The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

Heroic young men carry the emotional weight of their lives to war in Vietnam in a patchwork account of a modern journey into the heart of darkness.


About the Author: Tim O'Brien received the 1979 National Book Award in fiction for Going After Cacciato. His other works include the acclaimed novels The Things They Carried and July, July. In the Lake of the Woods received the James Fenimore Cooper Prize from the Society of American Historians and was named the best novel of 1994 by Time. O'Brien lives in Austin, Texas.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is the first story, "The Things They Carried," written in third person? How does this serve to introduce the rest of the novel? What effect did it have on your experience of the novel when O'Brien switched to first person, and you realized the narrator was one of the soldiers?

2. In the list of all the things the soldiers carried, what item was most surprising? Which item did you find most evocative of the war? Which items stay with you?

3. In "On The Rainy River," we learn the 21-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage: "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. It was a comforting theory." What might the 43-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage be? Were you surprised when he described his entry into the Vietnam War as an act of cowardice? Do you agree that a person could enter a war as an act of cowardice?

4. What is the role of shame in the lives of these soldiers? Does it drive them to acts of heroism, or stupidity? Or both? What is the relationship between shame and courage, according to O'Brien?

5. Often, in the course of his stories, O'Brien tells us beforehand whether or not the story will have a happy or tragic ending. Why might he do so? How does it affect your attitude towards the narrator?

6. According to O'Brien, how do you tell a true war story? What does he mean when he says that true war stories are never about war? What does he mean when he writes of one story, "That's a true story that never happened"?

7. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," what transforms Mary Anne into a predatory killer? Does it matter that Mary Anne is a woman? How so? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?

8. The story Rat tells in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is highly fantastical. Does its lack of believability make it any less compelling? Do you believe it? Does it fit O'Brien's criteria for a true war story?
9. Aside from "The Things They Carried," "Speaking of Courage" is the only other story written in third person. Why are these stories set apart in this manner? What does the author achieve by doing so?

10. What is the effect of "Notes," in which O'Brien explains the story behind "Speaking Of Courage"? Does your appreciation of the story change when you learn which parts are "true" and which are the author's invention?

11. In "In The Field," O'Brien writes, "When a man died, there had to be blame." What does this mandate do to the men of O'Brien's company? Are they justified in thinking themselves at fault? How do they cope with their own feelings of culpability?

12. In "Good Form," O'Brien casts doubt on the veracity of the entire novel. Why does he do so? Does it make you more or less interested in the novel? Does it increase or decrease your understanding? What is the difference between "happening-truth" and "story-truth."

13. On the copyright page of the novel appears the following: "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary." How does this statement affect your reading of the novel?


15. "The Ghost Soldiers" is one of the only stories of The Things They Carried in which we don't know the ending in advance. Why might O'Brien want this story to be particularly suspenseful?

(Questions from publisher.)