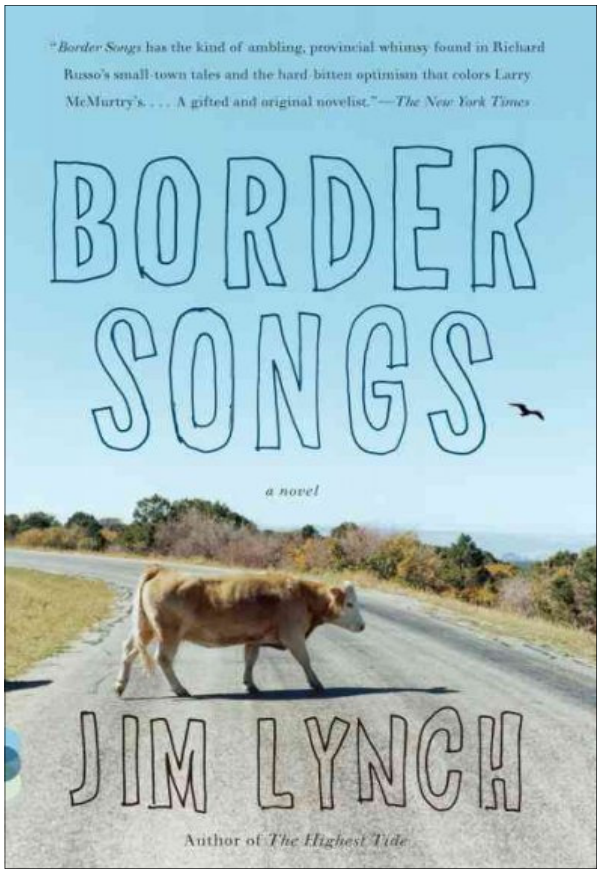

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on “catalog”
- In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. “Everyone remembered the night Brandon Vanderkool flew across the Crawfords' snowfield and tackled the Prince and Princess of Nowhere.” What does the first sentence of the novel tell us about what's to come?

2. Have you read Jim Lynch's first novel, *The Highest Tide*? If so, what similarities do you find in *Border Songs*? Differences?

3. What are the major themes of *Border Songs*? What point is Lynch trying to make? Is he successful?

4. On page 13, Brandon says, “I think the most interesting people I'll meet these days will be criminals-or people about to become criminals.” Is he right?

5. Discuss Wayne Rousseau: Why does he try to replicate already-existing inventions? What is the significance of his choices—the lightbulb, *The Great Gatsby*? How does this intersect with his politics?

6. Compare Wayne and Norm. Why are they so antagonistic toward each other?

7. At several points in the novel, characters describe Brandon as seeing things differently, or seeing things that others don't see. Why do you think that is? How does it help him and hurt him?

8. Why does Madeline fall in with Toby? Why does she do what he asks? Why does she suddenly decide to stop?

9. On page 79, Lynch writes, “Now [Norm] felt as if he'd sent his son to the front lines of a war he hadn't realized was going on in his own neighborhood.” How does Norm deal with this guilt? How does the notion of a war affect the way the novel's characters behave?

10. All around him, Norm's life is in upheaval: His cattle are sick, his wife is sick, his son is attracting attention that Norm finds embarrassing. How does he respond?

11. How does Brandon's relationship with the natural world—birds, cows, foliage, and so on—affect his abilities as a Border Patrol officer?

12. Discuss the area's reaction to Brandon's arrest of the bomber/smuggler, on pages 89-93. What is happening here?

13. Several Canadian characters compare the United States' policy on marijuana to Prohibition. Are they right? How does this relate to the vast number of previously law-abiding Americans who are willing to work with smugglers?

14. Why does Brandon stop counting birds (page 103)?

15. On page 156, McAfferty says, “Bad shit has always passed through here, but now we're watching so closely that we see way more of it.” Is this an accurate assessment?

16. Why is Norm building a boat, of all things?

17. What does Pearl's death signify? Is it a turning point for Norm?

18. “Astronauts' footprints stay on the moon forever,” Brandon whispers to Madeline on page 250, “because there's no wind to blow them away.” What is he trying to say? How do you imagine Madeline reacts?

19. What purpose does the character of Sophie serve in the novel? What did you think she was up to? Did the reality surprise you?

20. On page 290, the art expert says of Brandon's work, “His focus appears to be the instant before collapse-or surrender.” What does this mean, in terms of Brandon's art and his life?

21. Discuss the final scene, and Brandon's interaction with the swallows.

(Questions by Random House, Inc.)

Author Bio: Jim Lynch

Source: http://www.jimlynchbooks.com/bio.htm, retrieved 7/29/10.

I am drawn to dramatic settings. I get fascinated with places and study them until the characters and stories rise up. So I lucked out being born in the Seattle area and growing up in the Northwest.

As a teenager I was dazzled by the rowdy novels of Tom Robbins and Ken Kesey and the way they made our countryside come alive on the page. By the time I hit college I wanted to write novels.

