

**Truth, Lies, & Story-Telling in the Works of Tim O'Brien:  
A Guide for the USNA Instructor**

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During their professional careers, our midshipmen may be faced with the challenge of deciding under what circumstances, if any, it is appropriate for a leader to lie. As instructors, we ought to offer challenges to the ethical codes our students have begun to absorb but perhaps not reflect upon, so that they may be better prepared to negotiate similar challenges when they leave the safe confines of the Academy. We ought to ask if it is feasible for midshipmen to adhere strictly to the USNA Honor Code once they graduate (or even while they are here). In the future, might they be justified in lying to acquire government funding for a worthwhile public works project which special interests threaten to derail? Or to guarantee the effective completion of a scientific project, as when medical researchers give placebos to patients? What about lying to locals to spread misinformation about planned military maneuvers? What about lying to the press for the same purpose? What if the lie has no immediately negative consequence and might in fact improve morale or performance among subordinates, as when a platoon leader promises a wounded Marine that rescue is imminent when he in fact knows differently?

Because it is fundamentally involved with matters of trust and the reliability of language, the issue of lying should naturally draw the interest of instructors in LEL and English alike. As the saying goes, 'Your word is your bond,' and our respective disciplines are deeply engaged with the relation between language and the bonds of trust. Our students can value from inquiries into and challenges to their views on lying, and the study of literature can provide a sort of moral laboratory in which such experiments in ethics can take place, allowing students to articulate, reflect upon, and even try to defend ethical views that are unfamiliar or contrary to their own. The value of such an experience is, in fact, experience, for in the classroom they may make mistakes, suffer confusion, and face doubt without harm to themselves or to those they lead. We do not want our midshipmen to graduate without direct challenges to their entrenched and unexamined views (moral, political, etc.), since they will have less time and fewer resources available to make sense of those challenges once they are operating in a professional setting. As William Blake puts it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without Contraries is no progression."

This project will attempt to address some of the questions and issues mentioned above. The three parts are: an essay on truth and story-telling in the works of Tim O'Brien; a series of lesson plans with close readings of select stories in *The Things They Carried*, the best-known of O'Brien's books and one which easily meets the genre requirements of HE111 (as a collection of short stories) and of HE112 (as a novel) and which offers LEL instructors an excellent anthology of stories from which to select for NL110; and a timeline of key events in the Vietnam conflict, which should supply useful background information for midshipmen and instructors alike as they try to situate the moral ambiguities of O'Brien's works in their historical reality.

## Truth, Lies, & Story-Telling In the Works of Tim O'Brien

The novels and stories of Tim O'Brien are, at their core, epistemological studies; that is, they attempt to make sense of how we know what we know. For O'Brien, any notion of 'truth' is fundamentally individual and ambiguous; as he writes in *In the Lake of the Woods*, "How often do we lie awake speculating—seeking some hidden truth.... We find truth inside, or not at all" (295). Yet this condition does not preclude truthfulness for O'Brien, for one may nevertheless accurately represent the whirl of individual and ambiguous truths that composes our reality without having to grasp at a single, exclusive, 'true' version of that reality. Such surety in the midst of uncertainty is what the poet John Keats calls "*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (43). For Tim O'Brien, such a relation to truth is best achieved by telling stories, since "Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (*TTC* 38).

Concerned with issues of truth, story-telling, and the relation between the two, O'Brien focuses much of his writing on the difficulty of telling the truth about war, from the experience of combat to the challenge of returning home after war. (Although the Vietnam War colors many of his writings, O'Brien rejects the label of war novelist; for him, war occasions and/or exemplifies human life under pressure, a condition that can be experienced in any number of other situations.) O'Brien's interest in truth-telling and war is not unique; one of his important predecessors is Ernest Hemingway, whose collection of short stories and vignettes *In Our Time* provides an important model for the organization of O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried*. In his short story "Soldier's Home," Hemingway writes that the story's protagonist, Harold Krebs, disaffected after his return from WWI, spends his time reading about the engagements in which he served, noting that "Now he was really learning about the war. He had been a good soldier. He made a difference" (72). Krebs's struggle is a crucial one for the combat veteran's experience, since factual accuracy can supply a sense of pattern and order to counterbalance the chaos, disorder, and potential meaninglessness of war.

But the effort to arrive at the absolute truth about an event is beset with problems, since the excess of factors involved in war prevents any one participant from grasping and representing the whole. Writer and journalist Michael Herr suggests that the very nature of the war in Vietnam intensified the difficulty of explaining just what happened there, and he illustrates this view in a brief anecdote from his book of Vietnam reporting, *Dispatches*. Herr writes "'Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened'" (6). While O'Brien also represents the experience of Vietnam as one in which it is particularly difficult to "tell... what happened," he finds that an inherently epistemological problem and more general than the Vietnam experience itself. In *Going After Cacciato*, Captain Rhallon says that "[The soldier] registers... only those few items that he is predisposed to register and not a single thing more.... (A)fter a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories" (196). Nevertheless, that effort to locate and express the truth about an experience, particularly the experience of trauma, is crucial; to do otherwise is to abandon one's self to the madness of chaos and meaninglessness.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from absolute truth is the absolute absence of truth, manifest in the unreality of daydreaming, which O'Brien associates with escapism, and in

cultural amnesia and blindness, which characterizes the American response to Vietnam both during the war and afterward. It is no coincidence that many of O'Brien's most traumatized characters—Paul Berlin, Norman Bowker, John Wade—often lose themselves in a dream world that protects them from the brutalities of the real world. Nor is it surprising that O'Brien's most depraved yet perhaps most sympathetic character, John Wade (*In the Lake of the Woods*), is not only a skilled stage magician, but also a skillful amnesiac. Wade edits his Army service records to conceal his presence at the My Lai massacre, then conceals these facts from his wife and ultimately from himself. Only when implicating photos emerge during his failed senatorial campaign does Wade begin to confront the truth, only to enact an even greater trick of forgetfulness as he conceals from himself his own likely culpability in the disappearance (and likely death) of his wife before disappearing himself in the woods of northern Minnesota. For O'Brien, daydreaming and cultural blindness obscure the relative complexities of truth just as fully as the insistence on absolute truth; to be swept up in illusions or denial during the traumatic experiences of war is not unexpected, but unchecked it can be dangerous, for an utter divorce from reality also signals a divorce from morality.

Fiction proves the golden mean between absolute truth and absolute dream. It is impossible to ascertain the absolute truth of an experience, but it is nevertheless critical that one try to ascertain the multiple truths, to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason,” and this challenge marks the human condition. Fiction is neither counter to nor identical with the truth, though given the exigencies of war, fiction often provides the best approximation of reality; as O'Brien writes in “How to Tell a True War Story,” “In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (*TTTC*, 82). O'Brien claims that “My role is not to solve mysteries, but to expand them... To ultimately make readers think of their lives in terms of ambiguity. It's the human condition and we're uncertain about almost everything” (Hicks, 89-90). The storyteller takes the facts of experience and embellishes or even alters them in order to get at a closer experience of truth; O'Brien finds in fiction the possibility of expressing “that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (*TTTC*, 71). Thus, the capacity to tell a story, to make a factual account that leaves out the subjective experience into a fictional but seemingly more truthful account, is essential to understanding the experience of war for all involved and to beginning the long process of recovering from its damages and of correcting its failures.

