

GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON

---

**Telling the Truth about History**  
**Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods***

“And even I can remember  
“A day when historians left blanks in their writings,  
“I mean for things they didn't know

—Ezra Pound, “Canto XIII”

**T**im O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* is a “missing person” mystery in which an unnamed narrator attempts to reconstruct the events leading to the disappearance of Kathy Wade, the wife of U. S. Senate candidate John Wade (who goes missing himself at the end of the novel), in the wilderness of the Lake of the Woods, an enormous mosaic of waterways and islands on the border between Minnesota and Canada. Of the novel's 31 chapters, eight are labeled “Hypothesis”—in each of these chapters, the narrator lays out a hypothesis regarding what may have happened to Kathy in the day(s) following her disappearance. Seven other chapters are labeled “Evidence,” and these contain excerpts from books, archives, or interviews, as well as descriptions of material evidence such as photographs or a box of magic tricks. The book excerpts are from actual books and are carefully cited, but the interview excerpts are from fictional characters. As is the case with many historical novels, fictional characters interact with historical figures: in the scenes set during the My Lai massacre, historical figures such as William Calley, Varnado Simpson, and Paul

Meadlo are present along with fictional characters such as John Wade and Richard Thinbill. Occasionally O'Brien blends fiction into history more audaciously—as noted, most of the footnotes that reference other texts are accurate, but occasionally we get something like footnote 86, in which testimony from the fictional character Richard Thinbill is cited as appearing in box 4, folder 8, page 1734 of the “Court-Martial of Lieutenant William Calley” in the U.S. National Archives. One may indeed find the text (as well as a sound recording) of these court-martial proceedings in the National Archives, and there is a Box 4 that contains transcripts of testimonies, but there is no folder 8 or page 1734, and of course no Richard Thinbill. The novel’s 133 footnotes appear primarily in the “Evidence” chapters, and reflect the “four years of hard labor” (30) that the novel’s narrator spends researching the events surrounding Kathy’s disappearance. In the novel’s remaining sixteen chapters, the narrator reconstructs the final days that Kathy and John spend together in a cabin on the Lake of the Woods, and the several weeks that John spends there after her disappearance, before finally disappearing himself. Several of these chapters flash back to John’s childhood, his time as an infantryman in Vietnam, his dating Kathy in college, and the early years of their marriage and his political career. All of these chapters are told from the point of view of the narrator, but because he speaks to us directly only in the footnotes, it is easy for readers to forget that these chapters are in large part speculative, especially when they depict private conversations between John and Kathy, the private thoughts of John or Kathy, or things that happened in the cottage when only John and Kathy were present. The novel’s narrator never talks directly to either Kathy or John.

In a footnote early in the novel, the narrator writes, “Biographer, historian, medium—call me what you want—but even after four years of hard labor I’m left with little more than supposition and possibility. . . . Even much of what might appear to be fact in this narrative—action, word, thought—must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events. I have tried, of course, to be faithful to the evidence. Yet evidence is not truth. It is only evident” (30). This seems fairly straightforward—the narrator has worked hard to understand what happened to John and Kathy, but he has been unable to come to a definitive conclusion. Yet an emerging critical consensus reads this novel as an instance of postmodern skepticism regarding our ability to ever know the truth about the past. For example, Tobey Hertzog finds the novel enacting “a postmodernist denial of absolute truth and finality” (910). Similarly, Marjorie Worthington asserts that “the larger project of the novel . . . is to cast doubt about whether truth can ever be definitively determined” (120), and adds that “O’Brien makes the case that the truth of any historical account is indeterminable” (121). Worthington finds O’Brien arguing for “the slippery indeterminacy of the truth”

because “the novel does not overtly privilege one hypothesis over another; instead, it provides enough evidence for any of the scenarios to seem valid” (122). One of the hypotheses suggests that John, in a post-traumatic-stress-induced psychotic state, pours boiling water over Kathy’s face while she is sleeping, and then hides her body at the bottom of the lake. In Worthington’s reading, this hypothesis ought to be no more or less valid than any other, so she finds the following footnote “strange”: “Finally, it’s just a matter of taste, or aesthetics, and the boil is one possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting. Besides, there’s the weight of evidence. He was crazy about her” (300, n131). She writes, “This fairly definitive statement about what happened (or, at least, about what did not) seems to contradict the philosophy that truth is unknowable . . . [and] to challenge the idea that it is up to the *reader* to determine his or her own truth” (122). Like many of us when confronted with contrary or anomalous evidence, however, Worthington is able to salvage her thesis: “The narrator’s assertion becomes one more voice in the cacophony, taking no more or less precedence than any other” (123).

