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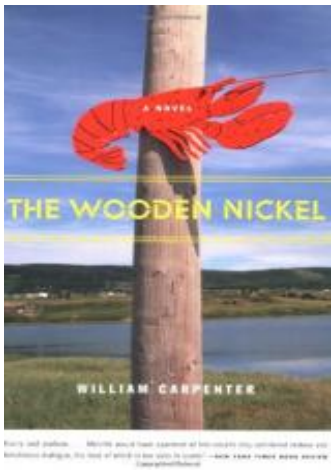
The Wooden Nickel: A Novel

by William Carpenter



About the Book

The Wooden Nickel is a boat. Its owner, Lucky Lunt, is an endangered species: a Maine lobsterman who works the same waters as his father and grandfather. Lucky's world is changing faster than he can fathom - his heart is failing him, too - and soon he is embroiled in a turf war that forces him to abandon what he should hold most dear: family, health, solvency, and even the rules of the sea. It only makes matters worse that Lucky's partner in crime is the sexy, not-quite-ex-wife of the local lobster wholesaler. Brilliantly capturing all the pathos and hilarity of Lucky's epic battle for survival, this remarkable novel announces the arrival of a startlingly fresh, mature, and important voice in American fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. How would you characterize Lucky and Ronette's relationship? How is it different from Lucky's relationship with Sarah? Do you think one is healthier or stronger than the other?

2. Seeing a cocktail party on an expensive sailboat, Lucky says, "Every one of them things is some son of a bitch screwing the working man" (page 121). Lucky has a very negative view of tourists and the summer people who come to Orphan Point, though much of his livelihood depends on them. Do you think his resentment is justified? What might account for his reaction to these outsiders?

3. Lucky and Sarah's son, Kyle, and their daughter, Kristen, pursue divergent paths in life, yet Lucky doesn't seem entirely comfortable with either of them. Discuss Lucky's relationship with each of his children. In the final chapters Lucky tries to run down Kyle's boat, while he buys Kristen the car of her dreams. Why does he end up treating his two children so differently?

4. Lucky sees his decision to work for Moto as a betrayal. Why is this such a wrenching choice? What motivates him to go forward despite his reservations? Can you sympathize with his decision, or do you think he should have acted

otherwise?

5. After learning about Ronette, Sarah tells Lucky, "Lucas, don't you see? Nothing is yours anymore. Not me, not this house, nothing. You don't even own yourself" (page 146). What does she mean by this?

6. What are the factors, besides simple desire, that propel Lucky into his affair with Ronette?

7. Discuss Sarah's reactions to Lucky's infidelity and to Ronette's pregnancy. Do you think her responses are appropriate? Do you think she might have acted differently in the first instance if Lucky had shown more remorse about the affair?

8. In a sense, Lucky is the author of his own demise ? much of what befalls him results from his own actions. Do you think there is an inevitability to the difficulties Lucky experiences, or does he bring them all upon himself?

9. Consider Ronette's perspective: Why would she choose Lucky as an escape route from her marriage? Unlike other blind forces operating in the novel, Ronette seems to have a plan. What do we know of her strategies and success in getting what she wants?

10. By the end of the novel Lucky has lost his wife, his boat, and his occupation and has traded his waterfront home for a house trailer. Given all this, is there any way we could say he is better off?

11. Identify other relationships ?apart from his entanglements with people ?that Lucky is involved in. How important are they to him and to the novel?

12. Lucky spends a lot of energy criticizing and condemning the world as he sees it. But what positive values does he seem to hold?

13. How do you interpret the novel's ending? What do you think happens to Lucky and Ronette after the last scene? Do you agree with the author's decision to leave the ending ambiguous?

14. The novel is seen through Lucky's eyes and told in his voice. How might the story be different if told from the perspective of one of the other characters?

Author Bio

My father was a college teacher but in those days faculty salaries were pretty monastic so I grew up in working-class neighborhoods. In Watertown we lived near the train yards and I hung out with a gang of kids who used to hitch rides on the boxcars being shunted back and forth. One day we got caught and I showed up at home in a police car. Then, in the fifth grade, we moved to a mill town in central Maine. Most of the neighbors were taught by nuns in the parochial schools. I was the first protestant they'd ever seen, and they had to ask the mother superior if they could play with me. "You can," the nun told them, "but don't get too attached to him. He'll be going to hell."

My summers took me to another world, thanks to a grandmother who had an old house on Cape Cod and arranged a shore cottage for us right on the tide line. My grandfather was a refrigerator repairman winters but in the summer he was

a professional sportfishing guide with a powerful 22-foot inboard skiff, the "Nike II." We would go out trolling for stripers off Nauset and in the Cape Cod canal. Nobody in my high school ever read a word they didn't have to, but my summer friends were boarding-school kids who were reading Salinger's **Nine Stories**, Fitzgerald's **This Side of Paradise** , Shaw's**Man and Superman** and Dostoevsky's **Crime and Punishment**. I kept reading till I got a Ph.D in English and a teaching job at the University of Chicago. It was the worst possible time to start an academic career. My students smoked dope in class and showed up naked in the cafeteria line. They left for Canada, faked psychoses, shot up and starved themselves to avoid the draft. My office building was occupied by the SDS. The high point was teaching Tolstoy's **War and Peace** five years in a row to anyone that would listen.

I had been reading Loren Eiseley and Rachel Carson, and I fled east with my young family to help start an environmental college on a Maine coast island. I started writing poems and published 3 poetry books in the 80's, then wrote my first novel, **A Keeper of Sheep**, about a college girl dealing with the AIDS crisis. Meanwhile my son had gone off to college and I started another family in another home, this one on the water overlooking Penobscot Bay, in year-round contact with the boats and mariners of the Maine coast. I started reading sea stories to my young son, winters in his upstairs bedroom and summers in the cozy forward cabin of our boat. After working through the**Aeneid** and the **Odyssey** it seems natural that I tried my hand at my own story of a sailor toughened by years at sea and faced with the sirens and sea monsters of his time.

My favorite late 20th century novels are **American Psycho** and **The Satanic Verses**, and behind them, **100 Years of Solitude** and **The Book of Laughter and Forgetting**. Their brand of surreal and grotesque comedy seems like the best route through and the complex negativities of our era. At the moment I'm working through the novels of the Egyptian writer Naguib Mafouz. A lot can be learned about the present world from Mafouz' insights into Islamic family life of a few generations back.

WILLIAM CARPENTER teaches literature at the College of the Atlantic in Maine. He is the author of three books of poetry and a previous novel, **A Keeper of Sheep**.

Critical Praise

"Powerful. . . . The Wooden Nickel will be the punchiest, raunchiest Maine coast lobstering novel you'll encounter in a long while."

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Publication Date: March 5, 2003
Paperback: 368 pages
Publisher: Back Bay Books
ISBN-10: 0316089745
ISBN-13: 9780316089746