Why is O'Brien's work so unrelentingly preoccupied with issues of truth and fiction? Such obsessions may be directly related to the experience of the Vietnam War itself, in which unclear motives, deceptive operations, an alien culture, and an anonymous citizenry created an atmosphere of ambiguity in which ascertaining the facts of war proves an incredible challenge. Writing about the summer he was drafted, O'Brien remarks, “The only certainty that summer was moral confusion. It was my view then, and still is, that you don't make war without knowing why. Knowledge, of course, is always imperfect, but it seemed to me that when a nation goes to war it must have reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative of its cause. You can't fix mistakes. Once people are dead, you can't make them undead” (*TTTC*, 39-40). For O'Brien, daydreaming, amnesia, and an insistence on absolute truth represent a failure to negotiate the ambiguity of truth, and such a failure makes us vulnerable to manipulations of the truth, the consequences of which can be devastating. As he warns us in “How to Tell a True War Story,” “You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you

don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" (*TTTC*, 69).

To better understand the ties between truth, lying, and the Vietnam conflict in O'Brien's fiction, a few important instances of U.S. political deception during the Vietnam era bear repeating:

- Gulf of Tonkin: Though there had been a relatively significant U.S. presence in Vietnam since 1950, it escalated following the alleged attacks on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin by Vietnamese torpedo boats on August 2 and 4, 1964. These attacks prompted President Lyndon Johnson to demand full Congressional support for a response to the attacks, leading to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which did not declare war on Vietnam but nevertheless pleased President Johnson, who said of it (according to Johnson biographer Robert Dallek) "It's just like Grandma's nightshirt. It covers everything."
- The 1964 Campaign: Running against Cold Warrior Barry Goldwater, Johnson called his opponent a war-monger and promised not to go to war. Johnson carried all but five states, but he and his circle did not believe they could withdraw from Vietnam, fearing the political damage.
- The Tet Offensive: From January to March, 1968, the National Liberation Front (NLF, aka "Viet Cong") launched an offensive coinciding with the Tet holiday, fighting in cities which were thought secure since 1965. Though the offensive proved a military defeat for the NLF, it did great damage to the credibility of the U.S. military and civilian leadership, which had long assured the public media of the security of these areas. As a measure of public reaction against Johnson, which had been building for some time but which may have reached a boiling point in the wake of Tet, we might look at the March 1968 Democratic primary in New Hampshire. Johnson won, but Eugene McCarthy, campaigning on his opposition to Vietnam, received a substantial percentage of the vote (42% to Johnson's 49%), shocking the press. Later that month, Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election.
- Incursion into Cambodia: Under President Richard Nixon, the U.S. stepped up its air war in Northern Vietnam, secretly extending its campaign into NVA (North Vietnamese Army) sanctuaries in Cambodia, which was a neutral state.

These instances of uncertainty and political deception both exacerbated and symbolized the confusing challenges that the U.S. military encountered in Vietnam, and their very real consequences touched O'Brien directly and continue to fuel his epistemological concern with trying to tell the truth about the Vietnam experience.

But doesn't the effort to 'tell the truth' about what apparently cannot be truthfully told amount to lying? Doesn't the manipulation of biography and factual events in order to craft a compelling story, as O'Brien does in "On the Rainy River," amount to lying? And shouldn't we, as truth-seekers, reject lying? Perhaps not, according to philosopher Sissela Bok. In *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, Bok criticizes the absolute rejection of lying typified by Kant's categorical imperative, which holds that one should act only if one could simultaneously will that one's action would become a universal law. For Bok, there are indeed

circumstances in which it is not only possible to lie, but morally appropriate to do so (as when one lies to a murderer about the location of a potential victim). But Bok also rejects a facile utilitarianism that holds that truth and lies are to be distinguished only by the relative good or harm they bring; rather, lies are exceptional. Yet the liar often overestimates the instances in which such exceptional lies are appropriate. Many lies overlook alternative solutions to the circumstances they attempt to resolve, and as a result, they contribute to detrimental practices that steadily erode relations to truth.

Two key criteria for Bok in terms of determining the appropriateness of lies are whether or not such lies will contribute to a future practice of lying and whether or not they stand up to the test of publicity. In the former instance, she asks if the lie will expedite or otherwise help rationalize the telling of other lies, and she rejects the lie if it may produce other foreseeable deceptions. In the earlier circumstance of lying to a murderer about the whereabouts of his victim, Bok suggests that such an exceptional circumstance is unlikely to become the standard for other questions about whereabouts (say questions asked by a parent), and if the lies are told in circumstances where there is an ongoing threat to survival (say when the murderer is a Nazi and the victims in question are Jews one is hiding as part of one's efforts at resistance), then the threatening environment suspends any judgment about the harmful effects of any longstanding practice of deception.

In the latter instance, Bok argues that lies must bear the test of publicity; that is, of public scrutiny and judgment. Here, Bok is pushing for us to judge the lie in anticipation of ourselves being the dupes of the lie. Certainly there are circumstances where deception is necessary and needs no outside verification, but more often than not, Bok argues, a public consideration of the value and validity of such lying will not limit its future effectiveness (as when we have a public discussion of the right of our government to send spies abroad). Moreover, public consideration will guarantee the responsibility for judging the validity of the lie rests not with the liar, who will often exaggerate the need for deception, but with potential victims, who will be more scrupulous and discerning on the basis of self-interest.

Where does fiction fit in the continuum between truth and deception? There is a longstanding conflict in Western culture over this issue, and two of the most familiar positions come to us from Plato and from the Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the *Republic*, Plato argues that literature and art are at three removes from nature, and he justifies his banishment of "the poetic tribe" from his ideal state by claiming that "mimetic art is far removed from truth" (823) and that "if [the artist] had genuine knowledge of the things he imitates he would far rather devote himself to real things than to the imitation of them" (824). Yet Coleridge argues in *Bibliographia Literaria* that literature invites and requires a "willing suspension of disbelief" (264) or the audience's consent to be deceived in order to function, such consent overriding any accusations of deception. Bok's few comments about fiction appear in a chapter on paternalistic deception (the use of deception to guide and coerce others, often children, in order to serve their best interests). She cautions against labeling fiction deception, since doing so makes it easier to regard lying as simply the act of telling stories, whereas genuine storytelling always supposes a *willing* suspension of disbelief; that is, "fiction does not *intend* to mislead" (207). Yet she notes in a footnote that there are borderline areas where fiction and willful deception cooperate, and one instance of this mingling is of particular interest in discussing O'Brien. Bok writes that fiction may be considered deceptive "if the author mingles fiction and purportedly factual statements without signaling where the 'suspension of disbelief' is appropriate" (207).

