"In the lake of the Woods" is a novel, in which it is explained mainly how hidden facts of your past can affect your present and future, your emotions and your life. This is what happens to John and his wife Kathy. John is a politician who lost the campaign for US Senate when clues from his past were uncovered by his opponent, indicating John was present in a Vietnamese village's slaughter. But these ghosts from John's past affect also his marriage as Kathy didn't know what had happened in Vietnam.

John and Kathy decide to spend some time away from civilization and all the recent memories of John's lost campaign. But they have never thought that this isolation would finally turn against them. The cabin in the Lake of the Woods is the place where the couple realizes that it is too late to fix their relationship and their happiness is something superficial and fiscal. John can't escape from his past and his present loss while Kathy is troubled about John's reaction when he asks her to have an abortion. Kathy has the abortion and her thoughts about a happy family with children vanish. After a while Kathy disappears. A search party is formed to find Kathy, but John is unwilling to help and this behavior makes him look suspicious.

The setting of Vietnam is made mainly of John's memories from the past. A whole village was slaughtered but John claims that he was never involved in this scene. Of course John erased any possible connection with the Company when he was working in a records office.

Both settings seem to connect at the point where the main character is regarded as a suspect for Kathy's murder as the writer suggested in one of his hypotheses and his possible involvement in Vietnam's village.

All the decisions and mainly the conclusion are left to the reader. Maybe Tim O'Brien created his main character not to get sympathy, as it seemed in the beginning, but to create a character so different from any other main character ever existed.