

# Wild Timothy Short Guide

## Wild Timothy by Gary L. Blackwood

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## Overview

Wild Timothy is a compelling adventure story of survival in the wilderness.

Wrong Way Timothy Martin, a teen-age boy more at home with a book in his hand than an ax, gets lost in the woods while on a camping trip with his outdoorsman father. Injured and scared, he manages to forage for food, find water, and build a shelter, relying on knowledge he has gained from reading hundreds of books. Timothy has to overcome his own reservations about his ability to make it on his own before he can survive. By trial and error he learns to build a fire, boil water in a bark basket, and make a shelter watertight.

Much of the book's appeal stems not from a traditional boy-against-nature conflict, which is common in many survival novels, but from the unique situation of a boy learning to live within the bounds of nature. The animals around Timothy become not creatures to fear, but creatures in partnership with him as he becomes as one with the wilderness.

## About the Author

Gary L. Blackwood was born October 23, 1945, in Meadville, Pennsylvania, the son of Roy and Susie (Stallsmith) Blackwood. He grew up in the small town of Cochran, Pennsylvania, dreaming of becoming a writer and studying with that in mind. He graduated with a B.A. in English from Grove City College in Pennsylvania.

While a college student, he published his first short story, "Cliffs of Gold," in *12/15* magazine. He quickly learned that writing alone would not support him and turned to other sources for income. His work experience varies from managing a book store, copywriting, teaching, creating advertising art, to working in a cannery, loading meat trucks, and carpentry.

His first book, an adult historical novel, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, was self-published in 1982, but it was not until the publication of *Wild Timothy* seven years later that his writing career took off. He has written six plays, which have been produced on stage, but his subsequent novels were all written for a young adult audience.

*Wild Timothy* has been translated into four languages and was picked up by the Weekly Reader Book Club. The American Library Association named *Wild Timothy* a Recommended Book for Reluctant Readers.

Blackwood lives in the Missouri Ozarks, with his wife Jean and two children, in a back-to-nature simple style that echoes the theme of *Wild Timothy*. As Blackwood says and Timothy learns, "A lot of the things we have are luxuries, and sometimes we need to find out what the necessities of life are."



## Setting

Timothy Martin, who lives in present-day Elmira, New York, views the outdoors as merely a place between climate-conditioned buildings. Accompanying his father on a week-long camping trip in the Adirondacks on the Independence River not only scares him, but irritates him as well. This trip is something his brother would enjoy, but he is not his brother and his father will not accept Timothy for what he is: a nonathletic, quiet, private individual, who prefers a Big Mac over freshly caught fried fish, and a motel over a tent.

While camping with his father, Timothy finds the air in the tent suffocating, the unidentified night noises terrifying, and he wishes he were back in his own room, staring at the familiar lines and cracks in the ceiling. Later, injured and lost in the wilderness, Timothy wishes for the zippered comfort of his sleeping bag and a tent above him instead of the night sky. Following an overgrown logging road and deer trails as he seeks civilization, Timothy identifies the wilderness noises that frightened him before—owls, a mountain stream, beavers, rabbits, chipmunks and his greatest fear, a bear. Timothy limps along the stream until it broadens to form a lake. Here he homesteads while he awaits a rescue party. The structure he builds becomes his new home, as familiar as the cracks on the ceiling in his room in Elmira.



## Social Sensitivity

The portrayal of Timothy's parents—his father as a stubborn, self-centered man who cannot relate to his son, and Mrs. Martin as a doting mother—is realistic and necessary for Timothy's story to unfold. Although the father is more obnoxious about it, both parents compare their sons, with Timothy relegated to a poor second. These characters are essential for the background of Timothy's personality and attitudes.

Although Timothy knows he irritates his father, he is surprised and hurt to learn that his father returned to Elmira, leaving the rangers to continue the search. He is also amazed that his parents never ask what he did during his three weeks in the wilderness, but relay in great detail the events that took place in their own lives during that same period.

Blackwood's opinions about the environment and acid rain become those of his main character. Although the message is subtle, the problem of man's uncaring treatment of his world is vividly portrayed. The author's negative views on hunting are also expounded.

Blackwood appends his text with a disclaimer that the novel is not to be used as a survival manual. Timothy learns by trial and error and does some things right and some things wrong.

Readers interested in survival techniques should consult nonfiction books on the subject.

# Literary Qualities

Timothy learns, like Thoreau before him, that living in the wilderness has its own satisfactions and rewards.

There the parallel might end, for Thoreau chose his existence at Walden Pond and Timothy has his experience thrust upon him. However, after returning to civilization, Timothy, like Thoreau, wishes he were back in a simpler existence.

Timothy's half-remembered knowledge from his vast reading helps him to live in the wilderness. Ironically, he finds a paperback copy of *The Lord of the Flies* in his coat pocket, and he applies some survival techniques he finds in its pages. Other literary allusions abound. Timothy follows a path until it forks, then pauses to decide which to take and is reminded of a poem by Robert Frost. When trying to make a fire, he recalls how the young boy manages it in *The Jungle Book*, although that method proves useless.

