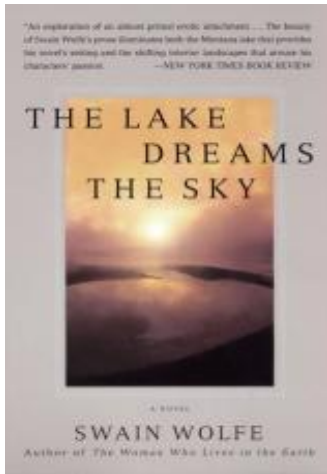

The Lake Dreams the Sky

by Swain Wolfe



About the Book

The Lake Dreams the Sky is set near a deep mountain lake in Montana. After twenty-three years away, Liz, a Boston businesswoman, returns to visit her eccentric grandmother, seeking solace from the lake that made her first believe the world was alive and aware.

Among her long-stored treasures she finds a primitive painting of a woman that reminds her of a legend from childhood; a romance about lovers whose passion sets the lake on fire. The heart of the novel is that love story, of a post-World War II affair between Rose, a local waitress raised by Indians, and a drifter named Cody. Their defiance of society's unwritten rules makes these lovers outlaws in an unforgiving time.

The Lake Dreams the Sky indelibly conjures a landscape of passion, shifting perception, and the visceral longings that shape our lives.

Discussion Guide

1. Liz returns twenty-three years later to the lake where she grew up, because she wants "some of the confidence and understanding she possessed as a child." (p.10) What does returning home mean to people? How does the experience of nature in childhood differ from what we experience as adults?
2. Throughout the novel, the theme of the relationship between primitive man and nature emerges. Ana says, "Before horses or farming, we were totally dependent on wild animals....We were compelled to speak to nature and to negotiate for more control." (p. 95) How has our lack of dependence on nature affected our lives and the way we view the world? Where does the source of our power lie now? With whom do we negotiate for control?
3. When Rose tells Cody about being raised by Indians, she describes a world that is aware, "the world was awake,

everything could speak: trees and animals, grass and stones--they all spoke. Sometimes they would speak to me. And they could see me. They were thinking about me." (p. 42) How does the belief that the world is alive and aware affect our own sense of who and where we are?

4. When Liz asks Ana to define romance, the old woman responds, "Shared yearning." Do you agree? How would you describe romantic love?

5. Ana claims that primitive man approached nature with rapture and awe and that today, "Perhaps rapture and awe became unnecessary in our negotiations with animals and found another expression." (p. 96) What do you think are these alternative expressions? Does love today have the power and mystery our ancestors found in nature?

6. In considering the difference between Indians and whites, Liz says, "It's ironic that the Indians felt betrayed by their culture, because their hearts weren't hardened and we feel betrayed because ours are." (p. 185) How does this statement reflect the relationship between Native Americans and the rest of society? What kept their hearts from hardening? What has hardened ours?

7. This novel interweaves a contemporary story with one that takes place in the forties. The difference in life's pace is obvious. In the contemporary story, Ana comments, "We have good reason to feel crazy. We have the nervous system of an animal that came from a slow-moving world where all its energy came from the food it ate. Now look at us. Evolution never prepared you for this." (p. 140) Is this a definition of stress as we know it? How has access to increased sources of energy changed our lives?

8. In the novel, Katherine, the old Indian woman who raised Rose, embodies tradition and wisdom. Are we as aware of patterns and cycles now as those in the past might have been? How does wisdom differ in today's world? What place does tradition have in contemporary life?

9. Cody and Rose were ostracized in the forties because they defied society's sense of propriety. Society has made outlaws of people for many reasons, and we often view them romantically. What qualities have made people outlaws throughout history? Why are they so appealing?

10. From talking crows to flying cars, waking dreams to the monster loneliness at the bottom of the lake, magic realism infuses the pages of this novel. How does magic realism expand and reflect the novel's themes?

Author Bio

Swain Wolfe is a writer and filmmaker who has lived in Montana most of his life. *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* (HarperCollins Publishers) is his first novel.

His early films were made in Oakland, San Francisco, Seattle, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Montana. An interest in cultural anthropology resulted in the films ENERGY & MORALITY, about the effect of high energy use on social behavior, and PHANTOM COWBOY, about the ways groups and individuals heighten their sense of identity by using aggression to isolate themselves and their causes from the general public. His films have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and have twice represented the United States in the International Public Television

Conference.

Recent projects have taken him to a Bedouin shanty town on the Gulf of Aqaba and to an island in Alaska to observe and film grizzly bears. The latter film, *THE SACRED BEAR*, will explore bear stories from early Eurasian and North American cultures, and compare our present views of nature with those of our early ancestors. One day in a meadow by the sea, he woke from a nap to find himself surrounded by five large grizzlies. He explained, "The bears were eating Chocolate Lilies. They ignored me. But sometimes, when I'm just waking up, I can still feel bears around me: large, serene, self-possessed bears."

For years Wolfe lived and worked around natural storytellers. The first were the cowboys he lived with as a boy on ranches in Colorado and Montana. As a young man he worked in the underground copper mines of Butte and Walkerville, and later as a logger in the Bitterroot Mountains. In an interview for the *Bloomsbury Review* he explained how these jobs affected the way he sees the world.

