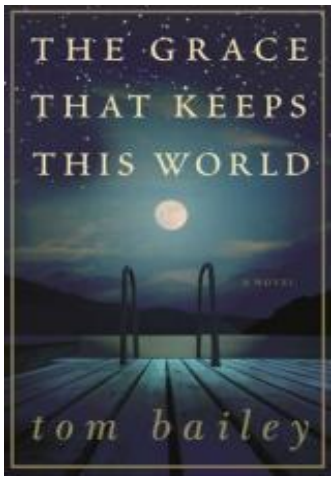
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Grace That Keeps This World

by Tom Bailey



About the Book

On the edge of the Adirondack wilderness, survival is a way of life for the Hazen family. Gary Hazen is a respected forester and hunter, known for his good instincts and meticulous planning. He and his wife, Susan, have raised their sons to appreciate the satisfaction of this difficult but honest life. In spite of this, the boys, men now, are slipping away. His older son, Gary David, is secretly dating a woman of whom his father would not approve even as Kevin, the younger boy, struggles against the limits of his family's hardscrabble lifestyle, wanting something more. On the first day of hunting season the Hazen men enter the woods, unaware that the trip they are embarking on will force them to come to terms with their differences and will forever change their lives.

In **The Grace That Keeps This World**, Tom Bailey gives us an emotional page-turner, infused with a deep sense of foreboding. Alternately narrated by the Hazens and their neighbors in Lost Lake, the story perfectly captures the enduring rhythms of life in a rural town.

Discussion Guide

1. Why are the chapters about Kevin written in the third person when all the other characters' sections are written in the first person? Does this stylistic choice affect your attitude toward Kevin?

2. What role does Roman Catholicism play in the novel? What aspects of Gary's personality does the reader glean from Father Anthony's perspective via the confessional? The evening of the Hunters' Mass, Gary notices that the North Star seems to point toward his home, a reference to the biblical story of a star that led worshippers to the site of Christ's nativity. Does the author suggest here that Gary has a messiah complex? What does Father Anthony identify as Gary's great sin?

3. Why does the author include the diametrically opposed points of view of Lucy and Brad Pfeiffer, a couple who has

transplanted from Lost Lake to Florida? What purpose does Brad Pfeiffer's depression serve in the narrative?

4. A great deal of the novel's early tension is built around Officer Roy's observations of Lamey Pierson?"It was his eyes that held you, though, and cautioned that he was neither simply lost nor merely crazy, but actually might be dangerous as well. Yellow as a coyote's, they had that same sort of clever, plotting glow" (page 33). Is Lamey a stereotypical villain, positioned to keep the reader uneasy, or does his character function on a more complex level? Why does he laugh hysterically at the scene of the Hazens' carnage in the woods?

5. The novel opens with Susan, closes with Gary, and in between focuses largely on Kevin, Gary David, and Officer Roy. Whose story is this?

6. The novel takes on a surprisingly lighthearted tone with the advent of the absurd faux-goose episode. What is the significance of this narrative twist? What does it tell us about Gary? What attitude toward Hollywood does the author convey through the characters/caricatures of Pierre Pardoe and Blaze Farley? How do the citizens of Lost Lake respond to them?

7. Why does part three open with Brad Pfeiffer's account of a harrowing snowmobile accident? What irony haunts Brad's memory of the event? Is it meaningful that the accident involves strangers to the town rather than residents of Lost Lake?

8. The novel takes its title from the Wendell Berry poem "A Warning to My Readers." Which character in the story might speak this poem? What emotion does the poem evoke?

9. What is the author's attitude toward Gary Hazen's frontier dream of a wholly self-sufficient homestead?

10. In the prologue, Susan identifies a vital difference between the sexes: "It is not that men don't love, but that their love contains within it a concern for and consideration of themselves?what they love and so think we'll care for?and not the sacrifice which is an imagining of others that is a woman's love, a motherly love born out of our bearing others" (page 5). Examining the relationships between Gary and Susan, Brad and Lucy, Officer Roy and Gary David, and Jeanie and Kevin, to what extent is this novel a study in the different ways that men and women love? In which of these relationship does Susan's theory ring true?

11. Susan recognizes Gary's extremism, but seems to consider it a mildly amusing character trait in her beloved: "I'm not sure that I would have loved him so if he hadn't been so resolute, sure in the rightness, even the *self-righteousness* of his life . . . another sort of man would not have felt he'd failed utterly as a father because one of his two sons had said he was not going to accompany him on a hunt. But then again that man would not have been Gary Hazen" (page 131). Given that Susan is painted as a perceptive, intelligent woman, what do you make of her collusion with Gary's unreasonable rigidity?

12. What symbolic meaning does the shell bag have for Kevin, for Gary David, and for Gary? What role does it play in the family's demise?

13. In the prologue, Susan watches her family leave and comments, "that was the last I heard from the three of them all together ever again" (page 7). How would the novel read differently if the coming tragedy was not revealed in the beginning? What devices does the author use to create suspense around the finale?

14. How does Gary's Vietnam experience play into his sense of self?

15. Armound Pollon and his team of clear-cutters represent the kind of newfangled forestry that Gary finds shortsighted and greedy. How does this subplot involving the Upper Lake Frenchmen contribute to the story? What larger themes does it frame?

16. Why does Gary describe the death of each goose in such lurid detail?

17. Kevin's oration of a passage from Homer's **The Odyssey** creates in him "a sudden soaring elation," the abrupt conviction that he wants to teach, and the liberating sensation that, for the first time in his life, "Everything seemed to make perfect sense" (page 148). Later, the piece of paper containing this passage allows Kevin to build the fire that keeps him and Gary alive in the woods. Why is this ironic? What is the significance of the specific passage he has chosen? Can **The Grace That Keeps This World** be read as a modern-day **Odyssey**, with Kevin as Odysseus? Does he make his way home at the end?

Author Bio

The Grace That Keeps This World

by Tom Bailey

Publication Date: July 25, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 320 pages
Publisher: Three Rivers Press
ISBN-10: 0307238024
ISBN-13: 9780307238023