Timothy Melley offers a more developed argument on these lines. Taking John’s inability to remember what he did on the night of Kathy’s disappearance as emblematic of postmodern history, Melley writes that “amnesia has become one of the several important tropes through which ‘postmodern’ theories of history and subjectivity are tested in the cultural arena. . . amnesia [is] a metaphor for historiographical dilemmas—for the sense that it is no longer possible to ground historical narratives securely and that the failure to do so has led to dangerous forms of collective forgetting” (107). For Melley the postmodern historiographic dilemma lies in “the difficulty of finding sound correspondences between past events and the narratives that purport to describe those events” (108); later in his essay, that difficulty has become an impossibility: “the postmodern historiographical problem [is that] it seems impossible to develop a unified account of the past, impossible to ground historical narrative in the authority of ‘fact’” (114). He concludes that because *In the Lake of the Woods* “offers no final explanation . . . it seems an end-of-the-line instance of postmodern historical skepticism” (112). John Wade, traumatized and amnesic, “becomes an emblem of history’s groundlessness . . . a postmodern hall of mirrors because he is a *model of history*, a model in which the truth of events is always out of reach, obscured by failures of memory, falsified documents, and misleading testimony” (121). Like all history written under the sign of postmodernity, O’Brien’s novel “cannot satisfactorily conclude. It can only document the difficulty of approaching the past before articulating a sense of profound doubt and skepticism about our ability to tell its story” (129).

Hertzog, Worthington, and Melley all fall victim to the either/or fallacy: *either* we know the truth about the past, and our historiography corresponds objectively to the truth of past events, *or* we are consigned to a radical skepticism regarding any truth-claims about history. But the narrator's admitting that the evidence is insufficient to reach a conclusion supports neither Worthington's radical relativism (each reader decides the truth for herself, and no decision is more or less valid than any other) nor Hertzog's and Melley's claims that we used to be able to ground our historical narratives in the facts, but in the postmodern era we can no longer believe that our narratives correspond reliably to the events they claim to represent.

While it is true that writers as different as Leopold von Ranke and Karl Marx believed that history could tell the objective or scientific truth about the past, and that sophisticated thinkers such as Carl Hempel and Gertrude Himmelfarb continued to endorse such a view well into the twentieth century (in the epigraph to *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond also states that it ought to be the goal of all historians), it is equally true that many writers as far back as the nineteenth century were quite certain that historical narratives could not be securely grounded in the authority of "fact," as Melley puts it. In "On History" (1830), Carlyle claims that any historical narrative is "at best . . . a poor approximation" to what actually happened, an unavoidable reduction of history itself, "that complex Manuscript, covered over with formless inextricably-entangled unknown characters" which "can be fully interpreted by no man" (qtd in Stern 96). F. H. Bradley, in *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), writes, "We ask for history, and that means that we ask for the simple record of unadulterated facts; we look, and nowhere do we find the object of our search, but in its stead we see the divergent accounts of a host of jarring witnesses, a chaos of disjointed and discrepant narrations, and yet, while all of these can by no possibility be received as true, at the same time not one of them can be rejected as false" (qtd in Holton 11). Henry Adams tells us that he once tried to write the kind of history Bradley says we ask for—to see if, "by the severest process of stating, with the least possible comment, such facts as seemed sure, in such order as seemed rigorously consequent, he could fix for a familiar moment a necessary sequence of human movement." He failed miserably: "Where he saw sequence, other men saw something quite different, and no one saw the same unit of measure" (Adams 382). Their understanding of history, however, did not prevent Carlyle or Adams from writing history; Adams, in fact, remains among the greatest American historians. O'Brien's narrator is not skeptical of the "truth" of the facts or evidence he has uncovered, but he knows that "evidence is not truth. It is only evident" (note 21, 30). To be skeptical of the objective truth of the narratives, analyses, or

hypotheses into which historians embed facts and evidence requires only a critical, not necessarily a postmodern, sensibility.

