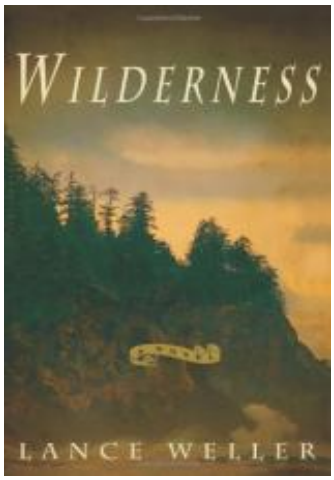
Wilderness

by Lance Weller



About the Book

Abel Truman lives at the very edge of the country, in a tiny shack overlooking the ocean in Washington state. His piece of land is known as ?Broken Man Cove,? and Abel is indeed broken, still traumatized by the Civil War over thirty years after the last shots were fired. Although he has left the South behind, he is haunted by memories of the Rebel friends he lost in the battle of the Wilderness. Thinking it might be time to head back East, Abel and his faithful dog set off on the journey on foot.

But Abel is a sick man, and his dog isn?t faring much better. When they are targeted by two bandits, Abel has little hope of surviving. But he is saved, again and again, by the generosity of strangers along the way. Abel realizes the true purpose of his journey: to help others, as strangers have always helped him?from the runaway slaves who doctored his wounds during the war to the interracial couple who offer him shelter through the winter in a Washington farmhouse. Abel dedicates the waning days of his life to rescuing a Chinese family trapped by heavy snow and threatened by the same bandits who terrorized Abel and his dog. Though no longer a soldier, Abel?s last march is a dangerous trek down the mountain to save Jane Dao-ming, a little girl who will remember Abel?s generosity long into the twentieth century.

Discussion Guide

1. Wilderness opens with a prologue set in 1965, with elderly Jane Dao-ming Poole living in a rest home. How does this prologue set the scene for the story to come? What do we learn about Abel?s legacy from Jane?s memories? How did Abel give Dao-ming ?vision to replace sight? in the final days of his life (7)?

2. Discuss the relationship between Abel and his dog. What kind of comfort does the dog give Abel in his old age? What side of Abel?s personality is revealed through his interactions with the dog? What are some possible reasons that the novel might withhold the dog?s name, Buster, until the end of the story?

3. As an old man, Abel?s memories are often stirred by his senses: ?How the mind works when presented, without warning, with sights and sounds and smells and doors? (20). How does the rich prose of **Wilderness** evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of the nineteenth century, from the Civil War battlefield to the lush wilderness of Washington state? What kinds of ?doors? are opened by Abel?s sharp senses in the novel?

4. Consider the two treasured objects that Abel carries: a crucifix and an old bullet. Where do these objects come from, and how do they travel throughout the novel? What significance do these objects have to Abel and to their other owners?

5. Consider the two villains of **Wilderness**, Willis and the Haida, who attack Abel, Ellen, Glenn, and Jane. What seems to motivate these two evil characters? What makes them particularly terrifying?

6. Abel tells Edward Poole dismissively, ?You?re only an Indian? (110). How does Edward react to Abel?s statement? In what ways does Edward consider himself an American? Why does Abel retract his statement when he says good-bye to Edward the next morning? How does Abel?s sense of what it means to be ?American? change over the course of the novel?

7. When Edward asks Abel to tell him about the Civil War, Abel responds, ?I don?t think I can tell it . . . Not really and make it like it was. I don?t think any man can, and those that try . . . Well, they either weren?t there?in the moment, if you understand me?or it?s maybe just their own small version of it. A small part of a big thing? (111). How does this statement about war stories apply to **Wilderness** as a whole? How does the novel attempt to recount the experience of war, and how much does it leave untold?

8. Discuss the role of women in **Wilderness**. What particular sorrows do the women of the novel endure, including Elizabeth, Ellen, and Hypatia?

9. Discuss Abel?s reasons for heading to Washington state after the war ends. What does he seek in visions of the Pacific Ocean and starry skies? What is he able to leave back on the East Coast, and which painful memories follow him all the way to the Pacific?

10. According to Oyster Tom, the true job of all men is to ?take responsibility for what?s theirs and let go of the rest? (116). How has Oyster Tom lived by this rule? How does Abel follow Oyster Tom?s lesson in the final days of his life?

11. When Ellen tends to Abel, she discovers all of his old scars, ?a lifetime of hurting plotted there for any to follow who could read such charts? (197). How does Abel?s body tell the story of his suffering? How does it map out a small history of the Civil War?

12. While in the hospital at the end of the war, Abel declares, ?This war? It ain?t never goin? to stop. That?s what I say. That?s what I?ve always said? (239). In what ways is Abel?s prediction of an everlasting war proved true and false? What vestiges of the war carry over to 1899, and which parts of the war are long over?

13. After the war, Abel identifies himself as a ?Lincoln man. Through and through? (246). How does the sight of Lincoln?s funeral train affect Abel? Why does he wish he?d always been a Lincoln man? How does Abel reconcile his Rebel affiliation with his changing values after the war?

14. Abel tells Ellen that he?d like to help the Chinese family over the mountain pass: ?And that?d help me too . . . I reckon you know what it is I?m talkin? about? (217). What kind of redemption does Abel seek by helping the Chinese family? How does Abel come to terms with unfinished business in his past?from the loss of his wife and baby to the death of Hypatia?when he rescues Jane Dao-ming?

Author Bio

Lance Weller has published short fiction in several literary journals. He won *Glimmer Train*?s Short Story Award for New Writers and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. A Washington native, he has hiked and camped extensively in the landscape he describes. He lives in Gig Harbor, Washington, with his wife and several dogs.

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