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## IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS

By Tim O'Brien

Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 309 pp.

The tragedy of a life's defining moments is that, as they are happening, we often get sucked too deeply into the whirlpool of their immediate emotional tow to see how and why they transformed the course of our life forever.

For John Wade in Tim O'Brien's hauntingly poignant new novel, it takes the twinned disasters of a destroyed political career and his wife's disappearance to clarify the forces that led him inexorably to ruin.

Begin with John's father. John adored him, and, when he was sober, his father adored John right back. But what stays with the son of an alcoholic is the side brought out of the bottle, the side that demeans you, says you're fat, foolish, sissyish, not worth loving. At 14, John loses his father, without ever feeling secure in the man's flawed love. What John experiences thereafter, never understanding it, is a truth given clearest voice in the play *I Never Sang for My Father*: "Death ends a life. It does not end a relationship."

The quest for what he still needs from his dead father causes John later to fall completely in love with 18 year-old Kathy. "More than anyone she'd ever known," Kathy learns, "John needed the conspicuous display of human love—absolute, unconditional love—love without limit." That they love each other, neither doubts. But John's been burned by love before: "The ambiguity of it all seemed intolerable...there was always the threat of tomorrow's treachery, or next year's treachery."

So, as he'd done with his father, John spies on Kathy. As a child he'd become fascinated with magic shops, buying the tricks and mirrors in which he could see love as unconditional and forever. From behind bushes and within shadows, he spies on Kathy to look for signs she might leave him.

But first he leaves her for a time, for Vietnam, for the same reason: he "went to war...only to be loved. He imagined his father, who was dead, saying to him, 'Well, you did it, you hung in there, and I'm so proud, just so incredibly goddamn proud.'" John loved Vietnam, where his buddies appreciated his tricks and called him Sourcerer. To the boy whose feet never rested securely on the ground, Vietnam's hallucinatory world "felt like home."

In that world, the lines blur and fade that separate right from wrong and define individual responsibility for brutal actions. One day in 1968, after John's company had taken horrible losses, his platoon leader, Lt. William Calley, herds a villageful of old, young and female into a ditch and screams at his men: "Get with it—move—light up these fuckers!" As others open fire, John runs, but not without shooting an old man

whose hoe looked momentarily like a rifle and a buddy who looked momentarily like a V.C. His moral system devastated, John reenlists for another tour: "He had no meaningful choice...he'd lost touch with some defining part of himself."

Once back in the world, John marries Kathy and enters politics for the same reason as he'd extended his tour, as a chance for atonement in its literal sense of at-one-ment: "He genuinely wanted to do good in the world.... He was struck by the dim notion of politics as a medium of apology, a way of salvaging something in himself."

For years, his star rises. Then, during a primary race for Minnesota lieutenant governor, his role at My Lai, which he'd hidden from Kathy and largely from himself, comes out, hits the papers and makes him a mote in the public eye. His career over, he takes Kathy to a lakeside cabin to regroup and begin healing.

Within days, as we learn in the novel's opening pages, Kathy vanishes. We never learn why or to where. Nor, despite the magnificent tension O'Brien creates surrounding her disappearance, are we meant to. This book is no mystery; it is an exploration of how, no matter what needs life has carved into our character, we search for peace and redemption.

The sheer brilliance of technique with which O'Brien unfolds that quest would have done his late editor, Seymour Lawrence—that most Maxwell Perkins-like of contemporary figures—proud. O'Brien moves his plot not in a line but a spiral, ever widening through four quadrants of concern: Kathy's disappearance, John's history, authorial speculation on what might have happened and fragments of "evidence" that suggest the forces causing John's tragedy. O'Brien, who himself won a Purple Heart near My Lai and a National Book Award for his war fiction, in his own voice both confesses bewilderment over Kathy's fate and exorcises his own Vietnam demons. His presence in this novel, then, approximates the location Islam ascribes to God: "More distant than stars and nearer than the vein in your neck."

Only an accomplished master can navigate that distance as compellingly as O'Brien does here.