

READING GROUP GUIDE
for
SAFE FROM THE SEA
By Peter Geye

AN INDIENEXT PICK FOR OCTOBER 2010

***A Publishers Weekly* “Indie Sleeper” Selection**

A MIDWEST CONNECTIONS PICK

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

"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

ABOUT THE BOOK

SAFE FROM THE SEA is the story of a man returning home to Duluth to help his ailing father. But returning home makes Noah tense and uncertain. He and his father have been estranged for years, an estrangement that began after his father survived the sinking of his Great Lakes ore boat during Noah's youth. Survived in body, but not in spirit. He wasn't much of a father to Noah or to Noah's sister, Solveig.

Once Noah arrives in Duluth, though, it's clear that his father is not simply ill but dying—which the father knows, though he hasn't been explicit. He doesn't want sympathy. And so the two begin an awkward journey toward the end of Olaf Torr's life and, possibly, toward reconciliation.

Meanwhile, Noah's own struggle to make a life with an absent father has found its real reward in his relationship with his sagacious wife, Natalie, who is at home alone in Boston, bearing the scars of lost pregnancies and now fading hopes. Although she is initially furious that Noah has left during a time when they might conceive, Natalie isn't one to wallow. Also, she understands the importance of family, and she makes a sudden and surprising choice. She, too, will go to Duluth.

This beautiful, powerful novel has resonated for reader after reader—men, women, booksellers, reviewers. One bookseller called it “Chick Lit for men.” But in truth, its themes are universal, and it’s a story for all of us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Geye received his MFA from the University of New Orleans and his Ph.D. 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. This is his first novel.

To learn more about Peter Geye, please visit <http://petergeye.com/index.html>.

A CHAT WITH THE AUTHOR

1. Some writers are offended when asked if their fiction is based on fact. But writers do tend to take things from their lives and weave them in to their tales. Was there anything in your novel, any thread, that came from experience? Are you from a seafaring family?

I don’t shrink at all from this question. I think most writers, if they’re being honest, find inspiration in their own lives. Some directly, others in more roundabout ways. My old man was a seafarer of sorts. He retired as a navy captain, and he still loves to sail, but he never resembled the father in *Safe from the Sea*. Neither in temperament nor in occupation. In fact, my father was quite the opposite of Olaf. The inspiration for the seafaring part of the story comes simply from my memories of being up on the North Shore as a boy. We used to spend a fair amount of time up there renting cheap cabins or camping in state parks. I recall watching the ore boats out on the lake with a profound curiosity. To see those behemoth vessels floating out on that endless lake, well, the sense of awe obviously stuck with me.

The thread of the book that’s more traceable to my own experience is the issue of infertility that hounds Noah and Natalie. My wife and I went through a very similar trial before we had kids, and much of that difficulty occurred while I was working on the first drafts of the book. It’s impossible for me to describe how difficult it was to watch her struggle. My wife is a woman with amazing resolve. If she sets her mind to something, no matter what it is, she’ll succeed. With her infertility issues though, no amount of hard work seemed to make a difference. She couldn’t understand it. Neither could I. Not only did it confound us, but it absolutely sapped us emotionally. For years—*years*—we endured one heartbreak after another. Finally, I said I couldn’t do it anymore, couldn’t continue going on with the disappointment, couldn’t commit to more of the same hard work. Noah says something similar in *Safe from the Sea*, only to have Natalie

override his sense of resignation. Luckily, Dana—my wife—had the same sort of determination as Natalie. Three kids later, and here I am.

2. *You've been an editor as well as a writer. Was your editorial experience a help or a hindrance?*

I was editor of *Third Coast*, the literary journal at Western Michigan University, where I got my PhD. I had to be some kind of fool to take that job while trying also to finish my degree. The amount of work it took—the sheer number of hours spent reading, planning, coercing colleagues to volunteer their time, which was as short as mine—it's a miracle I was able to do any of it.

Ah, but the reward. While I was working on *Third Coast* we published some seriously talented writers. Donald Ray Pollack, Amanda Boyden, Tatjana Soli, Eric Gansworth, Laura van den Berg, Randy DeVita, and many others. These are writers whose work is making a lot of noise now. I mention them not to name drop, but because their work was an inspiration. You see what they're doing, and you want to keep pace. I subscribe to Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, and though at times it felt like a slog—reading hundreds of mediocre manuscripts, say, or coordinating the mailing for our subscribers—there's no doubt that culling all those fantastic stories from the dregs, working with the writers to make them better, being a part of the literary community on that integral level, all of it encouraged me to work harder myself.

3. *You're a stay-at-home Dad. When do you write? Being a Dad, was it hard to write about Olaf and Noah's relationship?*

I write all the time, literally. I'll be at the grocery store with three screaming kids, a thought will cross my mind, and I'll take the notebook from my back pocket and write. I've used cereal boxes as desks right there in aisle three. It's not an ideal way to work, but when time is as precious as it is, it's the best I can do right now. Which is not to say I don't get concentrated work time. I do. I usually work Friday through Monday, about five hours each morning. My sister—bless her—watches the kids on Mondays and Fridays, and my wife handles morning duty on weekends. I also work many evenings, though that time is reserved more for editing and getting organized—you know, transcribing those back-pocket notes—than actually writing. That's the schedule now, anyway.