This latter instance of deception seems especially pertinent to *The Things They Carried*, given the many counterfactual events O'Brien describes (e.g. O'Brien's attempt to flee to Canada in "On the Rainy River" when he in fact spent the summer playing golf before accepting his orders; the presence of his 9-year old daughter Kathleen when O'Brien in fact has no daughter; etc.). Yet if Bok's criterion is a clear signal for the willing suspension of disbelief, then there could be no clearer signal than the subtitle of *The Things They Carried* is "A Work of Fiction." Our failure to remember this claim (or disclaimer) is one of the great concerns in O'Brien's writing.

On the one hand, overlooking the subtitle exemplifies a more general American failure to pay attention to words, to expressions of meaning through language, as when we use the words "patriotism," "enemy," "liberty," and even "fiction" without reflecting upon what they mean. Inattentiveness and imprecision with regards to language can expose us to the manipulation of language, and this exposure can have real consequences. O'Brien speaks to this point in "On the Rainy River," where he rails against the locals of his hometown, "a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted," condemning "their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simpleminded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand" (45). For O'Brien, those who embrace clichés and maudlin sentiments are the same who cannot accept the obscenities of war, yet are willing to have others sent to wage war, and it is this inconsistency that his mingling of the fictional and the factual so poignantly reveals.

On the other hand, that we might confuse fiction with reality speaks to the great power that literature has over our emotional lives, a power that might heighten our moral sense and guide us away from cliché toward a more attentive search for truth and meaning. At the moment in "On the Rainy River" when Tim O'Brien must choose between swimming into Canada to save his life or going to Vietnam to fight in war he does not support, he writes that "Inside me, in my chest, I felt a terrible squeezing pressure. Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it" (56), a moment of empathy that allows O'Brien to set up the moral challenge that so many great works of literature offer: "What would you do? Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?" (56, emphasis added).

The difficulty of ascertaining truth gains power in the issue of whether or not O'Brien killed anyone during the war. In "The Man I Killed," the factual details of the dead VC's body are intermingled with imaginings about the man's life, so much so that as soon as we begin to believe the fact (or fiction) of the man's existence and death, the opposite conclusion immediately arises, a wavering between the literal and figurative that is mirrored in the syntax of the man's thoughts about his future in the war: "He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people" (*TTTC*, 130). The dead soldier does begin to seem a literary invention, since he serves as a doppelganger or double for O'Brien, his death a metaphor for O'Brien's own loss of innocence in the war. But this conclusion is complicated by the matter of Tim O'Brien's narrative of his own return to Vietnam in "Field Trip," a trip that seems quite plausible and realistic, except that Tim O'Brien is accompanied by his nine-year old daughter Kathleen, who is in fact an invention (O'Brien had no children at the time he wrote *TTTC*).

It is in the vignette "Good Form" that O'Brien acknowledges and justifies his manipulation of truth and reality in his stories. Writing that "I want you to know why story-truth

is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179), he asserts that “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present” (180). While the aside “I guess” suggests that even this simple claim must be qualified against the complex ambiguities of reality, the claim is nevertheless key to understanding the drive of O’Brien’s works and their epistemological import. For O’Brien, stories retrieve the past and allow us to experience it again, reviewing, reliving, and reflecting upon the events and the perceptions of each person involved. Each alteration of the known facts is licensed by the power of the story to make us “feel what I felt” (179), the emphasis on empathy reminding us of the importance of stories (told and received) in recovering from trauma. O’Brien’s works teach us to accept the limitations of reason and to reside in that ambiguous space where truth and fiction cannot be teased apart. Yet they also offer the chance to recover what has been lost—friends, innocence, memory—and experience them once more, fantasizing about how we might have acted differently in the past and then accepting how we did act, the better to act as we would wish—bravely, always bravely—in the future. “But this too is true,” O’Brien writes in “The Lives of the Dead,” “stories can save us” (225).

## **Lesson Plan(s) on Truth, Lies, & Storytelling In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried***

Leading quotations from “The Things They Carried” and bullet points marked in **bold** go on board. This lesson plan focuses on literary devices, conflicts, and themes from *The Things They Carried*, though the discussions can be extended to the rest of O'Brien's writings. The five numbered sections can be used for a single class (though it might be a bit packed) or broken into five different classes (each corresponding to a Roman numeral) or any combination thereof.

### **I. “They carried catch as catch can”**

- **Storytelling as a fight for life:** For O'Brien, the trauma of war disorders military and civilian lives alike, and storytelling is an important means of surviving that disorder, since stories impose a narrative pattern and offer both author and audience catharsis (the purging of unwanted emotions through the experience of pity and awe). While we should be cautious about reading too much of an author's biography into his or her writings, O'Brien foregrounds his own experience of the Vietnam War in order to authenticate his claims. Yet one of the dangers O'Brien warns against is a naïve acceptance of the seeming truth of first-hand accounts; one of his most powerful stories about the painful effects of the war, “On the Rainy River,” recounts Tim O'Brien's failed effort to flee to Canada upon being drafted, ending with the painful admission that “I was a coward. I went to the war.” Yet as O'Brien inevitably asserts during his public readings of the story, the narrative is pure fiction. While he did have political and philosophical reservations against the war, he accepted his draft orders and did not try to flee the United States. The truth of the story, O'Brien asserts, isn't based in its ‘facts,’ but in its emotional weight and credibility; “On the Rainy River,” like many other stories in the collection, is “a tale created and told to define the experience of wanting to run but being unable to gather the courage to do so” (Smith, *Companion*, 5). The need to articulate these feelings clashes with the ‘facts’ of what happened, at which point the superficial facts no longer serve and the author must employ the imagination to get at the truth. Reflecting on his own career as a storyteller, O'Brien remarks that “when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story” (246). Just as one fights for one's life by any means available, so one tells a story by any means available; among the conflicts O'Brien faces are:
  1. Ambivalence about the war, before and after
  2. Memories of his own experiences during the war
  3. The evil of American soldiers at My Lai (Than Khe) in the Quang Ngai province and the need not to forget it
- ***TTTC* as collage of various genres:** O'Brien subtitles *TTTC* “A work of fiction,” and the term “fiction” has important implications for the genre of the book. Is this a novel? *TTTC* deals with a fairly constant cast of characters, features recurrent settings, has a linear narrative thread in addition to its numerous digressions, and explores a core set of



themes throughout. Yet many of its chapters were originally published as separate short stories in different journals, and several are frequently included in short story anthologies, so is it a collection of stories? There are several full-length short stories, each with that sense of completeness we attribute to the short story form, yet there are a number of pieces in *TTTC* that function mostly as vignettes or inter-chapters that implicitly comment on the stories they follow and precede. Moreover, since O'Brien uses so many details from his own life and service in Vietnam, we might be inclined to ask if this is a memoir. Yet the subtitle seems to suggest otherwise, and O'Brien might be alerting us not to be taken in by promises of factuality, when "happening-truth" and "story-truth" exist in such an ambiguous relation to each other.