Still, our “common sense” manner of thinking about past events strongly suggests that the truth is “out there,” waiting to be uncovered—by the historian, or the biographer, or the detective, or the investigative reporter. This notion of truth goes back to the Greek *aletheia*, which means literally “the state of not being hidden; the state of being evident.” In this sense, we understand truth as “disclosure” or “unconcealedness.” The job of the historian, or the police detective, or the prosecuting attorney, is to uncover it, to reveal it, to pull back the curtain—and in so doing to construct a narrative that corresponds to, or exposes, the past as it actually happened.

Yet we know that despite their best efforts to uncover the truth, detectives and prosecutors sometimes get things wrong. Jed Rakoff tells us that

as a result of DNA testing alone, more than 335 persons previously found guilty of the most brutal crimes have now been exonerated. In most of these cases, juries had found the defendants guilty beyond a reasonable doubt and state appellate courts had affirmed the convictions, typically concluding that the evidence of guilt was “overwhelming” . . . Nor is the problem limited to death penalty cases. In just this past year, according to *The New York Times*, “149 people convicted of crimes large and small—from capital murder to burglary—were exonerated.”

We don’t need “postmodern skepticism” to persuade ourselves that, more often than we would like, we are wrong when we think we know the truth about “what happened.” Nor does knowing what Rakoff tells us lead us to conclude that the project of criminal justice is impossible. Rakoff’s data ought to instill in us a measure of humility and caution, but to announce that we can never discern the truth about a criminal case would be extreme. Still, O’Brien pokes at our desire to believe that the truth is “out there,” and that a good detective could solve the puzzle. John Wade keeps many secrets; most egregiously, he literally erases all military records of his service in the unit that participated in the My Lai massacre (this secret gets exposed when a fellow soldier tells a political rival that Wade was there, and this exposure destroys Wade’s election bid for the U.S. Senate). For John Wade, O’Brien’s narrator tells us:

The war itself was a mystery. Nobody knew what it was about, or why they were there, or who started it, or who was winning, or how it might end. Secrets were everywhere—booby traps in the hedgerows, bouncing betties

under the red clay soil. And the people. The silent papa-sans, the hollow-eyed children and jabbering old women. What did these people want? What did they feel? Who was VC and who was friendly and who among them didn't care? These were all secrets. History was a secret. (72-73)

Finally, however, the novel shows us plainly that understanding the world in terms of secrets, or in terms of our ability to reveal and conceal what can be known, is fatally flawed.

Nonetheless, the desire to know the truth is tenacious, and if the three critics mentioned earlier find that O'Brien's novel advocates a radical skepticism about all historical truth-claims, H. Bruce Franklin makes the opposite claim: the solution to the mystery of what happened to Kathy Wade is clear, and he has uncovered it for us. Unlike the previous three critics, Franklin finds the novel more traditional than postmodernist, "[d]issenting from the fashionable notion that history is merely a verbal construct" (342). He begins his argument by reminding us that "'Denial' has been, in every sense, the term necessary to fathom the depths of deception and delusion essential to America's war in Vietnam" (332). For Franklin, Wade's attempt to deny his participation in My Lai is analogous to Kennedy's denial of U.S. involvement in the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem, and George Bush authorizes the denial of history in his 1989 inaugural address when he states: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory" (334). For Franklin, the tissue of lies and evasions woven by John Wade mirrors "[t]he actual history of U. S. warfare in Vietnam[, which] was buried under layer after layer of falsification, fabrication, illusion, and myth" (334). Franklin subscribes to the notion of truth as *aletheia*, as if truth and falsehood are a simple binary, and all of our claims about the past are merely one or the other. This notion of truth plays to the muckraking or conspiracy strain in the American character: we strongly suspect that "they" are covering up the truth about the meatpacking industry, or Standard Oil, or more recently, Benghazi, or Area 54, and we look for those who can pull back the veil and reveal the truth. Sometimes someone *is* covering something up, and we are grateful for the uncovering. But to understand truth as always, or even primarily, a function of *aletheia* is misleading.

