

Guiding Questions about *The Things They Carried*

Prefatory material

1. Examine the reverse side of the title page, specifically the publication history of the stories in the book. What does this information tell you about the writing of the book? How did O'Brien assemble his novel? Or is it a collection of short stories? Or is it a collection of non-fiction essays? (This question is about the composition of the book, both as written and as read.)
2. Who does O'Brien dedicate this book to? Since the people named appear in the book, does that mean that they are not fictional characters?
3. Read the epigraph to the book, taken from John Ransom's *Andersonville Diary*. What was Andersonville? What war is this passage referring to? What does this epigraph say about the truthfulness and accuracy of O'Brien's story? How are we to read *The Things They Carried*, according to this epigraph—as truth or as fiction?

"The Things They Carried"

- (1) In what sense does Jimmy love Martha? Why does he construct (7) If this is a story about sacrifice, what does Jimmy sacrifice, and why?
- (2) When is he most likely to think about her? Why is he thinking about her while one of his platoon members is in the tunnel?
- (3) In what sense is Ted Lavender's death his fault?
- (4) Here is his excuse for allowing his men to be lax: "He was just a kid at war, in love." Why does Jimmy use this excuse? In what sense does it excuse him? In what sense, doesn't it?
- (5) Why do the soldiers tell jokes about the war, about killing?
- (6) How is the idea of weight used and developed in this story ("Jungle boots, 2.1 pounds")? How do you, as a reader, feel reading those lists of weight? What effect does it have on you?
- (7) If this is a story about sacrifice, what does Jimmy sacrifice, and why?
- (8) How has Jimmy changed by the end of the story? How will he be a different person from this point on? What has he learned about himself? Or to put it another way, what has he lost and what has he gained?
- (9) Do you think the war will affect him in a different way now that he refuses to think about Martha? How will it be different? What did "Martha" save him from?

"On the Rainy River"

- (1) How do the opening sentences prepare you for the story: "This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone"? What effect do they have on you, as a reader?
- (2) Why does O'Brien relate his experience as a pig declotter? How does this information contribute to the story? Why go into such specific detail?
- (3) What is Elroy Berdahl's role in this story? Would this be a better or worse story if young Tim O'Brien simply headed off to Canada by himself, without meeting another person?
- (4) At the story's close, O'Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but doesn't: "I did try. It just wasn't possible." What has O'Brien learned about himself, and how does he return home as a changed person?

(5) In this story, 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?

"How to Tell a True War Story"

(1) Why does this story begin with the line: "This is true"? How does that prepare you, as a reader, for the story? In what sense is "this" true?

(2) In this story O'Brien relates a number of episodes. What makes these episodes seem true? Or, to put it another way, how does O'Brien lull you into the belief that each of these episodes are true?

(3) Find a few of O'Brien's elements of a "true war story" (such as, "A true war story is never moral.") Why does O'Brien believe these elements are important to a "true" war story?

(4) In what sense is a "true" war story actually true? That is, in O'Brien's terms, what is the relationship between historical truth and fictional truth? Do you agree with his assessment that fictional truth and historical do not need to be the same thing?

(5) According to O'Brien, why are stories important? In your opinion, what do we, as people, need from stories--both reading them and telling them?

(6) Why is the baby water buffalo scene more disturbing than the death of one of O'Brien's platoon members, Dave Jensen

(7) Why does Rat Kiley kill the baby water buffalo? Explain the complex emotions he experiences in this scene.

(8) O'Brien explains that this story was "not a war story. It was a love story." In what sense is this a "love story"? Why?

(9) How many times are we told the story of Curt Lemon's death? What are the differences in the way the story is told?

(10) Finally, O'Brien says that "none of it happened. None of it. And even if it did happen, it didn't happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy..." If O'Brien is not trying to communicate historical fact, what is he trying to communicate? Why change the details? What kind of truth is he trying to relate, and why is this truth set apart from historical truth? Is it OK that this "true" war story may or may not be entirely true?

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"

(1) Is this a war story, per se? If so, who is the main character, and why?

(2) Again, this story plays with truth. In the first paragraph, O'Brien tells us, "I heard it from Rat Kiley, who swore up and down to its truth, although in the end, I'll admit, that doesn't amount to much of a warranty." How does O'Brien engage you in a story which, up front, he's already admitted is probably not "true"? How does this relate to his ideas for a "true war story" found in an earlier story?

(3) How does O'Brien use physical details to show Mary Anne's change? (Think of her gestures, her clothes, her actions.) How, specifically, has she change? And why?

(4) Why do you think O'Brien keeps stopping the story so that other characters can comment on it. How do these other conversations add to Mary Anne's story?

(5) Does it matter what happened, in the end, to Mary Anne? Would this be a better story if we knew, precisely, what happened to her after she left camp? Or does this vague ending add to the story? Either way, why?

"Stockings" and "Church"

(1) Notice that the story before this also has to do with a "girlfriend" and her relationship with one of the members of the platoon. Both women, in very different ways, reject their boyfriend. What does Dobbins do with his pantyhose when his girlfriend dumped him? Why?

