

How to Tell a True War Story

Tim O'Brien

1987

"How to Tell a True War Story" first appeared in October 1987 in *Esquire*. It later came to hold a central position in Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried*, published in 1990. An interesting combination of recalled events and editorial commentary, the story received critical attention at its first publication. Indeed, nearly every reviewer and critic who treats O'Brien's work singles out this story for special commentary. The story in many ways provides a map to the rest of *The Things They Carried*. By trying to characterize what constitutes a true war story, but never really achieving this feat, O'Brien introduces the most important themes of his book, including memory, imagination, epistemology (the study of the nature of knowledge), and truth. In addition, O'Brien uses the very technique he would later use in creating *The Things They Carried*, interspersing anecdotes and stories with commentary about the roles of fiction and storytelling. As D. J. R. Bruckner stated in the *New York Times* in an early review of *The Things They Carried*, "How to Tell a True War Story" is "at least as much about storytelling as about men at war." Certainly, by having his fictional characters tell stories and then recant the truth of those stories, O'Brien calls into question the possibility of ever telling a true war story. The result of this technique is that the story is both fragmentary and cohesive: the stories within the larger framework are fragments held together by a narrative voice determined to "get it right." Certainly, any student wishing to begin a study of



Tim O'Brien would be well served to pay close attention to "How to Tell a True War Story."

Author Biography

William Tim O'Brien was born on October 1, 1946, in Austin, Minnesota. His father sold insurance and his mother was a teacher. Both of O'Brien's parents served in the military during World War II. O'Brien and his family lived in Austin, Minnesota, for ten years, then moved to Worthington, Minnesota, where O'Brien spent the rest of his childhood and adolescence. He enrolled in 1964 at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

In 1968, just two weeks after graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Macalester and while preparing to enter Harvard graduate school, O'Brien received his draft notice. Although he was opposed to the war, he found himself in August 1968 assigned to an infantry unit in the army on his way to Vietnam.

O'Brien's Vietnam experience was life changing. Upon his return to the United States, he enrolled at Harvard as a doctoral student in government. During this time, he wrote for a number of magazines and newspapers and completed his first book, a memoir of his time in Vietnam called *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, published in 1973. In 1975 he published his second book, the novel *Northern Lights*. Around 1976 he gave up graduate studies to pursue a full-time career as a writer. The same year, he won an O. Henry Memorial Award for a short story that would later be included in his 1978 novel, *Going After Cacciato*. He garnered yet another O. Henry Memorial Award in 1978 for a second story from *Going After Cacciato*, and in 1979 the novel won a prestigious National Book Award.

His next novel, *The Nuclear Age*, was published in 1985. Following this publication, O'Brien spent about four years producing some of his best short fiction, including "How to Tell a True War Story," which appeared in 1987 in *Esquire*. Another short story, "The Things They Carried," won the National Magazine Award in 1987, and in 1999 was chosen for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, edited by John Updike.

In 1990 O'Brien collected some of his stories, including "How to Tell a True War Story," and published them as a book titled *The Things They Carried*. Though reviewers had difficulty determin-

ing whether the book was a novel, linked short stories, or some completely new genre, the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. The collection was named as one of the year's ten best works of fiction by the *The New York Times*, and received the Heartland Prize from the *Chicago Tribune*. The book also was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critic's Circle Award, won the Melcher award in 1991, and the French *Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger* (Prize for the Best Foreign Book) in 1992. Many scholars consider *The Things They Carried* to be O'Brien's best work to date. Since the publication of the collection, O'Brien has written two more books, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)—which received the James Fenimore Cooper Prize from the Society of American Historians and was named best novel of the year by *Time* magazine—and *Tomcat in Love* (1998).

Plot Summary

"How to Tell a True War Story" is not a story in the traditional sense. It does not follow a straight, chronological path from start to finish. Rather, it is a collection of small stories interspersed with instructions about "true" war stories.

The story opens with the words, "This is true." The narrator then goes on to tell the story of his friend Rat Kiley, who writes a letter to the sister of his buddy who had been killed a week earlier. It is a long, heartfelt letter. He waits for two months for a reply to the letter, but the sister never writes back.

The story then shifts to commentary. "A true war story is never moral," the narrator instructs. The narrator asks the reader to "listen to Rat" as he spews obscenity, as, according to the narrator, a true war story is committed to "obscenity and evil."

In the next section, the narrator reveals that Curt Lemon is the buddy who was killed. Thus, this section actually occurred in time before the opening section. Curt and Rat are playing with smoke grenades when Curt trips a rigged 105 mm. artillery round. The narrator reports "It's all exactly true." The narrator provides a stunning visual description of Curt's ascent into the trees as he is blown up.

Again the narration shifts to commentary. The narrator argues that it is difficult in true war stories to distinguish between what actually happened and what seemed to happen.

The narrator then suggests that “a true war story cannot be believed” and that sometimes it is simply impossible to even tell a true war story. He uses the example of a story told by Mitchell Sanders. Sanders recounts how a patrol of six men goes up into the mountains to establish a listening post. They are supposed to remain in the mountains for a week, absolutely silent. As the men listen, they begin to hear all kinds of weird noises. They hear music and voices. They hear a glee club and opera. Sanders says that the rocks are talking. Finally, the men become so frightened that they call in fire-power and burn up the mountains. Throughout this story, Sanders insists that every word is true.

