



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Things They Carried

by Tim O'Brien



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Preface

The Vietnam War still has the power to divide Americans between those for it and those against. Today it also divides us, just as surely, between those who remember its era firsthand and those not yet born when the troops came home. There may be no better bridge across these twin divides than Tim O'Brien's novel in stories *The Things They Carried*. The details of warfare may have changed since Vietnam, but O'Brien's semi-autobiographical account of a young platoon on a battlefield without a front, dodging sniper fire and their own misgivings, continues to win legions of dedicated readers, both in uniform and out.



“Abstraction may make your head believe, but a good story, well told, will also make your kidneys believe, and your scalp and your tear ducts, your heart, and your stomach, the whole human being.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

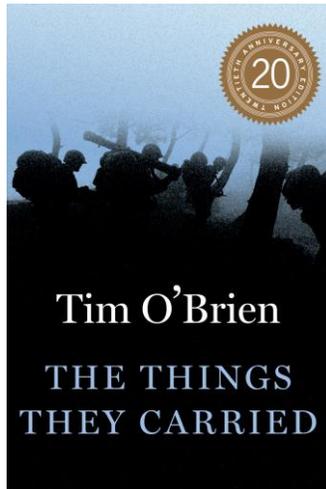
Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) is considered one of the finest books about the Vietnam War. Far from a combat story of pride and glory, it is a compassionate tale of the American soldier, brimming with raw honesty and thoughtful reflection.

The book's narrator follows a platoon of infantrymen through the jungles of Vietnam. We see them trudge through the muck of a constant downpour, get hit by sniper fire, pull body parts out of a tree, laugh while they tell their stories to each other, and fall silent when faced with making sense of it all—both in the moment and twenty years later.

The book is split into a lush mosaic of vignettes drawn from O'Brien's own experiences. The title story describes what the soldiers must lug with them—both literally and figuratively—as they march: food, canteens, flak jackets, and weapons, as well as grief, terror, secrets, and memories. In another story, O'Brien tells of a young medic who brings his high-school sweetheart to his aid station in the mountains of Vietnam, chronicling her transformation from an innocent girl in a pink sweater to a cold night stalker who dons a necklace of human tongues. Yet another story tells of a soldier back from the war who drives his Chevy around his Iowa hometown, struggling to find meaning in his new life.

Central to the book is O'Brien's unique style, which blurs the lines between fact and fiction, then examines how and why he does just that. O'Brien challenges readers to ponder larger philosophical questions about truth and memory, and brings the reader closer to the emotional core of the men's experiences. "For the common soldier," O'Brien writes in "How to Tell a True War Story," "war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true."

The Things They Carried is not just a tale of war, and the book's themes are no less relevant today than they were decades ago. This award-winning work is a brutal, sometimes funny, often profound narrative about the human heart—how it fares under pressure and what it can endure.



Major Characters in the Book

Tim O'Brien is the narrator who never wanted to fight in the Vietnam War and remains haunted by memories even 20 years after he returns to America.

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is a solitary, pensive platoon leader who cares about his men. He carries photos and letters from the girl he loves back home in New Jersey, who doesn't love him back.

Bob "Rat" Kiley is a likeable and skilled medic who braves danger to keep his fellow soldiers alive. He carries comic books, brandy, and M&Ms.

Kiowa is a kind and moral soldier from Oklahoma, a Native American, a devout Baptist. He carries an illustrated New Testament, worn-out moccasins, and his grandfather's feathered hunting hatchet.

Norman Bowker is a quiet boy from Central Iowa who strives to live up to his father's expectations and finds he can't relate to anyone back home after the war. He carries a diary and a thumb cut from a Viet Cong corpse.

Henry Dobbins is a large, strong, dependable, unsophisticated machine gunner. He carries extra rations and wears his girlfriend's pantyhose tied around his neck.

About the Author

Tim O'Brien (b. 1946)

Before Tim O'Brien was drafted into the army, he had what some would consider an all-American childhood. He was born on October 1, 1946, in Austin, Minnesota, and raised in Worthington, a small prairie town in the southern part of the state. His mother was an elementary school teacher, his father an insurance salesman and sailor in World War II. O'Brien played Little League, dabbled in magic tricks, and spent much of his youth in the county library daydreaming about such characters as Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.



