

COMMENTARY BY ALEX VERNON

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## Field Notes on *The Things They Carried*

*Author's Note:* This essay is a slight adaptation from a presentation given at New River Community College, 3 October 2015, as the kickoff lecture for a National Endowment of the Arts “Big Read” program in the New River Valley region of South Western VA. Big Read NRV was a collaboration between Radford University’s McConnell Library and its partners, Glencoe Museum, Montgomery Floyd Regional Libraries, New River Community College, Pulaski County Library System, Radford Public Library, and Virginia Tech’s Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society.

**T**im O’Brien is a master of the imagination as an inventor of stories, a creator of characters, and an alchemist of personal experience. He is also a consummate student of the imagination. Most if not all of his books aren’t just products of the imagination; they are studies of the imagination.

I first read Tim O’Brien’s masterpiece *The Things They Carried* some seventeen years ago. It remains one of the very few books I remember encountering for the first time. I’ve read it and taught it so many times now that my initial emotional response and aesthetic astonishment, my tear-jerked-put-down-the-book-and-step-away-for-a-spell recognition of its power, is an abstract memory. Now I’m left with two roads to regaining some modest portion of that pleasure. The first is in introducing and sharing *The Things They Carried* with students and others; the second is in researching and writing about it. This afternoon I get to do both.

I’ve titled this afternoon’s presentation as I have, “Field Notes on *The Things They Carried*,” for one reason because it results from what I regard as my field work as a literary scholar: archival research into drafts, letters, and notes, and whatever other

documents one can access. I've also titled this lecture as I have because the material in the Tim O'Brien archives consists of metaphoric field notes of his writing journey as well as actual field notes from his days as an enlisted soldier in Vietnam and as a veteran returning to the old battlefields. My challenge today is to present *The Things They Carried* to two different audiences at the same time—to those of you who know the book and to those of you who only know *of* it, perhaps having just recently learned of it because of the New River Valley's fantastic National Endowment for the Arts' "Big Read" program. My solution is to weave together Tim O'Brien's background in Vietnam, the creative process that transformed his experiences into the novel, and some select passages from the published novel and a couple of his other works. Along the way I'll advance some propositions about *The Things They Carried* for you to bear in mind as you read it, discuss it, reflect on it.

We could do worse, by way of introducing *The Things They Carried*, than to consider a letter O'Brien wrote to his publisher about marketing strategies and possible titles. Although O'Brien thought of the book as "a new fictional form," in marketing "It should be emphasized that the book is accessible to the average reader. We should not hit too hard on the literary form business." He was particularly concerned that the book establish itself as "intended as much for women as for men." As for the main subject, he felt some hesitation: "The war aspect should be addressed, I think. Though the stories revolve around Vietnam, it is by no means a typical war novel."

In fact he did not care for the book's working title, *War Stories*, as he wrote to his publisher Seymour Lawrence:

WAR STORIES has the advantage of being short and memorable. It has the disadvantage of being too common, almost trite. Nor does it do justice to the scope of the book, which goes beyond war. I'm afraid, too, that it will turn off a great many female readers ... . Also, it classifies the book as a collection of stories, which would hurt us commercially, and which again does not do justice to the overall novelistic effect. THE THINGS THEY CARRIED, which I prefer, may be a bit "literary" and probably less memorable at first glance. But it has several advantages: it sounds like a unified book; it has a certain music; it resonates with the book's larger themes—the burdens of war and memory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Undated letter from Tim O'Brien to "Sam" (Seymour Lawrence), Seymour Lawrence Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi [hereafter U.Miss.], Box 53, Folder "Tim O'Brien 1989-1991."

He wanted *The Things They Carried* to appeal to as inclusive a readership as possible. He wanted it to be read. Widely.

The worry about women readers was well-grounded. Although O'Brien had published three short stories about Vietnam in *Redbook*,<sup>2</sup> he tended to land commercial sales of his short pieces, fiction and nonfiction, in *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and even *Gallery*. And it wasn't just O'Brien, or even male authors or manly stories. Corinne Browne, the author of 1973's *Body Shop: Recuperating From Vietnam*, reported on wounded veterans for *Penthouse*. One dazzling blurb for O'Brien's memoir, by a war correspondent and future National Book Award winner, was rejected on gendered grounds: "Since we consider IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE a powerful men's book (our marketing approach) it is our feeling that the quote you suggested by Gloria Emerson is not as strong as the one we have chosen from Publisher's Weekly. Therefore, we would like to stick to the latter."<sup>3</sup> O'Brien wrote one of the stories in *The Things They Carried* specifically for women readers, whom he directly addressed in a part of the draft eventually removed.