"When you're underground for a while, you begin to get the feel of where the ore flows, how hard the granite is one place from another, how hot the wall temperature is from level to level, where the earth slips and messes up the tracks, and things you knew but never had words for. Then one day after work you drive over to Anaconda to see your girl and you realize something is very different. Your world is never going to be the same because you cannot be on the surface without thinking about what's underneath. And like water seeping through sand, that sensation invades everything, all your thoughts, your dreams. You're never the same. The mines let you see in unconventional ways. At the same time, many of the miners knew how to tell stories better and with greater purpose than any I've read.

"After the mines, I worked in the woods. I became intensely aware of trees, which created another world for me and a very different way of seeing. Our early ancestors believed the world was alive and aware of us. I know how that feels and it affects how I write and how I tell stories."

His novel, *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*, evolved over a period of years. "The end of the story came from a dream I had as a child. The personalities of the people, even various animals, and, of course, all those experiences that show up in small, unconscious ways -- all these things became a vague sensation that surrounded my dream. Then one day it was a story. It was like seeing a face for the first time in the ancient plaster of your kitchen wall. We can look at something for years, and suddenly see it."

In recent years his interest as a filmmaker and writer have focused on the way different cultures and individuals use stories. He has just finished a children's story about a lonely man who discovers what it is that hides in his shadow and why his past follows him wherever her goes. Wolfe is currently working on a love story about two people who attempt to create a life outside the norms and conventions of society.

Why is a Story Like a Stone?

A story is like a stone because just as the shape of a stone is a record of the negotiation between what is inside the stone and what is outside the stone, so a story shows us the negotiation between what is hidden deep inside us, the reader and writer, and what is outside: the landscape of culture, parents, wind, and trees.

A story is dimensional, it is layered. I believe that in telling a story we always tell two stories. One story is on the

surface. It is the story we can discuss, analyze, and teach.

It stimulates some very important, very necessary, thinking. From discussing the stories we read, we gain a better understanding of how our culture is changing. Discussion and analysis are ways of testing the water -- a way of reexamining the assumptions we've made about our lives.

But there is another story that moves around, through, and beneath the surface story. The surface story is part of this other story, the real story, which is dangerous and true and useful, and of which we are never completely conscious.

The real story allows our unconscious mind to reexamine and reorder the world for us. We use this story to solve riddles hidden away, deep inside.

A story that works at both levels of storytelling can help us negotiate the differences between ourselves and our culture. We are always searching for a sense of who we are, and at the same time we are trying to negotiate a truce with the spoken and unspoken rules of society. We want to answer, among other things, how and where we fit into the culture, and we want very much to know how to change society's hold on us.

A useful story speaks to the quandaries buried in each of us, and, therefore, a story rarely says the same things to any two people. With time, the meaning and purpose of a story change for each individual. We know, from going back and rereading a story, how different it can be. I think it's possible that children listen to the same story over and over because the mysteries of childhood change -- from day to day and moment to moment.

What the writer means and what the reader needs are probably never the same. I do not know how important it is to know the writer's meaning. And in my case, at least, I often do not even know the meaning of what I've written until I've thought about it for a while. Perhaps the writer's purpose is given too much importance when it comes to discussing a story. As readers, we need to pay attention to the ways a story affects us. If a story resonates through our hearts and dreams in a way that moves and inspires us, we can assume that there is something in us that completes the writer's story. Without the reader, the story is unfinished.

Real meaning -- meaning that moves us, solves our quandaries, heals our hearts, that gives us new insight and vision -- that kind of meaning is expressed in the whole story, which includes the way it's told. All the images, patterns, word shape and word sounds, pauses, punctuation, and music are elements of telling. And because it is a total telling, pulling a story apart is impossible. Every piece depends upon every other piece for its existence. Meaning depends upon the reverberation of all the parts with one another -- a humming phantom drifting through our subconscious minds with no middle, end or beginning. The story must exist all-at-once or not-at-all. And that is why it's impossible even for the writer, especially the writer, to pull it apart and assign meaning to various pieces.

Meaning evoked through word images and word sounds is beyond the ability of words themselves to express. Meaning can only be realized, as the story can only be realized, in the individual reader's subconscious mental processes. Meaning is found in the individual quest -- the solitary journey for redemption and the resolution of personal dreams, demons and dramas set against the oppressive, inescapable landscape of culture.

Stories are powerful tools, not only for individuals, but for entire societies. Stories tell us who we are and where we came from. They allow us to change the shape and direction of our lives. The stories of our ancient ancestors told them

how to negotiate with the spirits of animals -- how to acquire power through nature. Later our stories began to tell us how to acquire power over nature. Today they tell us how to negotiate the conflicts between the needs of the individual and the demands of culture. A circle of stories. Perhaps not yet a full circle, but a half circle. And it will be stories in the last half of the circle that will tell us whether or not we come to terms with Nature as well as human nature -- we will see our fate written in these stories.

Critical Praise

"Swain Wolfe is a magician--his hypnotic prose makes the familiar strange, the strange familiar. "

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