Tim O'Brien (Copyright Marion Ettlinger, courtesy of Houghton Mifflin)

At Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, he received good grades and became student body president. Occasionally, he'd attend peace vigils and protests against the burgeoning war in Vietnam. He graduated in 1968 with a B.A. in political science and thought of becoming a writer, inspired in part by his father's personal accounts of two World War II battles, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, published in *The New York Times*. Then O'Brien got his draft notice. He once recalled in an interview that "even getting on the plane for boot camp, I couldn't believe any of it was happening to me, someone who hated Boy Scouts and bugs and rifles."

O'Brien spent his tour of duty from 1969 to 1970 as a foot soldier with the 46th Infantry in Quang Ngai province. For some of that time he was stationed in My Lai, just one year after the infamous My Lai Massacre. He was sent home with a Purple Heart when he got hit with shrapnel in a grenade attack.

His first writing about his war experiences came in the form of a memoir called *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, published in 1973 during his graduate studies in government at Harvard University. Soon after, he took a position for a year as a national affairs reporter for *The Washington Post*, then turned full-time to writing books.

O'Brien published *The Things They Carried* in 1990. His many accolades include a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Book Award, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. He nearly stopped writing after his sixth book, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), due to a battle with

depression. But following a nine-month hiatus, he began work on a new novel, *Tomcat in Love*, published in 1998. He currently teaches creative writing at Texas State University.

An Interview with Tim O'Brien

On November 13, 2008, Josephine Reed, Managing Audio Producer at the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Tim O'Brien. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Josephine Reed: What is *The Things They Carried* about?

Tim O'Brien: It's a book that centers on Vietnam and a platoon of soldiers. In one sense, it's about the Vietnam War, but it's also about storytelling, how stories rule our lives, how they're told and retold as we look for an elusive truth. And finally, it's about writing itself—writing as an effort to pin down with language the truth about a subject.

JR: What is the distinction between truth and accuracy?

TO: What we see accurately with our eyes can sometimes be very deceptive. We don't see everything. No historian can fit into a textbook the thoughts of every single soldier in every single war and every single episode. Much is being selected and generalized. So in *The Things They Carried*, I'm trying to get at this sense of how difficult it is to pin down the truth with a capital "T." In a way, it's a warning against absolutism, against black and white declarations of what's true and what's not true. So part of the effort is trying to display through fiction the ambiguous, blurry, complicated, grayish fog of even the most plainly historical events.

JR: I was profoundly moved by the story "On the Rainy River," not only by the character of Tim, but also the old man, Elroy. He seemed as real to me as the man sitting next to me on the train this morning.

TO: That's an example of what imagination can do. He's an imagined character—more so, even, than the Tim O'Brien character, who is also, I must say, imagined. But the old guy is made up out of the whole cloth. And yet, he represents something real that you couldn't put your finger on, which has to do with conscience, or being watched by, say, a dead father—that feeling of someone there with you who's not offering advice but is simply present as a kind of moral witness. Old Elroy is meant to stand for a whole bunch of things: my dad, my mom, my country, God, and conscience, all together.

JR: I'd also like to talk about your story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." It reminded me very much of *Heart of Darkness*.

TO: Yes, it was intentionally structured to be the other hemisphere of *Heart of Darkness*. Because Kurtz is a man, because Marlow's a man, and because virtually every character in the story is a man, the whole structure of my story is meant to be a female flip of it. In a way, I was trying to put a woman in a man's boots and see if she behaves much differently or feels other things than a man might feel. In a way the point of the story (if stories ever have "points"—and of course they don't, or maybe they have a trillion angles on a point) has to do with the image of the woman as nurturer and peaceful and incapable of the conspicuously violent behaviors of men—which, of course, when you look at history, is totally ridiculous. So the story is meant to be inclusive of women in almost all war stories.

JR: You structured this book in such an interesting way. Each individual story is like a small gem, like a pearl necklace. But when you string them together, the cumulative effect is powerful.

TO: That's my goal. I wanted to have self-contained stories that I think all chapters of books ought to be anyway. Yet I wanted each story to receive the light of other stories, the way it would in a necklace. Or one gemstone would receive the light of the ruby next to it. Although they are meant to stand alone, it seems to me that in the end, you aim ambitiously for what all writers worth their salt aim at—of making a book of art, of some sort. And that's the sense of pieces being in position, so that they can reflect. So that the pieces are capable of not just reflecting, but absorbing the light of the others.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Tim O'Brien

1940s

- 1945: World War II ends.
- 1946: Tim O'Brien is born on October 1.
- 1948: With *The Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer sets a new standard for American writers about war.

