



Nuclear Age, The

By Tim O'Brien

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In 1969, 22-year-old Tim O'Brien was drafted and eventually sent to Vietnam. In a memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and two works of fiction--*Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*--he revisited the war, crafting gut-wrenching tales of terror, death, and futility among the rice paddies and jungles of Southeast Asia. In *The Nuclear Age* the author explores the road not taken: his hero, William Cowling, avoided the draft and spent the 1960s, instead, in a welter of antiwar radicalism. But soon one begins to wonder how different life in the underground, with its strange mix of idealistic visionaries and glory-seeking psychotics, really is from the battlefields of Vietnam. Enlisted in the ranks of an antiwar paramilitary organization in Florida, William remarks to his radical girlfriend Sarah that the group is "like a death squad. Can't tell the good guys from the bad guys, they're all gunslingers. Completely scrambled. But it's lethal. I know that much, it'll kill somebody." Nevertheless, he sticks it out in a noncombatant capacity and resurfaces several years later at the end of the war as a profitable trader in uranium.

Success hasn't dulled William Cowling's survival instinct, however; at the novel's start in 1995, the now-middle-aged businessman is busy digging a bomb shelter in his back yard. Nuclear war has been a particular obsession of his since those childhood drills back in the mid-1950s during which he was expected to crawl under his desk at school and cover his head against fallout. Forty years later, he still isn't taking any chances. His daughter thinks he's crazy, his wife is on the verge of leaving him, but still he digs--and as he digs he reviews the events in his life that have led up to this moment. *The Nuclear Age* is especially strong when it focuses on William's childhood and the complex web of relationships that exist within families. Less successful is O'Brien's portrayal of his character's obsession with nuclear war; though we are meant to see William as the only truly sane man in an insane world, all too often he comes across as genuinely cracked. Despite the book's weaknesses, it has many strengths, not least among them being Tim O'Brien's fierce intelligence, black wit, and eloquent prose. --*Alix Wilber*

From Library Journal

Brilliant nuclear detonations and rising silver Titans have plagued William's dreams since his childhood during the Cuban missile crisis, when he fashioned a fallout shelter from the family ping-pong table. Thirty years later his fear has mushroomed into blinding paranoia, and when his wife announces she is leaving, he laces a hole in the backyard with dynamite, places her in it, and prepares to blow her up. Understand, however, that he is a good pacifist. The impending murder is really the Bomb's fault. "If you're sane, you see the Bomb's madness. If you see madness, you freak." Such is O'Brien's ceaseless harangue in *The Nuclear Age*, an awkward polemic sure to disappoint readers of *Going After Cacciato*. Sadly, *The Nuclear Age* is not in that league, with orchestrated excitement here replaced by a didactic monotone. Paul E. Hutchison, English Dept., Pennsylvania State Univ., University Park
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From the Publisher

The Nuclear Age is about one man's slightly insane attempt to come to terms with a dilemma that confronts us all -- a little thing called The Bomb. The year is 1995, and William Cowling has finally found the courage to meet his fears head-on. Cowling's courage takes the form of a hole that he begins digging in his backyard in an effort to "bury" all thoughts of the apocalypse. Cowling's wife, however, is ready to leave him; his daughter has taken to calling him "nutto"; and Cowling's own checkered past seems to be rising out of the crater taking shape on his lawn, besieging him with flashbacks and memories of a life that's had more than its share of turmoil. Brilliantly interweaving his masterful storytelling powers with dark, surreal humor and

empathy for characters caught in circumstances beyond their control, Tim O'Brien brings us his most entertaining novel to date. At once wildly comic and sneakily profound, *The Nuclear Age* is also utterly unforgettable.

Users Review

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