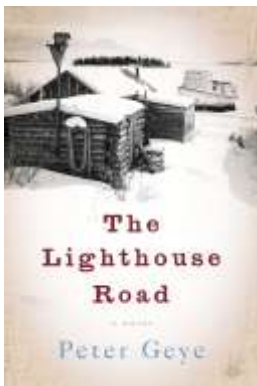




“*The Lighthouse Road* is a cinematic thundercloud gusting across the northern landscape Peter Geye so clearly loves. With its conflicted heroes and their seafaring, bootlegging, lumber-camp agonies, **this book understands hard work and heartbreak -- it takes no shortcuts but delivers its cargo in generous style, a tale wrapped in blizzards and viewed through the glass eye of history.**” —Leif Enger

“the story and its people achieve remarkable emotional resonance. The echoes of the characters' heartbreak through the generations are as haunting as the howling of the wolves on the wind.”  
—*Booklist*, starred review★

“...Peter Geye is doing for Minnesota what Hemingway did for Michigan, what Kent Haruf did for Colorado....” —Matthew Batt, in an interview on MinnesotaReads.com



## Reading Guide for

# *THE LIGHTHOUSE ROAD*

by Peter Geye

### FROM THE AUTHOR

I love looking at old photographs. They make me feel like it's possible to transcend time. One such picture was my first inspiration for *The Lighthouse Road*. The photograph is of a woman standing beside a cook fire in a cambouse shanty circa 1872. A crew of lumberjacks who look worn by a long winter surrounds her. She's got a look on her face that says, quite plainly, “How in the world did I end up here?” The first time I saw it, I knew I wanted to imagine her life.

*The Lighthouse Road* began as her story, though I moved the year to 1895. I never thought I'd write a novel with so much historical distance, but once I started, I found myself in a sort of trance. Somehow, the years between that woman's story and my own sensibilities were like a liberating force. The language with which I imagined her life was practically funneled onto the page. I've never had that experience writing fiction before. Each moment seemed authentic and essential and interesting.

The life of her son, whose story eventually became the novel's center of gravity, seemed equally natural. I could not wait to pick up my pen each day, to see what misadventures or trouble he could get into. Odd Einar Eide is a man very much at odds with himself. Though he's only a young man, he's already been forced to grapple with enormous loss in his life. This struggle has given him a suspicious wisdom, one I learned a lot from.

*The Lighthouse Road* is a novel in which all of the characters struggle to be their true selves. Only one of them—Thea Eide, the woman who was born into my imagination in that old photograph—has any luck at all in the department of living an honest life. I've tried to figure out why I'm drawn to characters like these, and I think I know at least part of the answer: They all live in a place that remains, even now, surrounded by a colossal wilderness. Though I don't live in such a place myself, I know the feeling I have when I'm there, in the northwoods, and it's unambiguously diminished, more animal than human. Maybe my characters struggle the way they do because they have the same feelings.

—Peter Geye

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Are Odd, Rebecca, and Hosea a family?
2. What role do place and landscape play in this novel? Could this story have taken place anywhere else? Why or why not?
3. Is the real wilderness here exterior—what is outside—or interior to the characters, or both?
4. What role does weather play?
5. Discuss Odd's glass eye. What do you think the author wants us to take from his visual experience?
6. Can these characters overcome their pasts?
7. This is in part an immigrant story. But many people are starting over in this novel, not only those who travel from other countries. Discuss.
8. Why do you think the author chose the names for his characters that he has chosen?
9. How important to the book is communication?
10. What do you think the ending signifies?
11. The women in this novel have very different lives, in part because of where they live. Discuss.
12. How does a town caught between wilderness and wild water develop? How do its inhabitants?

*In a fun development, the following questions were contributed by book blogger, Serena Augusto-Cox of Savvy Verse & Wit (<http://savvyverseandwit.com>)*

13. What is the significance of Lighthouse Road?
14. How are Odd and Hosea similar by the end of the book and why?
15. By the end of the book, had Rebekah and Odd grown or evolved?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Peter Geye** received his MFA from the University of New Orleans and his PhD from Western Michigan University, where he was editor of *Third Coast*. He was born and raised in Minneapolis and continues to live there with his wife and three children. He is the author of the award winning novel, *Safe from the Sea*. His website is [petergeye.com](http://petergeye.com).