1. *TTTC* is a novel because it is a fictional prose narrative dealing with the complex experiences of a more or less constant set of fictional characters.
  2. *TTTC* is also a short story collection, because its individual chapters have titles of their own and were in many instances originally published as independent short stories, meaning that they complete themselves emotionally and dramatically in a way that novel chapters, woven as they are into a larger and preconceived whole, cannot.
  3. *TTTC* is a memoir, because many of its chapters/ stories concern the experiences of a narrator / protagonist named "Tim O'Brien," whose background and character are in many instances identical with the author's but on certain points are clearly fictionalized.
  4. *TTTC* is a collection of tall-tales, like Mitchell Sanders's story of the phantom orchestra, though some prove to be not only plausible but verifiable (as in the case of Mary Anne in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong").
  5. *TTTC* contains many passages that might be called essays in aesthetics, in which the narrator Tim O'Brien and other characters discuss different approaches to & reasons for telling stories. Such passages are typical of metafiction, or fiction that is self-conscious of its own fictional nature and that foregrounds its narrative techniques.
- **Storytelling techniques in *TTTC*:** The title story of the collection, "The Things They Carried" is perhaps O'Brien's best-known and most anthologized story. O'Brien's efforts at creating the reality of the soldiers' experience in Vietnam are aided by his use of several literary devices. Note how O'Brien uses highly literary and artificial techniques to evoke a sense of the war that many consider to be 'realistic' (not artificial or contrived). Is O'Brien already setting us up for a conflict between 'truthfulness' and 'factual accuracy'?
1. Catalogues: O'Brien uses long catalogues to detail the many different things that American soldiers in Vietnam might carry. These catalogues belong to the epic tradition and are characteristic of the long lists of armaments Homer used in the *Iliad*. They are set apart from the rest of the story, though they often mention narrative details that will arise later in the story (most notably, Ted Lavender's death). They have their own driving rhythm, which might become monotonous if not for the sheer variety of items the men carry. By naming all the things carried,

these catalogues allow O'Brien to convey a sense of a group—an Army company—while also allowing for revealing details about individual characters, including:

- a. Ted Lavender: tranquilizers and pot (relates to Lavender's desire for escape);
  - b. Norman Bowker: a diary (relates to Bowker's desire to tell his story);
  - c. Kiowa: a Bible and a hatchet.
2. Weights: Throughout the story, O'Brien lists the weights of the different items the men carry. He does this because it is psychologically appropriate—men need to know how much items weigh so that they can know how much to carry. These weights allow readers not familiar with such items to imagine what it would be like to carry them. And the weights also grant the story a corresponding factuality; we tend to trust numbers and measurements beyond all else. But O'Brien knows this, and uses the weights of physical items to provoke questions about the weight of “intangibles,” the feelings the men experience during the war. Again, O'Brien does this to help convey the reality of the war to the reader. Emotions and thoughts have physical effects on those who experience them, and by establishing a field of weights and measurements, O'Brien allows the reader to approximate the physical effect of weight of different feelings. O'Brien clearly sees this form of connection as essential to his project; as he writes about the terrible anxiety he experiences in “On the Rainy River,” “Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it” (57).
  3. Non-linear narration: Although there is a discernible timeline of events in “The Things They Carried,” O'Brien does not narrate the story chronologically. Instead, he mentions or even narrates later events earlier in the story, thereby disrupting the conventional narrative order to which we are accustomed and plunging us into the wartime experience of time, in which past events are remembered and worked over, while the current moment stretches endlessly and without variation until it suddenly snaps into place during an instant of extreme and deadly danger, as in a firefight.
  4. The language of soldiers: O'Brien notes that when the soldiers in Vietnam talked about death, “they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself” (20). In this story and throughout the book, O'Brien tries to capture the “hard vocabulary” of the soldiers.

### Questions for discussion

1. What literary genres do you notice in *TTTC*? Which dominates? That is, if you had to shelve it at Borders, where would you shelve it?
2. What are your attitudes and expectations about such genres of literature? When you read them, what do you look to gain?

3. To what extent is O'Brien giving you what you expect from a certain genre? To what extent is he thwarting your expectations? Why is he doing so?
4. Is there something about the Vietnam War that prevents it from being claimed by a specific genre? WWI produced some of the great poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; WWII, an array of novels; our own Iraq War has produced numerous memoirs. What is it about the Vietnam War that makes it almost demand treatment through a number of genres?
5. Towards what genre do you gravitate when you read *TTTC*? Why? What does this say about your tastes and expectations as a reader?
6. Which chapters in *TTTC* have most disappointed your expectations? Why? What have you done to engage with these chapters?
7. Why did O'Brien title his book *The Things They Carried*? Why didn't he name the collection after another story in it? If you could choose a different story's title for the title of the collection, which would you choose, and why?
8. What characterizes a work of fiction? Plot? Dialogue? Descriptions of setting? What characterizes a work of 'nonfiction'? Its subject matter? Its tone? Do the two genres share characteristics? Which? Which of these characteristics are present in *TTTC*?
9. Think for a moment of the different nonfiction books you have read in your lifetime: biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, histories, etc. How have these differed from *TTTC*? What characteristics, if any, do they share?

## II. "(T)he intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight"

- **The two intangible burdens each soldier carries: cowardice and loss:** In an interview for *Artful Dodge*, Tim O'Brien claims that he is no more a writer of war stories than Joseph Conrad is a writer of sea stories, which is to say that O'Brien's subject isn't war *per se*, but human character. War simply enables him to depict humans operating under maximum psychological pressure, and this pressure forces their true character to the surface. For O'Brien, the intense experiences of war make "intangible" emotional experiences "real," granting them a physical presence or reality that the soldiers must carry along with all their other weighted gear. By conveying the physical weight of these intangibles, O'Brien also seeks to convey their reality directly to the reader, and the two intangibles with which he is most concerned are the experiences of cowardice and of profound loss.
  1. Cowardice: Upon learning that Lee Strunk has died while being evacuated to a hospital after losing his leg to a mine, Dave Jensen feels "relief" (66) for not having fulfilled his promise to kill Strunk if he were severely wounded, a failure which Jensen seems to feel was an act of cowardice.
  2. Cowardice: When O'Brien is sitting in Elroy Berdahl's boat twenty yards off the coast of Canada, thinking of fleeing from his draft notice, he feels "a terrible squeezing pressure" in his chest (56). The repercussions of succumbing to cowardice can be deadly, but the greatest cowardice occurs not on the battlefield, but at home, when O'Brien passively accepts his draft notice and goes to a war he doesn't believe in. "I was a coward. I went to the war" (61), he writes, a decision

that leads, directly or indirectly, to the death of a young Vietnamese man and to Kiowa's drowning in a shitfield.