Immediately the narrator shifts to a comment, “You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end.” Mitchell Sanders returns to the narrator later that night and tries to give the story a moral, as if he is unable to end the story the way he wants it to. The next morning, he once again approaches the narrator to tell him that he “had to make up a few things” while telling his story. Sanders tries yet again to give the story a moral, “That quiet—just listen. There’s your moral.”

Although the narrator earlier told the reader that war stories are never moral, Sanders continues to try to provide one. The narrator even shifts from his earlier position when he suggests that, if there is a moral, it is “like the thread that makes the cloth.” He further argues that a true war story affects the gut, not the brain.

Next, the narrator tells a story of his own: the events that occurred between the death of Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley’s letter writing. After Curt’s death, the squad captured a baby water buffalo. Rat winds up killing it slowly, by shooting off various parts of its anatomy. The narrator connects the killing with Curt’s death, and the rest of the platoon eventually participates by throwing the carcass into the village well.

In the next section, the narrator tells the reader, “The truths are contradictory.” He spends a long time describing the sensation of being in battle, trying in images and words to create a true war story for the reader. By the end of the section, however, in a quintessentially contradictory statement, the narrator tells the reader, “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.”

The narrator then returns to the death of Curt Lemon in a very short fragment. Here he recalls being ordered to climb up into the tree to collect the remains of the young man. His buddy, also up in the tree, sings “Lemon Tree” the whole time.

By the end of the story, it seems very important to the narrator that he be able to tell the “true” story of Lemon’s death. But just as it appears he may be able to do so, he inserts a passage that tells the reader that everything in the entire story has been made up. None of it is true. And yet, even here, the narrator squirms away: “None of it happened. *None* of it. And even if it did happen, it didn’t happen in the mounts, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy, and one night a guy named Stink Harris woke up screaming with a leech on his tongue.”

The story concludes by suggesting that a “true war story is never about war.” Thus, even at the very end of the story, the reader is left to ponder how to tell a true war story.

Characters

Stink Harris

Stink Harris has a very small role in this story, although he figures in other stories in *The Things They Carried*.

Dave Jensen

Dave Jensen is a minor character in this story, a fellow member of Tim’s platoon.

Rat Kiley

Rat Kiley is another member of Tim’s platoon. The story opens with Tim telling the story of how Rat wrote a letter to the sister of Curt Lemon, one of Rat’s buddies who was killed. The sister never writes back and Rat calls her a “dumb cooze.” A second story involving Rat concerns a “baby VC water buffalo.” The event occurs soon after Curt’s death. The platoon captures the buffalo and takes it with them. However, when it refuses to eat the food Rat offers it, Rat begins shooting the buffalo. The narrator attributes this action to Rat’s grief and anger over the death of his friend.

Kiowa

Kiowa is a Native American member of Tim’s platoon. His role in this story is limited to helping

Dave Jensen throw what is left of the baby water buffalo in the village well. However, in other stories in *The Things They Carried*, Kiowa is a central figure.

Curt Lemon

Curt Lemon is a member of Tim's platoon who dies. The story of his death is woven through this story and throughout the entire collection of stories that make up *The Things They Carried*. Curt and his friend Rat Kiley were playing with smoke grenades when Curt stepped on a rigged 105 mm. artillery round. Tim tells the story over and over, trying to describe Curt's ascent into the trees. Curt's role in the story is as "the dead guy." His death offers an illustration of the difference between happening-truth and seeming-truth. The happening-truth is, of course, that he is killed in an explosion. The seeming-truth, however, is that somehow the sunlight lifts him up into the trees.

Tim O'Brien

Although the first person narrator of the story has the same name as the author (the narrator is not named in this story; readers learn this information from other stories in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*), readers should not confuse the two. The author has deliberately created a fictional persona to tell this story. Like the author, the narrator Tim is a white male writer in his mid-forties, recalling his time as a soldier in Vietnam. He alternates between commenting on the construction of "true" war stories and memories that illustrate his points. Indeed, Tim's first words in the story are "This is true." Tim serves as the chief storyteller in the story, although he reports on stories he has heard from his comrades. Repeatedly, however, Tim points out to the reader those characteristics that identify a war story as true. At the same time, however, he also contradicts and changes his stories. Just as his opening words are "This is true," he later tells the reader that "None of it happened. None of it." Likewise, although he claims that this is a story about war stories, in the final paragraph he tells the reader, "And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war."

Mitchell Sanders

Another member of Tim's platoon, Mitchell Sanders, tells the story of a patrol that goes up into the mountains to spend a week listening for enemy movement. What they hear, however, is not enemy

movements, but a whole host of other sounds, including a glee club, a Chinese opera, and a cocktail party. He swears that the episode is true. Later in the night he returns to tell Tim the moral of the story, although Tim has just told the readers that a true war story has no moral. Even later in the night, Mitchell returns once again to Tim to tell him that he had to make up a few things in order to make the story true. Nevertheless, within the story, Tim presents Mitchell Sanders as a reliable narrator.

