In 1968, into the beautiful, spare environment of remote coastal Labrador, a mysterious child is born: a baby who appears to be neither fully boy nor girl, but both at once. Only three people are privy to the secret -- the baby's parents, Jacinta and Treadway, and a trusted neighbour, Thomasina. Together the adults make a difficult decision: to raise the child as a boy named Wayne. But as Wayne grows to adulthood within the hyper-masculine hunting culture of his father, his shadow-self -- a girl he thinks of as Annabel -- is never entirely extinguished, and indeed is secretly nurtured by the women in his life. Haunting, sweeping in scope, and stylistically reminiscent of Jeffrey Eugenides' Middlesex, Annabel is a compelling debut novel about one person's struggle to discover the truth in a culture that shuns contradiction.
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Born in Bill Quay, England and raised in Newfoundland and Labrador, Winter began her career as a script writer for Sesame Street before becoming a columnist for The Telegram in St. John's. Her debut short story collection, boYs, was published in 2007 and won that year's Winterset Award and Metcalf-Rooke Award. Her novel Annabel was published in 2010, and was a shortlisted nominee for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the 2010 Governor General's Awards. It held the distinction of being the only novel to make all three awards' 2010 shortlists.

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Discussion Questions

1. How is Wayne a litmus test for the humanity of others in the novel? How does he challenge their preconceptions?

2. What is Thomasina’s role in the book? How do other people react to her?

3. Jacinta always fears for Wayne's growing-up world, the taunting that seems inevitable. Yet Jacinta raises Wayne with a sense of possibility. How does she foster his love of art, music and fantasy?

4. What does the practical Treadway hope to instill in his son? Is there a spiritual element in this Labrador trapper? How is this world part of the legacy he hopes to leave Wayne?

5. "There were so many ways Wayne could fail" (p. 134). How does Treadway's disapproval make his son's "chest tense up"? From the Carnation milk, to the bridge, to his class-dance boycott, the boy is a sore disappointment to the father he loves. How do they treat each other? "Wayne did not want to admit that Wally was teaching him the alto harmony for Fauré’s song, or that he was copying postcards from Thomasina" (p. 133). Do you recall Treadway's trying to understand the boy? When does Wayne feel as though he is walking on eggs? Cite instances of his being judged harshly by others.

6. Do you think marriage is extolled in this book? Whose? Is it seen by any of the married people as a full salvation? Talk about Thomasina and Graham Montague. How does she survive grief after Graham and Annabel drown? Is Jacinta set apart in the town because she takes marriage seriously as compared to her silly friends, Eliza and Joan? Why do women stay rooted in place after being ignored or betrayed? "A family can go on for years without the love that once bound it together, like a lovely old wall that stays standing long after rain has crumbled the mortar" (p. 150). How do women prop up their lives?" It is amazing how small things keep you anchored in a place. Material things were important. Her slippers. Her sewing basket with sinew in it and needles with the right-sized eye for sewing leather. The cribbage board ... But was there a place where she could live with truth instead of lies? ... If you held back truth you couldn't win. You swallowed truth and it went sour in your belly and poisoned you slowly" (pp. 150 – 151). Does Wayne cement or fragment his parents' marriage?
7. "Wally Michelin had stomped through kindergarten and grades one and two with a certainty Wayne found fascinating. Wayne was in love with her from the moment he heard her crumbly voice. So in love he wished he could become her. If there was a way he could make himself into a ghost without a body—a shadow—or transparent like the lures his father used to catch Arctic char, he would have done it. He would have transformed into his father's lure, slipped under Wally Michelin's divinely freckled skin, and lived inside her, looking through her eyes" (p. 99). Talk about the love that feeds these children in youth and later.

8. Would you say the glory days of Wayne and Wally are on the Ponte Vecchio? How does Thomasina trigger the idea of the Ponte Vecchio? How is it built, and what goes on there? When Wally wrote in her diary under the Christmas lights and"sang as Wayne drew his designs, the bridge took on the enchantment of an airborne caravan, something out of a dream" (p. 129). What assails their dream world on the bridge? Does Treadway learn something from this cauterizing that helps him years later understand what the hawk tries to tell him?

