

The Highest Tide

by Jim Lynch

About the Book

The Highest Tide

One moonlit night, thirteen-year-old Miles O'Malley slips out of his house, packs up his kayak and goes exploring on the flats of Puget Sound. But what begins as an ordinary hunt for starfish, snails and clams is soon transformed by an astonishing sight: a beached giant squid. As the first person to ever see a giant squid alive, the speed-reading Rachel Carson-obsessed insomniac instantly becomes a local curiosity. When he later finds a rare deepwater fish in the tidal waters by his home and saves a dog from drowning, he is hailed as a prophet. The media hovers and everyone wants to hear what Miles has to say.

But Miles is really just a teenager on the verge of growing up, infatuated with the girl next door, worried that his bickering parents will divorce, and fearful that everything, even the bay he loves, is shifting away from him. While the sea continues to offer up discoveries from its mysterious depths, Miles struggles to deal with the difficulties that attend the equally mysterious process of growing up. In this mesmerizing, beautifully wrought first novel, we witness the dramatic sea change for both Miles and the coastline that he adores over the course of a summer that will culminate with the highest tide in fifty years.

Praise for the Book

‘Original and appealing. His love of the ocean is infectious ... Even the most hard-hearted readers will finish this book wishing they had their own bay to explore’

—**Matt Thorne, Sunday Telegraph**

‘The Highest Tide is one of the best novels it has been my pleasure to read for many a day ... Buy it you should. It is lyrical, moving, funny and breathtakingly well written ... This is a great novel which you will want to reread’

—**Susan Hill, Spectator**

‘Poetic yet lean, restrained, lucid and radiant. The metaphors are sharp and newly minted, and the beautifully observed and described details of marine life suffused with a Wordsworthian sense of wonder’

—**The Times**

About the Author

Jim Lynch is the author of *The Highest Tide* which won the 2006 Pacific Northwest Bookseller Award. A bestseller in the United States and the United Kingdom, the novel was performed on stage for three weeks in Seattle last spring. The movie rights have sold as well.

Of his path to writing that book he says, "I grew up on a lake near Seattle and explored Puget Sound as a child during weekend trips aboard my parents' sailboat. Wilson Rawls, the author of "Where the Red Fern Grows," visited my grade school and planted the writing seed inside me. And by my teens I'd fallen in love with the rowdy novels of writers like Ken Kesey and Tom Robbins. Jim graduated from the University of Washington in 1985 with degrees in journalism and creative writing, then began a career as a newspaperman with stints in Alaska, Washington D.C. and newspapers throughout the Northwest. Along the way his work won national awards, including the H.L. Mencken Award and the Livingston Young Journalist Award.

He wrote fiction on the side during his journalism career, then quit his day job in 2004 after he sold an unfinished draft of *The Highest Tide*. "I'd always hoped to write a novel with Puget Sound as a backdrop, but with *The Highest Tide* I could actually plunk the reader in the same mesmerizing waters that I enjoy with my wife, Denise, and daughter, Grace, on the outskirts of Olympia."

Since the novel came out in late 2005, Jim has been in demand as a speaker, making more than 100 appearances at bookstores, schools, book groups, yacht clubs, prisons and more. Ten different cities and communities have picked *The Highest Tide* as the book they strive to get everyone to read.

Jim lives with his wife and daughter in Olympia, Washington on Puget Sound, where he kayaks and sails as often as possible. His next novel, *Border Songs*, will roll out next June.

www.thehighesttide.com

Discussion Questions

1. A reviewer praised Lynch for his skill in using marine life as a “subtly executed metaphor for the bewilderment of adolescence.” Is there anything to that?
2. In what ways does Miles seem older than his years? What particular observations or actions demonstrate his unusual level of maturity?
3. Miles narrates his own story of the summer he was 13, a summer in which he was “ambushed by science, fame and suggestions of the divine.” What is the effect of Miles’ narration and his occasional direct address to the reader throughout the novel? How does Miles’ voice contribute to the reader’s sense of his character as “real”?
4. How would you describe the relationship between Florence and Miles? Is she a surrogate mother? What does Florence offer that Miles’ parents don’t? What does Miles offer Florence?
5. When Miles tells Phelps all about Rachel Carson, including the fact that she was “brave and brilliant,” Phelps tells him that he’s in love with a spinster who’s been dead for decades.” Phelps also tells Miles, “You’re a freak ... Why don’t you use all your homo-reading to study something of value to us...like the G-spot?”. What is the basis of the friendship between Miles and Phelps, and why are such conversations between the two (about sex and sea life, mainly) so funny?
6. Miles has overheard that his parents didn’t really want to be parents and that he was a mistake. Why are his parents so incompatible? Why are they so oblivious to Miles and his interests? How does Miles cope with his parents?
7. When asked by a TV reporter why the giant squid might have ended up in the cove, Miles responds, ““Maybe the earth is trying to tell us something.”” He then comments, “They liked that a lot. A kid says something like that, and people go ahhh. Offer a plausible explanation and they yawn. Dip into the mystical, especially if you appear to be an unsullied, clearheaded child, and they want to write a song about you.” What do these very different insights—one about the earth, and one about people—tell us about Miles?
8. Miles has a knack for rescuing people and creatures: he tries to save the giant squid; he resuscitates Lizzie, a half-drowned retriever; he rescues Phelps when he is stuck in the mud during an incoming tide; he rescues Florence daily with his visits; and he wants nothing more than to rescue Angie from her unhappiness. He also wants to rescue his parents’ marriage, but that doesn’t seem likely. And, he says, “I want to keep my bay, as I knew it, intact.” How did such an unlikely boy become a conservator and rescuer?