Themes

Memory and Reminiscence

Because "How to Tell a True War Story" is written by a Vietnam War veteran, and because Tim O'Brien has chosen to create a narrator with the same name as his own, most readers want to believe that the stories O'Brien tells are true and actually happened to him. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, O'Brien's so-called memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, contains many stories that find their way into his later novels and short fiction. Thus, it is difficult for the reader to sort through what is memory and what is fiction.

There are those, however, who would suggest that this is one of O'Brien's points in writing his stories. Although most readers would believe that their own memories are "true," this particular story sets out to demonstrate the way that memories are at once true and made up.

Further, as O'Brien tells the reader in "How to Tell a True War Story," "You'd feel cheated if it never happened." This is certainly one response to O'Brien's story. Readers want the stories to be true in the sense that they grow out of O'Brien's memory. O'Brien, however, will not let the reader take this easy way out. Instead, he questions the entire notion of memoir, reminiscence, and the ability of memory to convey the truth.

Truth and Falsehood

Certainly, the most insistent theme in this story is that of truth and falsehood. O'Brien, however, would be unlikely to set up such a dichotomy. That is, according to "How to Tell a True War Story," truth is not something that can find its opposition in

Topics for Further Study



- Investigate the incident that has come to be known as the My Lai massacre. Summarize the events that occurred in My Lai. Using your summary and research, try to determine why such an incident might happen and what affect it had on popular opinion about the Vietnam War.
- Read Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, a book by a former North Vietnamese soldier. Compare and contrast the story that Bao Ninh tells with the stories in *The Things They Carried*.
- Watch the movies *The Green Berets* (1968) and *Platoon* (1986). What are some of the reasons for such different portrayals of the Vietnam War? Using O'Brien's criteria, are either of these movies a "true" war story?
- Read Tim O'Brien's memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, and the rest of the stories in *The Things They Carried*. Can you find some of the sources for O'Brien's fiction in his own experiences? How does reading "How to Tell a True War Story" affect your reading of memoir?
- Read *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque and do some brief research on the First World War. Does Remarque's story classify as a "true" war story? Why or why not?
- O'Brien distinguishes between happening-truth and story-truth. What do you think he means by this? What role does fiction play in presenting the "truth" of the Vietnam War?
- Michael Herr's 1977 book *Dispatches* is another work that blurs the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Originally written as a work of journalism, Herr later described the book as fiction. What do you think qualifies the book as what has come to be known as the "new" journalism? Why do you think it can also be called a work of fiction? What other recent memoirs or biographies have continued to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction?

untruth. Rather, according to O'Brien, because war is so ambiguous, truth takes on many guises. Even seemingly contradictory events can both be considered true.

O'Brien uses the event of Curt Lemon's death to make this point. O'Brien knows, for example, that Curt is killed by a rigged 105mm round. However, as the scene replays in his mind, O'Brien sees the event very differently. It seems to him that Curt is killed by the sunlight, and that it is the sunlight that lifts him high into the tree where O'Brien will later have to retrieve Curt's body parts. Thus O'Brien distinguishes between the truth that happens and the truth that seems to happen.

Moreover, O'Brien likes to play with words and to undermine the logical connection between words. In Western philosophy, it is considered impossible for a word to mean itself and its opposite at the same time. O'Brien demonstrates it may

indeed be possible. For example, when he writes, "it is safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true," he is creating a paradox. If nothing is ever absolutely true, then even that statement cannot be absolutely true. The paradox suggests that while it might be possible to approximate truth, it must be told, as Emily Dickinson once wrote, "aslant."

Perhaps the most disconcerting moment in this tale occurs when O'Brien tells the story of the woman who approaches him after he tells this tale. Most readers assume that O'Brien the author is speaking, and that perhaps he is telling a story of what happened to him after a reading of his fiction. When the woman says she likes the story about the water buffalo, O'Brien is annoyed. Although he does not tell her, he tells the reader that the entire episode did not happen, that it was all made up, and that even the characters are not real. Readers may be

shocked. How could O'Brien have fabricated all of this? Then the reader may realize that O'Brien is playing with the truth again, for if everything in the story is fabricated, then so is the woman who approached him. This play with truth and falsehood provides both delight and despair for the reader who will never be able to determine either truth or falsehood in O'Brien's stories in the traditional sense. As Stephen Kaplan suggests in *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, "[O'Brien] completely destroys the fine line dividing fact from fiction and tries to show . . . that fiction (or the imagined world) can often be truer, especially in the case of Vietnam, than fact."

Style

Point of View and Narration

One of the most interesting, and perhaps troubling, aspects of the construction of "How to Tell a True War Story" is O'Brien's choice to create a fictional, first-person narrator who also carries the name "Tim O'Brien." Although the narrator remains unnamed in this particular story, other stories in the collection clearly identify the narrator by the name Tim. Further, the other stories in the collection also identify the narrator as a forty-three-year-old writer who writes about the Vietnam War, ever more closely identifying the narrator with the author.

On the one hand, this connection is very compelling. Readers are drawn into the story believing that they are reading something that has some basis in the truth of the writer Tim O'Brien. Further, the authorial voice that links the story fragments together sounds like it ought to belong to the writer.

