

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

DISCUSSION GUIDE

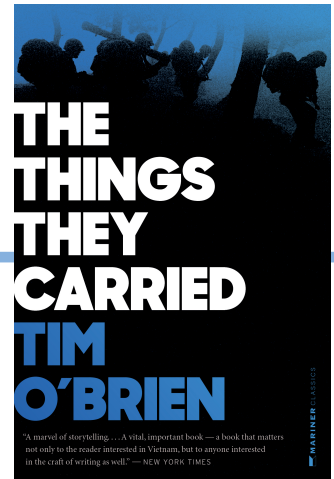
INTRODUCTION

Tim O'Brien's award-winning collection of stories about the men of Alpha Company and their time as soldiers during and after the Vietnam War—based in part upon the author's own experiences as a soldier in the 23rd Infantry Division—has become a classic of American literature for good reason. Not only is it a story about war, courage, love, and loss, it is also a stunning testament of the power of storytelling. Combining fact and fiction, reality and invention—or what the author calls “story-truth” and “happening-truth”—*The Things They Carried* continues to challenge our preconceptions of what is moral and what is true. Ultimately, O'Brien's masterpiece of fiction, cleverly disguised as memoir, still has much to teach us about the experience of being human and the weight that we carry with us throughout history—and our own lives.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

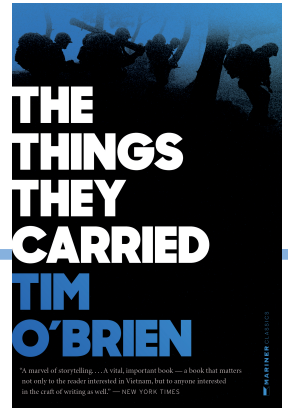
1. Why do you think the author chose to open *The Things They Carried* with a story that describes the things soldiers carried with them in Vietnam? What are some of these items, and what do they reveal to us about the people carrying them and the situation they find themselves in? Why do you think that O'Brien goes into detail about the physical weight of each item? What are some of the non-physical things that he tells us they carry with them, and what might these reveal about the individuals carrying them, the experience of going to war, and the universal human experience?

2. Although the book is ultimately a work of fiction, why do you think that the author chose to disguise the book as memoir? How does the author accomplish this? Why do you think that he went so far as to use the characters' names in the book's dedication? Why might the author have chosen to include himself as a character? What effect did this have on you, as a reader? How do you think that your experience of the stories would differ if there was no Tim O'Brien presented in the book?



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3. Consider point of view. Who tells the stories in the book, and whose points of view are represented within those stories? Is/are the narrator(s) reliable? How do we know this, and what part do narration and point of view play in supporting the major themes of the book? Is anyone's point of view omitted from the book, and if so, what might we infer from their absence?

4. Explore the theme of truth. What does O'Brien mean when he says in "Good Form" that there is "story-truth" and "happening-truth" (171)? Why do you think that the author chose to oscillate between the soldiers' realities and their fantasies and imaginations in the opening story? How does the book support a shifting notion of what is true? Does the author or the character O'Brien offer any suggestions as to how we can best determine what is true and what is not? What message(s) does the book ultimately deliver about truth?

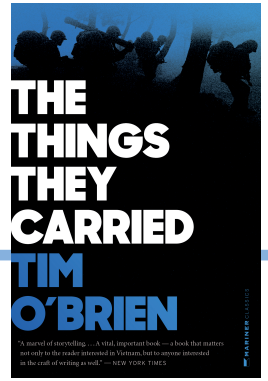
5. How does the author create a dialogue about the power of storytelling and using one's imagination? What examples of this do we find in the book? According to O'Brien, what responsibilities does—or should—the storyteller bear? Why does the character O'Brien say that he chooses to write? What can a good story accomplish? Does the book suggest whether a storyteller writing about real-life events has an obligation to tell the truth?

6. In the book, O'Brien tells readers that a good and true story should make them feel it in their stomach. What literary devices does the author employ in order to evoke these feelings from readers? For instance, what language is repeated throughout the book, and how does the author use "silence" or the omission of dialogue to evoke a particular feeling or make a point? How does the imagery in the book support the author's mission of making the reader feel the story in their stomach?



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7. How do the stories in this collection compare to other “war stories” you have read? Consider how O’Brien’s story collection deflects staples of the war story genre and challenges the traditional rhetoric of war. What tropes does the book eschew? What stereotypes does the author resist? What messages does the book ultimately deliver about war and the way that we talk about war? Did the book ultimately change or influence your thoughts about war? Why does O’Brien say that the stories he tells are love stories and not war stories? Do you agree?

8. Evaluate the depiction of women in the book. What do the women mentioned in the book have in common? From whose point of view are they presented? How does “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” challenge the view of the women offered in the other stories? What attitude and preconceptions about women does Rat Kiley say the men need to get rid of?

