

In the Lake of the Woods Study Guide

In the Lake of the Woods by Tim O'Brien

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Plot Summary

John and Kathy Wade travel to a cottage at the Lake in the Woods after John loses an election. While they both try to put a brave face on the situation, they are obviously devastated. The two met in 1966 when John was a senior in college and Kathy was a freshman. John is immediately fearful of losing her and begins to spy on her. While he does not find her in a situation that indicates his fear is founded, he says that he knows he cannot possibly guarantee that she will not cheat on him in the future. John leaves for a stint in the military and when he returns, he immediately sets out to spy on Kathy before announcing his presence. When she returns to the dorm after being gone for an entire night, there's little in the way of explanation offered but the author notes that "they married anyway."

It is revealed that John's actions in the military were what cost him the election. John is known as "the Sorcerer" by his fellow squad members and sometimes claims to tell fortunes. John kills a fellow soldier and apparently participates in a series of atrocities during the war. There is a court martial hearing later and one member of their company is convicted of war crimes. John himself tries to avoid being publicly associated with the situation by changing records during a brief term as an office worker near the end of his time in Vietnam. He knows that the majority of the men will never remember his name because they know him as "Sorcerer." His participation is revealed during his campaign and it's the news stories about those events that turn his winning tide.

In a series of "evidence" chapters, it is revealed that his father committed suicide when John was young, that he had been incredibly interested in magic, and that he'd been considered something of a loner as a youngster.

John and Kathy come to the cabin offered to them by the cabin's owner, Claude Rassmussen. They are there only a few days when John wakes one morning and realizes that Kathy is not there. He does not worry at first, thinking that she is probably out for a walk. Later, he calls on Claude for help and police are called in. The search expands but Kathy is not found and there is no sign of her body either. The theories abound with some believing that John killed Kathy and dumped the body. Others discount that idea and think that Kathy ran away with a mysterious lover. Still others think that John had something to do with her disappearance though not in a violent way. Those people believe John might have helped Kathy run away and then joined her. That theory gains credence when John also disappears. The mystery of her death is never solved.



1 through 7

1 through 7 Summary

The story opens in September, following the primary election, in the Lake of the Woods, where John Wade and his wife Kathy have gone to recover from the rigors and disappointment of a lost campaign. They talk about things they want to do, places they want to go and things they want to buy, refusing to talk about the fact that any of these things are impossible because they are in debt. John is angry and bitter over the loss and admits to being humiliated over the landslide loss. As John and Kathy hold each other one night on the porch of the cabin, he promises that they will visit Verona, that they will do deluxe hotel packages and that they'll have lots of children to take along. At one point, Kathy says that it is a "rotten time" they have to get past and he agrees.

In Chapter two, "Evidence," statements by several family members and friends are presented as well as details of Kathy's physical appearance and condition. It's noted that she's five-foot-six, weighs one hundred eighteen pounds, is thirty-eight years old, and had pneumonia at sixteen. She also had a "pregnancy termination" at age thirty-four. There is a statement from John's mother, Eleanor Wade, indicating that his father teased John for being overweight and another indicating that she could not believe John might have hurt Kathy. Vincent Pearson, known as Vinny, who is the local law enforcement officer but is also the owner of Pearson's Texaco, says outright that he believes John killed Kathy. Lake of the Woods Sheriff Arthur Lux says that he did everything he could to find Kathy short of draining the lake, and that he continues to keep an eye out.

In Chapter three, John is fourteen when he is called out of gym class and picked up by his mother on the day his father died. He is angry and lashes out during the funeral. Later, he copes by pretending that his father is really alive though he knows the truth when teachers say how sorry they are.

In Chapter four, on their seventh day at the cabin, John and Kathy are "careful" with each other. They had tried to make love once but it had been a failure and they hadn't tried again. A day later, when Kathy was missing, John would wonder what would have happened if they'd been less careful, if Kathy had suggested that they make love in the kitchen. Later that day they swim, lay on the beach for awhile in the sun and swim again until the chill runs them inside. That afternoon, John calls his former campaign manager Tony Carbo but is told that he is in a meeting. When John calls again, Tony is gone for the day and John unplugs the phone and puts it in the cabinet under the sink. They drive into the town of Angle Inlet where Kathy receives a letter from her sister, Patty, who is telling of her trouble juggling two boyfriends. Kathy says that it's "double trouble" and that Patty's boyfriends always seem to be like "snakes or politicians." She tells John that it was a joke but he's angry over her wisecrack and they snap at each other before letting it go.



They return to the cabin later where they play backgammon, listen to records and go for a walk. At one point during the evening, John tries to open a conversation about "that stuff in the newspaper," but Kathy cuts it off. They go to bed around eleven that night and Kathy seems cheerful as she turns off the light. In chapter five, "Hypothesis," the author poses a series of possible explanations. He suggests that there was someone else waiting to help Kathy escape an impossible situation.

Chapter six is another "Evidence" chapter. In this chapter, Eleanor Wade says that John was "secretive" as a child and spent hours in the basement, practicing magic tricks. In another entry, she says that John had "hardly cried" when his father died though he'd been very angry and had created a scene at the funeral.

In Chapter seven, "The Nature of Marriage," the author notes that John and Kathy met in 1966 at the University of Minnesota when he was a senior and she was a freshman. From the beginning, John is obsessed and fearful of losing her so that he set out to make sure that she loved him. By November, he began spying on her. Though he feels guilty for the deception, he can't stop. He goes to the extreme of sometimes making a date with her, then canceling and following her to find out what she would do. While he insists that it is not a matter of distrusting her, he is looking for some sign that she is being unfaithful to him. Kathy seems to realize there is something not quite right but does not know what it is. She continues to love him and John grows secure enough to stop spying except on rare occasions.

In 1967, John graduates and begins a stint in the military. Kathy questions his motives which are apparently an effort to further his political aspirations. He is hurt by her attitude and writes back that he hopes she will someday believe in him. When he leaves the military, he stays outside Kathy's dorm room and follows her as she goes through her day. While he finds nothing amiss in her actions, he knows that she might very well betray him tomorrow or the next day or the next year. She doesn't come back to her dorm that night and he's still waiting when she returns the following morning. She tells him that she was "out," and the author notes that they "marry anyway." The second morning after their wedding, Kathy asks if he has regrets, says that she loves him completely and says that she knows they'll be happy.

1 through 7 Analysis

The story begins to unfold with hints of a problem that led to the landslide victory of John's opponent but the entire story won't come out for some time. Kathy professes her love for John and says that she cares nothing about elections. This will later be discussed in greater detail as the reader learns that she had actually hated elections and the campaign trail.

From Chapter five, the first of the "hypothesis" chapters, the author proposes possible alternatives to Kathy's death. He suggests that she might have simply got up, either sometime during the night or early the following morning, and gone to meet someone who was waiting for her. The author suggests that it might have been someone waiting



in a car nearby but that would not explain the fact that the boat is missing from the boathouse. These suppositions could be designed simply to throw the reader off and it's left to the reader to decide the significance.

