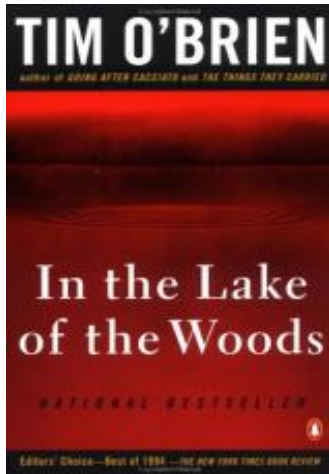


In the Lake of the Woods

by Tim O'Brien



About the Book

In the Lake of the Woods suggests the classic locked-room mystery turned on its head. Sometime between the night and late morning of September 19, 1986, a woman vanishes near Lake of the Woods in northern Minnesota, "where the water was everything, vast and very cold, and where there were secret channels and portages and bays and tangled forests and islands without names." While the traditional locked-room mystery presents investigators - and readers - with the seemingly impossible, the disappearance of Kathy Wade poses too many possibilities, a wilderness of hypotheses. There are too many places she could have gone, too many things that could have happened to her.

As Tim O'Brien gradually reveals in this haunting, morally vertiginous novel, there were too many reasons for Kathy to vanish. All of them are connected to her husband, John, an attractive if morally confused 40-year-old politician whose career has lately ended in a defeat so humiliating that it has driven the Wades to an isolated cabin in the Minnesota woods.

A long-buried secret has resurfaced to bury John alive; perhaps it has buried Kathy along with him. John's disgrace originated in "a place with secret trapdoors and tunnels and underground chambers populated by various spooks and goblins, a place where magic was everyone's hobby...a place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else."

Its geographic epicenter is the village of Thuan Yen in Vietnam. It was there, eighteen years before, that John Wade was transformed from a boy with a gift for performing magic tricks (his platoon-mates knew him as "Sorcerer") into an entranced killer.

What happened at Thuan Yen was not fiction. The events that took place there were widely reported and documented in official U.S. Army hearings and are known today as the My Lai massacre. At the heart of **In the Lake of the Woods** is its brutal re-creation of this wound in John Wade's history and his country's. Because Wade was one of many killers,

Tim O'Brien intersperses his narrative with the testimony of real figures like Lieutenant Rusty Calley and U.S. Army Investigator William V. Wilson--not to mention Presidents Richard Nixon and Woodrow Wilson. Just as John's and Kathy's associates--his mother and campaign manager, her sister and co-worker--try to decipher the events at *Lake of the Woods*, those historical witnesses posit partial explanations for America's mysteriously aligned obsessions with politics and violence.

Clausewitz observed that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Tim O'Brien suggests that politics, at least in its American variety, is a continuation of needs more basic and more terrible even than the need for power. The craving for love, he reminds us, can drive the human soul toward acts of desperation, deceit, and even violence.

For O'Brien, as for the unnamed investigator who is his narrator, all explanations are hypotheses rather than proofs. Beyond the mystery of Kathy's disappearance and John's role in it, and even beyond the mystery of My Lai, are other riddles: What predisposed John to become a murderer? What sort of magic enabled him to make his past vanish for twenty years, and what disappeared along with it? How could he love Kathy with such self-annihilating ferocity while keeping an essential part of himself hidden from her? Was Kathy a victim of John's deceptions or a participant in them? Is John an autonomous moral agent or another victim--of a bad childhood or a bad war or the murderous pastel sunlight of Vietnam? With **In the Lake of the Woods**, O'Brien has reinvented the novel as a magician's trick box equipped with an infinite number of false bottoms. Kathy's disappearance remains a "magnificent giving over to pure and absolute Mystery." John believes that "to know is to be disappointed. To understand is to be betrayed." This brave and troubling novel neither betrays nor disappoints, but brings the reader into a direct confrontation with the insoluble enigmas of history, character, and evil.

