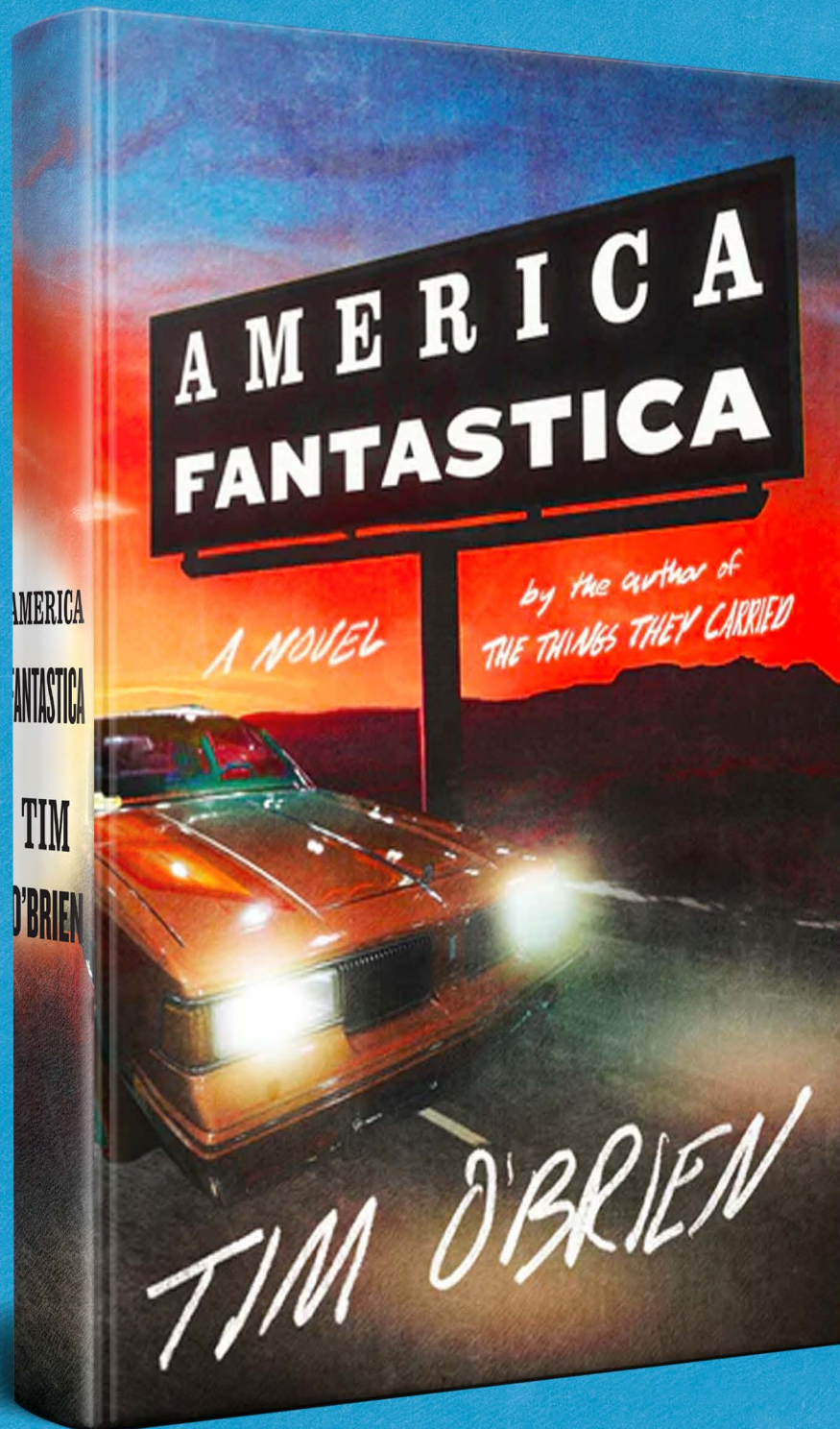


READING GROUP KIT



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *AMERICAN FANTASTICA*

1. If you have already read *The Things They Carried*, you know that a major theme of Tim O'Brien's work is the friction between emotional and factual truth. How does *America Fantastica* explore the theme of truthfulness?
2. We learn early in the novel that when Boyd robbed the bank for eighty-one thousand dollars, he had seventy-two thousand dollars in his own account. If he evidently wasn't in it for the money, what do you think his true motivation is for the robbery?
3. *America Fantastica* is a classic "on-the-road" narrative, exploring movement through the American landscape, particularly the West. How does the novel play with this genre, whose forbearers range from Twain to Cather to Kerouac and beyond?
4. The book includes several interstitial passages that capture the national zeitgeist, defining the beliefs and feelings of the time. Discuss the role of these passages. What do they add to the story as a whole?
5. The novel is set in 2019-2020 and uses a moment in our the recent past to explore the present day. What commentary does the story make about the current state of the country?
6. What is Angie's function in the story? Despite her front of innocence, what can we understand about her deeper motivations?
7. Explore the bond between Boyd and Angie. How does their relationship compare to Boyd's relationship with his ex-wife? What is O'Brien saying about authentic feeling and truth?
8. Where do you see Boyd's journey at the end of the novel? Is there room for happiness?

TIM O'BRIEN

ON *AMERICA FANTASTICA*

Q. *America Fantastica* is your first novel in 20 years. Had the idea for this novel been brewing for a while, or did it come to you more recently? What sparked the idea?

A. Yes, *America Fantastica* has been stewing inside me for two decades. I had hoped to avoid forever the agonies of writing another novel — all those hours of isolation and frustration and way too many cigarettes. But the book's characters kept needling me, kept bragging about themselves. Angie Bing, in particular, seemed to be screaming: "Look at me! Listen to me! I'm funny, I'm smart, I'm relentless, I'm Pentecostal, I'm a missionary, I'm cute, I'm a force of nature, I'm out to save souls and save America! Give me a break! Write the damn sentences!" Same with the novel's hero, or anti-hero, or whatever you'd call a compulsive liar like Boyd Halverson, a man who manufactures