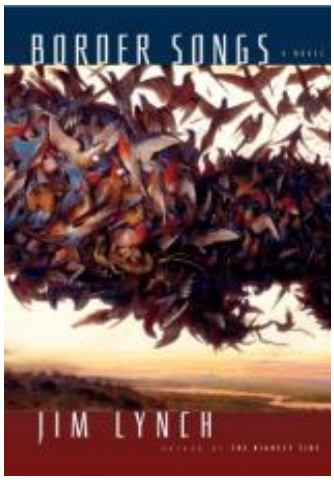
# Border Songs

by Jim Lynch




## About the Book

By the acclaimed author of **The Highest Tide**, a story of contrary destinies further complicated by the border that separates them.

Six foot eight and severely dyslexic, Brandon Vanderkool has always had an unusual perspective -- which comes in handy once his father pushes him off their dairy farm and into the Border Patrol. He used to jump over the ditch into British Columbia but now is responsible for policing a thirty-mile stretch of this largely invisible boundary. Uncomfortable in this uniformed role, he indulges his passion for bird-watching and often finds not only an astonishing variety of species but also a great many smugglers hauling pot into Washington State, as well as potentially more dangerous illegals. What a decade before was a sleepy rural hinterland is now the front line of an escalating war on both drugs and terrorism.

Life on either side of the border is undergoing a similar transformation. Mountaintop mansions in Canada peer down into berry farms that might offer convenient routes into the budding American market, politicians clamor for increased security, surveillance cameras sprout up everywhere and previously law-abiding citizens are tempted to turn a blind eye. Closer to home, Brandon?s father battles disease in his herd, and his mother something far more frightening. Madeline Rousseau, who grew up right across the ditch, has seen her gardening skills turn lucrative, while her father keeps busy by replicating great past inventions, medicating himself and railing against imperialism. And overseeing all is the mysterious masseuse who knows everybody?s secrets.

Rich in characters contending with a swiftly changing world and their own elusive hopes and dreams, **Border Songs** is at once comic and tender and momentous --- a riveting portrait of a distinctive community, an extraordinary love story and fiction of the highest order.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** ?Everyone remembered the night Brandon Vanderkool flew across the Crawfords? snowfield and tackled the Prince and Princess of Nowhere.? What does the first sentence of the novel tell us about what?s to come?

**2.** Have you read Jim Lynch?s first novel, **The Highest Tide**? If so, what similarities do you find in **Border Songs**? Differences?

**3.** What are the major themes of **Border Songs**? What point is Lynch trying to make? Is he successful?

**4.** On page 13, Brandon says, ?I think the most interesting people I?ll meet these days will be criminals --- or people about to become criminals.? Is he right?

**5.** Discuss Wayne Rousseau: Why does he try to replicate already-existing inventions? What is the significance of his choices --- the lightbulb, **The Great Gatsby**? How does this intersect with his politics?

**6.** Compare Wayne and Norm. Why are they so antagonistic toward each other?

**7.** At several points in the novel, characters describe Brandon as seeing things differently, or seeing things that others don?t see. Why do you think that is? How does it help him and hurt him?

**8.** Why does Madeline fall in with Toby? Why does she do what he asks? Why does she suddenly decide to stop?

**9.** On page 79, Lynch writes, ?Now [Norm] felt as if he?d sent his son to the front lines of a war he hadn?t realized was going on in his own neighborhood.? How does Norm deal with this guilt? How does the notion of a war affect the way the novel?s characters behave?

**10.** All around him, Norm?s life is in upheaval: His cattle are sick, his wife is sick, his son is attracting attention that Norm finds embarrassing. How does he respond?

**11.** How does Brandon?s relationship with the natural world --- birds, cows, foliage, and so on --- affect his abilities as a Border Patrol officer?

**12.** Discuss the area?s reaction to Brandon?s arrest of the bomber/smuggler, on pages 89?93. What is happening here?

**13.** Several Canadian characters compare the United States? policy on marijuana to Prohibition. Are they right? How does this relate to the vast number of previously law-abiding Americans who are willing to work with smugglers?

**14.** Why does Brandon stop counting birds (page 103)?

**15.** On page 156, McAfferty says, ?Bad shit has always passed through here, but now we?re watching so closely that we see way more of it.? Is this an accurate assessment?

**16.** Why is Norm building a boat, of all things?

**17.** What does Pearl?s death signify? Is it a turning point for Norm?

**18.** ?Astronauts? footprints stay on the moon forever,? Brandon whispers to Madeline on page 250, ?because there?s no wind to blow them away.? What is he trying to say? How do you imagine Madeline reacts?

**19.** What purpose does the character of Sophie serve in the novel? What did you think she was up to? Did the reality surprise you?

**20.** On page 290, the art expert says of Brandon?s work, ?His focus appears to be the instant before collapse --- or surrender.? What does this mean, in terms of Brandon?s art and his life?

**21.** Discuss the final scene, and Brandon?s interaction with the swallows.

## Author Bio

Jim Lynch is the author of three novels set in Western Washington. His most recent offering is TRUTH LIKE THE SUN (April, 2012), which Knopf is calling a "classic and hugely entertaining political novel." His first novel, THE HIGHEST TIDE (2005), won the Pacific Northwest Bookseller Award, was performed on stage in Seattle and became an international bestseller after it was featured on England's Richard and Judy television show. His second novel, BORDER SONGS (2009), was also adapted to the stage and won the Washington State Book Award as well as the Indie's Choice Honor Book Award. The film rights have been sold for THE HIGHEST TIDE and TV rights for BORDER SONGS.

Lynch grew up in the Seattle area and graduated from the University of Washington before bouncing around the country as a reporter for newspapers in Alaska, Virginia and for columnist Jack Anderson in Washington, D.C. Returning to the Northwest, he wrote for the *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, the *Portland Oregonian* and the *Seattle Times*. His national honors along the way included the H.L. Mencken Award and Livingston Young Journalist Award for National Reporting. He now lives in Olympia, Washington with his wife, Denise, and daughter, Grace.

## Critical Praise

"Wonderful... tender, sad and leavened with wit?Looming large among these characters is the irresistibly odd Brandon Vanderkool, a 6-foot-8, 232-pound naïf who?s recently joined the U.S. Border Patrol [and] communicates lucidly with the natural world, particularly with birds, which soar over political borders and through some of this novel?s most beautiful passages?Lynch has written not just a liberal critique of the war on terror but also a moving, optimistic rebuttal of our paranoia that encourages us to imagine, with Brandon, the possibility of flying over everything that divides us."

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