In Chapter six, Sheriff Arthur Lux, says that Vinny had a theory about Kathy Wade's death but that he hadn't personally been willing to create a theory. It's in this section that the author includes a foot note that makes him seem to be the historian or "biographer" of the case. He says that he'd spent four years researching the story and that after all that time he had come to few conclusions. In the author's words, "Kathy Wade is forever missing." This is the first indication that there will not be a solution to the story and that Kathy's disappearance will remain a mystery.

John seems to become somewhat unhinged during his time of military service in the war. It is noted that he is considered mysterious and that John encourages this attitude. He says that he can do "much" with "his jackknife and a corpse." That isn't explained but the author goes on to say that he sometimes performs prophecies or tells fortunes. After a while, the other members of his company begin to refer to him as "Sorcerer" and he claims to be able to foresee events. When he mentions this to Kathy, she tells him that his talk in this vein frightens her.



Chapters 8 through 12

Chapters 8 through 12 Summary

In Chapter eight, "How the Night Passed," the author returns to the night of Kathy's disappearance. John wakes twice during the night, the first time moving toward Kathy and the second time he gets up, thinking about the election and what happened to cost him the victory. He refers to Tony Carbo, saying that Tony had called the situation "ambush politics." John recalls the defeat in the election, the fact that there had been news stories with "certain secrets," that friends had slipped away and money already pledged had dried up.

After he gets up that night, he goes to the kitchen and heats an iron kettle of water to the boiling point. He uses a dishtowel to pick up the kettle and goes to the living room where he pours the boiling water on every plant in the room, killing it, and creating a horrible odor of dead foliage. He then heats the filled kettle again and goes to the bedroom he's sharing with Kathy. It's noted that he watches her sleep but that he feels disjointed. The rest of the night is even more disjointed and he later recalls only pieces of it. There was a moment when he was pushing Kathy's hair from her face, another memory of something like "red hot eels," a memory of standing in the water, another when he was submerged, and another of waking to find Kathy was not in their bed.

In Chapter nine, "Hypothesis," the author suggests that Kathy woke after John had killed all the houseplants with boiling water and had "just walked away" because she was afraid. From Kathy's point of view, it probably seems by now that nothing satisfies John, including their marriage. She would have recalled, as she was trying to decide what to do, that they'd known the election was lost weeks before the final numbers were in. The author admits that this might not have happened at all, and that Kathy might have gone to John as he was in the middle of his tirade and that he might have turned to her with the teakettle in his hand, and that there might have followed "the scent of wet wool" and "a hissing sound" as Kathy realized there was nothing she could do for him. At that point, she might have rushed out, fallen and hurt herself, and might be "still out there."

In Chapter ten, "The Nature of Love," the author notes that John decides to join the military because he imagines that his family will be proud of his accomplishments and that future audiences of supporters will honor him for his service. He writes to Kathy while in Vietnam about his love for her but never talks to her about the killing. However, while in Vietnam, John is caught up in a bloody battle in which he fires at everything that moves because he is so afraid. When the shooting eventually stops, John is at the bottom of a slimy drainage ditch. An American soldier named Weatherby steps up to the edge of the ditch and calls out, "Hey Sorcerer" just before John shoots and kills the young man. He soon convinces himself that he wasn't responsible for the man's death.



John says that there are some secrets that he doesn't share with anyone. One is Weatherby's death, another is that he feels at home in Vietnam and another is his role in the events at a Vietnamese village called Thuan Yen.

As a youngster, John's relationship with his father left much to be desired. When his dad asks if he would like to go to a game, John says "maybe" and his father, obviously disappointed, says that is good enough. His father does not understand the obsession with magic but takes John to the magic store to get whatever he wants for his birthday gift. As John ages and gains some weight, his father ridicules him, calling him "Jiggling John."

In Chapter eleven, "What He Did Next," John sleeps in on the morning after pouring the boiling water on the houseplants. When he wakes, he has breakfast and realizes Kathy is not in the cabin but believes that she is probably out for a hike. He recalls a few events from the previous night, including "flapping sounds." He believes that Kathy would have seen the dead houseplants, smelled the odor of decay, and John knows that he'll have to come up with an excuse. He gathers up all the dead plants and straightens up some. He notes a smell of ammonia and sees Kathy's robe. The day passes with John continually reassuring himself that Kathy will return to the cabin within the next hour. Twice he notes the smell of ammonia. He drinks throughout the day and at six that evening he goes to the dock. He realizes that Kathy loves nature but considers potted plants examples of nature and fears that something might have happened to her. He walks into the woods and calls her name several times. He returns to the cottage and drinks some more and realizes that he hasn't checked to see if the boat is in the boathouse. He finds it gone and it's near midnight when he drives to the Rasmussen house. Claude Rasmussen's wife Ruth makes coffee and Claude promises that they will call for the sheriff but urges John to "think positive" in the meantime.

John remembers that Claude had been one of the few supporters to contact him after the election. Claude had offered up the use of the cabin for two weeks "without newspapers." Now Claude asks John if he can walk and they go back to the cabin where John makes himself another drink and Claude has one as well. Claude asks if John and Kathy had argued and John insists that they didn't. He says that Kathy was gone when he got up. As Claude and John pass the hours, Claude says that he was surprised John didn't ask for financial help during the election. He says that John didn't have a chance after the stories hit the newspapers, but that he might have pitched in some money for a "lost cause" anyway.

Chapter twelve is called "Evidence." In this chapter, Ruth Rasmussen is quoted as saying that John had been drinking on the night of Kathy's disappearance but puts it down to the "clobbering" John took in the election.

Chapters 8 through 12 Analysis

Tony Carbo was John's campaign manager. He is quoted early in the book as having said that he'd asked John if there was anything in John's past that might hurt the



campaign. He says that John never mentioned the situation in Vietnam and that Tony had trusted him. At one point, Kathy seems to believe that Tony's advice is keeping John from addressing any real issues during a particular campaign but Tony tells her that John is the boss. John recalls that he lost the election by a landslide and admits now, in the cabin after the defeat, that it might have been because he climbed the political ladder too quickly.

Chapter eight contains Kathy's disappearance though what actually happened to her is never explained. John kills all the plants in the house with boiling water. He then has another kettle of hot water in his hands as he goes to the bedroom where Kathy is sleeping. He has a memory of "red hot eels" which might have indicated that he was pouring boiling water on Kathy. In another of his disjointed memories of that night, he was standing waist deep in water and another time he was submerged. This could indicate that he was disposing of Kathy's body. However, there is apparently no real evidence that he murdered Kathy in their bedroom because the police become very involved in the search for her over the coming days. It seems impossible that a kettle of boiling water would have been enough to kill a grown woman and that she would fight. It also seems that if he had murdered her in some other way there would have been evidence, though it will later be suggested that he covered up any evidence. There will be other hypotheses offered to explain her disappearance as the search escalates but it's ultimately left to the reader to decide what probably happened, or to accept that it's a mystery that won't be solved.

In Chapter nine, the author offers up some hypotheses about the night of Kathy's disappearance. He is careful to say that, regardless of the scenario, Kathy might have walked away from the cabin.