Photo by Matt and Jenae Batt

## Speaking with Peter Geye

### **1. Setting and location are critical to your books, in the same way the West or the South are to writers in those regions. What about the North Shore makes it a great setting?**

For many years, before I started writing about the North Shore, I spent time wondering how it had been neglected as a literary locale. Certainly people had written about it, but not in the way I wanted them to. Which is to say, not in the same way that William Gay wrote about Tennessee or Tom Franklin writes about Mississippi. Not in the way that Alyson Hagy or Annie Proulx write about Wyoming, or Kent Haruf writes about Colorado. Because I couldn't find the stories I wanted, I guess I decided to write them.

The North Shore is a place defined for me by its seasons, its weather, its few people. On one side of the road, the world's greatest lake shimmers or boils. On the other side of the road, one of America's great wilderness areas goes on and on forever. It takes a special sort of person to want to inhabit that strip of civilization. In its long and colorful history, many such people have come and gone. Also, and simply, it's a beautiful place.

But perhaps most importantly, it's a place that evokes strong feelings. Maybe this is because of some of the things I've mentioned, but it's certainly not limited to that. There's a magnetic and hypnotizing power to the region. It's that power I'm trying to capture more than anything else.

### **2. Your stories are set in a particular region but aren't regional. What do you think makes the difference between a regional book and one with broader readership and reach?**

I think I'm being honest when I say that all I've ever wanted to do is write stories that entertain and evoke strong emotions. On the other hand, I've been very conscious about writing North Shore books. How these two ideas get reconciled is perhaps beyond my capacity to explain. Or even understand.

Though I certainly understand why Faulkner is a southern writer, I understand equally why he's an American writer. Same goes for Wallace Stegner and Jeffrey Lent and Louise Erdrich. The list just goes on and on. What those writers have in common, and certainly what I aspire to, is the ability to tell their stories through a regional lens. But of course they're also telling stories that anyone would want to read. Stories that anyone might empathize with. Their characters aren't Californians or New Englanders or Southerners even if they are. They're *human*. Their stories resonate and last because they inspire the reader to identify with the drama. In other words, it's the reader who makes the story universal, not the writer.

The human heart being in conflict with itself (to paraphrase Faulkner) is not a regional crisis. It could never be, even if it inevitably is.

### **3. Where did you get the idea for this story?**

I've been lugging the idea of this book around for a long time. I have notes on it that date to 2006 and the reality is that Thea Eide, one of two protagonists in the story, has been a character I've wanted to write for much, much longer than that.

I first conceived of her on the basis of a photograph in a book of old Great Lakes photographs. In the picture, a young woman stands next to a cook fire in a cambouse shanty, circa the late 1800s. The expression on her face is profoundly revealing. She's worried and sad and lonely. She's alone in a world of rough men, in a rough place, in a rough era. And I love her.

I spent years thinking about her, about what her life would be like, about what her hopes and aspirations would be. The character of Thea Eide is what I came up with after all that imagining.

#### **4. Your books deal with family divisions and restructuring. What as a writer compels you more, the way people pull away from each other, or how they reconnect?**

What a beautiful question. I think the short answer is that you can't have one without the other. In the same way that happiness depends on sadness, and vice versa, the family drama depends on both coming and going, and the attendant joys and sorrows of that movement. This is as true in fiction as it is in real life.

But I think that there's more drama in the reconciliation. At least I hope there is. It's easy to walk away, and so much more difficult to come back. To face the past, to come to terms with whatever it was that drove the characters apart in the first place.

It seems to me that the family drama begins with the leaving but is more greatly amplified in the reunion. If I think about my own life, of the mistakes I've made and the corrections I've made, it would most often have been easier to walk away. But because I haven't, my relationships are fuller and more meaningful for the reconciliation. This is true with my parents, my wife, my kids. I guess I've adopted the same attitude in my fiction.