Regarding the novel's eight hypothesis chapters, which for Worthington seem equally valid, Franklin insists that:

Except for one, every hypothesis chapter contains details that are inconsistent with the main narrative. For example, the first two hypotheses, that she drove off with a secret lover or simply got lost in the woods near the cabin,

do not account for the fact that the boat is missing from the boathouse. The next hypothesis, that she was zooming across the lake at such high speed that she was hurled from the boat, is contradicted by the fact that the boat was powered by an old 1.6-horsepower outboard motor. And so on. The one hypothesis that does not contain contradictions is also the only one filled with details consistent with the main fictive narrative. And it is also the only one that makes the horrors of *My Lai*, and its denial, relevant to the horror and denial at the center of John Wade's life and relation to Kathy. (338-39)

For Franklin, the evidence points to only one conclusion: "Although John apparently cannot remember whether or not he murdered his wife, enough details bubble up from the depths of his memory—not his imagination—to allow readers to reconstruct the gruesome scene. Unless, O'Brien suggests, readers would rather indulge in elaborate fantasies of denial" (339). This seems a bit extreme. The novel's characters hold various positions on the likelihood of John's guilt. Claude and Ruth Rasmussen, campaign contributors who have offered their cottage to John and Kathy, seem to believe that John is innocent. Late in the novel, Claude challenges John—"And you didn't do zilch"—but he seems to accept John's answer: "I did things. Not that" (245). The County Sheriff who leads the investigation into Kathy's disappearance, Art Lux, seems appropriately skeptical of some of the things Wade says and does, but although he never rules out the possibility that Kathy was murdered, neither does he ever conclude that she was: "I deal in facts. The case is wide open" (30). Kathy's sister Patricia has never liked John, and at one point she asks him directly, "You didn't *do* something?" John replies, "No, I didn't *do* something" (186)—Patricia is suspicious, but her suspicion never seems to reach the status of a firm belief in John's guilt. The only character in the novel who is convinced of John's guilt from the very beginning of the investigation is Sheriff's Deputy Vinny Pearson, a Marine Vietnam veteran and auto mechanic who comes to this conclusion quickly and never wavers from it, despite the inconclusive evidence. The novel never makes it seem that the Rasmussens, Sheriff Lux, and Patricia are "indulg[ing] in elaborate fantasies of denial."

Franklin is correct that some of the hypotheses seem to fit the available evidence better than others, but is the "murder" hypothesis really free of holes? If John killed her and sunk her body in the lake, as Franklin believes, why can't police divers find the body? Sheriff Lux says he "[b]rought in divers and a couple of State Police sniffer dogs. No luck" (289). In the hypothesis that Franklin accepts, John gets up in the middle of the night in a mentally unstable state of mind, boils water in large teakettle, and pours boiling water on each of the cottage's houseplants. Then he walks into the bedroom

where Kathy lies sleeping and pours boiling water onto her face. It isn't clear whether the boiling water itself kills Kathy or whether John does something else to her, but in this scenario he definitely kills her, places her body in the cottage's boat, heads out into the lake, sinks both Kathy and the boat, and swims back to shore. If he was able to swim back to shore, then the area to be searched is finite, yet the divers can find neither Kathy nor the boat. For Vinny Pearson, that failure means nothing: "My guess? I don't need to guess. He did it. Wasted her. . . . Who cares if we didn't never find no evidence? All it means is he sunk her good and deep" (296). Vinny reasons deductively—right from the start, he pegs John Wade as a particular type of man, a type he's sure he knows, and he is certain that Wade has killed Kathy. No lack of evidence is sufficient to destabilize that certainty.

The novel, however, does not encourage us to believe that Vinny Pearson must be correct. When Franklin mentions the details that "allow readers to reconstruct the gruesome scene," he has in mind several passages in which the narrator speculates on what John Wade may have done, like this one that occurs, hypothetically, one night several weeks after Kathy's disappearance. Perhaps Wade, having had too much to drink, possibly self-medicated, possibly suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, went down to the cottage's boathouse around midnight:

A sense of pre-memory washed over him. Things had happened here. Things said, things done. . . . The dank odor revived facts he did not wish to revive. There was the fact of an iron teakettle. Kill Jesus, that was also a fact. Defeat was a fact. Rage was a fact. And there were the facts of steam and a dead geranium. It was almost a fact, but not quite, that he had moved down the hallway to their bedroom that night, where for a period of time he had watched Kathy sleep, admiring the tan at her neck and shoulders, her fleshy lips, the way her thumb lay curled along the side of her nose. At one point, he remembered, her eyelids had snapped open. . . . in the weak light Wade could make out a number of grooves and scratchings where the boat had been dragged out to the beach. 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. . . . Right now he couldn't help feeling the burn of guilt. All that empty time. The convenience of a faulty memory. (188)