The details of what happened to cost John the election are left somewhat to the readers' imagination at this point though there will soon be details about John's stint in Vietnam and it seems evident that his actions there are the basis for the newspaper stories that cost him so much political support.

John is coming unhinged and Kathy seems to see the signs but does not insist that he get help. The author notes that it is a statement of how their relationship really is that she doesn't insist and John doesn't believe that he needs help. When John talks in his sleep and wakes Kathy, she accepts his insistence that it is just bad dreams. However, his dependence on her is so overwhelming that he wishes he could "crawl inside her," apparently seeing that as one of the only places in the world where he could be safe.

John's relationship with his father is convoluted. While John wishes desperately for his father's unconditional love and support, he is not willing to meet his father on common ground, such as attending a ball game. Even at this age, John seems to want to set the terms for someone else to accept him.

John is obviously a complete narcissist and convinces himself that he has no responsibility in Weatherby's death. Instead, he blames the war and takes his anger out on the Vietnamese people. He considers himself a magician through all this and cites



his ability to transform one piece of fruit to another as well as his ability to whisper a few words on a radio to completely destroy a village.

John notes the scent of ammonia in their bedroom on the morning after Kathy's disappearance. As he is cleaning up the dead houseplants, he goes to the bedroom and there he sees Kathy's robe on a hook and smells ammonia. That scent is never explained but it seems it could have been used to clean up any blood left from Kathy's murder. A little while later, John notes "that ammonia after-scent" and feels "an illicit tug at his memory." This seems proof that he'd done something to Kathy but it may also mean that he's remembering his tirade of the night before when he killed all the house plants. There's another clue at the moment John finds the boat is missing. He realizes then that she's no longer a child and that she knows all his secrets. From this knowledge, she knows "what he's capable of." As John admits this to himself, he believes that he sees her and during this vision she "jerked sideways" and "puffs of steam rose from the sockets of her eyes" before the vision disappears. John notes that the vision is "impossible" but it seems that it could have been his remembering her death at his hands.



Chapters 13 through 17

Chapters 13 through 17 Summary

In Chapter thirteen, "The Nature of the Beast," John is back in Vietnam. He receives a letter from Kathy saying that she loves him and hopes that he realizes that they have both grown up in their time apart and will therefore both have to make concessions to the other's emerging maturity. Soon after receiving the letter, John and his company are involved in a raid on the village of Thau Yen. As John walks through the village, he sees carnage including men, women, children and animals. He says that no one is "dying quietly" in the chaos. He sees Weatherby shoot "two little girls in the face." Another man has a ponytail, taken from one of the victims, attached to his helmet. John eventually hides in a ditch and is there when Weatherby steps to the rim of the ditch and calls his nickname.

In Chapter fourteen, "Hypothesis," the author suggests that Kathy gets out of bed very early and checks on John before she heads to the kitchen where she has breakfast in the early morning hours, her favorite time of the day. She considers that she might share with him her own "big secret," that she is excited and relieved to know that his political days are over. She then discovers the dead houseplants and decides to go out and takes the boat from the boathouse, remembering to pick up the extra can of gasoline. As she heads out into the lake, she realizes that it's time for some changes in her life with John and decides that she'll tell him "about Harmon," who is later identified as a dentist with whom Kathy had an affair. The author suggests that she might have hit a sandbar while skimming along the lake or otherwise have gotten into trouble, capsized the boat and drowned.

In Chapter fifteen, "What the Questions Were," Sheriff Art Lux arrives at the lake the following morning from his headquarters in Baudette. It's immediately clear that Vinny believes John killed Kathy and dumped the body though Lux refuses to allow Vinny's questions on that topic. Through Lux's questions, John says that Kathy was in bed at midnight, that John hadn't gotten up until nearly noon and that Kathy had disappeared sometime during that period.

Vinny says that there is no way John could have slept through the outboard motor starting and John says that he had been drinking. Vinny refers to a statement provided by a clerk at a store in town that indicated she'd seen John and Kathy arguing but John says the argument was minor. After they leave John remembers the night of Kathy's disappearance. He recalls walking to the bedroom, "puffs of steam in the dark," the sound of "flapping," and being in the lake up to his waist. He pushes the memories aside. John talks later to Claude about Vinny's obvious suspicions. Claude says that he and Ruth don't believe John had anything to do with Kathy's disappearance but suggests that it would be good to "show some concern." John calls Kathy's sister, Patricia Hood, and she says that she's already seen news coverage and will arrive the following day.



In Chapter sixteen, "Evidence," a group of men in John's military company are questioned during court martial hearings. Paul Meadlo says that he'd shot women, children and babies because he'd expected attacks from them. William Calley says everyone in the village was considered to be the enemy and was therefore destroyed. Tony Carbo and Eleanor Wade say they knew John had a difficult time during the war and Tony says that he believes it might have "destroyed" John though his mother says she doesn't believe he was involved.

In Chapter seventeen, "The Nature of Politics," John tries to become more focused after the events at Thuan Yen and is injured twice. Upon his return to the United States, he starts school and passes the bar in 1973, and then takes a job with the Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor Party where he makes little money but makes important contacts. In 1976, he runs for the Minnesota State Senate with Tony Carbo as his campaign manager. John remains in that seat for six years with Tony managing "slick, expensive" campaigns. Keeping up the right image requires money and the expense of regular campaigns eats into their income so that John and Kathy are constantly having money problems. Among Tony's instructions are that John needs to be involved in church and John agrees to become Lutheran as he kicks off a campaign for Lieutenant Governor.

In 1982, Kathy is pregnant and John arranges an abortion but admits that he is saddened. Later, he says that it was "bad timing" but Kathy is angry, saying that a child is "all she's ever wanted." Both realize they have given up something important in their efforts to hold John's political career together but they never talk about it. At one point, Kathy asks Tony why John is not being allowed to address serious issues during his campaigns and Tony counters that it is a case of doing what is necessary to win an election before taking on the issues. When Kathy pushes the point, Tony says that John's the boss and says that John would not take that chance.

Chapters 13 through 17 Analysis

In one letter, Kathy tells John that she has been seeing some other men but that it's "nothing serious." While the reader has seen up to this point that John is manipulative and uncaring, this provides some interesting insight into Kathy. It is not hinted that John's attitude changes after receiving this letter but it seems impossible that it would not have affected him. He is a very controlling person and he would have been enraged at his ability keep tabs on Kathy.

In recalling the events in Thuan Yen, John describes seeing an old man with the bright metallic glint of a gun which prompted John to shoot him. However, he sometimes admits that it was a hoe in the old man's hands. John also hides behind the fact that the atrocities of the murders could not have actually happened and therefore convinces himself that they didn't. Other times, he remembers in great clarity. John wants to remember that he was brave during the events but admits that he crawled away and hid. The shooting of Weatherby can be attributed to the heat of a battle and fear for one's life until additional details are provided. At this point, John admits that Weatherby

smiled at him before calling out "Sorcerer." The author writes that "John shot him anyway," indicating that John had realized who he was before pulling the trigger. There's never any real indication but it seems possible that John's action to Weatherby could have been prompted by the atrocities he'd just seen his own men commit. It's left to the reader to decide.



