

IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS

by Tim O'Brien

INTRODUCTION

On its surface, *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.

ABOUT TIM O'BRIEN

Minnesota native Tim O'Brien graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul in 1968. He served as a foot soldier in Vietnam from February 1969 to March 1970. Following his military service, he went to graduate school in Government at Harvard University, then later worked as a national affairs reporter for *The Washington Post*.

O'Brien is the author of the novel *Going After Cacciato*, winner of the 1979 National Book Award for fiction, and of *The Things They Carried*, winner of the 1990 Chicago Tribune Heartland Award in fiction. Its title story, first published in *Esquire*, received the 1987 National Magazine Award in fiction.

His other books are *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, *Northern Lights*, *July, July*, and *The Nuclear Age*.

His work has appeared in numerous magazines, including *Esquire*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Playboy*, *McCall's*, *Granta*, *Harper's*, *Redbook*, *The New Republic*, *Ploughshares*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, and *Saturday Review*. His short stories have been anthologized in *The O. Henry Prize Stories* (1976, 1978, 1982), *Great Esquire Fiction*, *Best American Short Stories* (1978, 1987), *The Pushcart Prize* (Vols. II and X), and in many textbooks and collections. He has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation.

In the Lake of the Woods was selected by the editors of *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the best books of 1994.

Praise

"A risky, ambitious, perceptive, engaging, and troubling novel...a major attempt to come to grips with the causes and consequences of the late 20th century's unquenchable appetite for violence, both domestic and foreign."—*Chicago Tribune*

"A relentless work full of white heat and dark possibility."—*The Boston Globe*

"At bottom, this is a tale about the moral effects of suppressing a true story, about the abuse of history, about what happens to you when you pretend there is no history."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"A memorable mystery story charged with haunting ambiguity...If any American novelist is creating more beautifully written, emotionally harrowing tales than Tim O'Brien, I don't know who it could be."—*Entertainment Weekly*

"An unrelenting exploration of the darkest recesses of the human heart and psyche. O'Brien's approach is bold, ambitious, and intriguing."—*Houston Chronicle*



"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."—*The New Yorker*

"O'Brien's clean, incantatory prose always hovers on the edge of dream...No one writes better about the fear and homesickness of a boy adrift amid what he cannot understand, be it combat or love."—*Time*

Related Titles

The Things They Carried

What are the things men carry into war? And what is the legacy that they return with? In the title story of this critically acclaimed collection of stories of the Vietnam War, O'Brien goes beyond the physical objects in knapsacks and pockets to explore the emotional baggage of men facing death. "I want you to feel what I felt," he says. "I want you to know why story—truth is truer sometimes than happening—truth."

"In prose that combines the sharp, unsentimental rhythms of Hemingway with gentler, more lyrical descriptions, Mr. O'Brien gives the reader a shockingly visceral sense of what it felt like to tramp through a booby-trapped jungle. A vital, important book..."—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM O'BRIEN

How did you come to write *In the Lake of the Woods*? Did you know the whole story from the beginning, or did you start with a particular premise or image?

I certainly did not know the whole story. It would've killed my own interest and curiosity—like going to a movie after someone has given away its conclusion. I began *In the Lake of the Woods* with the scene on the porch. An image of two very unhappy people, lost in the fog, lost in a deep spiritual and psychological way. As a writer, I had to discover bit by bit the causes of their immense despair, just as the reader does. Discovery is one of the great joys for both the reader and the writer.

One of the problems this novel poses is that the reader is asked to like—or at least empathize with—a character who is, at the very least, severely damaged, addicted to subterfuge and guilty of terrible acts during the Vietnam War. Was this something that worried you as you wrote? How did you compensate for it?

It didn't worry me. One of the things I've never understood is the complaint that such-and-such a character is "unlikable." The figures in fiction I respond to most powerfully are those I don't necessarily like or even identify with: Raskolnikov, or Abraham, or Bartleby, or Captain Ahab, or Anna Karenina, or Emma Bovary, or Lady Macbeth, or Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, another man damaged by a war. Who wants to go out for a beer with Lady Macbeth? Yet when I read about such characters, I'm pulled along by their spiritual and moral problems; I'm often rooting for them to emerge whole from the blackness. Wade is one of those characters. I find myself rooting for him, wishing him the best, even as his life gets bleaker and bleaker, as he keeps making bad choices. But then, sometimes people don't have absolute freedom of choice. Life and history impose constraints on all of us. In Wade's case—a childhood like his, a history like his—the freedom to choose has been limited by an overwhelming need to be loved, at almost any cost. So I have sympathy for him. He's a man in great trouble. There's a piece of John Wade inside each of us, I think. We don't have to like it, but we would be wise to acknowledge it.

Speaking of guilt, is John Wade responsible for what happened at Thuan Yen? Are the terrible things that happened to him in combat—and earlier during his childhood—meant to justify or even explain his conduct? Do you believe that William Calley had a story of his own that might mitigate his guilt? Is something like the My Lai massacre fully explicable in terms of individual pathology?