1950s

- 1953: Dwight D. Eisenhower is inaugurated U.S. president, heralding a period of economic prosperity.
- 1954: The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu. French Indochina is partitioned into Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam.
- 1955: U.S. offers aid to the South Vietnamese government.

1960s

- 1964: An incident between North Vietnamese and U.S. battleships in the Gulf of Tonkin prompts President Johnson to order the first U.S. airstrikes against North Vietnam in August.
- 1965: The first U.S. combat troops are sent to Vietnam in March.
- 1967: Nearly 100,000 people march in Washington, D.C., to protest the war in October.
- 1968: O'Brien graduates from college and is drafted into the army.

1970s

- 1970: O'Brien is sent home with a Purple Heart and the rank of sergeant.
- 1974: President Nixon resigns over Watergate scandal.
- 1975: Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese, ending the Vietnam War in April.
- 1979: O'Brien's third novel, *Going After Cacciato*, wins National Book Award.

1980s

- 1981: The Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees receives the Nobel Peace Prize for aiding the escape of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese "boat people."
- 1982: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall is completed in Washington, D.C.
- 1985: O'Brien publishes *The Nuclear Age*.

1990s

- 1990: O'Brien publishes *The Things They Carried*.
- 1993: The Vietnam Women's Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C.
- 1998: O'Brien publishes *Tomcat in Love*.

2000s

- 2001: The U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement goes into effect, opening the American market to Vietnamese goods in December.
- 2002: O'Brien publishes *July, July*.
- 2010: 20th anniversary edition of *The Things They Carried* is published.

The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was one of the longest military conflicts in U.S. history, claiming the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and wounding more than 300,000. Estimates place the number of killed or wounded North and South Vietnamese at roughly four million soldiers and civilians—roughly 10% of the population.

In 1959, North and South Vietnam were divided along what is known as the "17th parallel." The North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front sought to unify the country under Communist rule; the South Vietnamese army struggled to maintain independence. In 1964, the U.S. Congress authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to take steps "to prevent further aggression" and keep the South Vietnamese government from collapsing, or as Woodrow Wilson once pledged, to "make the world safe for democracy."

In 1965, the U.S. sent ground troops to South Vietnam and began a series of bombing missions over North Vietnam called Operation Rolling Thunder. Densely forested countryside prevented the effective use of tanks, provided cover for guerrilla fighters and medical evacuations, and allowed helicopters to transport troops and supplies. By the end of 1966, the U.S. had nearly 400,000 troops fighting in Vietnam; by the start of 1969, the draft was in full force and that number had increased to 540,000.

In mid-1969, strategies shifted as it became more evident to American soldiers, politicians, and citizens that the U.S. efforts in Vietnam were not prevailing. Newly elected President Richard Nixon responded by withdrawing 25,000 troops.

Unlike in World War II, there was no front in Vietnam, the danger was pervasive and unrelenting, and the most common measure of "success" was counting the dead bodies of the enemy. The average age of U.S. service members in Vietnam was 19, seven years younger than in WWII, making soldiers even more susceptible to psychological strain.

Although the war claimed countless Vietnamese civilian casualties, Americans were shocked when they learned about an incident that occurred in March of 1968. In what is known as the My Lai Massacre, members of a U.S. infantry company slaughtered more than 300 Vietnamese villagers, including women, elderly men, children, and infants. As news of this incident and other failures of the war broke in Western publications, the American peace movement gained momentum.

Large antiwar protests spread across America. The morale among troops—particularly those coming home from the war to a country with little empathy for what they had experienced—was low. Suicide, alcoholism, divorce, and unemployment were more rampant among veterans of Vietnam than of any other war in U.S. history until then.

In January 1973, the warring governments signed a peace accord, ending open hostilities between North Vietnam and the U.S. However, the conflict between Vietnamese forces continued until the fall of Saigon in South Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

The complexity of the struggle and the reasons for America's involvement are still widely debated. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is the most famous tribute to the war. Designed by Maya Ying Lin and constructed in 1982, the memorial is a stark black granite wall with the names engraved of American service members killed and missing in the war.

Other Works/Adaptations

O'Brien and His Other Works

Tim O'Brien published the first of his books in 1973, at age 27, to wide critical acclaim. A powerful memoir of his experiences in Vietnam, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* is in many ways a precursor to *The Things They Carried*.

His debut novel, *Northern Lights*, was published two years later. It is a gripping story of two brothers, one who fought in Vietnam and one who stayed home and protested the war. Stuck in a blizzard in Minnesota's north woods, they are forever changed by what they learn about each other.