3. Cowardice: When Ted Lavender dies, he goes down "under an exceptional burden," writes O'Brien, not only from his equipment but also "the unweighed fear" (6).
  4. Loss: Jimmy Cross and Ted Lavender—When Cross reflects on the death of Ted Lavender, for which he feels responsible because of his constant daydreaming about Martha, his grief and guilt weigh on him like "a stone in his stomach" (16).
  5. Loss: Jimmy Cross and Martha—The "stone in his stomach" (16) that Cross feels for Ted Lavender's death is linked figuratively to the pebble that Martha gave Cross. As a sort of penance for Lavender's death, Cross renounces his love for Martha and presumably throws the pebble away (though O'Brien never tells us exactly what finally happened to it).
  6. Cowardice and Loss: Linda's exposure and humiliation (234-35). When Nick Veenhof pulls off Linda's stocking cap, he reveals the scars from her surgery and the fact of her (ultimately terminal) brain cancer. O'Brien's failure to intervene, even though he knows their plans, is his first act of cowardice, one that prefigures his future failures and which his only means of redressing is by telling its story.
- **Proximity to death makes intangible or psychological experiences real:** For O'Brien, the threat of death intensifies the experience of our (vulnerable) reality. In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien explains that "At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (*TTTC*, 81).
    1. O'Brien repeatedly describes Curt Lemon's death in "How to Tell a True War Story" in order to convey what must have seemed "the final truth" for Lemon, which was not that he died from a booby-trap, but that "the sunlight was killing him" (84). Ironically, O'Brien indirectly evokes the legendary Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden when he recalls how Dave Jensen threw down Lemon's body parts while singing Peter, Paul, & Mary's song of lost love, "Lemon Tree," which includes the lines "Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet / But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat." Tasting the fruit of that tree led Adam and Eve into sin and mortality, but according to Christian thought it is a *felix culpa* or fortunate fall which occasions God's redeeming grace. Thus, in the section following the singing of "Lemon Tree," O'Brien relates a story about soldiers killed by a grenade who nevertheless can speak and crack jokes about their misfortune, suggesting at least a partial or temporary defeat of death.
    2. When O'Brien encounters his first dead VC (226), he can't participate in the mock greetings the other soldiers offer it. Instead, "as if I'd swallowed

something, I felt a moist sickness rise up in my throat” (226). “Maybe it’s too real for you?” Dave Jensen asks him. “That’s right,” says O’Brien, “Way too real” (226).

3. When young Tim’s friend Linda dies, it doesn’t quite register for him (237); thinking of her at home, he is “just floating, trying to imagine what it was to be dead” (237). But when he sees her body at the funeral home viewing, the reality of her death is manifest in the evocation of her body’s weight; O’Brien writes that “I tried to pretend she was taking a nap, her hands folded at her stomach, just sleeping away the afternoon. Except she didn’t *look* asleep. She looked dead. She looked heavy and totally dead” (242). Yet her death leads O’Brien to imagine her living: “In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say, ‘Timmy, stop crying’” (236).

### Questions for discussion

1. What “intangibles” does O’Brien pay attention to and ‘weigh’? Which one(s) strike you as particularly burdensome for someone in war, and why?
2. Are there any intangibles O’Brien didn’t name that might have been included in the long catalogues of the story “The Things They Carried”?
3. What instances of cowardice occur in these stories? Why do they occur? Do you think that they are cowardly?
4. Are there any actions in the stories that you would consider cowardly but which aren’t identified as such? Why do you think them cowardly? Why doesn’t O’Brien identify them as such?
5. By speaking of Ted Lavender’s death as “a stone in his stomach,” O’Brien implicitly equates Cross’s guilt over Lavender’s death with the loss of his love for Martha, who sent him a stone from the New Jersey shore. Why does O’Brien give the two losses equal weight, when our first instinct might be to value the loss of life over the loss of love? Drop loss from the question: what is more valuable, love or life?

### **III. “All that peace, man, it felt so good it hurt. I want to hurt it back.”**

- **Retaliation against innocence:** Throughout O’Brien’s writings, we see men dealing with loss, particularly the loss of innocence or happiness, by retaliating against other innocent and vulnerable individuals. For O’Brien, this is the dark and shameful secret of war, one that is suppressed or concealed by myths of American exceptionalism or by willful acts of amnesia (the historical corollary is the 1968 massacre at My Lai, a Vietnamese village in the area where O’Brien was deployed). Yet in his narration O’Brien does not judge against such acts; rather, he helps the reader empathize with those who have been victimized and with their victimizers in order to understand why individuals in war will harm the harmless. Examples of such violence prove to be among the most emotionally gripping and conflicted moments in O’Brien’s fiction.

1. Azar's detonating of the puppy (36-37): This is a minor event, yet a telling one. Azar embodies the cruelty unleashed by the wartime setting, as demonstrated by his wanton killing of the puppy Ted Lavender adopts (Azar will later assist O'Brien in his ritual humiliation of Bobby Jorgensen in "The Ghost Soldiers," another instance of retaliation against the innocent). Azar's explanation for his action, "Christ, I'm just a *boy*" (37), at first seems like a schoolboy's excuse, yet upon further consideration, we see that he is 'just a boy' *in war*, and that such cruelties are perhaps the dangerously logical outcome when the innocent are placed in an environment of such uncertainty and violence. As dislikable as we might find Azar, he voices O'Brien's primary reason for offering soldiers our imaginative sympathies: "Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real is" (204). In Vietnam, one passes through the looking glass and finds moral reality overturned; in Azar's case, the expected consequences of one's actions (punishment, shame, etc) no longer occur, so that one is free to behave without moral guidance. Yet as O'Brien is at pains to point out in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," while the character flaws may exist in the individual, it is the circumstances of war that unleash them. Unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy, one loses one's moral balance; the soldier must avoid losing sight of the moral reality which enables him or her to imagine the experience of others and act accordingly.
  
2. Rat Kiley's slaughter of the buffalo: Several of O'Brien's works feature a scene in which U.S. soldiers slaughter a helpless water buffalo. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, men in O'Brien's company shoot a cow which has wandered from the village herd (135-137); in *Going After Cacciato*, Stink Harris kills a water buffalo in an apparent act of sadism (50); and in the most graphic depiction of such a killing in "How to Tell a True War Story" from *The Things They Carried*, Rat Kiley tortures "a baby VC water buffalo" (78) by shooting it to pieces in retaliation for the death of Curt Lemon. Mitchell Sanders comments on Kiley's actions serve as the clearest statement on the repercussions of such acts for those who perpetrate them: "'Well, that's Nam,' he said. 'Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's fresh and original'" (80).
  
3. The destruction of Than Khe: Another scene repeated throughout O'Brien's works is the firebombing of a Vietnam village in retaliation for the death of a U.S. soldier. The village is identified as Than Khe, though in *In the Lake of the Woods*, we learn that its other name is My Lai, the site in 1968 of the worst U.S. massacre of civilians in Vietnam and a village in the area where O'Brien served in 1969.
  
4. John Wade's (presumed) murder of his wife Kathy: After the collapse of his senatorial campaign due to revelations of his involvement in the My Lai massacre, John Wade and his wife Kathy seek refuge at a holiday cabin on Minnesota's Lake of the Woods, where they must come to terms with the numerous deceptions on which their marriage is founded. One night, Kathy disappears mysteriously, and John becomes a prime suspect in the investigation of

her disappearance and possible murder, before he too disappears. Throughout the novel, Wade suffers from unwanted images (or are they memories) of pouring scalding water into Kathy's eyes until she dies, an act punctuated by the desire "to scream the most terrible thing he could scream—*Kill Jesus!*" (5), an exclamation that becomes the motto for the most absolute and depraved violation of innocence imaginable.