But let's step back.

Tim O'Brien was raised in Worthington, Minnesota, the self-proclaimed Turkey Capital of the world. Born in 1946, he's the son of the World War II generation, and like most of those who went to the war in Vietnam, he grew up listening to American Legion speeches, playing soldier and marine fully equipped by the Army Surplus store near Tenth and Main, and swimming in the deluge of 1950s and 1960s righteous American war movies: "The movies were my basic training. In the salty rows of the old State Theater, I received my instructions in the GI postures and folkways. My drill instructors were Audie Murphy and Alan Ladd and Gary Cooper" ("Vietnam: Now Playing," 62).

He received his draft notice the summer of 1968, shortly after graduating from Macalester College, where he served as student body president and campaigned for Eugene McCarthy. He seriously considered escaping to Sweden through Canada, and while stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington for advanced infantry training, he researched and planned what would have been a rather easy evasion operation. But "I simply couldn't bring myself to flee," he writes in his memoir. "Family, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run. ... I was a coward" (*If I Die* 68).

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<sup>2</sup> "Claudia May's Wedding Day" (Oct. 1973); "Keeping Watch by Night" (Dec. 1976); "Where Have you Gone, Charming Billy?" (May 2975).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Saul Cohen, managing editor at Dell, to Tim O'Brien, 29 November 1973 (Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin [hereafter HRC], Box 4, Folder 6).

The local paper's caption for the photograph of him and three others on the day of their departure for military service gets his name wrong. In the copy in the archives at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas-Austin, someone has written, "Wrong guy got drafted!"<sup>4</sup> Better for Tim, but worse for American letters, had the army drafted Tom.

O'Brien served as a light infantryman in Quang Ngai, two provinces south of the DMZ at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, from March 1968 to February 1969. He was, as College Joes frequently were, assigned as the company RTO, the radio man, whose big antennae and proximity to the commander drew enemy fire. I don't know what images come immediately to your minds when you think of the Vietnam war, but there is a good chance the movie-in-your-head matches his experience: of platoons and companies sloshing through paddies, humping up mountains, and securing villages; of helicopter insertions and casualty dust-offs. By the end of his tour, O'Brien had received a Purple Heart for a relatively minor injury, and a Bronze Star; had been promoted to sergeant; and had become a clerk in the battalion headquarters, where among other jobs he edited and wrote for the battalion weekly newsletter, *The Professional*. His contributions included baseball commentary, a short series on Vietnamese vocabulary, an editorial on the need for "establishment of rapport and mutual respect between American troops and citizens of Vietnam,"<sup>5</sup> even a poem. A few of these articles became late chapters in O'Brien's first book, the 1973 memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*.

O'Brien published four books prior to the book he, and I, and pretty much everyone rates as his masterpiece, *The Things They Carried*.

For aspiring writers out there, I can assure you that there were plenty of false starts along the way. There was a novel about Czechoslovakia O'Brien that wrote as an undergraduate in 1967, before his army days, and sent to Ballantine Books. Titled *A Man of Melancholy Disposition*, this amateur effort he today prays has been destroyed or otherwise relegated to unread oblivion.<sup>6</sup> In the mid-seventies, while he was writing *Going After Cacciato*, there was an idea for a novel called *The Hunt*, about "a sixty year-old insurance salesman" living in the "gray, rocky, wild country

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4 Not the "four" others cited in *If I Die* (21). The caption identifies the other three as Donald J. Ult de Flesch, Raymond Dickey, and Michael W. Kleve, all from Nobles County (HRC Box 27, Folder 6).

5 *The Professional*, v1n81 (11 Oct 1969) and v1n82 (20 Oct 1969), HRC Box 27, Folder 6.

6 Letter from Alan E. Johnson to Tim O'Brien, 1 July 1972, p.2 (U. Miss. Box 54, Folder "TIM O'BRIEN Jul-Dec 1972"); letter from Ballantine Books dated 6 August 1968 (HRC Box 28 Folder 4). That these letters reference the same unpublished book was confirmed by O'Brien in a personal email dated 26 Sep. 2015.

of South Dakota” who “is being hunted, and he has no inkling why.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps from this idea came one for a new novel on which O’Brien was working in the summer of 1978. He felt this one would be a “better” book than *Going After Cacciato* (which hadn’t yet won the National Book Award):

I’m tackling a very big (and much ignored) thing: H-bombs and Minutemen missiles. The central plot, as it has evolved, is about a seventy-year-old rancher out in the Dakotas whose land is bought up to put in Minuteman silos; he doesn’t like this, doesn’t like being the target for Russian missiles which of course will be pointed back at this area. So, after doing all he can to stop the construction, he finally rides out on his horse to blow the whole business up. ... Can’t wait to see what happens at the end.<sup>8</sup>