his own truth if the truth doesn't satisfy him. "Get off your ass," he'd seem to mutter. "Put me in a book. I'm one of a kind. I lie about everything — my age, my height, my name, my history. Lies tickle my teeth and my tonsils. I make POTUS look like a raw beginner. Half of America will worship me, the other half will laugh at me." These and other characters in *America Fantastica* eventually gave me the sensation of being nine-months pregnant — give birth or explode. Agony, for sure. But I tried to have perverse fun amidst the word-by-word torture of writing this book.

Q. Early in the novel, you introduce the term "mythomania," and how its earliest victims included "the disappointed, the defeated, the disrespected, and the genetically suspicious." Does this category include Boyd, the chief protagonist of *America Fantastica*? Or does he stand apart from this group of people?

A. Mythomania, along with its twin term pseudologia fantastica, refers to a psychological disorder in which people substitute fantasy for reality. Most of us call this compulsive lying. So, yes, Boyd Halverson is a man who, since his early childhood, replaces sordid reality with outrageous fantasy. Reality is intolerable to him. Reality is a monster. Boyd is certainly among the disappointed and defeated and disrespected — like a good many chat room patrons and a good many Americans who swallow ludicrous conspiracy theories. Reality can be ugly; fantasy can be tempting. Boyd recognizes that compulsive lying has been ruinous to himself and to others. Deceit has cost him his beloved wife, his job, his reputation, his self-respect. He has betrayed himself and he has betrayed others. Still, he cannot stop. He does not want to stop. For him, and for a great many other human beings, fantasy represents a form of salvation. Prince Charming fantasies. Life everlasting fanta-

**"REALITY IS
A MONSTER."**

sies. Harps and halos fantasies. Casino fantasies. Lottery fantasies. Happy-ever-after fantasies. Gunslinger fantasies. Ferrari fantasies. *Ozzie and Harriet* fantasies. Porn fantasies. I-won-the election-I-lost fantasies. When reality fails us, delusion can and does keep us going. But it can also kill us.

Q. *America Fantastica* begins with a bank robbery and reads like a chase narrative, fast-paced and full of twists and turns. But it also has something larger on its mind as well, as all great works of literature do. Did you intend to make some commentary on our society (our world, our country) as you wrote the novel?