On the other hand, however, the device allows O'Brien to play with notions of truth and ambiguity. Does the narrator represent the author? Or do the narrator's words tell the reader not to trust either the story or the teller? What can be said unequivocally about the Vietnam War? O'Brien's use of the fictional narrator suggests that there is nothing unequivocal about the war. Rather, it seems that O'Brien, through his narrator Tim, wants the reader to understand that during war, seeming-truth can be as true as happening-truth.

Ought the reader consider the narrator to be unreliable? After all, after pledging the truth of the

story from the very first line, he undercuts that claim by telling the reader at the last possible moment that none of the events in the story happened. While this might seem to point to an unreliable narrator, a narrator who cannot find it in himself to tell the truth, it is more likely that O'Brien is making the point that the entire story *is* true, it just never happened. This distinction, while frustrating for some readers, is an important one not only for the understanding of "How to Tell a True War Story" but also for the reading of *The Things They Carried*.

Structure

"How to Tell a True War Story" is not structured in a traditional manner, with a sequential narrative that moves chronologically from start to finish. Rather, O'Brien has chosen to use a number of very short stories within the body of the full story to illustrate or provide examples of commentary provided by the narrator. That is, the narrator will make some comment about the nature of a "true" war story, then will recount a brief story that illustrates the point. These stories within the larger story are not arranged chronologically. Consequently, the reader learns gradually, and out of sequence, the events that led to the death of Curt Lemon as well as the events that take place after his death.

This structure serves two purposes. In the first place, the structure allows the story to move back and forth between concrete image and abstract reality. The narrator writes that "True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis." Thus, for the narrator to provide "true" war stories, he must provide the concrete illustration. While the stories within the larger story, then, may qualify as "true" war stories, the larger story cannot, as it does indulge in abstraction and analysis.

The second purpose served by this back-and-forth structure is that it mirrors and reflects the structure of the book *The Things They Carried*. Just as the story has concrete, image-filled stories within it, so too does the larger book contain chapters that are both concrete and image-filled. Likewise, there are chapters within the book that serve as commentary on the rest of the stories. As a result, "How to Tell a True War Story" provides for the reader a model of how the larger work functions.

The story that results from this metafictional (metafiction is fiction that deals with the writing of

fiction or its conventions) structure may seem fragmentary because of the many snippets of the story that find their way into the narrative. However, the metafictional commentary provided by the narrator binds the stories together just as the chapters of the book are bound together by the many linkages O'Brien provides.

Historical Context

The Reagan Years: 1981–1988

In 1980 Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter for the presidency of the United States. Although the country could not yet know it, this was the year that the Gulf War really began, when Iraq invaded Iran. Because Iran held a group of Americans hostage, the United States initially favored Iraq in the conflict and provided arms to both Iraq and to Saudi Arabia. Throughout the decade, military concerns focused on the Middle East.

At this time, registration for the military draft was reinstated. Although there were some protests against registration, the protests did not come close to the scope of protest mounted against the draft and the Vietnam War in the previous two decades.

During the Reagan years, the president cast the Soviet Union as "The Evil Empire," and urged Congress to pass funding for his Strategic Defense Initiative, commonly called "Star Wars." Reagan wanted to defend the United States against a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union; however, there is no indication that his plan would have been effective.

In 1982, in a televised address, Ronald Reagan gave his narration of the Vietnam War. Scholars of the war have demonstrated that Reagan's history was in error on several key points. It is important, however, to note that his address ushered in an era of Vietnam War narratives, narratives that often were ambiguous and contradictory.

By the end of the decade, the Soviet Union was no longer a threat. Indeed, shortly after the Reagan years, the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a country. For all intents and purposes, the Cold War was over, marked by the crumbling of the Berlin Wall. The nation was left to puzzle over its legacies and the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Cultural Responses to the Vietnam War

By 1987, the year "How to Tell a True War Story" first appeared, Vietnam War veterans had been home for at least fourteen years. In the early years after their return, the veterans seemed almost invisible. It was as if the country, tired from years of protest and conflict, wanted to forget all about the Vietnam War and its soldiers. However, as the years passed, that attitude changed dramatically as the nation entered the 1980s.

During the 1980s, many of the emotional and physical problems endured by the veterans were finally diagnosed. For example, a number of veterans suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) directly related to the terrible sights, sounds, and fear they had witnessed during the war. This disorder made it difficult for those suffering from it to sleep well, to hold steady employment, and to fit back into society. Other veterans suffered from the aftereffects of exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliation chemical that had been sprayed over the jungles of Vietnam to expose enemy hiding places. In 1984, a class action suit against the companies who manufactured Agent Orange was settled out of court and a victims' fund was established.

As the problems of the Vietnam War veterans received increasing attention during the period, films and books about the war also began to appear. The 1980s saw an unprecedented cultural examination of the war. Many of the poets, novelists, memoirists, and playwrights of the period were Vietnam War veterans, mining their own experiences for subject matter. As a nation, it appeared that the United States was trying to find a narrative of the war that all could live with.

Films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *In Country*, *Hamburger Hill*, *The Killing Fields*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam* examined the experiences of the veterans before and after the war. Other films such as the *Rambo* series and the *Missing in Action* series explored deeply held cultural beliefs that many American veterans had been abandoned in Vietnam by their government when the United States withdrew its troops in 1973.

