who refused to heed warnings at the time—Philadelphia's outbreak spiked after roughly 200,000 people attended that September parade—but Americans in 1918 were already accustomed to wartime sacrifice, pitching in for "Gasless Sundays," "Meatless Mondays," and "Wheat-less Wednesdays." Women were used to making due with the essentials, working with what they had "on hand" to makes meals. People strived to eat breads made from corn, oats, barley, and other wheat substitutes to save the wheat for the

soldiers. They went without ice to save ammonia, which could be used to make more hand grenades. Many people didn't own an icebox, and mass produced foods were a new thing.

Today there are very vocal groups of protesters unwilling to give up their "hard-earned" freedom for the greater good. It makes me wonder what future historians and storytellers will say about us when they look back at this time of COVID-19. Will they admire our willingness to rise to the occasion, or not? Will they realize we learned from the past or that we were destined to repeat it? Perhaps if more of us remembered 1918—the year of the "forgotten pandemic"—we'd beat back COVID-19 sooner rather than later.

More Great Stories From *Vanity Fair*

— Why Meghan and Harry's Move to California Seemed So Sudden
— How *Kinfolk* Magazine Defined the Millennial Aesthetic…and Unraveled Behind the Scenes
— The Surprising—And Surprisingly Contentious—History of Purell
— 31 Great Quarantine Reads, Chosen by the *Vanity Fair* Staff
— How Bob Dylan's New JFK Song Helps Explain 2020
— The Coronavirus Pandemic Could Change Dining as We Know It, Forever
— From the Archive: How Bob Guccione Turned Graphic Porn, Muckraking Journalism, and Tabloid Headlines Into a Magazine Success Story

Looking for more? Sign up for our daily newsletter and never miss a story.