Chapters 18 through 20

Chapters 18 through 20 Summary

Chapter eighteen offers another "Hypothesis." This time the author suggests that Kathy might not have met with an accident at all. Instead, she takes off toward Bucket Island, but becomes disoriented. Perhaps she looks away for a few minutes or the island she aims for is not actually Bucket. She travels onward, not realizing how serious the situation is. For an hour or more she is headed in the wrong direction and finally decides that she has to retrace her route. But in turning around, she is doubly disoriented and when she comes to a choice of three possible routes, chooses the center one with no real idea if it's right. She's realizing this is not the correct route when she runs out of gas and has to refill the tank from the spare can. The motor is slow to start but eventually catches and she heads out again, this time looking for a route to the south that might lead her back into the main body of the lake.

As she travels, she is thinking. She remembers Harmon, a dentist with hands that seem impossibly stubby for someone in his profession. She knows that she was never in love with Harmon but had "felt things for" him. She forces herself to stop thinking along those lines. She spends some time imagining how she'll tell John about her adventure when she finally makes it home. She finally gives up on finding her way out of the situation that night and heads for a shoreline. She can't bring the boat in using the motor and finally strips off her jeans and jumps into the cold water, dragging the boat onto the shore. She gathers pine boughs and throws an oil tarp over the makeshift bed. She sleeps in the life jacket for its added warmth and eats one of the Lifesavers she has in her pocket. She plans for the coming morning, deciding that she'll catch some fish for her breakfast before she sets out again.

In Chapter nineteen, "What Was Found," the search begins on the morning of the second day and the author notes that no trace was discovered, including the boat. Claude and Ruth man the phones, filtering out news reporters, but John spends a great deal of time on the phone anyway. Patricia checks in and says that she'll arrive by sea plan that afternoon. John agrees to meet her. John drives into town before time for her arrival and talks with Lux who asks that Patricia come by for some background questions. Lux tells John that he believes in John as a politician. Lux says that he'd voted for John and that John "deserved better," obviously referring to the election. Lux also says that Vinny believes John to be guilty in Kathy's disappearance and says that John could counteract some of the rumors by getting out on the lake and searching for Kathy himself.

John picks up Patricia who is angry that John didn't call sooner, but John says that he kept thinking Kathy would return on her own. Patricia asks where Kathy might have been going and John insists that he doesn't know. Patricia says that she keeps thinking that Kathy was a "good person" and that she was totally wrapped up in her love for John. John agrees on the first point, says that he also loved her completely and points



out that Kathy had an affair. Patricia says it was an attempt to make John wake to the fact that he was going to lose her. John says that he was never unfaithful but Patricia disagrees, saying that John's political career was the same as a mistress that took him away from Kathy and the things that should have been important in their lives. Patricia also says that Kathy hated the political circuit, a point on which John disagrees. Later, John tells Claude that he'll want the use of a boat the following day. Claude says that he'll go along, citing the fact that he doesn't want John and Patricia to become lost as well.

Chapter twenty is titled, "Evidence." In this chapter, Sandra Karra of the magic shop says that John had "slick hands," and that he knew how to keep quiet about things. A former classmate of Kathy, a woman named Deborah Lindquist, says that Kathy always knew about John's spying on her and that Kathy had called him "Inspector Clouseau." It's also in this chapter that Eleanor Wade says she "found" John's father in the garage, obviously referring to the place he hanged himself. She also says that John's tendency toward secrecy intensified after his father's suicide. Eleanor says that she had often heard John talking to his father and that she believes both of them had wanted to know why he had committed suicide, but that neither of them had come up with answers. There are also additional pieces of testimony from the court martial trials, including a man who says that Sorcerer had admitted to accidentally killing one of their own.

Chapters 18 through 20 Analysis

After Kathy has prepared herself for the night, her thoughts turn again to Harmon and she knows that she'd sought him out as "someone kind and decent." This seems a contradiction because she'd thought earlier of one of his lewd jokes. It could be that Harmon was so totally removed from the spotlight of politics that Kathy saw him as something completely different John and that, in her mind, made him a decent person. Her thoughts on this point are never explained.

There is another indication that John might have killed Kathy as he and Patricia are near the boat dock at the cabin. John senses Kathy's "ghostly presence" in the trees near the water. It could be that he knows that she is dead or it could be simply that he is afraid she is.

Later that night, John goes to the shoreline alone. In the boathouse, he finds an odor that prompts "facts he did not want to revive." He tries to imagine Kathy dragging the boat to the water and lifting the motor onto its place on the boat. He admits that he can't imagine her managing those things and that his doubt leaves room for speculation, but doesn't elaborate. At this point, it seems possible that John's earlier recollection of being submerged in water could have occurred after he put the boat in the water and deliberately capsized it. While it seems impossible that Kathy's body wasn't found if this is the case, he could have disposed of the body by burying it in the woods somewhere and using the boat to divert attention, a trick any good magician would understand. As with all the conjectures and hypotheses, it's left to the reader to decide.



Chapters 21 through 23

Chapters 21 through 23 Summary

Chapter twenty-one, "The Nature of the Spirit," begins with the statement that "the killing went on for four hours" and that it was "thorough and systematic." At one point, PFC Richard Thinbill tells John that he'd thought there were to be no civilians in the village and says that he assumes that they were Communists. John agrees. The scene then reverts to the night of the election. John makes his concession speech fairly early in the evening with Tony and Kathy at his side. He and Kathy go to their hotel room where they undress and go to bed but get back up an hour later and order a late supper. Tony comes into their room and tells John that he has taken another job. When John asks if he could not have waited, Tony says that he could have, but that he's "a pig" and decided not to wait. Kathy becomes obviously disgusted with the conversation and goes into the bathroom where she locks the door leaving Tony and John alone. Tony says that he would have left the campaign a month earlier except that he's lovesick over Kathy. He says that he'd imagined that Kathy might go away with him if he shaped up and had joined a gym but was unable to lose any weight at all.

The scene then reverts to Vietnam. In the hours after the massacre, the company had stopped to rest some distance away and John noted the odor of blood from his body and his clothes. At one point, he defends a man named Thinbill who is obviously upset about the murders, saying that there were babies in the village. Another soldier, Calley, says that there weren't any babies and "the guilty shouldn't cast no stones." A short time later, a soldier's foot is blown off by a mine.

The scene then switches to John's childhood. He sought to lose weight and by eighth grade, he is tall and bordering on skinny, prompting his father to call him "Javelin John." He spends a great deal of time in the basement, working to perfect his magic trips. He begins performing in public, at school assemblies and birthday parties, and revels in the applause. John begins spying on his father and sometimes fills up vodka bottles with water.

The scene reverts to Vietnam in the moments after the soldier was injured by the mine when the platoon is ordered back to Thau Yen. There are bloated bodies everywhere and the men tie towels and shirts around their faces in an effort to block some of the stench. Calley orders that everyone forget any "atrocities" that occurred in the village at their hands and orders the men to find weapons that can be used to justify the murders. During the night, Thinbill says that he and John should tell their superiors about what happened at the village, despite Calley's insistence otherwise. John, thinking about Kathy and the future he hopes to have in politics, says they should forget it and Thinbill finally agrees.