Franklin reads this passage as if it were told by an omniscient narrator, but O'Brien reminds us repeatedly that the novel's narrator has never met John or Kathy. This

passage is a speculative reconstruction of what *might* have happened. Contrary to Franklin's insistence that John is remembering, not imagining, the events in this passage, the novel's narrator has absolutely no way of knowing not only whether this scene involves memory or imagination, but whether John ever experienced anything like this. The narrator knows that John says he can't remember what happened on the night of Kathy's disappearance, he knows that John has a background of strange behavior, possibly trauma-induced, and he knows that all of the cottage's houseplants are gone when Claude Rasmussen visits the cottage on the day after Kathy's disappearance. Claude notices the empty flowerpots (91), and the narrator builds his "John boiled the houseplants and then boiled Kathy" hypothesis from this bit of evidence, along with what he has learned about John's state of mind.

In fairness to Franklin and to Vinny Pearson, the narrator knows that John is capable of violence, and that he can lose control when someone he loves leaves him (there is evidence of marital difficulties between John and Kathy, and it is possible that he was afraid she would leave him). John has killed people in Vietnam, although the novel's most shocking instance of this, when John kills a member of his own unit during the My Lai massacre, would also seem to be speculation on the part of the narrator. John has apparently never told anyone he did this, and nobody else saw him do it—the other men in John's unit assume that the man was killed by "fucking VC." Still, it's fair to assume that anyone who served in an infantry unit in Vietnam at the peak of the fighting knows how to kill. We also know, based on what John's mother tells the narrator, that during his father's funeral, the fourteen-year-old John was very angry, threw tantrums and yelled loudly (28). And like Patricia, Art Lux, and Vinny Pearson, we are suspicious of John's inability to remember what happened on the night of Kathy's disappearance, and of his failure to report her disappearance until late the following day. For the reader, John's failed memory grows more troubling because the novel includes transcripts from William Calley's My Lai court-martial, during which many of the soldiers who testify repeatedly answer questions with "I don't remember" or "I can't remember." Thus the possibility that John killed Kathy seems quite real. But finally, as the narrator himself concludes, and despite the certainty of Franklin and Pearson, we don't *know* what happened.

Franklin finds our inability to know whether John killed Kathy, or as he might put it, our reluctance to admit that we know John killed Kathy, analogous to the nation's unwillingness to know, or to remember, that the massacre at My Lai happened. For Franklin, that massacre was

not an aberration but a sample of how the United States conducted its genocidal warfare against the people of Vietnam. . . . At My Lai, American soldiers did not just slaughter as many as five hundred unarmed people. They also sodomized young girls, raped women in front of their children, bayoneted children in front of their mothers, and used babies for target practice. . . . This was, after all, the U.S. strategy for much of Vietnam, especially My Lai's province of Quang Ngai. . . . (339-40)

This is a strong claim, and to weigh its validity lies beyond the purpose of the present essay. That claim transitions into another strong claim: that John Wade loses the U.S. Senate election not because news of his participation in the My Lai massacre is leaked to the press, but because his campaign managers did not have the time necessary to spin the story in a way that the public would have accepted. In American politics during the 1980s and 1990s, Franklin asserts, "it is not what Wade did in Vietnam that devastates his candidacy and thus destroys his life, but rather his concealment and falsification" (341). Franklin agrees with Wade's campaign manager, Tony Carbo, who tells Wade, "All you had to do was *say* something. Could have made it work for us. Whole different spiel" (202). In support of this assertion, Franklin reminds us that in 1971, "The Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley" sold more than a million copies, and he claims that "there are now men sitting in the U. S. Senate who killed many more Vietnamese civilians in fact than John Wade did in fiction" (341-42). In response, we might point out that during the Vietnam War, anti-war songs outsold songs like "The Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley" by a wide margin, and that nobody now sitting in the U. S. Senate participated in anything as horrible as the My Lai massacre. Something profoundly evil happened at My Lai, and in other places during the Vietnam War, and Franklin wants to read O'Brien's novel as an indictment of Americans' refusal to acknowledge that evil, but the novel resists viewing things in such black-or-white terms.