#### **5. Your novels both are about childbirth in some respect. Why?**

For a long time now, the central preoccupation in my life has been of children. For perhaps five years my wife and I struggled to have children. It was a terrible thing to witness at such close range, my wife's sadness. My own helplessness. We spent years at the mercy of treatments and the hold those treatments had on our entire life. There were many times that I couldn't see the end, which is a scary thing.

But then we had kids, three of them, and the despair of not being able to have kids became the despair of dirty diapers and sleepless nights. And where I couldn't see the end before, now the end looked entirely different. It looks different all the time. This is wonderful, and I'm thankful for it, but also somewhat terrified of how many different ways there are to screw it up. All of this is merely to reiterate what I said at the outset of answering this question: children have been my central preoccupations for a long, long time. It seems only natural that I'd explore some of those anxieties in my fiction.

I also have a strong sentiment that the family drama is the most interesting vehicle for a storyteller. If you're going to write a family drama, you'd better be as ready to think about childbirth and all its consequences and rewards as you ought think of death.

#### **6. What research did writing this book require?**

When I wrote *Safe from the Sea*, I spent months learning about the history of the ore industry on the Great Lakes. Literally months. I learned about it the way I learned about geometry in high school: as a subject unto itself. (For the record, I did better with Great Lakes shipping than I ever did with geometry). With *The Lighthouse Road*, I had to familiarize myself with several subjects, but on a smaller scale.

Immigration, the old logging camps, the commercial fishery on Lake Superior, bootlegging, boatbuilding, law and order in a frontier town, the habits of bears, medical practices from a hundred years ago, beaver trapping, wolves, sled dogs, glass eyes...all of these subjects feature in *The Lighthouse Road*. But none of them feature in the same way that the ore boat does in *Safe from the Sea*.

So my research was conducted on a smaller scale and more piecemeal. I relied on a couple of very good books on logging and boat building. I have a writer friend who raises and runs sled dogs in northern Minnesota, and he helped me get that part right. My wife, who is a lawyer, helped me to handle the criminal aspect of the book. I read old medical texts to handle the different surgeries and procedures that my characters undergo. I've long been fascinated by the wolves in northern Minnesota, and so relied on some old learning for those things.

All of this makes it sound like a book of nonfiction, which it is decidedly not. I hope I've melded the family drama with all of these smaller subjects to create a world that is at once interesting and organic to the time and landscape. But it's the people and their emotions that drive the book.

### **7. You're a stay-at-home Dad to three young children. When do you write?**

I always feel like I'm complaining when I answer this question, which I don't mean to do. The honest answer is that it's very difficult to find enough time to write. Between taking care of the kids, being a good and decent husband, mowing the lawn, shoveling the walk, and trying to find time to unwind myself, there aren't a lot of hours left in the week. Especially for someone like me, who could write ten hours a day every day if given the chance.

I write four days a week, usually in five-hour chunks, Friday through Monday. When I'm just starting or just finishing (or am otherwise especially inspired) I'll also work on weeknights or at naptime. That's my official schedule.

But in another way, I'm kind of constantly writing. I've learned to concentrate in the damndest places. I write in the grocery store, where I always seem to be. I write while driving. I write while I'm falling asleep. While I'm watching the kids at soccer or swimming lessons. And I don't mean I *figuratively* write in these places. I *literally* write, in my notebooks, in these places.

It's not ideal, but it's how my life has evolved and it's the best I can do at this stage of it.

### **8. What inspires you as a writer?**

In no particular order: my wife, my kids, the weather, the wilderness, sadness, joy, my father, my brother and sisters, travel, photographs, sex, longing, books, movies, animals, the past, the future, memories, music, friendship, hate, love, readers, water, death, ski jumping, the early morning, fear.