My first real writing was as a reporter in an Alaskan fishing village, but I'd always found ways to write stories during the odd jobs I had before then,

including stints as a bellman, a security guard, a salmon cannery worker and a maid at The Old Faithful Inn at Yellowstone National Park.

(Jim's boat *Shibumi)*

And I usually wrote fiction in the mornings before my newspaper jobs, draft after draft, agent after agent, rejection after rejection. It wasn't some high-minded discipline that kept me rolling. I couldn't resist trying to write a good novel.

It's hard to see where you grow up as exotic. What brought Western Washington alive for me were the dozen years I left it to write for newspapers in Virginia, Washington, D.C., eastern Washington and Portland, Oregon. By the time I crawled back here, the mountains seemed larger and Puget Sound more mesmerizing. I kept kayaking, sailing and beachcombing until a premise and characters arose clearly enough to write my first novel, *The Highest Tide*.

I wasn't sure what would come next, but I knew where it would be set. As a reporter, I'd spent time studying the western end of the U.S.-Canadian border, that nonsensical line that tries to follow the 49th parallel from Minnesota to the Pacific. The line overgrows and the two countries are often divided by nothing more than a drainage ditch or nothing at all. I spent time along the border after 9/11 and saw what it was like on both sides after the U.S. Border Patrol tripled its forces.

Somehow, these quiet, humble farmlands had turned into a prime battlefront on the war on terror AND the war on drugs. I started to see provocative material and comic potential. I also soon found myself inventing characters on both sides of the line, including a young, dyslexic 6-foot-8 Border Patrol agent obsessed with birds. *Border Songs* gradually took shape.

I remain inspired by where I live, overlooking this bay at the southern bottom of Puget Sound, which probably means that at some point I will, no doubt, try to set another novel in these waters.

Reviews

Kirkus Reviews

★ Lynch, Jim. Border Songs. New York: Knopf, 2009.

Tensions on the U.S.-Canadian border disrupt a neighborhood in Lynch's entertaining second novel. Only a ditch separates one part of British Columbia from Washington State; it's narrow enough for prickly, left-wing Canadian Wayne Rousseau to exchange insults with his American neighbor, Norm Vanderkool. A retired professor with MS, Wayne makes use of a legal remedy: smoking cannabis. The more conventional Norm is a dairy farmer with sick cows and a wife losing her memory. Both men have interesting children. Madeline Rousseau, running wild since her mother's death, has started growing bud indoors for Canadian kingpin Toby, but it's her erstwhile school friend Brandon Vanderkool who's the star of the show, towering over the other characters literally (he's 6'8") and figuratively. Dyslexic 23-year-old Brandon has a hard time with people but an amazing affinity for animals and birds, his passion. Pushed into joining the Border Patrol by Norm, he barely passed the test (he's a lousy shot), but once on the job he's a sensation. Starting with a spectacular flying tackle of two hapless border-crossers, Brandon makes bust after bust of illegals and drug smugglers, seemingly without effort. Lynch presents a three-ring circus. In ring number one, the BP agents. Number two, the Canadian growers and smugglers. In the third ring, the Americans on the border, mostly dairy farmers tempted by easy money

for letting smugglers cross their property. The action (there's plenty of it) is shot through with wry humor and intermittent suspense. Brandon remains an innocent, albeit "an innocent who's bad for business," as Toby says darkly. Guns are in evidence. Maddy deceives the trusting, lovestruck Brandon about her involvement. We seem headed for a major, possibly tragic confrontation, but it doesn't happen, and the story slowly deflates. Forget the shaky plot. What's memorable is the masterful use of Brandon as a bridge between the human world, foolish and chaotic, and the more ordered universe of birds.

"Engaging, even heartwarming… Every character is memorable, each etched with distinctive lines and endearing idiosyncrasies." —Bill Ott, ***Booklist***

"Lynch's depiction of the natural world and his deep sympathy for his characters carry the book [with] majestic moments." —***Publishers Weekly***

Suggested Related Reading

The Gift of Dyslexia, by Ronald D. Davis.

The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Thinking in Pictures: my life with autuism, by Temple Grandin.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, by Mark Haddon.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, by Ken Kesey.

The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet, by Reif Larsen.

The Short Bus: a journey beyond normal, by Jonathan Mooney.

Look Me in the Eye: my life with Asperger's, by John Elder Robison.

The God of War, by Marisa Silver.

Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck.

Born on a Blue Day: a memoir, by Daniel Tammet.

The Devil's Highway: a true story, by Luis Alberto Urrea.

Imperial, by William T. Vollmann.

Web Resources

Author website: http://www.jimlynchbooks.com/

Department of Homeland Security Customs and Border Patrol website: http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/about/

National Institutes of Health Asperger Syndrome fact sheet: http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/asperger/detail_asperger.htm

Mayo Clinic on dyslexia: http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/dyslexia/DS00224