(2) The sequence of the two chapters is odd, yet the two are connected because the monks relate best to Dobbins. What do those three have in common?

(3) What did the monks at the temple help Henry Dobbins do? Any comment on the irony of their actions?

(4) How does Kiowa feel about the soldiers camping at the temple? Why?

(5) Thinking of New Testament parallels, what might be the significance of Dobbins washing his hands?

"The Man I Killed," "Ambush," & "Good Form"

(1) When Tim O'Brien introduces the subject of "The Man I Killed," he does it with the following description. Why does he start here? Why use these details? "His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward into a cowlick at the rear of the skull," etc.

(2) "The Man I Killed" describes fairly intimate aspects of the dead man's life? Where do these details come from? How can Tim O'Brien know them? What is going on here? "(From) his earliest boyhood the man I killed had listened to stories about the heroic Trung sisters and Tran Hung Dao's famous rout of the Mongols and Le Loi's final victory against the Chinese at Tot Dong. He had been taught that to defend the land was a man's highest duty and highest privilege. He accepted this," etc. (By the way, remember some of these names from Le Ly Hayslip?)

(3) For the remainder of the story O'Brien portrays himself as profoundly moved by this death: "Later Kiowa said, 'I'm serious. Nothing anybody could do. Come on, Tim, stop staring.'" How would you describe O'Brien's emotional state in this scene?

(4) In "Ambush," Tim O'Brien's daughter, Kathleen, asks if he ever killed a man: "'You keep writing these war stories,' she said, 'so I guess you must've killed somebody.'" Following this, O'Brien relates two possible scenarios of the death described in "The Man I Killed" to explain "This is why I keep writing war stories." In your opinion, why does O'Brien keep writing war stories?

(5) Reread "Good Form." In it, O'Brien tells two more versions of "The Man I Killed" story. In the first, Tim simply sees a dead soldier, the one with the star-shaped hole in his cheek, laying at the side of the road. "I did not kill him." Following this, O'Brien admits that "even that story is made up." In the second version, he explains that he merely saw many faceless, dead men. Where does truth reside in this book? What is the connection between O'Brien's actual experiences and the events in this book? Why is O'Brien using lies to get at "the truth"?

(6) In "Ambush," O'Brien tells part of "The Man I Killed" story to his daughter, Kathleen. Consider that O'Brien might not actually have a daughter. Would that change how you felt about the story? If he doesn't have a daughter, what is she doing in this novel?

"Speaking of Courage" & "Notes"

(1) To begin with, why is this story called "Speaking of Courage"? Assume the title does NOT hold any irony. In what sense does this story speak of courage?

(2) Why does Norman Bowker still feel inadequate with seven medals? And why is Norman's father such a presence in his mental life? Would it really change Norman's life if he had eight medals, the silver star, etc.?

(3) What is the more difficult problem for Norman--the lack of the silver star or the death of Kiowa? Which does he consider more and why?

(4) Like other male characters in this novel (for example, Tim O'Brien and Lt. Jimmy Cross), Norman Bowker develops an active fantasy life. Why do these men develop these fantasy roles? What do they get from telling these fantasy stories to themselves?

(5) Why is Norman unable to relate to anyone at home? More importantly, why doesn't he even try?

(6) 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?

(7) In "Notes," Tim O'Brien receives a letter from Norman Bowker, the main character in "Speaking of Courage." Why does O'Brien choose to include excerpts of this seventeen page letter in this book? What does it accomplish?

(8) Consider for a moment that the letter might be made-up, a work of fiction. Why include it then?

(9) In "Notes," Tim O'Brien says, "You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain it." What does this tell you about O'Brien's understanding of the way fiction relates to real life?

"The Lives of the Dead"

(1) Reread the first paragraph of "The Lives of the Dead." How does O'Brien set us up to believe this story? What techniques does he use to convince us this story is "true"? In general, how are details used in this collection of stories in such a way their truth is hard to deny?

(2) In your opinion, why does O'Brien choose to include this story about a young girl, named Linda, in this collection? What does it accomplish?

(3) In many ways, this book is as much about stories, or the necessity of stories, as it is about the Vietnam war. According to O'Brien, what do stories accomplish? Why does he continue to tell stories about the Vietnam war, about Linda?

(4) Reread the final two pages of this book. Consider what the young Tim O'Brien learns about storytelling from his experience with Linda. How does this knowledge prepare him not only for the war, but also to become a writer? Within the parameters of this story, how would you

characterize Tim O'Brien's understanding of the purpose of fiction? How does fiction relate to life, that is, life in the journalistic or historic sense?

(5) Would it change how you read this story, or this novel, if Linda never existed? Why or why not?

(6) This final story carries a motif of "death" from the very opening with the dead old man in Vietnam through the story of his friend Linda in his youth. In between the stories, O'Brien makes connections between death, memory, and storytelling. At the same time, O'Brien talks about storytelling as reviving "at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging." According to this last story, why does O'Brien tell stories?

Created from numerous sites, including:

<http://wwwpp.uwrf.edu/~tb00/TimObrien.html>

www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/things_they_carried.asp

<http://mailer.fsu.edu/~tjp4773/thingsquestions.html>