Likewise, many television documentaries, books, poems, plays, memoirs, histories, and short stories appeared during the 1980s and into the 1990s. It was during this fertile period that Tim O'Brien wrote most of the stories collected in *The Things They Carried*, including "How to Tell a True War Story."

Compare & Contrast

- **1980s–1990s:** Iran and Iraq engage in war between 1980 and 1988. After this war ends, Iraq invades Kuwait in 1990. The United States eventually engages in war with Iraq on behalf of Kuwait.

Today: Although the United States defeated Iraq in the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein is still in power. American troops are still stationed in the Middle East and an uneasy peace prevails.

- **1980s:** During this decade, the unthinkable happens: the Soviet Union crumbles and the Eastern European Communist bloc falls apart. Yugoslav President Tito's death in 1980 sets up the devolution of his country.

Today: The breakup of Yugoslavia leads to a confusing war and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and Kosovo in the closing years of the 1990s. The United States participates in United Nations peacekeeping missions and continues to station troops in the troubled area in the following decades.

- **1980s:** At the beginning of the decade, Vietnam invades Cambodia, leading to wide-scale bloodshed and a ten-year war.

Today: Vietnam is no longer at war with its neighbors, and has begun to normalize relations with the United States. Many American Vietnam veterans return to Vietnam for visits.

- **1980s:** During the decade, the market for Vietnam War fiction and film expand rapidly. Books such as *Paco's Story* by Larry Heinemann, *In Country* by Bobbie Ann Mason, and *Song of Napalm* by Bruce Weigl are published, and films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *The Killing Fields* are produced.

Today: Interest in the Vietnam War continues, although the number of new films and fiction taking the war as a subject have declined. Academic study of the war has grown and many new textbooks and histories are available.

Critical Overview

The Things They Carried, the collection in which "How to Tell A True War Story" appears, received rave reviews from critics and readers alike when it appeared in 1990. Many of the stories in the collection, including "How To Tell A True War Story," had previously won awards following publication in periodicals such as *Esquire*, *Ploughshares*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. Indeed, critics such as Robert R. Harris, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called the volume a must-read for anyone interested in the Vietnam War.

The Things They Carried followed O'Brien's National Book Award for *Going After Cacciato*, another novel which has as the subject a soldier's Vietnam War experience. *The Things They Carried* was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critic's Circle Award. In addition,

the book won the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize, the Melcher Book Award, and the *Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger* (The Best Foreign Book Award), an important French honor.

The Things They Carried met with immediate praise from reviewers, and, in nearly every review, "How to Tell a True War Story" was singled out for comment. Reviewers and critics have returned to the story again and again, seeing in it the essence of O'Brien's prose. In particular, the story seems to offer a blueprint for the larger book.

Early reviewers such as D. J. R. Bruckner were particularly taken by O'Brien's attention to storytelling. Bruckner writes in his *New York Times* review, "In his new work the magic is in the storytellers' prestidigitation as the stories pass from character to character and voice to voice, and the realism seems Homeric." He further notes the way

that "characters snatch stories from one another's mouths and tell them in a different way, with different incidents."

In another early review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Julian Loose observes that O'Brien's talent is in convincing the reader that "incredible stories are faithful to the reality of Vietnam." This comment is particularly apropos to "How to Tell a True War Story." In this story, O'Brien not only includes incredible tales, he offers comments on why these are "true" tales, even if they never really happened.

Harris, in a review of *The Things They Carried*, praises the book as "essential fiction" about the Vietnam War. He closes the review with direct reference to "How to Tell a True War Story," arguing that it "cuts to the heart of writing about war."

The story continued to draw favorable commentary from critics in the years following its publication. Because the story is so complicated, it is rich ground for scholars examining the Vietnam War and the literature it inspired. Steven Kaplan, for instance, notes in a 1993 essay in *Critique* that, just as O'Brien invented his stories, the United States government had to invent Vietnam: "The Vietnam War was in many ways a wild and terrible work of fiction written by some dangerous and frightening storytellers."

Likewise, in a widely circulated and important critical study in *Critique*, Catherine Calloway focuses on the use of metafiction in the text. She is particularly interested in the way that O'Brien writes about the writing of fiction in his stories, especially in "How to Tell a True War Story." She argues that "O'Brien draws the reader into the text calling the reader's attention to the process of invention and challenging him to determine which, if any, of the stories are true."

In an innovative article for *Contemporary Literature* appearing in 1998, Tina Chen tackles the connection between fiction and the body. She suggests that in "How to Tell a True War Story" "the stories, like the bodies, become metonyms for Vietnam." In other words, the bodies and the stories, although only a part of the entire picture, come to stand for the entire picture in much the way that "hands" stand in for the entire body in the statement, "All hands on deck."

Finally, in an article published in 2000 in *Twentieth Century Literature*, John Timmerman

writes about the "gap" between the "the imaginary casting of an event (the fictive event) and the factual details of that event (the historical chronicle)." In so doing, Timmerman arrives at the heart of this story and the issue that O'Brien apparently wants to resolve: how do people mediate between what "really" happened and what "seemed" to happen? That is, how do people internalize and integrate a traumatic experience into the texture of their lives? Timmerman argues that it is through the act of fiction-making that the dialectic between history and imagination can be integrated into a unified whole.