Discussion Guide

1. Almost from this novel's first page we know that Kathy Wade will vanish, and it is not long before we discover that her disappearance will remain unsolved. What, then, gives **In the Lake of the Woods** its undeniable suspense? What does it offer in place of the revelations of traditional mysteries?
2. Instead of a linear narrative, in which action unfolds chronologically, Tim O'Brien has constructed a narrative that simultaneously moves forward and backward in time: forward from John and Kathy's arrival at the cabin; backward into John's childhood, and beyond that to Little Big Horn and the War of Independence. It also moves laterally, into the "virtual" time that is represented by different hypotheses about Kathy's fate. What does the author accomplish with this narrative scheme? In what ways are his different narrative strands connected?
3. What does O'Brien accomplish in the sections titled "Evidence"? What information do these passages impart that is absent from the straightforward narrative? How do they alter or deepen our understanding of John as a magician, a politician, a husband, and a soldier who committed atrocities in wartime? What connections do they forge between his private tragedy and the pathologies of our public life and history? Does the testimony of (or about) such "real" people as Richard Nixon, William Calley, or George Custer lend greater verisimilitude to John's story or remind us that it--and John himself--are artifices?
4. Who is the narrator who addresses us in the "Evidence" sections? Are we meant to see him as a surrogate for the author, who also served in Vietnam and revisited Thuan Yen many years after the massacre? (See Tim O'Brien, "The

Vietnam in Me," in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 3, 1994, pp. 48-57.) In what ways does O'Brien's use of this narrator further explode the conventions of the traditional novel?

5. One of the few things that we know for certain about John is that he loves Kathy. But what does John mean by love? How do John's feelings for his wife resemble his hopeless yearning for his father, who had a similar habit of vanishing? In what circumstances does John say "I love you"? What vision of love is suggested by his metaphor of two snakes devouring each other? Why might Kathy have fallen in love with John?

6. Although it is easy to see Kathy as the victim of John's deceptions, the author at times suggests that she may be more conscious (and therefore more complex) than she first appears. We learn, for example, that Kathy has always known about John's spying and even referred to him as "Inspector Clouseau," an ironic counterpoint to John's vision of himself as "Sorcerer." At a critical moment she rebuffs her husband's attempt at a confession. And in the final section of "Evidence," we get hints that Kathy may have planned her own disappearance. Are we meant to see Kathy as John's victim or as his accomplice, like a beautiful assistant vanishing inside a magician's cabinet?

7. Why might John have entered politics? Is he merely a cynical operator with no interest in anything but winning? Or, as Tony Carbo suggests, might John be trying to atone for his actions in Vietnam? Why might the author have chosen to leave John's political convictions a blank?

8. John's response to the horrors of Thuan Yen is to deny them: "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not." Where else in the novel does he perform this trick? How does John's way of coping with the massacre compare to the psychic strategies adopted by William Calley or Paul Meadlo? Do any of O'Brien's characters seem capable of acknowledging terrible truths directly? How does *In the Lake of the Woods* treat the matter of individual responsibility for evil?

9. Each of this novel's hypotheses about events at the cabin begins with speculation but gradually comes to resemble certainty. The narrator suggests that John and Kathy Wade are ultimately unknowable, as well; that any attempt to "penetrate...those leaden walls that encase the human spirit" can never be anything but provisional. Seen in this light, **In the Lake of the Woods** comes to resemble a magician's trick, in which every assertion turns out to be only another speculation. Given the information we receive, does any hypothesis about what happened at Lake of the Woods seem more plausible than the others? With what certainties, if any, does this novel leave us?

Author Bio

Tim O'Brien received the National Book Award for *GOING AFTER CACCIATO*. Among his other books are *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*, Pulitzer Finalist and a *New York Times* Book of the Century, and *IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS*, winner of the James Fenimore Cooper Prize. He was awarded the Pritzker Literature Award for lifetime achievement in military writing.

Critical Praise

"This remarkable book is about the slipperiness of truth, the weight of forgetting, and the way two people disappear into themselves, and, ultimately, into the Lake of the Woods. "

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