We're all responsible for our actions in the world, and John Wade is responsible for his. Unfortunately, he can't own up to his sins and failures and weaknesses. He not only hides them from others but from himself, as so many of us do. Even as Wade tries to atone for his past by entering politics as a progressive Democrat, he's drawing a veil over his own misdeeds and so is both perpetuating and compounding all his guilt. There's a difference between explanation and exculpation. One can point to all sorts of reasons why people like Calley did what they did: fear, frustration, rage at the enemy—yet such explanations do not justify mass murder. Wade is guilty not only for his actions at My Lai, but also for leading a deceitful and self-defeating life afterwards. Still, I don't find him evil by nature. He loves his wife dearly, he feels great guilt, he wants to open up but cannot, until it's too late. The man suffers. He's terrified of losing the woman he loves.

I know that you yourself were present at My Lai some time after the massacre. What was it like for you? Did it leave you, do you think, with any intuition into what someone like John Wade—or William Calley or Paul Meadlo—might have felt in the moments before the killing started?

In some respects. Not just My Lai, but Quang Ngai province and Vietnam in general. For instance, there was a sense of never being able to find the enemy because they were both among and of the population. There was a sense of rage as you watched your friends' bodies pile up. A sense of mystery, too, at never knowing who was for you and who was against you. A sense of growing indifference to the fate of the Vietnamese themselves. All this was true for me, and it was probably true for Calley. But it's just as true that you don't go killing babies just because you're enraged or frustrated. The events at My Lai are also a metaphor for the evils that occur every day, for the sins that are committed even in the course of living a life in the suburbs and streets of America. Sin isn't limited to warfare. We've all done bad things and had to find ways to keep living.

Why did you choose to make the narrator a character in the novel? Who is he intended to be? Is the reader meant to trust his interpretations? Is he any more reliable than John himself?

He's more trustworthy. Imperfect, though—limited by all that he does not and cannot know. Like all of us. I saw the narrator as a biographer, a medium, a storyteller like Conrad's Marlow. He's trying to present an accurate flow of events, periodically stepping back to make sense of what he's relating. Marlow is fallible just as my own narrator is fallible. There's always the problem of ignorance. There's always so much we can never know about Kurtz. There's so much we can never know about what happened at that cottage on Lake of the Woods. There's always the wall of ignorance, beyond which the narrator can only speculate. And that's the heart of the novel. On the plot level, we will never know what happened to Kathy. On the psychological level, we can't read the hearts of other human beings. We can't penetrate the minds of our own husbands and wives. We can't read their motives or secret thoughts. We can only guess. We can only hypothesize. Certain things in life will always remain pure mystery, and this both frustrates and fascinates us. In a footnote I use the example of the way Lizzie Borden endures in American mythology. Custer's Last Stand, the Kennedy assassination, the disappearance of Amelia Earheart—we don't know what happened; we can't know. If these mysteries were to be solved, we'd stop caring. We don't go to movies about Herbert Hoover dying of old age. We go to movies like *JFK*. Human beings are entranced by mystery. Whole religions are built around the condition of profound human ignorance. What happens to us after we die? How did we all get here? What caused the universe to exist?

In your essay "The Magic Show" you compare the act of making magic, of conjuring up pleasurable illusions, to the art of writing fiction. Yet John's use of magic seems less pleasant, more sinister. Can you talk about this?

I tried to explore both sides of this magic—doing business. For John Wade, magic was partly a means of escape from an unhappy childhood, a way of empowering himself, a means of earning applause and respect and even love. But at the same time, he took all this to an extreme, trying to control other human beings through acts of deception and trickery. My psychological read on Wade is that he is a guy who needed magic as a way of manipulating an intolerable world, of seeking love through deceitful means. His magic grew into something pathological, a need to fool both himself and others in order to endure his own guilt. I think many human beings on this planet fall into exactly that trap. Politicians among others. That's why I made Wade a politician. That craving for power. That craving for love.

Throughout the narrative, you scatter clues that reinforce different hypotheses. For example, John's memory of standing naked in the lake on the night of Kathy's disappearance suggests that he may in fact have killed her. Did you intend one of your narrator's hypotheses to be "correct"? Or are you rather obeying some literary counterpart of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and presenting us with a series of alternative truths, mutually exclusive and equally valid?

I tried to make each hypothesis plausible. John may have killed Kathy. Or Kathy may have run off with someone else. Or maybe she simply drowned. Or got lost in that vast wilderness. I believed in each hypothesis as I wrote it. I inserted evidence to support each hypothesis—just as life itself gives us contradictory evidence about a great many things. But in the end, it's all a mystery, insoluble, beyond certainty. I mean, listen, if a mystery is solved, it's no longer a mystery! Right? Many readers will probably jump to the obvious and macabre conclusion: John was at My Lai; therefore he murdered his wife. Yet, the search of the cottage produces nothing incriminating. Both Claude and Ruth believe in Wade's innocence. And even Wade himself claims innocence toward the end of the novel. Most novels adhere to a principle of certainty. They show that this happened and then that happened. This book is different. This book is about uncertainty. This book adheres to the principle that much of what is important in the world can never be known. That's what disturbs people. *In the Lake of the Woods* suggests that the "truth" of our lives is always fragile, always elusive, always beyond the absolute. Frustrating, sure. But that's our human predicament.