We know a lot about what happened at My Lai, just as the novel's narrator knows a lot about what happened before and after Kathy's disappearance. But he doesn't know John or Kathy nearly as well as he would like to, and the evidence is sometimes contradictory or inconclusive. In the case of My Lai, we may wonder exactly what orders Captain Medina gave to Lieutenant Calley, on or off the record, directly or indirectly. We may wonder exactly what caused that group of soldiers to behave as they did—surely other soldiers endured similarly frustrating and frightening situations, and were operating under similar directives, but did not react as those men at My Lai did ("I never mass murdered nobody," says Vietnam vet Vinny Pearson (237)). Was My Lai in fact "not an aberration" but a reflection of "U.S. strategy for much of Vietnam,"

as Franklin asserts? If so, and if John Wade's campaign manager "could have made [Wade's participation in the massacre] work" to get him elected, then one wonders why the Army and the participants tried so hard to conceal and deny what happened. O'Brien tells us that he "more or less understands" what happened at My Lai, and we take his point. In one sense we know what happened there, and we can imagine what drove those soldiers to act as they did, but in another sense that event retains its opacity. Like O'Brien, the novel's narrator served in an infantry unit that patrolled the My Lai area one year after the massacre. "I know what happened that day," he says. "I know how it happened. I know why"—and he goes on to describe the rage and frustration of an invisible enemy, land mines, and booby traps. "This is not to justify what occurred on March 16, 1968, for such justifications are both futile and outrageous. Rather, it's to bear witness to the mystery of evil" (note 88, 199. See O'Brien's essay "The Vietnam in Me," published in *The New York Times Book Review* shortly before publication of *In the Lake of the Woods*, in which O'Brien ascribes to himself, in language very close to that in the novel, feelings about My Lai that are virtually identical to those of the novel's narrator.) This mystery of evil is what Melville, in *Billy Budd*, calls the "mystery of iniquity," and *Billy Budd* is another story in which we know a lot about what happened, but in another sense what happened remains opaque.

Franklin's essay appears in Mark Carnes's *Novel History*, in which critics respond to different historical novels, and the novelists then respond to the critics' comments (interested readers should compare Franklin's "Plausibility of Denial: Tim O'Brien, My Lai, and America," *The Progressive* 58.12 (1994): 40-44, which covers much of the same ground and lays out the same argument). O'Brien's response to Franklin, at first glance, would seem to suggest that I am wrong, for he writes, "Mr. Franklin's argument is convincing. I dispute almost none of it" (344). But first glances may be misleading. O'Brien ends his brief response like this: "What we imagine, like what we remember, represents a good part of what we are and a good part of what we will become" (345). What a nation remembers, or fails to remember, represents not only its perception of itself, but also what it may become or do. Because we fail to remember events like the Sand Creek Massacre (mentioned in footnote 97, page 258), we are more likely to find ourselves implicated in events like My Lai, and because we fail to remember My Lai, we are more likely to find ourselves implicated in events like Abu Ghraib. "What we imagine," however, may be equally revealing. Vinny Pearson's absolute conviction that John killed Kathy tells us something about Vinny, just as the Rasmussens' apparent belief in his innocence tells us something about them. H. Bruce Franklin is a serious scholar who holds an endowed chair as Professor of English and American Studies at Rutgers University. The titles of two of his many publications on the Vietnam War,

*M.I.A., or Mythmaking in Vietnam* (1992) and *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (2001), suggest the notion of “truth” as *aletheia*, i.e., they suggest that the truth is “out there,” that it may be concealed by myth or fantasy, and that it is the task of the historian to uncover it. Although O’Brien seems to accept Franklin’s reading of his novel, he titles his brief response to Franklin “The Whole Story,” which is just what his novel refuses to give us, but is also what Franklin claims to know. Franklin is a serious scholar who has done important work on the Vietnam War, but in his response to O’Brien’s novel, he is the academic equivalent of Vinny Pearson, or the guy at the bar who’ll tell you the *real* story behind the Kennedy assassination, or the Clintons and Whitewater.