#### Questions for discussion

1. According to O'Brien, does suffering violence (psychological or physical) somehow unleash the capacity to inflict violence? Which character(s) exemplify this transformation? Or is the capacity to inflict violence a preexisting condition? Which character(s) exemplify this condition?
2. What does violence violate? Our physical person? Our psychological wholeness? Our sense of trust in the world? Is the experience of violence (and of war more generally) similar to the violation of trust that Sissela Bok identifies as the consequence of lying? Is there any relation between Rat Kiley's sense of betrayal by Curt Lemon's sister and the slaughter of the water buffalo?
3. What are the consequences of committing violent acts against innocents for the following characters: Stink Harris (*Going After Cacciato*), Rat Kiley ("How to Tell a True War Story" in *TTC*), Tim O'Brien ("The Ghost Soldiers" in *TTC*), John Wade (*In the Lake of the Woods*)?
4. How do cowards in O'Brien's works behave in the wake of their cowardice? Is the loss of innocence related to cowardice? Which characters in O'Brien's writings exemplify cowards who retaliate against others in order to compensate for their own failures? Are there any characters who behave otherwise?
5. How is it that violence against individuals escalates to violence against groups?

#### **IV. "And they dreamed of freedom birds."**

- **Escapism as a response to loss and cowardice:** O'Brien often equates dreaming and daydreaming with escape; he opens *Going After Cacciato* with an epigraph from the WWI poet Siegfried Sassoon: "Soldiers are dreamers."
  1. This sort of escape is a key theme in his earlier novel *Going After Cacciato*, in which PFC Paul Berlin dreams of chasing an AWOL member of his platoon who he dreams has decided to hike from Vietnam to Paris.
  2. Lt. Cross daydreaming of Martha
  3. Tim O'Brien (the unnamed private) showing Kiowa a photo of his girlfriend.
  4. Tim O'Brien hallucinating crowds cheering for and against his decision to go into exile in "On the Rainy River."
  5. Tim O'Brien dreaming up a biography surprisingly like his own for the dead VC soldier in "The Man I Killed"
  6. Norman Bowker dreaming of conversations with his father.

## Questions for discussion

1. From what are O'Brien's characters trying to escape? Why can they not face and confront what plagues them?
2. What forms of escape are available to the soldiers in *TTC*? Which one(s) does O'Brien seem to approve of? Why?
3. When do moments of escape in O'Brien's works become dangerous? Why are they dangerous? Do the character(s) involved overcome such moments? If so, how? If not, what are the consequences?

## V. "No, man, go on. One thing I hate, it's a silent Indian."

- **Storytelling as the one effective response to loss and cowardice:** For O'Brien, the only genuinely effective response to the trauma of war is to talk about it with others and to work at getting a true account of one's experiences, no matter what they are. In *TTC*, a number of characters feel compelled to relate their experiences to others, including Lt. Cross, Kiowa, Rat Kiley, Norman Bowker, and the character Tim O'Brien. One might even read *TTC* as the author Tim O'Brien's effort to relate his Vietnam experiences to the reader, though one must remember that O'Brien is writing a work of fiction, not a memoir, and thus should reject 'authenticity' as a measure of worth and instead appraise the work aesthetically, judging the capacity of its stories to affect the reader, regardless of their factuality.
- **The consequences of not speaking and/or of having no one who will listen**
  1. **Overwhelming grief:** For O'Brien, speaking and storytelling provide catharsis for those who have suffered trauma. Even if the story told is not truthful—i.e. is exaggerated or purely fictitious—the effort at communicating reestablishes community and purges suffering. In *TTC*, O'Brien exemplifies the overwhelming grief that results from silence with the stories of Rat Kiley and Norman Bowker.
    - a. After the death of Curt Lemon, Rat Kiley writes a letter to Lemon's sister in which he describes his friendship with Lemon and describes his experiences in Vietnam. O'Brien's paraphrase of the letter is a satirical sketch of G.I. behavior, but it also captures the tone of Kiley's affection for Lemon (68). Lemon's sister never writes back, and shortly thereafter, Kiley wantonly tortures a water buffalo (a recurrent image in O'Brien's work which represents the consequences of corrupted innocence) before walking off, alone and weeping.
    - b. In "Speaking of Courage," we see Norman Bowker making an endless circuit of his hometown lake, reflecting on his failure to rescue Kiowa from drowning in a shit-field during a nighttime mortar attack. Throughout the drive, he imagines telling his story to different his old



girlfriend, Sally Kramer, and his father, the latter seeming to listen, the former rejecting the story for its obscenities, but the irony of the story is that Bowker never actually speaks to anyone about his experiences; the one actual conversation he has is with a fast food serviceman at a drive-through speaker. In the following story, “Notes,” we learn of Bowker’s absolute isolation, which drives him to commit suicide and leave no note explaining his decision.

2. Moral paralysis: In “On the Rainy River,” when the character Tim O’Brien cannot decide whether he should flee to Canada or go to the war in Vietnam, he suffers a moment of embarrassment, acknowledging that “Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn’t make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that’s all it was. And right then I submitted. I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was too embarrassed not to” (59). Yet as much as this scene represents an individual failure of courage, it is only the culmination of O’Brien’s continued isolation and failure to articulate his concerns to another, even to Elroy Berdahl, the sympathetic caretaker of the Tip Top Lodge, who seems to have guessed O’Brien’s situation and who ferries him next to the Canadian shore in order to give him the chance to *choose* to flee.
- **Why the story must be told**
    1. Confession / absolution: At the end of “The Man I Killed,” Kiowa repeatedly insists that O’Brien “talk about it” (*TTTC*, 130) as he looks at the body of a VC soldier he has just killed. O’Brien’s descriptions of the corpse are detailed and graphic and repeatedly expressed, suggesting his own fixation with this traumatic event and his continued effort to exorcise its effects by repeatedly describing it. Yet as much as this scene is about trauma and the process of recovery instigated by storytelling, it is also about the relation between truth and fiction. We might be led to believe the truth of this event because of its powerful emotional force; rarely do soldiers get to see the direct result of their actions in combat, and the stark realization that O’Brien has killed another human paralyzes him. Yet this account of the dead soldier does not mesh with O’Brien’s earlier representation, in his more conventional memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, of the body of a man he may have killed. Outside a village near My Lai, O’Brien and two other men fire on three suspected VCs. “It was the first and only time I would ever see the living enemy, the men intent on killing me” (97). Afterwards, they find “a man with a bullet hold in his head... That, at least, was Johansen’s report. I would not look” (98). O’Brien’s refusal to look at the body calls the scene in *TTTC* into question. Can we trust the emotions raised during this moment of confrontation with the results of one’s own actions, given that the confrontation is itself fictional? (Provided, of course, that we can trust the narration O’Brien offers in *If I Die*, though given that it was written before O’Brien’s more profoundly metafictional books, that seems a reasonable guess.) Does the fictional representation of an event lessen the truth of what did happen? Why does

O'Brien write that he looked at the corpse when in fact he didn't? It hardly seems that he is improving his image as a soldier; there's an indecision and uncertainty in the latter encounter that suggests confusion. But what if O'Brien is driven by regret for his failure to confront the results of his own actions? Is there any way to recover that decisive moral moment, when he might bear witness and accept responsibility? Yes, the two works suggest; by fictionalizing the event, without improving upon his own characterization in any way, he seems to be telling us that storytelling permits one to redeem one's failures in the past. For the reader who never reads *If I Die*, or who never makes the connection between the scenes in *TTC* and *If I Die*, O'Brien provides a scene of courage—the soldier accepts his actions and the psychological harm and uncertainty that comes with that responsibility. For the reader who makes this connection, however, O'Brien offers a narrative of failure—the failure to assume such responsibility—and recovery.