A. “Commentary” is a fiction writer’s death sentence. Story is everything. Graceful sentences help. Wonderful sentences help wonderfully, for they offer wonder. For me, as a novelist, grace and wonder (and comedy if it is divine) are always in the service of story, story alone, and I try to withhold my opinions about this or that character or this or that event. Personally, of course, I condemn bank robbery. I condemn liars in public places. I condemn murder. I condemn avarice and reckless thumb-driving and racism and corporate greed and voice recordings claiming that “our call volume is unusually high” when in fact it is always high, therefore “usual” and not “unusual.” My job, at least as I see it, is to present the world we live in, to present it vividly and sometimes with wit, but never to comment. The commentary, if any, must come from the reader. I love all the characters in *America Fantastica* — especially the bank robbers and murderers and liars in public places — just as a parent loves a child despite the child’s sins and imperfections. If God forgives, why can’t I?

Q. *The Things They Carried* is now firmly established as a classic — still widely read, taught in schools, and considered one of the finest pieces of literature about the Vietnam War and its aftermath. How do you view that book, so many years later? And to what extent is *America Fantastica* in dialogue with *The Things They Carried*?

“FOR WE CARRY OUR OWN HISTORIES, OUR OWN FEARS, AND OUR OWN PERSONALITIES TO EACH STOP ALONG THE WAY.”

A. I view *The Things They Carried* much like the parent I just mentioned. I forgive its imperfections, I love its humanity, and I’m proud of it for making its way through the world over the past few decades. The book is stuck with me as its father, but it has found its own identity and no longer belongs to me. It was written by a stranger — the man I once was. Even so, I realize that *America Fantastica* is engaged in a kind of friendly conversation with *The Things They Carried*. The new novel talks to the old one, comparing notes and ideas, disagreeing sometimes, amplifying other times, each sharing the other’s interest in storytelling as a way of exploring the frontiers between fantasy and reality, between truth and falsehood.

Q. Boyd and Angie travel from Northern California to Mexico, to Santa Monica, to Southeast Texas, to Bemidji, Minnesota. Do these locations represent something to you — or to the characters?

A. Well, one pretty common American fantasy involves the imagined freedom of life “on the road.” Leaving the familiar behind. Seeking new places, new people, new insights, new emotions, new sights and sounds. The open road beckons to us. At one point, Angie says to

Boyd, “I don’t want it to stop,” because to end their open-road journey will also end the adventure of their relationship, turn it humdrum and predictable and stale. Automobiles and buses and RVs and highways carry the appeal of freedom for thousands of tourists, just as they represent emblems of freedom for Angie and Boyd. False emblems, it turns out. For we carry our own histories, our own fears, and our own personalities to each stop along the way. The open road does a U-turn. The journey can be fun, and funny, but we end up back inside ourselves.

Q. Boyd Halverson is quite the fabulist! What was it like to write a novel about a very talented compulsive liar?

A. Liberating! Writing the novel was my own on-the-road journey. (Ending up, as I just mentioned, back inside myself.) As Angie says, “Lying is like farting. Everybody does it, nobody confesses.” Or as Hunter S. Thompson writes, “We are not a nation of truth-lovers.” *America Fantastica*, like every novel, is a bold and elaborate lie — none of it actually happened — yet, like every novelist, I hope it feels true, in which case it is true. Story-truth. Not happening-truth.

Q. Your novel is full of the hapless and the devious, which adds both humor and tension to the story. Were you ever rooting for Randy (Angie’s fiancé) or Henry (Boyd’s ex-wife’s husband’s henchman), who are both tracking Boyd and Angie, to succeed in their missions as you were writing?

“FOR A WRITER, AS FOR A PAINTER, BEAUTY IS MADE FROM MANY THOUSAND BRUSH STROKES, OR CLAUSES, OR SENTENCES, OR BITS OF DIALOGUE, AND EACH BRUSH STROKE BLENDS INTO AN IMAGE OR AN EMOTION THAT DOES SOMETHING TO THE HUMAN HEART.”