In Chapter twenty-two, "Hypothesis," the author suggests that Kathy, who had been a Girl Scout and was ultimately resourceful, might have taken the cover off the boat motor



during the night and use the spark from the engine to catch tissues on fire, using that to light a fire of twigs. She makes the decision to dry her clothing, get warm and then set out in the boat, holding to the direction she believes to be toward the cabin. As she drives, she considers a shoreline in front of her and decides it would make an excellent site for a casino. She recalls a trip to Vegas with Tony and John. It is a party event and in the casino she and Tony spend some time at a table, gambling. Both are incredibly lucky and she is hooked on the mood of winning when John appears behind her and urges her to stop, saying it is not typical behavior for her. Tony defends her and John walks away but the mood and the winning streak are broken and Kathy and Tony cash in their chips and go for a drink. She watches John talking with young legislators and is resentful of his interference when she was having so much fun. Tony defends John, saying that it's the kind of person he is. Tony points out that John is a magician and doesn't believe in luck. He says that John prefers to "stack the deck" but Kathy then comes to John's defense, saying that he never cheats. Tony doesn't argue but it's obvious that he disagrees. He tells Kathy that it's similar to John's magic - when John pulls a rabbit out of the hat, Kathy knows it's a trick but she applauds his ability to perform that trick. The talk then turns to Tony and he likens himself to the "trustworthy assistant" who sets up the props and ensures that John has a steady supply of bunnies. Kathy realizes, looking back on the scene from her boat on the lake, that there was something slightly uncomfortable in the way Tony had never let his gaze settle directly on her.

Later the talk turns to her affair, though neither she nor Tony offer up details. Kathy knows that Tony probably knows about the affair and confides in him that she'd felt horrible after. They go up to their rooms and Tony says that he would kiss her if he was not "such a pork chop." She kisses him on the cheek and he says that he'll "live forever" as they part. She goes to bed for awhile but then gets dressed and returns to the casino. She remembers the feeling as she bought chips with her earlier winnings and compares that to her feelings as she heads across the lake, completely lost and knowing that the odds of being found are not in her favor and that she needs a great deal of luck.

In chapter twenty-three, "Where They Looked," Claude picks up John and Patricia in his boat at the dock at six-thirty. Claude is armed with a chart of the lake but says their search is a "crapshoot." Patricia picks a point and they head out. John watches the water for anything that might float, including wreckage, an oar or a tennis shoe. Claude asks if John is sick and offers to find a place to put to shore for awhile but Patricia is immediately angry, accusing John of not caring and saying that he isn't even looking for signs of Kathy until Claude intervenes, calling for them to be polite.

That evening they arrive at the docks at Angle Inlet and Vinny is almost immediately making veiled accusations. He and John clash with John calling him an albino and obviously itching for a physical fight, especially after Vinny says that John is a mass murderer, referring to Vietnam. Lux talks to Patricia and urges John to ignore it. For the next two weeks, John and Patricia join the search each day. The official searchers eventually drop off and the private volunteers drop off except for three boats. On



October 19, there's a snow but everyday Claude arrives with the boat, Ruth packs sandwiches and drinks, Claude and Patricia choose a route and they set out.

One evening there is a heavy snow and Lux calls Patricia and John, telling them that the water search has been called off. He says that there are "other places to look" and then asks to speak to Claude. Claude tells John that the police are going to "tear the place apart," having come to believe that Kathy's body might be found in the area around the cabin. Claude says that John is free to leave and suggests that he might not want to be there when the police arrive to begin the search but John says he'll stay. As they talk, John comes to realize that Claude is probably his only true friend. Claude has adamantly refused to allow John the use of a boat on his own, citing the fact that John would only get lost as he believes Kathy had done. But the morning after their conversation, John finds the key to Claude's boat on the kitchen table. He gathers up what he needs and leaves the cabin alone.

Chapters 21 through 23 Analysis

After John's concession speech, Tony says that John should have come clean to Tony about his role in the massacre in Vietnam. According to Tony, the situation could have been spun in John's favor if he'd only had advance warning. He doesn't say how it could have been accomplished. In another part of the book, Tony says that John got in the habit of not talking about Vietnam and that he eventually convinced himself that his memories weren't real.

John's spying apparently begins as an effort to connect with his father. John continues to seem to blame his father for their lack of closeness and says that his father's drinking causes him to say hurtful things to John. John begins using the spying as a way to get into his father's thoughts though he often catches his father drinking.

While they are sharing a drink in Vegas, Tony tells Kathy that he knows his place is as John's assistant but Kathy says that he should consider going out on his own. It's not clear whether she believes he might be able to make it as a politician or if she's suggesting he do something else on his own. In any case, Tony says that he knows his limitations. Kathy's perception of Tony is that he's "bizarre." She notes that he is wearing scuffed shoes and a pink shirt on that evening and is about to say something when he interrupts, telling her not to suggest that he lose a little weight. She initially denies that she was going to say that but then admits it. Her overall impression of Tony seems to be that he's not in John's league but she seems to appreciate that he stands up for her to John when John wants Kathy to leave the gambling alone.

When he is at Angle Inlet and Patricia is being questioned by Lux, John considers that he should walk over to Lux and admit the truth of the situation. When the author presents these words, it seems that John is on the verge of confessing that he killed Kathy but he goes on to say that he does not remember all that happened that night and that he's unsure of both his own actions and any role he might have had in Kathy's disappearance. It seems plausible that he doesn't remember and that perhaps this is his



effort at closing out the horror of an event, just as he'd done with the massacre in Vietnam. It is also possible that he had nothing to do with Kathy's disappearance and that he's only recalling the tangle of half-dreams from a night spent drinking. As is the case with many aspects of this book, it's up to the reader to decide.

There are several other statements that seem to indicate that John knows Kathy is dead at the bottom of the lake. At one point, when there's a snow on the ground, he strips and dives into the water. He notes that he goes "to the bottom where Kathy was." It could be that he has simply accepted the fact that she's probably drowned in the lake but it could be that he knows her body is there. However, a short time later he notes that she "was there or she wasn't," going on to say that if she is not in the lake, she must be somewhere else. This seems to indicate that he does not know where she is.



Chapter 24 through 31

Chapter 24 through 31 Summary

Chapter twenty-four is another "Hypothesis." In this chapter, the author suggests that Kathy commits suicide. He says that she was taking anti-depressants and that she'd always felt guilty for her affair though by now she can no longer remember details about Harmon, even down to the color of his eyes. She recalls the days she spent with Harmon at a resort in Maine called Loon Point. There, they dance in public one night and the danger of the situation excites Kathy. She is "giddy" with the sensations but on the morning of the fourth day she tells Harmon that the affair is a mistake, that she loves John, and returns home early. She arrives at their apartment before John and has a long bath before making dinner. He asks about her trip, having believed she was visiting an old friend, and she responds appropriately. He squeezes her waist, a movement she hates because it brings her attention to the extra weight there, but finds it reassuring on this occasion because it means he knows nothing about the affair.