2. Confronting moral ambiguity: For O'Brien, fiction can be an assertion of truth in an uncertain and often morally ambiguous world. While it does not offer the absolute or definitive truth about any experience, since the truth is ultimately individual and relative, it can faithfully represent an individual's experience. Readers who can maintain an inclusive rather than exclusive understanding of the truth can negotiate the ambiguities and deceptions of reality,
3. Confronting death: Once imagined, death becomes real and heavy, but stories about the dead have a way of liberating storyteller and audience from those bounds, if only for a moment, so that O'Brien can conclude that "when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (246).
4. Love: It's easy to pass over book dedications, but the dedication page in *TTC* is important for understanding the book's major themes. First, we should note to whom O'Brien dedicates the book: "The men of Alpha Company." O'Brien did in fact serve as an infantryman in the U.S. Army's Fifth Battalion, 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry, but the names he lists here aren't those the men with whom O'Brien served, but of the fictional characters who populate the stories or chapters of this book. Thus, O'Brien is already working along the border between truth and fiction; dedications are typically reserved as thanks for those who have contributed to the production of a work, yet the men O'Brien names don't literally exist, which would seem to undercut the function of a dedication. O'Brien seems to have created a rich paradox, dedicating the book to the fictional characters for helping create the book that created them. According to O'Brien, "I dedicated the book to my characters... [because] I lived with them for five years while I was writing. In Vietnam people were being rotated constantly, so men you served with you would know six or eight months. The characters are the people I know best" (Bruckner, 15). But what role did these characters serve for O'Brien? We know that throughout *TTC*, characters are not only telling stories, but insisting that others tell stories as well, because of the powerful therapeutic value they offer for both

the storyteller and the audience; at the end of “The Man I Killed,” Kiowa repeatedly insists that the character Tim O’Brien “talk about it” (130) as he looks at the body of a VC soldier he has just killed. For a novelist, imaginative involvement in the life of one’s characters means becoming committed to telling their stories. We might then suggest that O’Brien dedicates his book to these fictional characters because it was these men who forced him to talk, “making up a few things to get at the real truth” (85). Thus, for O’Brien, truth and fiction are difficult to distinguish, but the distinction may not be as important as the purpose that truth and fiction serve. Note also that O’Brien dedicates *TTTC* “lovingly.” “Love” is one of the keywords of the book, recurring at several critical junctures, and it is the emotion most threatened by war and most in need of protection because of its capacity to help men endure and regenerate from their wounds. Ironically, it is an emotion simultaneously jeopardized and intensified by the experience of war; as O’Brien writes in his essay “The Vietnam in me,” “For me, at least, Vietnam was partly love. With each step, each light-year of a second, a foot soldier is always almost dead, or so it feels, and in such circumstance you can’t *help* but love” (51). What follows are discussions of several major occurrences of love in *TTTC*.

- a. “Love” is the title of the short vignette that partially resolves the opening story. In it, we learn that although Lt. Cross did not ever end up in a relationship with Martha, “It doesn’t matter... I [Cross] still love her” (29). Cross’s love for Martha dominates his experience of Vietnam. In “The Things They Carried,” the letters from Martha that Lieutenant Cross carries “were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping” (1). He carries a photograph of Martha “signed Love, though he knew better” (4). But Cross’s love distracts him at the village of Than Khe, where instead of establishing a secure perimeter, he daydreams about Martha. Ted Lavender is shot by a sniper as a result, though O’Brien’s suggests a measure of forgiveness when he reflects upon this: “He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn’t help it” (12).
- b. Love is the ultimate purpose, according to the narrator, of the story about Curt Lemon’s death in “How to Tell a True War Story”: “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (85), adding that a true war story is, among other things, “about love and memory” (85).
- c. In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” love is what Rat Kiley and many others felt for Mary Anne, the America schoolgirl who becomes a deadly killer after being brought to Vietnam by her boyfriend, Mark Fossie. “I loved her,” says Kiley. “The way she looked, Mary Anne made you think about those girls back home, how clean and innocent they all are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years” (113).

- d. In “The Man I Killed,” O’Brien imagines that his dead enemy “fell in love with a classmate, a girl of seventeen” just before he went to war, knowing that it “would finally take him” (128).
- e. Love is what drives the young soldier in “In the Field” (possibly the character Tim O’Brien) to turn on his flashlight to show Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend, thereby providing a target for VC mortars and leading to Kiowa’s death by drowning in the exploded shit field.
- f. Love is what the young Tim O’Brien felt for his first sweetheart, nine-year old Linda, who died of a brain tumor before the age of ten, forcing O’Brien to confront the powerlessness of love to stop death and the need to preserve love through storytelling in spite of that powerlessness. “I’m forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive... She’s not the embodied Linda; she’s mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name... Her real name doesn’t matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice” (245).

### Questions for discussion

1. Why do characters in *TTC* find themselves unable to tell stories about their experiences, wartime or otherwise? To what extent is this failure the product of outside forces and conditions, and to what extent are the individuals themselves responsible?
2. What are the consequences of not telling stories about one’s experiences? Which characters exemplify these consequences?
3. Which characters tell their stories? What are the consequences for them?
4. Are there any characters who survive by following the ‘strong, silent’ mode of stoic male behavior? How do you respond to them? How does O’Brien?
5. Which stories within the stories of *TTC* are lies? Who tells them? Why do they tell them? Which strike you as seeming the most truthful? Why? Which elements seem fictitious? Why? What do your answers suggest about the way you perceive and understand the world?

## Timeline of Key Events in the Vietnam War

This brief timeline of key events in the Vietnam conflict will provide an introduction to the historical context of O'Brien's major works, an important matter for students who are increasingly distant from a conflict that is much more familiar to their faculty, and whose understanding of American involvement in Vietnam is generally based in popular films. Such a timeline should provide a common base of knowledge for students and faculty.