Going After Cacciato (1978), O'Brien's third book, was a breakthrough critical and commercial success. Winner of the 1979 National Book Award, the novel follows a squad of soldiers on their search for a missing comrade who has deserted his post in Vietnam to walk more than 6,000 miles to Paris for the peace talks. The search becomes surreal when they find themselves following an elusive trail of M&Ms through the jungles of Indochina, and across India, Iran, Greece, and Yugoslavia.

O'Brien revisited the subject of the Vietnam War twice more in his books: *The Things They Carried* (1990), a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize; and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), named one of the best novels of the year in *Time* magazine and *The New York Times* Book Review. The protagonist of *In the Lake of the Woods* is a politician whose bid for the U.S. Senate is derailed when revelations surface about his participation in a village massacre during the war. He retreats to a cabin on a remote Minnesota lake with his wife, who mysteriously disappears.

O'Brien's other three books are a departure from the Vietnam War, illustrating his talents at tackling complex moral issues on any front. *The Nuclear Age* (1985) depicts a self-proclaimed pacifist who becomes insanely paranoid about a nuclear attack. In *Tomcat in Love* (1998), which marks O'Brien's first foray into the comic novel, a womanizing professor of linguistics and amiable sociopath suffers from a vengeful paranoia at the downward spiral of his life. *July, July* (2002) brings a college class of 1969 back for a 30th reunion to reminisce and examine the arcs of their lives.

To label O'Brien solely a war writer is to dismiss his command of fiction on any subject and the universal themes that permeate his work. "I think in every book I have written," O'Brien has said, "I've had the twins of love and evil. They intertwine and intermix. They'll separate, sometimes, yet they're hooked the way valences are hooked

together. The emotions in war and in our ordinary lives are, if not identical, damn similar."

Works by Tim O'Brien

- *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, 1973
- *Northern Lights*, 1975
- *Going After Cacciato*, 1978
- *The Nuclear Age*, 1985
- *The Things They Carried*, 1990
- *In the Lake of the Woods*, 1994
- *Tomcat in Love*, 1998
- *July, July*, 2002

Discussion Questions

1. The narrator of *The Things They Carried* has the same name as the book's author. How did this affect your response to the book?
2. In the title story, how do the things the men carry help define them as individuals? What are some of the more interesting items? Which "things" were unexpected? What would you carry if you went to war?
3. At the end of "On the Rainy River," the narrator says, "I was a coward. I went to the war." What does he mean by this? Do you agree?
4. In "How to Tell a True War Story," what does the narrator say on this subject? What do you think makes a true war story?
5. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," what causes the transformation in Mary Anne Bell? How does Rat Kiley's telling of the story add to the tension? What does the story say about the Vietnam experience?
6. In "Speaking of Courage," the narrator says, "Sometimes the bravest thing on earth was to sit through the night and feel the cold in your bones. Courage was not always a matter of yes or no." How does the narrator define courage? How do you define it?
7. In "Good Form," the narrator says, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." What does he mean by "story truth" and "happening-truth"? Why might one be "truer" than the other?
8. The narrator of the story "The Ghost Soldiers" says, "When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world." What might he mean by this?
9. Even though *The Things They Carried* is set during the Vietnam War, in what ways is it relevant today, with regard to war and politics as well as our personal struggles?

Additional Resources

Books about the Vietnam War

- Appy, Christian G. *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Viking, 1983.
- Langguth, A. J. *Our Vietnam/Nuoc Viet Ta: The War, 1954-1975*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Books about Tim O'Brien

- Herzog, Tobey C. *Tim O'Brien*. New York: London: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- Ciocia, Stefania. *Vietnam and Beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012.

If you liked *The Things They Carried*, you might also enjoy:

- Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, 1974
- Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, 1977
- Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, 1977
- Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, 1992
- Thom Jones's *The Pugilist at Rest*, 1993
- Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War*, 1994

Credits

Works Cited

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O'Brien, Tim. An Interview with Josephine Reed for The Big Read. 13 November 2008.

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Bourne, Daniel. "A Conversation with Tim O'Brien." *Artful Dodge*. 2 October 1991.

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Viking, 1983.

O'Brien, Tim. "Writing Vietnam." President's Lecture at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 21 April 1999.

Acknowledgments

Writer: Amy Stolls for the National Endowment for the Arts

Cover image: "Military Dog Tags" by Zim235. Dreamstime.



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