9. Channel 7's story about "the remarkable Olympia boy" makes much of Miles' extraordinary gift for seeing what others don't see, like the invasive Chinese mitten crabs and invasive seaweed *Caulerpa*. Florence, too, is able to know what other people can't know, as with her predictions of the earthquake and the tide. What does the novel seem to say about this ability to see or to know what other people can't? Is it a gift or a particular kind of attention?

10. According to Miles' mother, Angie Stegner has "gone public" with her craziness, which her father later tells Miles is bipolar disorder. This knowledge doesn't change Miles' feelings for Angie at all. What do his memories of Angie as his babysitter tell us about the basis of their bond? What is most interesting, or funny, about Miles' conversation with Angie in Chapter 12?

11. Some of the explanations given for the strange events occurring in the Sound that summer are winds, weather, global warming and human actions. Miles says, "People lost interest once the explanations rolled in. Some even got angry, as if scientists were determined to squeeze the magic out of everything." Given people's desire to fix on the mystical explanations for environmental events rather than the rational ones, how likely does it seem that people will take responsibility for actions that have an environmental impact? How do the media, in the novel, feed this irrational response?

12. Near the end of his story Miles says, "in the space of a summer I'd learned that everything was changing, including me. I grew six inches during the next ten months, then my voice dropped and tiny Miles O'Malley slipped away." How has Miles changed during the summer? How well has he dealt with such painful events as his parents' separation and Florence's death? How optimistic is Miles about his future?

13. In the novel's final scene, Miles and Angie are in her canoe on the flood tide, and Miles again quotes from Rachel Carson: "For all at last return to the sea—to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever—flowing stream of time, the beginning and the end." Angie tells Miles that she and the sea will wait for him. In what ways is this scene symbolic? What possible interpretations does it suggest?

14. Considering the sea life Miles observes on any given day—a giant squid, an organ-vomiting sea cucumber, horny phosphorescent worms, a scarred and battered ragfish, a giant sunflower star, moon jellies—does it seem true that we miss something exciting if we don't pay attention to the natural world? If there is a relationship between "science and suggestions of the divine" in the novel, how do they come together, or diverge?

15. In his conversation with Carolyn, in front of a large audience, Miles quotes from Rachel Carson: "If there is poetry in my book about the sea it is not because I deliberately put it there but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out poetry." Is Miles a poet as well, when he talks about the sea? Is he a natural teacher?

16. Miles says, “most people realize the sea covers two thirds of the planet, but few take the time to understand even a gallon of it...Most people don’t want to invest a moment contemplating something like that unless they happen to stroll low tide alone at night with a flashlight and watch life bubble, skitter and spit in the shallows. Then they’ll have a hard time not thinking about the beginnings of life itself and of an earth without pavement, plastic or Man.” In creating a character like Miles, does Lynch seek to make his readers think more like Miles and less like “most people”?

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If You Liked *The Highest Tide*, try...

Fiction:

Peace Like a River

By Leif Enger (2002)

Reuben Land, the asthmatic 11-year-old boy, recalls the events of his childhood, in small-town Minnesota circa 1962, in a voice that perfectly captures the stoicism of the northern Great Plains. "Here's what I saw," Rube warns his readers. "Here's how it went. Make of it what you will."

Our Lady of the Forest

By David Guterson (2004)

In North Fork, Washington, the town is reeling from the loss of its logging industry. 16-year-old Anne Holmes, a runaway asthmatic whose recent interest in Catholicism follows a period of petty thievery, while mushrooming one morning, encounters a bright light--the Virgin Mary, she believes. Soon, she has drawn a band of thousands as people flock to North Fork to witness the vision and be healed

Prodigal Summer

by Barbara Kingsolver (2000)

Wildlife biologist Deanna is caught off guard by an intrusive young hunter, while bookish city wife Lusa finds herself facing a difficult identity choice, and elderly neighbors find attraction at the height of a long-standing feud.

The Tree-Sitter

by Suzanne Matson (2006)

College student Julie falls in love with radical student Neil, who seduces her into abandoning her life of privilege to help him tree-sit in endangered forests, a shared effort that is challenged by Neil's increasingly militant acts.

The Monkey Wrench Gang

By Edward Abbey (1975)

Follows a gang of eco-saboteurs intent on saving the wilderness from further development.

Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain (1885)

Another body of water, the Mississippi, another wide eyed youngster, having trouble accepting the demands of the adult ways around him.

Non Fiction:

The Edge of the Sea

By Rachel Carson (1955)

A practical guide to identifying the inhabitants of the sea and the marshes, tide pools, and shallows that border it—a world which mirrors the "spectacle of life in all its varied manifestations as it has appeared, evolved, died out."

Under the Sea-Wind

by Rachel L. Carson (1941)

Carson's first book and her personal favorite takes you beneath the waves with the same kind of intimacy and wonder that made the documentaries Winged Migration and March of the Penguins such masterpieces of nature-immersion. Line drawings by Howard Frech

Chasing Clayoquot

by David Pitt-Brooke (2005)

A paean to Clayoquot Sound, a still pristine patch of Vancouver Island's west coast, designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. In a dozen poetic year-in-the-life chapters, Pitt-Brooke savors the place with Thoreauvian gusto

The Outermost House

By Henry Beston (1928)

Here's the other ocean. In 1925, Beston built a small house on Cape Cod and spent a year there with minimal human contact. His reflection on the experience, is a revered part of Cape Cod's literary history.

Websites:

www.bloomsburyusa.com

www.thehighestide.com

www.bookslut.com