The author notes that Kathy probably blames herself for her lack of energy in trying to keep her marriage alive and that she thought about all these things as she downed the entire bottle of anti-depressants and waited for them to work.

Chapter twenty-five is another "Evidence" chapter. Lux continues to say that he doesn't care to guess about the situation while Vinny continues to condemn John. Colonel William V. Wilson, an Army investigator who looked into the allegations of the massacre at Thau Yen, says that he had hoped that the entire report of the massacre was unfounded. Several soldiers, during court martial hearings, claimed that they were looking for revenge and some claimed responsibility for deaths, including Vernado Simpson who said he'd killed twenty-five men and women. A report from the Boston Herald indicates that one of the men from that company, Robert W. T'Souvas, is killed years later in Pittsburgh in a fight over a bottle of liquor. The man is homeless at the time and the news story mentions the massacre in Vietnam, stating that Calley was the only one of the group convicted in the court martial.

In Chapter twenty-six, "The Nature of the Dark," John's platoon continues to search for enemy and various members sometimes mention the massacre. There's talk that there will be an investigation but it doesn't happen. John reenlists, telling Kathy that he cannot explain his reasons. With only two months left to serve, he is assigned a desk job and he begins the tedious process of removing his name from the rolls, typing up commendations and awarding himself promotions. He knows that most men in his company won't remember him as anything other than "Sorcerer." While he admits that the "illusion" is far from foolproof, he completes it just a week before returning home.

Chapter twenty-seven is another "Hypothesis," though this one is about John's actions. The author suggests that John wakes in the night and boils the plants, then returns to the bedroom with another kettle of boiling water. There he watches Kathy for awhile



then pours the boiling water all over her face and down her throat. She wrestles but the flesh comes away in folds and she eventually lies still on the floor. He wraps her in a sheet, takes her out to the lake, weights the body with rocks and drops her overboard, then sinks the boat and swims back to shore, goes inside and returns to bed.

Chapter twenty-eight is titled, "How He Went Away." In this chapter, John takes the boat north and that night creates a make-shift camp on an island. He reads a note from Claude, indicating that the charts are in the boat and that Canada - a good place for a person to get lost - lies to the north. The night is cold but he revels in the mystery. The next day he talks to Claude by radio and Claude says that the police are tearing the cabin apart in search of Kathy's body. They are also using dogs in the search of the surrounding area. John assures Claude that they won't find anything. He gets drunk and does a great deal of rambling on the radio then disconnects it and drops it into the lake before continuing north.

Chapter twenty-nine details the fact that there are reflections on the lake and that Kathy's eyes peer up from the bottom. The author notes that "In John Wade's imagination," Kathy "belongs to" the lake and when she tries to speak, she can't.

In Chapter thirty, "Evidence," Lux says that some things didn't add up and that he should have taken Vinny's advice and questioned John more thoroughly. Ruth Rasmussen says Claude wasn't all that surprised when the boat came up missing. She says that she'd expected to get a note from John and Kathy after Claude's death, but that it hadn't arrived. She says she still expects that she will someday. Tony says that the couple was deeply in debt and had nothing left. He says that if he'd been in that situation with an opportunity to run away, he'd take it.

In Chapter thirty-one, "Hypothesis," the author says that people are cynical and tend to believe the worst, but that there could be a happy ending to this story. Her suggests that Kathy and John had concocted the idea of running away soon after their arrival at the lake and that they worked out the details. The author says that "the Sorcerer" would have been able to manage passports and the other details and that they could have made it happen. He goes on to say that they might even now be living in a foreign country with the children they wanted. He says that it is not impossible though he admits that most people would rather believe that John was a monster capable of murdering her wife.

Chapter 24 through 31 Analysis

As Kathy and John are eating dinner, she apologizes for arriving home early and refers to her message on his answering machine. When he says he had not listened to the messages, she is angry, probably feeling again that she is taken for granted. She privately wishes she had told him about the beautiful resort where she was staying instead. What's interesting here is that Kathy doesn't wish she had told him about Harmon.



Chapter twenty-five ends with the author's footnote dedicated to the power of a mystery. He notes that there is continued interest in Lizzie Borden and Lee Harvey Oswald because the story can never be resolved. The details will remain forever a mystery and that piques the interest of people. The author says that he's personally caught up in the mystery of what happened to Kathy Wade. He says, "John Wade was a pro. He did his magic, then walked away." This seems to indicate that John won't be convicted of having killed Kathy but it's also the first clue that John also disappears.

John's purpose in taking the boat onto the lake is never fully explained. He says that he wants to join Kathy though he denies that he wants to commit suicide. He admits that she's probably dead, the victim of the elements after becoming lost or a drowning victim. He says that he knows the search is hopeless but that he can't help but try to be as close to her as possible.

Chapter twenty-nine is the most obscure and confusing chapter of the book but seems to make it clear that Kathy drowned and was dropped in the lake.

The author's final footnote indicates that he has an ulterior motive in writing this book. He says that he was also involved in a war, that he has his "own Weatherby," and that his company killed and destroyed in ways that would never have been allowed in another situation. He says that a person wipes those memories away in an effort to survive and that his writing this book has helped him realize that. He says John's experiences feel more real than his own and that writing has helped him retrieve his own "vanished life."



Characters

John Wade

A political candidate who loses by a landslide in his party primary, John shows the signs of being a dedicated husband, although it is obvious that he and his wife Kathy are having problems after the political defeat. Kathy says that she is glad that his political career is over but John seems to have focused most of his life and his plans from a young age on political aspirations. John served in Vietnam and was involved in the massacre of an entire village and the news of that event seems to have played an important role in his political defeat. John is a very possessive person. Upon arriving back from Vietnam, he went to Kathy's dorm and watched her to see where she went prior to announcing his arrival. This spying continued over the years after their marriage and he seemed to take comfort in watching her when he believes that she is unaware of his presence. However, it seems evident that she knows when he is spying on her and may even have considered telling him that on their last night together. John disappears and it is unclear what happened to him. Some believe he drowned while others believe it was an elaborate ruse for John and Kathy to leave their debts and shame of the lost election behind them.

Kathy Wade

This character is the wife of John Wade. The story revolves around Kathy's disappearance one night and search for her. Her fate is never revealed and the reader is left to decide what happened to both Kathy and John. Kathy actually appears in only a brief section of the book with the rest of the information about Kathy being revealed through the comments of others. She has a sister but her parents are dead at the time of her disappearance. She is described as thirty-eight years old and five-foot-six. Kathy has played the role of the political candidate's wife but came to the point of hating the rigors of campaigning. She seems to have hated the duplicity of courting voters and the fundraisers as well. Kathy tells John on the night before her disappearance that she wants to have children though she had a pregnancy terminated just four years earlier. Once the campaign is over, she allows herself to dream of a normal life with her husband and a child. However, she seems to believe that a new start cannot happen without clearing the air by revealing all the secrets that they have been harboring.