As ideas about the Vietnam war continue to change, it is likely that literary and historical scholars will return to "How to Tell a True War Story" for additional insight into both the war and a master storyteller. O'Brien's ideas and techniques provide rich ground for both interpretation and appreciation.

Criticism

Diane Andrews Henningfeld

Andrews Henningfeld is an associate professor at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, where she teaches literature and writing. She holds a Ph.D. in literature, and regularly writes book reviews, historical articles, and literary criticism for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Andrews Henningfeld uses deconstructive literary criticism to examine the ways in which Tim O'Brien simultaneously searches for truth and undermines that quest in his story.

Tim O'Brien was already a successful writer by the time he penned "How to Tell a True War Story" in 1987. In particular, critics had praised his previous novel, *Going After Cacciato*, for which O'Brien won a National Book Award. This novel opens many of the themes that O'Brien would later explore in *The Things They Carried*, and particularly in "How to Tell a True War Story." O'Brien frequently returns to the same themes again and again: truth, imagination, memory, and stories. As many critics have suggested, O'Brien's work is more about the quest for truth, the use of the imagination in telling the truth, and the art of storytelling in creating the truth than it is about the Vietnam War.

What Do I Read Next?



- *The Sorrow of War* (1995), by Bao Ninh, a former North Vietnamese soldier, offers a look at the Vietnam War from the North Vietnamese perspective. This novel uses many of the same literary techniques found in *The Things They Carried*.
- *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), by Tim O'Brien, is a deeply troubling novel about the return to the United States of one Vietnam veteran and his inability to adjust to civilian life. The story is told with many metafictional devices. Although challenging to read, it is an important book for students of the Vietnam War.
- *Song of Napalm* (1988), by Bruce Weigl, is a collection of Vietnam War poetry. Weigl, along with Yusef Komunyakaa, John Balaban, and W. D. Earhart, is one of the most studied Vietnam War poets.
- *Poems from Captured Documents* (1994), selected and translated by Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl, offers a collection of poems taken from the notebooks, journals, and diaries of soldiers who fought against the U.S. forces in Vietnam. The book offers facing-page originals and translations, making it possible for both Vietnamese and American students to read.
- Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) remains one of the classic novels of the Vietnam War. Set in Vietnam immediately before the battle of Dien Bien Phu, when the French lost their colonial hold on Vietnam, the novel offers a look at the early days that led inevitably to the conflict involving the United States.
- Tim O'Brien's memoir *If I Die in A Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) provides insight into the events that inspired the stories of *The Things They Carried*.
- *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984), by Wallace Terry, is a collection of memoirs from Vietnam veterans. It is especially noteworthy as it presents the memories of minority soldiers caught in the conflict.

In an important article, Catherine Calloway examines the themes of truth, imagination, etc., focusing on metafiction in *The Things They Carried*. Calloway writes,

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.

While this definition may seem at first complicated, at closer examination the concepts are not difficult. First, Calloway simply argues that metafictional stories take as their subject the creation of fiction. That is, these are stories about the creation of stories. Clearly, "How to Tell a True

War Story" is a metafictional story. O'Brien immediately begins to write about the creation of stories after he tells the story of Rat writing to Curt Lemon's sister: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done." The rest of the story is peppered with instructions to the would-be writer and would-be reader of war stories.

Further, metafictional stories do not let the reader forget that the story the reader is reading is a story, not reality. They do this by commenting on their own construction. O'Brien accomplishes this in several ways. First, sometimes the characters in the story reveal that the stories they tell are made up. For example, Mitchell Sanders tells a story about a six-man patrol that goes up a mountain. Although he swears that it is true, he returns to the narrator later

to tell him he made up "a few things," calling attention to his story as an artificial construction. Second, O'Brien's narrator also tells stories that are constructed and are not true. For example, he tells the story of a guy who jumps on a grenade to save his squad and dies. The narrator reports, "That's a true story that never happened." Finally, O'Brien's narrator in the last section of the story tells the reader that all the stories he has told are untrue, that they are "just" stories, not events that really happened. This, of course, calls attention to the entire story as a work of fiction.

Calloway argues that metafiction opens the possibility that reality itself is fictive. Certainly, O'Brien suggests this may be the case by naming his narrator "Tim O'Brien" and giving the narrator a background very similar to his own. In so doing, he seems to suggest that there is really no distinction between the stories the fictional narrator tells and the stories the real O'Brien tells.

What separates Calloway's critique from the author's possible intent in this essay, however, is her claim that the stories in *The Things They Carried*, including "How to Tell a True War Story," are "epistemological tools, multidimensional windows through which the war, the world, and the way of telling a war story can be viewed from many different angles and vision." Again, while the language is complicated, the ideas are not. Epistemology is the study of how people come to know what they know. It explores the basis of knowledge and truth. Thus, what Calloway seems to be arguing is that "How to Tell a True War Story" has value as a tool that helps readers understand better what being in a war is like. In other words, by viewing the Vietnam War through the many angles that O'Brien provides, the reader can have a "truer" vision of what the lived experience was like. By reading the story, a reader can have a better idea of what constitutes a true war story.