## SELECTED HONORS AND KUDOS

### *for* THE LIGHTHOUSE ROAD

AN INDIE NEXT PICK FOR OCTOBER 2012

A Pulpwood Queen Bonus Book Club Selection

A MIDWEST CONNECTIONS PICK FOR OCTOBER 2012

"a **richly nuanced** collage that keeps readers guessing....**a page-turner**...."—*The Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"...**engaging**....**As with Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, readers will feel as if they are experiencing the nature that Geye paints for them first-hand.**"—*BookPage*

"**A beautifully written, stunning novel of self-preservation, secrets, and the ache for love.** Geye's work is unforgettable and will be read for generations to come."—*BethFish Reads*

"**Geye has hit another one out of the park** with *The Lighthouse Road*."—*Savvy Verse & Wit*

"In one of the novel's important threads, Odd painstakingly crafts his own boat, built on an 18-foot one-piece keel, carved from a white pine log. "The thought of his own life at the mercy of his workmanship filled him with doubt." But everyone who sees the finished boat marvels at the simple beauty of what Odd has made. Anyone who reads Geye's novel is likely to have the same reaction to it."—*The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

"With spare realism, Geye puts **a fresh spin on a familiar tale**, rendering a powerful portrayal of family bonds in an era long past. **Highly recommended.**"—*Library Journal*

"...a novel rich in character A fine historical novel set on the rugged shores of Lake Superior, featuring the tough, self-sufficient lot of Scandinavian immigrants who called it home."

—*Shelf Awareness, starred review* ☆

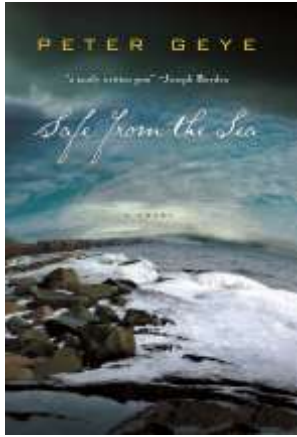
"smart, elegantly written"—*ForeWord Reviews*

"Tangled relationships and the search for love, even when that love is unwise, are the heart of Minnesotan Peter Geye's "The Lighthouse Road" ...**one of this season's most anticipated novels....the story's conclusion is exactly right**, binding together its universal themes of loss healed by love for a child, betrayal and revenge."—*The Pioneer Press*

"**A treasure.** A story of love and loss and courage set in the wilds of northern Minnesota, spanning the decades from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 1920s....will resonate long after you turn the last page."—*Hudson Valley News*

"This is **a beautifully written book, richly detailed, stark and tragic, but with glimmers of hopefulness.**"—*Historical Novels Review*

"One of those rare species of modest books that **feels like an epic while it's being read.**"—*Fiction Writers Review*



## SELECTED HONORS AND KUDOS

for Peter Geye's novel,  
**SAFE FROM THE SEA**

Available in paperback and as an e-book from Unbridled Books

**Indie Lit Award Winner for Fiction, 2010**  
**AN INDIENEXT PICK FOR OCTOBER 2010**  
**A Publishers Weekly "Indie Sleeper" Selection**  
**A MIDWEST CONNECTIONS PICK**  
**A WNBA Great Group Read selection for 2010**  
**GLIBA Great Lakes, Great Reads selection**

**"A beautiful book—all shipwreck and rescue."**—Alyson Hagy

**"A rich, satisfying novel** about family members who make amends after a lifetime of estrangement."**—Star Tribune**

**"Safe from the Sea** is small in scope but substantial, on all levels, in its impact. **It is a thing of beauty; a lesson in the ineffable power of story to take us out of ourselves and bring us to a place we never knew but recognize all the same.**"—*Bookslut*

**"In this deeply moving, powerfully realized debut novel, an estranged father and son find reconciliation in the final week of the father's life...Geye tackles the subjects of death, dying, and living with admirable insight and courage...Inspiring, wise, and enthusiastically recommended for all readers."**—*Library Journal*

**"Impressive."**—*Inland Seas, Quarterly Journal of the Great Lakes Historical Society*

**"Olaf's last wish presents Noah with a watery physical challenge of his own, and gives the back end of the novel a touch of fairy tale, a la late John Cheever."**  
—*The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

**"A finely crafted first novel...Give this book to readers of David Guterson and Robert Olmstead, who will be captured by the themes of approaching death and the pain and solace provided by nature."**—*Booklist*

**"Absolutely beautiful and will suck you in."**—*Devourer of Books*

**"A remarkable debut."**—**Ron Rash**

**"A deep hearted novel** of bitten lives lived out on the cold shore of a ferocious world. In the silence of their existence, the dignity of their bearing, Geye compassionately renders the magnitudes of their despair, endurance and greatness."  
—**Robert Olmstead**

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