Ruth Rassmussen

Wife of Claude, Ruth is a down-to-earth woman who continually says that there is no reason to believe that John had anything to do with Kathy's disappearance. Ruth says that she believes that sooner or later she will get a note in the mail indicating that John and Kathy are alive and well somewhere. She says that they have a deep abiding love and compares that to the love she shared with Claude.



Claude Rassmussen

Owner of lakefront property at the Lake of the Woods, he calls John with the offer for John and Kathy to use the cabin for a few days following John's traumatic political defeat. Claude is a down-to-earth man who tells John soon after Kathy's death that it would help John's cause if he acted as if he was concerned. Claude has a live-and-let-live attitude and tends to believe in the best in people. He tells John that he didn't donate to John's campaign, but that if John had called and asked for money, he would have. Claude says that he tends to support the underdog in any situation.

Vincent Peaerson

Known as Vinny, he is the local law enforcement and is almost immediately convinced that John killed Kathy and disposed of the body. Vinnie cites every piece of damning evidence against John and is upset when the sheriff does not follow that line of thought as well.

Patricia Hood

Kathy's sister, she is sometimes called Patty. She does not approve of John. Patricia sees news of Kathy's disappearance on the news before John contacts her. Patty says that Kathy was not happy in her role as the wife of a politician and that Kathy's affair with the dentist was nothing more than an effort to wake John to her own needs.

Sandra Karra

Known by John as the "Carrot Lady," she is redheaded and runs a magic shop known as "Karra's Studio of Magic." She knows John from the time he is very young when he drops into the shop to buy new gadgets and gizmos.

Arthur J. Lux

The sheriff of Lake of the Woods County, he arrives on the scene the day after Kathy's disappearance and coordinates the search efforts. Lux makes it clear that he isn't willing to go on theories and says that he will not make guesses about Kathy's fate but will wait for the case to have some resolution.

Eleanor Wade

This is John's mother who describes a great deal about John's relationship with his father. According to Eleanor, John's father drank almost constantly though she insists that he did not physically abuse John. The fact that she makes the point of specifying

physical abuse seems to indicate that there might have been some mental or emotional abuse.

Tony Carbo

This is the campaign manager for John Wade from his first federal seat through the election that he lost so miserably. Tony is somewhat overweight and refers to himself as a "pig," but seems in touch with the ins and outs of the political arena. After John's concession speech, Tony says that he could have left the campaign a month earlier after it was obvious that John would lose, but says that he had stayed because he was lovesick over Kathy. Tony also says that John would not have lost the election if he had confided in Tony about the situation in Vietnam because Tony could have put a spin on the story to save John's reputation.



Objects/Places

Angle Inlet

This is where the Lake of the Woods is located.

Lake of the Woods

This is where Claude Rassmussen owns a cabin that he offers up to John and Kathy after John loses the primary election.

Minnesota

This is where Angle Inlet is located.

Karra's Studio of Magic

This is where John buys magic supplies as a youngster.

Pearson's Texaco

This is the station owned by Vinnie Pearson.

Charlie Company

This is the unit to which John is assigned when he joins the military after college.

Thuan Yen

This is the Vietnamese village where John's military company kills so many innocent people.

Baudette

This is where Sheriff Lux has his headquarters.

Loon Point

This is the resort where Kathy spends several days with Harmon.

Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor Party

This is where John goes to work prior after finishing his law degree and prior to entering politics.



Themes

Ambition

John sees himself as a political figure climbing the ladder and takes that self-image very seriously from a young age. When John is involved in a massacre in Vietnam, he is horrified by his own actions and by those of his fellow soldiers. When a fellow soldier suggests that they should tell a military officer of the atrocities that occurred, he refuses, realizing what his association with those events would do for his political career. John then takes this another step and when he finds himself at a desk job he begins falsifying records in order to further remove himself from the events. He goes so far as to promote and bestow medals upon himself, fluffing up his military career in order to benefit his political ambitions. Another extreme situation occurs when Kathy becomes pregnant. It is never suggested that the pregnancy is anything other than an accident but she greatly desires children of her own. Despite the fact that she wants this child, John makes the arrangements and Kathy has an abortion. On the night after the abortion, they realize the enormity of what they have done simply because the pregnancy occurred at an inopportune time in John's political career. Although John insists that his ambitions are a shared goal, Kathy hates the political arena and is relieved with the loss that ends it all.

The Need for Love

As a child, John Wade feels unloved by his father. He blames his father but it also seems that John is somewhat responsible because he ignores his father's offers to spend time together at a ball game. John spends a great deal of time working on his magic tricks and begins performing at school assemblies and birthday parties. The applause is not quite like being loved but it is an adequate substitute in John's mind, which makes him hungry for the life of a public figure. This translates to his desire to become a politician. When John cites some idealistic goals to his campaign manager, Tony Corbo, Tony tells him that the most important thing is to garner the votes to win elections and John comes to hold this as his mantra.

John's need for love becomes obsessive as he spies on the people he loves. It begins with his father and John often discovers where his father hides liquor. Later, he spies on Kathy, spending hours following her in an attempt to ensure that she is not cheating on him. Even then, he knows that he cannot guard against future infidelities. What is interesting here is even when he knows she was not faithful including a night spent away from the dorm and an affair with a dentist, he continues to love her.

The Compelling Aspects of a Mystery

The story is presented as a research effort by the author and deep into the book, he includes a footnote that outlines the reasons people will be interested. The author points



out that people love a mystery. He says that people are compelled to examine unsolved cases, such as the story of Lizzie Borden who may have killed her family with an ax or the question of whether Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in his assassination of John F. Kennedy. The author points out that neither of these mysteries will ever be solved and that this inability to ever know the truth compels people to look at the cases over and over. He says the same is true in the case of the disappearance of John and Kathy Wade.

There are some compelling questions regarding the possibilities in this case. Some people believe that John Wade killed Kathy. There are clues that point to that conclusion but those could be a case of misdirection, which is a common tool for a magician. John and Kathy may have decided to walk away from their lives in order to start over somewhere else and the clues left behind may have been planned to throw officials off that possibility. However, it also seems possible that John, who was unbalanced since his stint in Vietnam, was further unbalanced by the devastating political loss and simply snapped, killing Kathy before becoming lost himself. Both may have died or John may have walked away. Of course, another possibility remains that Kathy reunited with her former lover, Harmon, and left John behind. All possibilities contain unanswered questions, but a good mystery usually does.

Style

Point of View

The story is written from the author's point of view with the perspectives alternating between various characters. For the most part, the perspective comes from John though Kathy is sometimes in control as well. The "Evidence" chapters are the exceptions with these being presented in a series of statements from real and imagined sources as they relate to the subjects at hand. For example, the author uses a fictional account of the death of a member of John's military company to provide some information about the court martial. In another instance, the author compares the massacre in Vietnam to that of the Indians at the hands of Custer, a real event in America's history. There are also statements from many people associated with the lives of John and Kathy. John's mother talks about his childhood and his relationship with his father. Tony Carbo talks about his observations of John's life and his opinion of John's efforts to forget the atrocities of Vietnam. Members of John's company detail the attack on the Vietnamese village. The remaining chapters are typically presented from John's point of view. The hypotheses chapters are presented from the author's point of view. In these chapters, the author provides possible explanations for Kathy's disappearance. The story also includes footnotes and these are sometimes presented entirely from the perspective of the author.