It is possible to demonstrate, however, that the opposite is the case, that someone reading "How to Tell a True War Story" may only *think* that he or she has more knowledge about war as a result of reading the story. Such a demonstration requires deconstructive reading. Deconstruction is a literary theory that contends that although readers and writers may seek the truth through writing, what they will have in the end is a literary construction, not the truth, even though sometimes it *seems* like the truth. Indeed, according to deconstructivists, text creates the illusion that words are firmly attached to mean-



Although the narrator claims that this is a true war story, it is also true that he has 'missed a lot.' How can he be responsible for the truth of his story when he cannot account for the facts of the event, simply because he did not see them?"

ing, and that it is possible to accurately describe reality through writing. However, they would emphasize this is only an illusion. Further, anything that has been constructed can be "deconstructed," or shown to mean the opposite of what it seems to mean on the first reading. O'Brien is a deconstructive master. While it appears that he is saying one thing about true war stories, what he is really doing is undermining not only the entire quest for truth, but also the possibility of truth existing in any knowable form.

O'Brien provides for readers all the hammers and hacksaws they need to deconstruct his story. In the first place, the narrator offers at least four different accounts of Curt Lemon's death. Each of these accounts is constructed slightly differently, with different emphasis and words. At the same time, the narrator tells the reader, "When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot." Although the narrator claims that this is a true war story, it is also true that he has "missed a lot." How can he be responsible for the truth of his story when he cannot account for the facts of the event simply because he did not see them?

In the second place, on the last page of the story, the narrator denies the truth of all of the stories that he has told within "How to Tell a True War Story." The situation of this denial occurs when he has apparently shared the stories in a reading, just as the author Tim O'Brien would read the stories to an audience. The narrator says that

often a woman will approach him after the reading and want to talk to him about the baby buffalo. He states,

All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. No trail junction. No baby buffalo. No . . . moss or white blossoms. Beginning to end, you tell her, it's all made up. Every . . . detail—the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. *None* of it.

That all of the stories are made up ought not come as any surprise to the reader. After all, this is a work of fiction. What ought the reader do, however, with the pages of advice the narrator has offered, describing how to tell a true war story? How is this prose any different from the “made up” stories? That is, although the linking passages that describe “how to tell a true war story” *seem* to be qualitatively different from the story passages, in reality these passages are also constructed from language just as the stories are. Further, and more disturbingly, the entire story is told by a fictional narrator, including the passage, “This is true.” What then, ought the reader make of this?

While many critics have argued that O'Brien is attempting to demonstrate the difference between story-truth and happening-truth, it is at least possible that what he is demonstrating is the impossibility of any truth at all. Rather than being an epistemological tool, this story serves to demonstrate how language only seems to provide knowledge, when all it really provides is more text. Indeed, even O'Brien's fictional characters run into this paradox: truth-telling leads only and always to more text, not to truth itself. The writing calls attention to the absence of the event itself; all that remains is the continually constructed and deconstructed text that tries to recreate the event itself.

It may at least be possible that O'Brien's project is significantly different from his narrator's project. While the narrator tries throughout the story to make the reader believe that true war stories can be recognized by a certain arrangement of words, that true war stories are “never about war,” and that fiction is a way to get to the truth of an event, O'Brien may be doing something very different. Indeed, it appears that he undermines his own text. O'Brien writes,

For example, we've all heard this one. Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened, without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue.

This passage is extremely important because by using the words “grounding reality,” O'Brien is referring to some external and eternal truth that exists independently of words and storytellers. However, because even the notion of “grounding reality” occurs in an obviously fictional story, it suggests that the grounding reality may itself be nothing more than fiction. The narrator's assertion that “you'd feel cheated,” is obviously true; if there is no grounding reality, but only the illusion created by texts, all of the great “truths” of the world tremble in a deconstructive earthquake.

It is human nature to seek the truth, and human nature to believe that such truth can be found. Readers want “How to Tell a True War Story” to be true at some level, to provide some insight into the ambiguity of the Vietnam War, to be an epistemological tool. Read closely, however, the story becomes a cautionary tale for putting too much stock into any narrator at all and a warning about the illusory nature of texts.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on “How to Tell a True War Story,” in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Catherine Dybiec Holm

Holm is a published writer and editor with a master's degree in natural resources. In this essay, Holm discusses the elusive nature of truth and reality in Tim O'Brien's work.

War stories bring the horrible truth of war home to the reader. Readers witness, through the author's prose, the bloody realities of what it must be like to be engaged in combat and to wonder whether one will make it through the day alive. But truth as it relates to war for author Tim O'Brien is a shifting concept, one that is not rooted in anything concrete or recognizable. The elusive nature of truth and reality in war is made clear in O'Brien's “How to Tell a True War Story.”

The irony of O'Brien's use of the word “true” in the title of this short piece (which the author calls fiction rather than a short story or nonfiction) is that for O'Brien there is no stable sense of truth or reality when it comes to war. The author shows readers this repeatedly, either through direct means (such as prose that addresses this issue) or indirect means (by

using shifting narration to retell an incident using a different slant with each retelling). According to Rosemary King, in the *Explicator*, O'Brien uses the word "true" to mean "either factually accurate, or something higher and nobler." But O'Brien's complete title for this piece is also ironic since he suggests that it may actually be impossible to accurately tell a true war story.

