

# *The Things They Carried* Book Summary

## By Tim O'Brien

Called both a novel and a collection of interrelated short stories, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a unique and challenging book that emerges from a complex variety of literary traditions. O'Brien presents to his readers both a war memoir and a writer's autobiography, and complicates this presentation by creating a fictional protagonist who shares his name. To fully comprehend and appreciate the novel, particularly the passages that gloss the nature of writing and storytelling, it is important to remember that the work is fictional rather than a conventional non-fiction, historical account.

👁️ *CliffsNotes article continues below*

Protagonist "Tim O'Brien" is a middle-aged writer and Vietnam War veteran. The primary action of the novel is "O'Brien's" remembering the past and working and reworking the details of these memories of his service in Vietnam into meaning.

Through a series of linked semi-autobiographical stories, "O'Brien" illuminates the characters of the men with whom he served and draws meaning about the war from meditations on their relationships. He describes Lt. Jimmy Cross as an inexperienced and ill-equipped leader of Alpha Company, both in-country and at a post-war reunion. Years after the war, the two spent an afternoon together remembering their friends and those who were killed.

In the introductory vignette, O'Brien describes each of the major characters by describing what they carry, from physical items such as canteens and grenades and lice to the emotions of fear and love that they carry. After the first chapter, the narrator is identified as "Tim O'Brien," a middle-aged writer and veteran.

"O'Brien" relates personal stories, among them a story that he had never divulged before about how he planned to flee to Canada to avoid the draft. "O'Brien," who spent the summer before he had to report to the Army working in a meatpacking factory, left work early one day and drove toward Canada, stopping at a fishing lodge to rest and devise a plan. He is taken in by the lodge owner, who helps him confront the issue of evading the draft by taking him out on the lake that borders Canada. Ultimately, "O'Brien" yields to what he perceives as societal pressures to conform to notions of duty, courage, and obligation, and he returns home instead of continuing on to Canada. Through the telling of this story, "O'Brien" confesses what he considers a failure of his convictions: He was a coward because he went to participate in a war in which he did not believe.

As a writer, O'Brien constantly analyzes and comments upon how stories are told and why they are told. For example, he tells the story of Curt Lemon's death and proceeds to analyze and explain why it holds an element of truth. Ultimately, he surmises, "truth in a story is not necessarily due to 'factual' accuracy." Instead, if the story affects the reader or listener in a personal and meaningful way, then that emotion is the truth of the story. O'Brien tests these ideas

by relating the stories that others told in Vietnam, like the story of a soldier who brought his girlfriend to Vietnam and grows more and more terrified as she becomes fascinated by the war and ultimately never returns home. The soldiers who hear the story doubt its truth, but are drawn into the story nonetheless, showing that factual accuracy is less important to truth than emotional involvement.

The recurring memory of the novel that O'Brien recalls as a sort of coda, or repeated image, is the death of his friend and fellow soldier, Kiowa. Kiowa was a soft-spoken Native American with whom "O'Brien" made a strong connection. The scene of Kiowa's death in a battlefield becomes the basis for several of the novel's vignettes: "Speaking of Courage," "In the Field," "Field Trip," and "Notes." In each of these, O'Brien recalls snippets of memory and builds an indictment against the wastefulness of the war.

In "Speaking of Courage," the fictional "O'Brien" presents a story that he wrote about a Vietnam comrade named Norman Bowker. "O'Brien" describes Bowker's difficulty adjusting to civilian life after he returns from Vietnam as he recalls his own ease slipping back into the routine of daily life, which for him was graduate school. In the end, in "Notes," "O'Brien" describes how Bowker suggested that he ("O'Brien") write a story about a veteran with problems readjusting and intense feelings of survivor guilt. "O'Brien" realizes that he must not have put the memories of Vietnam behind him because he constantly writes about them.

Finally, "O'Brien" remembers a girl from his childhood who died from cancer, the first dead body he saw before being in-country. He describes how as a little boy, "Timmy," he could dream her alive and see and talk to her. He recognizes the similarity of his ability to animate her in his mind and his writing about Vietnam, and realizes that he tells these stories to save his own life.

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/t/the-things-they-carried/book-summary>