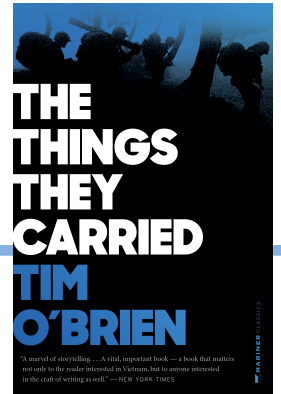
9. How does the book explore racism and the concept of “the other” and its role in conflict? For instance, how is Kiowa treated and spoken to by his platoon-mates? How does the book depict the people of Vietnam? How does the book create a discourse around the notion of “the enemy”? How do the stories “Enemies” and “Friends” contribute to this conversation? Why do you think that O’Brien included a story in which his own character imagines the life and personhood of the man he tells readers he killed?

10. What does the book tell us about courage and how it should be defined? What kinds of courageous acts are featured? In “On the Rainy River” what do you think O’Brien mean when he says, “I was a coward. I went to war” (58)? How does he come to this conclusion? What does he ask the reader to imagine? Within the discourse on courage in the book, how does the author also create a discourse about culturally prevalent notions of masculinity and its trappings? What does he say that the men feared most? Why does he believe so many men risked their lives to fight in a war they didn’t support?



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11. What does the book suggest about morality? Mitchell Sanders seems to seek a moral in every bad situation. Is he successful? Does there seem to be a clear sense of what is right and what is wrong throughout the book? Does it suggest whether the author believes there is a fixed and universal set of moral rules or that bad deeds are sometimes justifiable? Who takes responsibility for the soldiers in the platoon who do not survive? Are they ultimately responsible for these deaths? How does consideration of these two questions open up a broader conversation about morality?

12. What does “How to Tell a True War Story” teach readers about how to read so-called war stories? What does O’Brien say that a real war story is not and should never do? How does he say that a reader can tell if a war story is real and true? What factors should cause a reader to doubt the veracity or value of a war story according to O’Brien? Adhering to these guidelines, can we say whether O’Brien’s own stories are “true war stories”? What does O’Brien mean when he says that “a true war story cannot be believed” (68)?

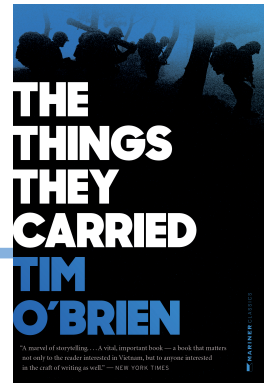
13. What does the book reveal about the post-war life of soldiers? In the story “Notes,” what do we learn about Norman Bowker’s post-war experience? Why does Bowker ultimately commit suicide? How does the character O’Brien seem to cope in his post-war life? What does he believe helps him to survive? Is he ultimately able to forgive himself for the things that plague him?

14. Why do you think that the author chose to conclude the book with the story “The Lives of the Dead”? Who is Linda, and what does she say to O’Brien after her death? How does O’Brien find closure in her passing? At the end of the book, what does he say “is true” (213)? What kind of miracle does O’Brien discover, and how does it change his perspective and help him to find peace?



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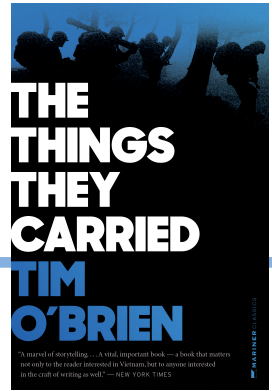
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim O'Brien is the author of *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973); *Northern Lights* (1975); "Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?" (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); and *Dad's Maybe Book* (2019). His short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and has been featured in *Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. O'Brien has received countless literary awards throughout his career including accolades from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts; a National Magazine Award for "The Things They Carried" in 1987; the *New York Times* 1973 Outstanding Book for *If I Die*; and the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction and Best Novel of the Year by *Time* in 1995 for *In the Lake of the Woods*. O'Brien won the National Book Award in 1979 for *Going After Cacciato* and was honored with the Dayton Literary Peace Prize Foundation's Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award in 2012 and the Pritzker Military Library Literature Award in 2013. *The Things They Carried* earned O'Brien France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger and a *Chicago Herald Tribune* Heartland Prize and was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize as well as a National Book Critics Circle Award. He was elected to the Society of American Historians and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from Whittier College. O'Brien attended Macalester College as an undergraduate before being drafted into the United States Army; he served as an infantryman in Vietnam and was awarded a Purple Heart. Following his service, he attended graduate school at Harvard University, and from 1973 to 1974 he was a national affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*. O'Brien resides in Texas, where he holds the Endowed Chair position in Creative Writing at Texas State University's MFA workshop in alternate years.



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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Abrams, David. *Fobbit*.

Antoon, Sinan. *The Corpse Washer*.

Butler, Robert Olen. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*.

Doerr, Anthony. *All the Light We Cannot See*.

Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*.

Klay, Phil. *Redeployment*.

Knowles, John. *A Separate Peace*.

Marlantes, Karl. *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*.

Ninh, Bảo. *The Sorrow of War*.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*.

Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Bird*.

Riverbend. *Baghdad Burning*.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