Examples are evident from the start of "How to Tell a True War Story" of O'Brien's unique treatment of truth as it applies to war stories. The author tells of two men in a combat unit in Vietnam. While taking a break during the day's hike, Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley play a game of catch with smoke grenades, normally harmless. The object is not to chicken out but to catch the grenades and be covered with smoke. Lemon steps backward at one point into the sunlight and something explodes. He is blown to pieces into the air.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien refers to the incident with Lemon and Kiley three additional times. With each retelling, different events are emphasized. The second retelling reveals that Lemon actually stepped into a "booby-trapped 105 round," which caused the explosion and his death. But this version focuses more on Kiley's actions later in the day, which mirror the pain he feels over Lemon's death. The men rescue a baby water buffalo, which Kiley later shoots in a deliberate, slow fashion, to give the animal as much prolonged suffering as possible before it dies. O'Brien starts this version of the story with the statement, "This one does it for me. I've told it before—many times, many versions—but here's what actually happened."

When O'Brien tells the story of Lemon's death the third time, he begins by saying "this one wakes me up," as if to imply that he is telling the story for the first time. O'Brien seems intent on demonstrating that the horrors of war can affect the perception of reality, even for a narrator. And this version of Lemon's death is truly horrible; it focuses on retrieving what's left of Lemon's remains from the tree near where the explosion took place.

The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing "Lemon Tree" as we threw down the parts.

O'Brien emphasizes the nebulous nature of truth when it comes to war stories by taking one



In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it is safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true."

story and telling it four different ways. Additionally, he starts several of the story versions with statements that make readers question whether the narrator realizes that he has told the story before. O'Brien's device could lead an astute reader to wonder whether the reality of war and the retelling of this particular war story has become confusing, at least in this narrator's head. And O'Brien's narrator backs this up with prose that directly questions what is and is not real regarding memories of war.

For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel . . . of a great ghastly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. . . . 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.

Critic Steven Kaplan refers to the "undying uncertainty" of O'Brien's narrator in this piece, and the rest of the pieces that comprise the collection *The Things They Carried*. According to Kaplan, most literature about Vietnam shares the certainty that "nothing was certain." The author's writings present facts and stories that:

are only temporarily certain and real; the strange "balance" in Vietnam between "crazy and almost crazy" always creeps back in and forces the mind that is remembering and retelling a story to remember and retell it one more time in a different form, adding different nuances, and then to tell it again one more time.

O'Brien's prose suggests that part of the difficulty of nailing down truth in matters of war has to do with inherent contradictions. The narrator explains that "war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty." The dichotomy of beauty and ugliness can be seen, for example, in "tracer rounds unwinding

through the dark in brilliant red ribbons" or "the purple orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. . . . It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not." The narrator also points out that a soldier's constant need to stare death in the face actually brings him to feel even more alive, another contradiction: "In the midst of evil, you want to be a good man. . . . You are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not."

In yet another example of the contradictory nature of truth in war stories, a character named Mitchell Sanders recalls a story of a combat unit in Vietnam that was ordered to hike into a remote, mountainous area and listen for any suspicious activity. Additionally, the men are to maintain strict silence for a week. After a few days, the men begin to hear music. Soon, they are hearing voices, wineglasses clinking, typical sounds of a cocktail party. None of this should be possible in such a remote area. Eventually the sounds turn into chamber music, opera, glee clubs, and chanting. It is more than the men can handle, to hear sounds coming from the rocks and the trees and the fog. They order all kinds of firepower, blast the area, and leave.

At this point in the story, the language used by the author seems to intentionally make it unclear as to whether the men actually succeeded in banishing the sound or not. Sanders says, "Around dawn things finally got quiet. Like you never even *heard* quiet before. . . . Everything's all sucked up inside the fog. Not a single sound, except they still *hear* it." This passage, particularly the last sentence, makes the reader wonder whether the men on the mission still heard the sound and how. Did memories of the music continue to reverberate in their heads, even though their logical minds heard no more sound in the woods around them? Or had they so lost their grip on reality and truth that they weren't sure what they were hearing anymore?

In another interesting example of contradiction, Sanders talks to the narrator the next morning and changes the details of the story again. According to Sanders, he made up the parts about the guys hearing a glee club and an opera. But Sanders does not let the suggestion of sound go away completely, adding, "Yeah, but listen, it's still true. Those six guys, they heard wicked sound out there. They heard sound you just plain won't believe." What is fact and what is fiction? Is O'Brien, as King suggests, "altering facts" rather than "clinging to the story of what actually transpired?" Apparently, this

technique is true of much of the author's work; Steven Kaplan comments that the author "destroys the fine line dividing fact from fiction and tries to show . . . that fiction (or the imagined world) can often be truer . . . than fact." O'Brien's clever use of contradiction and the changing slant of a story could leave a reader feeling just as confused and bereft of reality as some of O'Brien's characters.

What then, is a true war story? O'Brien may come closest to defining truth in "How to Tell a True War Story" when he says, "It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe." True to form, O'Brien ends "How to Tell a True War Story" with the suggestion that truth needs to be approached sideways in telling war stories. According to the author, a true war story is not about war, but about war's related experiences.

It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. . . . It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.

Truth, for O'Brien, straddles the line between fact and fiction and is constantly shifting to capture the experience of war.

Source: Catherine Dybiec Holm, Critical Essay on "How to Tell a True War Story," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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