- 1930** Indochinese Communist Party, opposed to French rule, is organized by Ho Chi Minh and his followers.
- 1945** Following Japanese surrender to Allies on August 15, Ho Chi Minh establishes Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi; Vietnam is divided.
- 1946** Ho Chi Minh attempts unsuccessfully to negotiate the end of colonial rule with the French. The French shell Haiphong Harbor in November, killing over 6,000 Vietnamese civilians, and by December, open war between France and Ho Chi Minh's guerilla army, the Viet Minh, begins.
- 1950** The U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group of 35 men arrives in Saigon in August. By the end of the year, the U.S. is bearing half of the cost of France's war effort in Vietnam.
- 1954** The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu and withdraw from Hanoi. The CIA establishes a military mission in Saigon, Ngo Dinh Diem becomes prime minister, and President Eisenhower pledges support to Diem's government and military forces.
- 1955** U.S.-backed Ngo Dinh Diem organizes the Republic of Vietnam as an independent nation; Diem declares himself president.
- 1956** Last French troops leave South Vietnam.
- 1959** The first American combat death in Vietnam occurs.
- 1960** The National Liberation Front (NFL)—called the Viet Cong—is founded in South Vietnam. U.S. military personnel serving in South Vietnam total 900 by year's end.
- 1961** U.S. military buildup in Vietnam begins; American military personnel in South Vietnam total 3,200 by year's end. CIA begins arming Hmong to fight Pathet Lao in the Laotian mountains.
- 1962** American military personnel in South Vietnam total 11,300 by year's end.
- 1963** Organized Buddhist opposition to Diem regime increases; first self-immolation of Buddhist monk in Saigon. South Vietnamese President Diem is assassinated (the Kennedy administration, having lost confidence in the ability of Diem to prevent

Communist takeover in South Vietnam, had secretly informed generals plotting to overthrow Diem that the U.S. would not oppose a coup). American military personnel in South Vietnam total 16,300.

November—President Kennedy is assassinated; Vice-President Lyndon Johnson becomes President.

- 1964** North Vietnamese undertake major expansion of Ho Chi Minh Trail network, running through mountains of southeastern Laos, used to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam. Trade embargo is imposed on North Vietnam in response to attacks from the North on South Vietnam.

August—The Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly attacked the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin, occurs. President Johnson asks Congress for a resolution against North Vietnam following this incident; Congress approves the Gulf of Tonkin resolution on August 7, which allows the president to take any necessary measures to repel further attacks. President Johnson orders the bombing of North Vietnam.

- 1965** Generals Ky and Thieu seize the South Vietnamese government; first U.S. combat troops reach South Vietnam. American aircraft begin intensive bombing of Viet Cong targets in South Vietnam.

March—U.S. begins first sustained bombing of North Vietnam, and in April, of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. First national demonstration against U.S. intervention in Vietnam draws 20,000 protestors in Washington, D.C.

October—About 100,000 demonstrators protest U.S. intervention in marches and rallies across the U.S. Over 184,000 American military personnel are in South Vietnam by year's end, and more than 1,300 Americans are killed in combat during 1965.

- 1966** U.S. aircraft bomb targets close to Hanoi and Haiphong for the first time, beginning campaign directed at petroleum and oil storage sites. North Vietnamese army begins moving in strength across the Demilitarized Zone into north Quang Tri province. Marines deploy along southern boundary of DMZ. More than 385,000 American military personnel are in South Vietnam by year's end, and more than 5,000 Americans are killed in combat during 1966.

- 1967** Thieu is elected president of South Vietnam. Buildup of U.S. forces continues.

April—Anti-war march in New York draws at least 125,000.

October—50,000 people march on the Pentagon, demonstrating against the war, an event portrayed in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*.

Over 485,000 American military personnel are in South Vietnam by year's end, and more than 9,300 Americans are killed in combat in 1967.

**1968** January—The battle of Khe Sahn begins, ending six months later. The Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, during which more than 1,700 Americans are killed, takes place. 20,000 South Vietnamese are killed in combat in 1968, while communist forces lose as many as 40,000.

March—The My Lai massacre occurs. An American infantry company murders between 200 and 500 unarmed South Vietnamese villagers.

April—Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated. His murder is followed by widespread rioting in American cities and increased racial tension among U.S. Forces in Vietnam.

May—American combat deaths total more than 2,000, the highest loss of any month of the war.

June—Robert Kennedy (who had first called for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam in March, 1967) is assassinated.

August—Police and protestors clash repeatedly in Chicago streets as the Democratic National Committee meets. Over 536,000 American military personnel are in South Vietnam by the end of the year, and more than 14,500 Americans are killed in combat in 1968.

**1969** U.S. bombing of Ho Chi Minh trail is increased as consequence of bombing halt over North Vietnam. Paris peace talks.

President Nixon orders first series of B-52 raids on Communist base areas in eastern Cambodia in March (bombing is not disclosed to Congress or the American public).

American troop strength reaches peak level of 534,000 men in April. U.S. forces suffer increasingly from declining morale, insubordination, racial tension, and drug use.

May—the battle for Hamburger Hill, an engagement that causes controversy in press and Congress over American tactics in Vietnam.

July—President Nixon announces the first troop withdrawals from South Vietnam.

September—Ho Chi Minh dies.

November—250,000 people demonstrate against the war in Washington, D.C.

December—First draft lottery held, as Selective Service moves to reduce number of draft deferments. American military personnel servicing in South Vietnam total 475,000 at the end of the year; more than 9,400 Americans are killed in action in 1969.

**1970** U.S. uses B-52 bombers over northern Laos. April—the armies of the U.S. and south Vietnam invade Cambodia.

May—four students are killed by National Guardsmen at Kent State University, Ohio.

More than 100 colleges are closed due to student riots over Kent State.

U.S. participation in ground combat in South Vietnam decreases. Congress forbids deployment of U.S. troops or advisors in Laos and Cambodia (though U.S. continues to provide air support for operations in Laos).

**1971** *New York Times* publishes in June the first excerpts from secret Defense Department study of U.S. involvement prepared in 1967-68. More than 156,000 American military personnel remain in South Vietnam at year's end, and more than 1,300 Americans are killed in action in 1971.

**1972** North Vietnamese launch massive invasion of South Vietnam (“Easter Offensive”). Nixon announces mining of North Vietnamese ports and expands bombing of North Vietnam. Christmas bombing of Hanoi.

**1973** January—United States and North Vietnam sign Paris Peace Accords, ending American combat role in the war. U.S. military draft ends.

February—POWs begin to return as part of Operation Homecoming.

March—Last U.S. combat troops leave Vietnam.

**1975** April—North Vietnamese forces take over Saigon (fall of Saigon), last Americans evacuated, last American combat death. South Vietnam surrenders to North Vietnam, ending the war and reunifying the country under communist control. Washington extends trade embargo to all of Vietnam.

**1977** President Carter pardons Vietnam-era draft resisters and evaders.

Over 900,000 Vietnamese, many of them ethnic Chinese, become refugees between 1975 and 1988, in addition to the 140,000 who fled the country during the communist victory of 1975.

**1978** Vietnam invades Cambodia and topples Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge government, ending its reign of terror.

**1979** Western countries and non-communist Asian nations support U.S.-led embargo against Vietnam, in protest against invasion of Cambodia.

**1982** The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a.k.a. “The Wall,” is dedicated in Washington, D.C.

**1991** Washington lifts ban on organized U.S. travel to Vietnam.



- 1992** Washington eases trade embargo, grants permission for U.S. companies to open offices, sign contracts with Vietnam.
- 1994** President Clinton announces the lifting of the trade embargo.
- 1995** President Clinton announces normalization of relations with Vietnam.

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