

Other Books by Tim O'Brien

Novels

Northern Lights (1975)
Going After Cacciato (1978)
The Nuclear Age (1985)
In the Lake of the Woods (1995)
Tomcat in Love (1998)
July, July (2002)

Collections

The Things They Carried (1990)
The Putt at the End of the World (2000)
(written with 8 other authors)

Non fiction

If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up And
Ship Me Home (1973)
From How to Tell a True War Story (1987)

UPCOMING DISCUSSIONS

Bring a
Lunch

Articles of War

by Nick Arvin 2-25-12

*Until Tuesday: A Wounded Warrior and the Golden
Retriever Who Saved Him*

by Luis Carlos Montalván 3-17-12

Specimen Days

by Michael Cunningham 4-28-12

Strength in What Remains

by Tracy Kidder 5-19-12

*River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest
Journey*

by Candice Millard 6-16-12

Questions courtesy of readinggroupguides.com

Guide designed by
Sandy Smith, Lodi Public Library

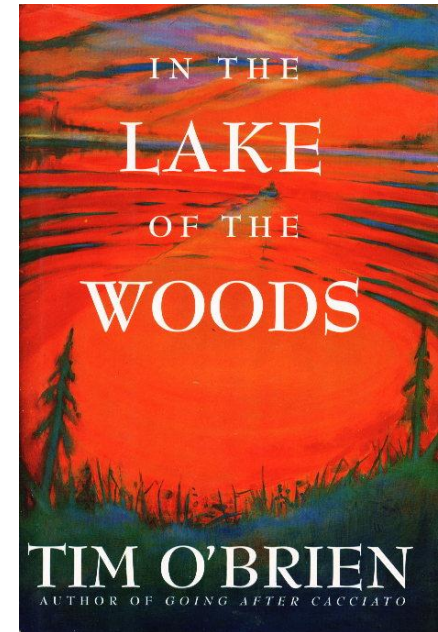


Brown Bag

Book Club



Digs in & Discusses



Feb. 4, 2012

Noon – 2pm

Activity Room

Lodi Public Library
201 W. Locust St.

Call 333-5503 for details

Discussion Questions

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?