*In the Lake of the Woods* does not endorse what some readers call a postmodern skepticism regarding our ability to know the past. Its narrator knows a lot about John and Kathy Wade, and about the events leading up to their disappearance. But he is honest about what he does not know:

For all my years of struggle with this depressing record, for all the travel and interviews and musty libraries, the man’s soul remains for me an absolute and impenetrable unknown, a nametag drifting willy-nilly on oceans of hapless fact. Twelve notebooks’ worth, and more to come. . . . We are fascinated, all of us, by the implacable otherness of others. And we wish to penetrate by hypothesis, by daydream, by scientific investigation those leaden walls that encase the human spirit, that define it and guard it and hold it forever inaccessible. . . . Our lovers, our husbands, our wives, our fathers, our gods—they are all beyond us. (101, footnote)

Unlike Vinny Pearson and H. Bruce Franklin, the narrator looks at the evidence and concludes, “there *is* no end, happy or otherwise. Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts, such as they are, finally spin off into the void of things missing, the inconclusiveness of conclusion. Mystery finally claims us” (301 footnote). Rather than postmodern skepticism regarding our ability to ever know anything about history, this strikes me as an honest admission that our knowledge has limits. The narrator mentions similar events from history, such as the disappearance of the writer B. Traven, or Custer at the Little Bighorn—“The thing about Custer is this: no survivors. Hence, eternal doubt, which both frustrates and fascinates. It’s a standoff. The human desire for certainty collides with our love of enigma” (Page 266, footnote).

But do we love enigma for itself, or do we love it because we love the challenge of solving it, or of speculating on what might have happened? Near the end of the novel,

the narrator considers the hypothesis that John and Kathy faked her disappearance and his mental instability, met up weeks later in Canada, changed their identities, and moved to somewhere like Winnipeg. “Too sentimental? Would we prefer a wee-hour boiling? A teakettle and scalded flesh?” Then he adds in a footnote: “Finally it’s a matter of taste, or aesthetics, and the boil is one possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting. Besides, there’s the weight of evidence. He was crazy about her. . . on the other hand, there’s no accounting for taste. It’s a judgment call. Maybe you hear her screaming. Maybe you see steam rising from the sockets of her eyes” (300, n 131). This is the passage that momentarily troubles Marjorie Worthington, who is wrong to suggest that the narrator is claiming to know that this is what happened; he is clearly acknowledging that of the several hypotheses that fit the available evidence, this is the one he would prefer to believe.

Sometimes the evidence is too inconclusive, or simply too thin, for even the most diligent historians to know the truth about what happened. This has nothing to do with the “radical unknowability” of the past, nor does it remove the foundation from the project of doing history. It simply means that historians’ knowledge is sometimes partial, sometimes provisional, and always open to revision either by the accumulation of new evidence or the re-interpretation of existing evidence. This does not mean that one interpretation is as good as any other (the “democratic” each-reader-decides-for-herself model put forth by Worthington), nor that history corresponds to a single truth that is already “out there” that the diligent historian must uncover, so that all claims about the past are either the truth or myth/fantasy, as Franklin seems to hold. Some accounts of the past will fit the available evidence better than others, or form more coherent narratives, but finally, the novel insists that good historians ought to admit what they don’t know even when they want very badly to know.

**Author’s Note:** I would like to thank the students of my FYE 111 class who read O’Brien’s novel with me this year—particularly Chloe McCarty and Noah Brady—whose good questions and provocative essays inspired me to write this essay.

### Works Cited

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

Franklin, H. Bruce. “Kicking the Denial Syndrome: Tim O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods*.” *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America’s Past (and each other)*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. 332-43.

Herzog, Tobey C. “Tim O’Brien’s ‘True Lies’ (?)” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.4 (2000): 893-916.

Holton, Robert. *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994.

Melley, Timothy. "Postmodern Amnesia: Trauma and Forgetting in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*" *Contemporary Literature* 44.1 (Spring 2003): 106-31.

O'Brien, Tim. *In the Lake of the Woods*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Whole Story." *Carnes*, 344-45.

Rakoff, Jed. "Letters." *The New York Review of Books* 24 March 2016: 45.

Stern, Fritz, ed. *The Varieties of History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Random House, 1972.

Worthington, Marjorie. "The Democratic Meta-Narrator in *In the Lake of the Woods*." *Explicator* 67.2 (Winter 2009): 120-23.

---

**GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON** is Professor of English at Lebanon Valley College. He is the author of *Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry's Engagement with the Past* (Lexington, 2014) and the editor of *Olson's Prose* (Cambridge Scholars, 2007). His most recent essays have appeared in *Modern Language Studies*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and *Mosaic*.