Blackwood uses the third-person narrative to tell the survival story, although Timothy is certainly the point-of-view character. He is alone during much of the book, but the lack of dialogue is not noticeable, because Timothy's interior monologues take its place. Blackwood's accounts of Timothy's step-by-step procedures for building a shelter, making a basket, or starting a fire are not tedious, but describe just enough for the reader to understand the process and to imagine the result. The author's language is simple and direct, yet full of vivid similes and metaphors young adults will appreciate. He occasionally resorts to rhyme which fits Timothy's personality. Although the style is basically straightforward, devoid of hidden meanings, one example of symbolism stands out.

Timothy continues to wear his watch, a trapping of society and its demands, even after the watch is broken. The time, frozen at five-twenty, is exactly correct when Timothy returns to society at the ranger's station.

The tone of the volume is suspenseful as Timothy is beset by one obstacle after another in his quest to return to civilization. Once he has acquired the necessities—food, water, and shelter—the tone becomes more philosophical as Timothy becomes content and satisfied with his life. The book is a thoughtprovoking coming-of-age story in which a boy learns to live with himself as well as being an entertaining adventure.



## Themes and Characters

Thirteen-year-old Timothy Martin is not athletic, carries a little extra weight, wears glasses, and likes to read—a typical nerd. When compared to his brother Kevin, a freshman at Syracuse University, a soccer player, a friendly, fun-loving kind of guy, Timothy seems inferior. Timothy's father, Jerry Martin, owns a construction firm and is a complete outdoorsman. Mr. Martin is intolerant of Timothy's lack of foresight, physical coordination, common sense, and enthusiasm for the camping trip. He belittles Timothy at every turn and destroys Timothy's selfconfidence. Stubborn, he will not admit when he is wrong or has been beaten.

Mrs. Martin serves as intermediary between Timothy and his father. She babies her son and undermines her husband's authority, all the while defending Mr. Martin's actions to Timothy.

At home, Timothy's personality is shaped by his parents. In the wilderness without them, he develops his own sense of identity. The change in his character is gradual and gives a sense of progression to the story. By the end of the narrative, Timothy has lost his extra weight, managed without his glasses, and put reading in perspective in his life. He even settles on a term for his adventure. He was "bewildered" by the wilderness, but like Daniel Boone, he was not lost.

His relationship with the bear defines Timothy's change in attitude. On the outset of the adventure, the bear is Timothy's nemesis and the reason Timothy strays and becomes lost. Before he returns to life in Elmira, Timothy and the bear have exchanged a meal of fish as Timothy learns not to battle nature, but to live with it. That some people view the trappings of civilization as necessities when in reality they are luxuries is a theme carried throughout the novel. The contrast between the primitive shelter that Timothy builds and the L. L. Bean picture-perfect campsite of the two hunters who rescue him illustrates Blackwood's point.

Timothy is proud of the shelter he has built and feels satisfaction with that achievement. Only when Timothy sees his wilderness home through the eyes of the hunters does he feel ashamed of the shabby structure he has created.

A lesser theme is a lesson that Timothy learns upon his return to civilization and school. He had never belonged to a group and did not have friends, yet suddenly the spotlight focuses on him, and students greet him as if they really know him and ask about his adventure. In order to belong to this group, Timothy has to reveal something of himself to them, and it is a price he does not want to pay. His "bewilderment" in the wilderness has given him an inner strength to be content with who he is and to disregard the insignificant opinions of others.





## Topics for Discussion

1. Blackwood's skillful use of similes and metaphors in Timothy's interior monologues defines Timothy's view of everyday life in Elmira. Find examples in the novel and discuss their significance.
2. Why did Timothy wear the broken watch?
3. Timothy used his paperback copy of *Lord of the Flies* in several ways.

What were they?

4. Timothy's parents never asked him what he did during his three weeks in the wilderness. Why? What did they do instead? How do their actions reflect their characters?
5. Occasionally Timothy remembered just enough from his reading to frighten himself. He knew sharks were attracted to blood. Were bears? Give other examples of half-remembered knowledge. What do these examples suggest about the relationship of book learning to practical experience?
6. Although he is unfavorably compared with his brother Kevin, Timothy does not dislike him. What does Kevin do to make the reader like him?
7. Belonging to school society was not as effortless as it appeared, and the price was more than Timothy was willing to pay. Explain this passage.
8. Mr. Martin's motto haunts Timothy throughout his adventure. Why?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When he is in the tent with his father, Timothy wishes he were back in Elmira staring at the "familiar cracks and stains on the ceiling of his bedroom." After his adventure in the wilderness and his return to civilization, he stares at the map of New York and wishes to return to the Adirondacks.

Compare and contrast his feelings in those two worlds.

2. Through examples, explain the significance of Timothy's literary references.

3. Timothy refers several times to man's treatment of nature—littering, acid rain, hunting, and pollution. What do you think of Timothy's opinion?

4. Timothy's goal was to find a way out of the wilderness. Although he was prepared to signal the airplane, he stood and watched it instead of placing the green branches on the fire to create smoke. When the hunters found him, he did not initially tell them that he was lost. What changed his mind about staying in the wilderness?

5. When the hunters asked Timothy if he wanted to take anything from his camp, he said he wanted to take nothing, yet he wanted to take it all. Explain this paradox.

6. Timothy believes that being "bewildered" by the wilderness is an apt description of what happened to him.

Why?

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