A. I can’t say I rooted for Randy or Henry in any plot sense. Rather, I rooted for them as characters — that they would entertain readers, that their hapless (but dangerous) villainy would disgust readers even while laughing at them, and that readers would recognize in them personality traits not all that dissimilar from certain talking heads on CNN or from what bounces back from a handheld mirror. In the end, however, the energy behind *America Fantastica* is the energy behind any work of art, whether sculpture or dance or opera or literature, which is to bring beauty into a sometimes ugly world. A beautiful painting, for example, can have as its subject a flophouse in Brooklyn or a cancer ward in Providence, Rhode Island. For a writer, as for a painter, beauty is made from many thousand brush strokes, or clauses, or sentences, or bits of dialogue, and each brush stroke blends into an image or an emotion that does something to the human heart.

Q. *America Fantastica* takes place between August 2019 and August 2020, in the context of conspiracy theories, dead schoolchildren, a politically divided country, and the run-up to a wildly contentious presidential election. Yet a number of the novel's images and references harken back to the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Why is that?

A. The America of 2019 and 2020 did not pop up out of a vacuum. Our country's fascination (and fantasies) in regard to guns, crime, lotteries, casinos, cars, money, RVs, and the general "pursuit of happiness" seems deeply rooted in our history. Nostalgia for an earlier, more unified, whiter, and "happier" America seems to make millions of my fellow citizens yearn for a Hollywood version of a country that never was. An *Ozzie and Harriet* country. A Jimmy Stewart, Lauren Bacall, John Wayne country. A *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* country. A country in which all the stories inevitably lead to happy-ever-after endings. I think these and other such fantasies are more or less what my MAGA friends hope to recapture. Erasing McCarthyism. Erasing racism. Erasing paternalism. Erasing polluted water, polluted air. Erasing huge income disparities. Erasing Harriet stuck forever in her kitchen. So, yes, *America Fantastica* tries to suggest at least a few pretty obvious threads winding back to the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. The past isn't dead. It isn't even prelude. It's with us now.

“FOR ME, IN A VERY PERSONAL SENSE, I HAVE NO FIRM GRASP ON EVEN THE TRUTH ABOUT MYSELF.”

AN AMERICAN MASTER RETURNS

The author of *The Things They Carried* delivers his first new novel in two decades, a brilliant and rollicking odyssey in which a bank robbery by a disgraced journalist sparks a cross-country chase through a nation corroded by shameless delusion and deceit.



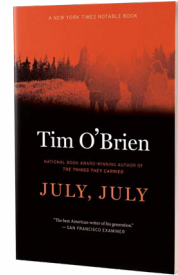
Tim O'Brien received the National Book Award for Fiction for *Going After Cacciato*. *The Things They Carried* was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award; it received the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize in fiction and France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger. In 2005, *The Things They Carried* appeared on the *New York Times* poll of "The Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years" and was earlier included among its "Books of the Century"; in 2021, it was named one of the Center for Fiction's "200 Books That Shaped 200 Years of Literature." *In the Lake of the Woods*, published in 1994, was chosen by *Time* magazine as the best novel of that year. The book also received the James Fenimore Cooper Prize from the Society of American Historians and was selected as one of the ten best books of the year by the *New York Times*.

In 2010, O'Brien received the Katherine Anne Porter Award, presented by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for a distinguished body of work. He has also received the Mark Twain Award in literature and lifetime achievement awards from the Dayton Literary Peace Prize Foundation and the Pritzker Military Museum & Library. O'Brien has been elected to both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

ALSO BY TIM O'BRIEN

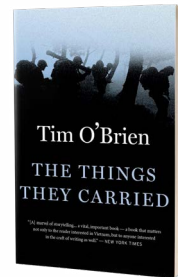
JULY, JULY

“A deeply satisfying story . . . O’Brien is intelligent and daring, but he is also eminently accessible.”
— *O, the Oprah Magazine*



THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

“A book so searing and immediate you can almost hear the choppers in the background. . . . This is prose headed for the nerve center of what was Vietnam.”
— *Boston Globe*



IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS

“Serious, gracefully written, and at the same time, as gripping as a thriller.”
— *Wall Street Journal*