Setting

The author makes the note in the opening pages of the book, alerting the reader to the fact that there are "references to actual places, people, and events, it must be read as a work of fiction." There are many references to the real people and places. The war in Vietnam is a prime example of the "actual" events while the massacre of Indians at the hands of the American General Custer is another. The use of some real events and places helps lend credence to the story overall.

The story has two major settings. Some of the story is set in Vietnam during the Vietnam conflict. Much of the action is set in Minnesota and is centered around a sawmill camp community of Angle Inlet. While the author does not say whether Angle Inlet is real, he says that "John and Kathy Wade are the creations of the author's imagination, as are all of the characters who populate the state of Minnesota and the town of Angle Inlet." The events that bring John and Kathy Wade to that community are potentially real such as the loss of an election after the story of John's role in the massacre of a Vietnamese village. Again, the setting and events are potentially real, making the story more believable. The story is apparently set in the late 1970s or early 1980s. This assumption is based on the fact that the author presents dates for John's various political races that occur in the 1970s. It is also evident that John doesn't have a cellular phone at the lake and depends on the telephone in the cabin. This supports this time setting.



Language and Meaning

The story is centered around a convoluted plot and the mystery of the story is never resolved. While the words used in the story will be familiar to most readers, the presentation is sometimes confusing and readers may have trouble understanding all aspects of the story. The story is not presented in a chronological order and the author sometimes skips around between time frames within a single chapter. This may be confusing to some readers as well though the author does an adequate job of keeping scenes and situations separate.

The fact that there are no resolutions to the disappearances of John and Kathy Wade mean that a great deal of interpretation is required by the reader. This may be disappointing to some reader, especially in light of the fact that the author offers up several possibilities. There is some foul language throughout the book and John Wade uses the curse phrase, "Kill Jesus" repeatedly. He seems to be seeking the most vile curse he can think of when he uses this phrase. Some readers will likely find both this phrase and the use of the curse words to be offensive, however, both seem in keeping with the characters and the plot of the story.

The author's choice of structure for the book may also be somewhat confusing to some readers. There are several chapters with the title "Hypothesis" and several with the title "Evidence." The hypothesis chapters offer up theories for what might have happened but the reader has to realize that these are the author's theories. The evidence theories include pieces of "evidence," such as statements from people associated with John and Kathy, including his mother, his campaign manager, her sister, members of his military company and officials who worked on the search. These are meant to provide clues as to what happened but are contradictory, leaving the reader to decide for himself. The author also uses footnotes in the evidence chapters, explaining where the information was obtained but also offering up personal observations. The reader may be tempted to skip over much of this but some of the footnotes provide valuable pieces of information in piecing together the clues.

Structure

The book is divided into thirty-one chapters. The chapters range from only a couple of pages in length to more than twenty pages in chapter twenty-three. . The titles are: How Unhappy They Were, Evidence, The Nature of Loss, What He Remembered, Hypothesis, Evidence, The Nature of Marriage, How the Night Passed, Hypothesis, The Nature of Love, What He Did Next, Evidence, Nature of the Beast, Hypothesis, What the Questions Were, Evidence, The Nature of Politics, Hypothesis, What Was Found, Evidence, The Nature of the Spirit, Hypothesis, Where They Looked, Hypothesis, Evidence, The Nature of the Dark, Hypothesis, How He Went Away, The Nature of the Angle, Evidence, and Hypothesis. Each of the chapters titled "Evidence" consists of a series of statements from various people related to the Wades, pieces of information such as the contents of John's magic kit, and details from fictional and real literary

works. These details include quotes from authors on topics such as self-image and on other historical events, such as Custer's massacre of the Indian village. The chapter titled "Hypothesis" offers possible answers to the mystery of Kathy's death. These hypotheses range from John murdering Kathy to Kathy committing suicide to the two of them running away together. The book never resolves the questions.



Quotes

"Among the missing, among the dead, there is only the flux of possibility" (Chapter 5, pg. 23.)

"In any case, Kathy Wade is forever missing, and if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book" (Chapter 6, pg. 30.)

"Nothing could ever be sure, not if he spied forever, because there was always the threat of tomorrow's treachery, or next year's treachery, or the treachery implicit in all the tomorrows beyond that" (Chapter 7, pg. 43.)

"First there, there was Vietnam, where John Wade killed people and where he composed long letters full of observations about the nature of their love. He did not tell her about the killing" (Chapter 10, pg. 61.)

"She enjoyed her morning stroll, the solitude and fresh air, but even then she conceived of nature as a department store with potted trees and a gigantic glass roof" (Chapter 11, pg. 81.)

"Those terrible things people said, it wasn't right. I don't believe a word. - Eleanor K. Wade" (Chapter 16, pg. 138.)

"But lying there in the dark, they also understood that they had sacrificed some essential part of themselves for the possibilities of an ambiguous future. It was the guilt of a bad wager" (Chapter 17, pg. 158.)

"He tried to imagine Kathy handling it alone and the Evinrude too, but he couldn't come up with a convincing flow of images. Not impossible, but not likely either, which left room for speculation" (Chapter 19, pg. 289.)

"'I guess the thing to bear in mind,' he said, 'is that your significant other doesn't place a whole lot of faith in lady luck. Doesn't believe in risk. The magician in him'" (Chapter 22, pg. 223.)

"There was nothing to find - he knew that - but he felt a curious peace looking out on the endless woods and water" (Chapter 23, pg. 239.)

"From the bottom of the lake, eyes wide open, Kathy Wade watches the fish fly up to swim in the land of sky blue waters, where they are pinned like moths to the morning moon" (Chapter 29, pg. 286.)

"If all is supposition, if ending is air, then why not happiness? Are we so cynical, so sophisticated as to write off even the chance of happy endings?" (Chapter 31, pg. 299.)



Topics for Discussion

Describe John Wade. What kind of person is he? What are the events of his life that impact his personality? What events have the most impact? What are his goals? What are the lengths to which he goes to achieve these?

Who is Kathy Wade? How does she fit into John's life? What kind of person is she? What are the events of her life that make her the person she is? What are her dreams? What is her attitude toward politics?

Who is Tony Carbo? What is his role in the life of John Wade and of Kathy Wade? What are his attitudes about John and Kathy? Describe the scene in which Tony and Kathy are together in Vegas.

How does John Wade come to be in the cabin at the Lake of the Woods? What is his goal during his time there? What happens there?

Who are Claude Rassmussen, Ruth Rassmussen, Art Lux, Vinny Pearson, Eleanor Wade, and Patricia Hood? How does each come to be involved in the lives of John and Kathy?

How does John come to be known as "Sorcerer?" Describe the events in Vietnam that eventually lead to John's political downfall. What does John do to try to cover these events?

What do you believe happened to John and Kathy Wade? Support your answer with facts from the story.