But most of *Safe from the Sea* was written either on long weekends at my in-law's lake place in Wisconsin, or in the middle of the night, between the hours of eleven and three. Those were wildly productive times, pre-kids, after my wife went to bed or alone in the woods. It's hard to imagine all of that peace and quiet now. But I've adapted. I'm on my eighth notebook for the new book I'm working on.

To the second part of the question, writing about Olaf and Noah was made more difficult by *not* having kids. As I said, most of the first drafts were written before any of the rug rats came along, when we were in the throes of our infertility problems. I remember one morning, after a particularly difficult night of writing, telling my wife that I didn't know how happy publishing the book would ever make me if I didn't have children of my own to read it to one day. Noah has a similar realization after Olaf tells him about the wreck of the *Rag*. For me it's one of the most important moments of the book.

Now my kids, two of them anyway, can recognize the cover of the book, they know it's a story about a shipwreck and that Papa wrote it. I often think to myself: If my kids are the only people who ever read this book, it'll be enough in its way. If, when I'm dead and gone, they can use the story to help their memory of me, to see how dear they were to me, well, then, I've done my job.

4. *Your book speaks to a region but is about any heart; its story is universal. How does one walk that line as a writer?*

I think it would be hazardous to start writing a book with the intention of addressing The Universal. At least I would never begin there. Luckily for writers, at least writers of realist fiction, most stories, if read with enough *imagination*, can be understood in a context larger than the literal boundaries of its narrative. That's a lengthy way of saying that just about any story starts and ends as an allegory.

Safe from the Sea is no exception, though the dimensions of that allegory, at least as far as I intended, aren't that grand. The book is predicated on a pair of simple ideas. One, the love between a father and son is often difficult. And two, nature is a beast. In fact, whenever someone asks me what the book is about, I say it's a father and son story built around a terrific storm and its aftermath.

I had a writing teacher who once gave a talk on the role mythology played in his work. He described how he incorporated a single element of Mexican mythology into one of his stories, and was thrilled to discover later that several of the threads that held the story together were part of the tapestry of the same myth he used as a starting point. He said that it seemed odd he should be so lucky, but then realized that stories tell themselves in certain ways, using certain details, almost as if they have their own will. I found the same thing to be true in writing *Safe from the Sea*.

It would be disingenuous not to mention the role of Norse mythology in the book. I used the concept of Ragnarok—the downfall of the gods, in that mythos—only as an organizing principle, as the climactic and pivotal moment in the lives of Olaf and Noah Torr. The details that followed: the fire and ice, the wolves, the tree on which Olaf rests after his ore boat washed ashore, those details occurred organically; they're all a part of the natural world of the novel. And that's how stories become universal, I think. They trust their local boundaries, the details of a very specific place, telling the simplest story. If it's a good story, those local details will engage a much larger world.

And let's not forget how much a universal interpretation depends on the individual reader and her own imagination. None of this literary-speak makes a lick of difference if the reader is not engaged, and relating to the story on a very personal level.

5. *Was it difficult to write about Natalie's pain?*

It only dawns on me now, but the sections of the book that should have been easiest to write about—that is, the sections of the book rooted in my own experience—were by far the most difficult. This despite the fact that so much research was required to write the scenes of shipwreck and survival.

The emotional pain Natalie suffers in the book required the least imagination. All I had to do was remember things my wife said, or the anguish or frustration I had felt myself. Transcribing those feelings required little more than my memory. In contrast, I sometimes had to spend hours—days even—trying to track down the smallest detail regarding the Great Lakes shipping industry. I must have read a dozen books on the subject. I spent so much time in museums and libraries, reading over old newspaper accounts, looking at old pictures, that I started to feel completely detached from the world I lived in from one day to the next. And still those sections in the book just came tumbling out of me. Any effort found immediate reward.

Whereas the scenes with Natalie, perhaps because they so closely resembled my life from day to day, and because that life was so melancholy, came out of me in fits. I would write and rewrite and throw it all away, day after day. Of course, this didn't make the business of real life any more pleasant. But there was a reason those scenes were difficult to write, without them, I could not have ended the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has grief changed the lives of the main characters in this novel?
2. How does setting affect these characters, and reflect them?
3. Did Noah make the right decision to go help his father and leave Natalie?
4. Noah is interested in ski jumping and in old maps. How do these metaphors shape the story?
5. Why do you think Olaf turned to Noah for help instead of turning to Solveig? Were his reasons deeper than the obvious?
6. How are these characters now safe from the sea?
7. Olaf presents his son with a special request. Do you think it was too much to ask? Were you surprised with how things played out?
8. Is this book about fathers and fatherhood? Or is it more a book about family?
9. Alyson Hagy, in praising the novel, said it was "All shipwreck and rescue." Do you agree? If so, how?
10. Some would argue this is a novel of redemption. Discuss.

11. Noah is ambivalent about his own possible fatherhood, given his childhood. But he recognizes the meaning a child would bring to Natalie's life. How do his wife's fertility problems and efforts complicate his emotions? In what ways does reconciliation with his father deepen his relationship with his wife and allow him to consider a fatherhood determined by who he is as a man and not who he was as a child?
12. Who would you like to pass this book along to?

FOR FURTHER READING

Outerbridge Reach by Robert Stone

Orchard by Larry Watson

Plainsong by Kent Haruf