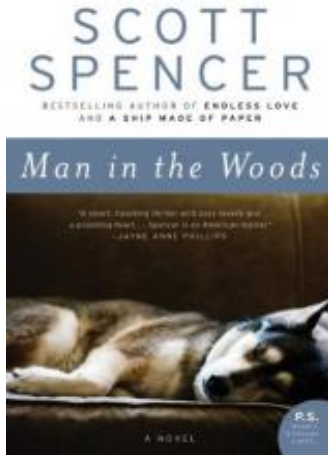


# Man in the Woods

by Scott Spencer

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## About the Book

A man, a woman, a child, and an unforgettable dog combine forces in this gripping and surprising psychological thriller, the most stunning novel yet from Scott Spencer named one of *Publishers Weekly's* Top Ten Books of 2010.

Can we ever get away with murder? Are there secrets that cannot remain hidden no matter how deeply we try to bury them? And do the things we hide control our destinies even more than the things we choose to reveal?

Paul Phillips has been on his own since he was a teenager, leading a life of freedom and independence, beholden to no one and nothing. Once he thought his life would have no particular rhyme or reason, touched only by transient strangers. Then he met the beautiful, intelligent, loving Kate Ellis, who offered order and constancy. But Paul is a man of deep convictions, and the compromises we all make to get along in the world elude him.

On his way home after a particularly trying day, Paul discovers a man beating a dog, and in a few fateful moments is plunged into a world of violence and onto a tumultuous journey of self-knowledge, guilt, and redemption.

## Discussion Guide

1. **Man in the Woods** begins in the last two months of the 20th Century. Why do you think the author chose that time? What do you think the lead-up to what was then called Y2K (Year 2000) has to do with the themes of this novel?
2. The novel is divided into two parts, and each begins with a line from a country song. Why do you think the author chose those quotations, and what bearing do you think they have on the story and the underlying themes of the book?
3. At one point in the novel, Paul Phillips and his friend are walking through the woods, and his friend recalls that early settlers in America used to believe that the American woods were a kind of church, and, in fact, some preachers used to

say. "No Jesus in the parlor." How does this idea play itself out in **Man in the Woods**?

4. Though secular in tone, **Man in the Woods** seems to be imbued with religious imagery and religious concerns --- there are angels, serpents, etc. Can you identify the ones that seemed most meaningful to you and discuss how they work their way through the novel?

5. What happens to Kate's belief in a Higher Power and what happens to Paul's?

6. Shep is for some readers a character in this novel as fully realized as the human characters. What do you think of Shep? What is his function within the novel? How is he different from other dogs in other novels?

7. If Shep were given a voice, would his account of the events cast a different light on the story? What is Shep feeling by the story's end?

8. From time to time, the novel cuts away to a police investigation, in which logic, and a belief in the law lead a detective through a step-by-step search for the person who has killed the man found in Martingham State Park. How does this character and his actions lend itself to the book's overall story and meaning? Who else in this novel is trying to bring the killer to justice?

9. Paul Phillips is a classic American type -- the loner who communes with nature and makes his living with his hands. **Man in the Woods** examines the conflict between the individual and the community. Did you think Paul needed to be punished for his act of violence? Can a person be his own judge and jury, or does he need to stand trial in a court of law? Are there laws that go beyond earthly law? Can a person be pure of heart and still deserve to be punished for wrongdoing?

## Author Bio

Scott Spencer is the author of such novels as *ENDLESS LOVE*, *WAKING THE DEAD*, *A SHIP MADE OF PAPER* and *WILLING*. He has taught at Columbia University, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Williams College, the University of Virginia, and at Eastern Correctional Facility as part of the Bard Prison Initiative. He lives in upstate New York.

## Critical Praise

"A smart, haunting thriller with bass reverb and a pounding heart....Spencer transforms an eight thousand dollar gambling debt and a dog with two names into an enthralling literary ride....Spencer is an American master."

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