9. The flowers that begin to bloom in Wayne are not only sexual. Through Wally, Thomasina, and Jacinta, how does he, nose twitching, get a scent of a world larger than his own home? "The kitchen: his mother, her pans of fried liver heart, little shoulder chops of caribou, and the other animals his father hunted—was that all? There was always what Jacinta called beautiful music: Brahms, Chopin. But the music came in to them through the radio, and there was no portal back out through which his mother could leave the realm of the ordinary. Wayne knew Jacinta had come from another world, that she remembered an elsewhere, but she was here now. She was staying here and the radio music could visit her, but she could not escape" (p. 114). What does music do for Wayne?

10. What is the origin of Gabriel Faure and "Cantique de Racine"? How is it important in the story? Talk about the phantom music Wally describes in her diary. Would she trade these "voices" for some anodyne?

11. Are some of the hateful villains themselves anomalies? What about Victoria Huskins's scrolling back over their early years. Who are the nasty people that provide such satisfying evil? Think of that snake, the new girl in town, Donna Palliser."She had a slow way of turning her head and giving a poisonous look to anyone she was taking out" (p. 99). How do those poisonous looks transmute into real treachery? Give details. Mr. Henry, the substitute teacher of the strong brown soap smell, is another narrow fellow in the grass, slimmer than Donna Palliser. What happens in the cloakroom that terrifies eleven-
year-old Wayne? What are the "ugly flowers" (p. 107) of evil that betray the boy? "If you ever need someone to talk to, about special things, things you don't want anyone to know—Mr. Henry's voice was so low it was deadly, as if he were saying Wayne could murder someone and tell Mr. Henry about it and Mr. Henry would help him conceal the crime—'you can come to me'" (p. 108). How is the boy saved from the moment of Mr. Henry's tenderness? But what is Wayne left with, "like the bulb of any bloom, underground" (p. 109)?

12. Luckily Thomasina saw that the child she had secretly named Annabel, in memory of her own lost daughter, had become graceful and mysterious... . He had no idea of the circumstances that had surrounded his birth, yet a thoughtfulness lay in his eyes that the other children, save for Wally Michelin, did not have. It was the spirit a poet might have, or a scientist, or anyone who sees the world not as he or she has been told to see it, with things named and labelled... . When Wayne Blake walked, he floated. He was Wayne, she saw now, and he was Annabel. He was both at the same time, but he did not know this" (pp. 171-172). After reading this book, have your ideas about hermaphrodites and perhaps other anomalies expanded?

13. "Wayne dreamed he was a girl again last night" (p. 148). Wally's diary is found and read by Treadway in his blitzkrieg of the children's bridge. What would you do with a child who is different? Handicapped or gifted or both together? What families have you known to transcend the conventions and see themselves as blessed for the child they have? "To Thomasina people were rivers, always ready to move from one state of being into another...Everyone was always becoming and unbecoming" (p. 41). Do you think this philosophy helps Thomasina in the loss of her own family, Graham and Annabel?

14. Talk about escape in Annabel. Think about Thomasina and Europe, Treadway and the bush (his trapline, books, and solitude), and Jacinta, if only in her mind, with her memories of music and movies in St. John. Then there is Wally, with her music, her Boston and London, her memory of Lydia Combs whose nun-teacher did not escape: "Run away, before it's too late" (pp. 115-116). What are the compromises some of these people have to make? How do you define responsibility and duty when it your own soul you are trying to save?

15. Music and dancing expand Wayne's sense of possibility. While dancing "you could say anything you wanted when you were that close. The normal restraint that made you keep things private was gone for the few minutes of the song; that's what music did, with the darkness and the closeness. If he could get that close to Wally Michelin, for one dance: that's what a dance
was, he saw. It was to get the two of you together in your own world. You could make that world anything you wanted. You could make it as far from here as possible, yet to the rest of the room you would look as if you were still here. They would have no idea where the two of you had gone... . A feeling of mystery and going forward with more than just your body. Underground streams feeding your mind. You'd ask questions and get lost together” (pp. 277 - 278).

16. Gracie, his actual prom date, is nothing if not persistent. "What's so interesting about Wally Michelin anyway? ... What are you hoping to get with her? That you couldn't have with me? ... He tried to explain. Remember the last poem we did in English? [Gracie:] The one nobody had a clue about what it meant? [Wayne:] By John Donne ... "Dull, sublunary lovers' love, whose soul is sense" (pp. 276 - 279). Why is this poem, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," a key to Wayne and Wally's story? How does the compass image reflect their own separation, as well as that of the lovers in the poem?

17. Near the end, why does Treadway want that orange as he plots the trapping tip of his life? What is the outcome? Is it possible to relate the journeys of father and son in the novel?