This germ of a novel, *The Sweetheart Mountains*, was actually under joint contract with Dell along with *The Nuclear Age*. O’Brien abandoned *The Sweetheart Mountains* after a chapter or two.<sup>9</sup>

In a sense the archival history of *The Thing They Carried* begins on 1 December 1985, with a letter to his agent, Lynn Nesbit. With *The Nuclear Age* published, O’Brien writes about his next project and his hopes for securing an advance to speed up the writing. The next novel, whose plot the letter describes in some detail, will be about a politician whose career has just imploded and whose wife has simply vanished—a story some of you will recognize from *In the Lake of the Woods*, the book not published until 1994, four years after *The Things They Carried*. Yet while working on *In the Lake of the Woods*, indeed for several years earlier, O’Brien was writing and publishing the core stories of *The Things They Carried*:

“The Ghost Soldiers,” *Esquire* March 1981

“The Things They Carried,” *Esquire* August 1986

“How to Tell a True War Story,” *Esquire* October 1987

“The Lives of the Dead,” *Esquire* January 1989

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7 Tim O’Brien letter to Seymour Lawrence, 23 December 1976, p. 1. O’Brien talks about writing *Cacciato* in other letter to Seymour Lawrence, 1 December 1975; 6 February, 3 March, 24 May, 12 September, 29 November 1976, p.2 (U.Miss. Box 53, Folder “TIM O”BRIEN 1976”).

8 Letter to Seymour Lawrence, 13 June 1978, p1-2. (U.Miss. Box 53, Folder “Tim O’Brien 1978-1980.”)

9 Tim O’Brien letter to Carole Baron, Editor-in-Chief, Delacorte Press, requesting to be released from the contract for the two books (U.Miss. Box 53, Folder “Tim O’Brien 1981”). That these letters reference the same book was confirmed by O’Brien in a personal email dated 26 Sep. 2015.

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” *Esquire* July 1989  
“In the Field,” *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, December 1989  
“On the Rainy River,” *Playboy*, January 1990

The first documented evidence I’ve found about plans for *The Things They Carried* is a 1987 letter O’Brien wrote to Robert Warde, a professor at Macalester College, using his need to work on *In the Lake of the Woods* as his reason for not making a college appearance:

I’m at work on a novel set up in Lake of the Woods—part love story, part ghost story, part mystery, part fantasy, part who-knows-what. Hard to explain: you’ll have to read it, I’ll have to write it. I’ve also done a few Nam stories (one of which you heard) and at some point soon I’d like to do a whole bunch more, twenty or thirty, just a nice fat collection with various characters appearing here and there, maybe connected by mini-essays about the act of writing, maybe with some commentary about the stories themselves and what they grew out of and how they came to be as they are, maybe throwing some non-factual nonfiction—bald lies, in other words, the kind of lying that fiction writers always do. For now though, it’s a matter of finishing up the novel within the next 12 months or so. Which means staying off the college-reading circuit.<sup>10</sup>

O’Brien appears to have finished the first draft of *The Things They Carried* in December 1988, with a planned draft delivery day of June 1989 with *In the Lake of the Woods* due about a year later.<sup>11</sup> Documents from the first half of 1989 see the title alternate between *War Stories* and *The Things They Carried* while it and *In the Lake of the Woods* are being simultaneously pitched to publishers in the US and abroad.

I appreciate your patience as I work through this history. It matters for our understanding of the novel a few reasons.

First, we can surmise which stories were written with the book in mind. For one thing, the publication chronology validates O’Brien’s statement that “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”—the story written for women readers—was

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<sup>10</sup> Letter dated 6 November 1987 (HRC Box 25 Folder 9)

<sup>11</sup> Handwritten note from O’Brien to Seymour Lawrence, dated 14 December 1988, about an enclosed piece of writing to add as a “Notes” chapter “to accompany ‘The Things They Carried.’” The next day Lawrence writes what appears to be an intra-office memo promising manuscript delivery dates (UMiss. Box 53, Folder “Tim O’Brien 1989-1991”).

written for the book. Second, we can study the book in the order in which it was composed, as best anyway as the publication dates map the composition dates, instead of the order in which they are arranged in the book. I'm particularly curious to think about "The Ghost Soldiers" as the book's genesis story rather than as very nearly the final one.

Third and finally, it encourages us to read *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods* as a paired set. At some point in the publication process O'Brien completed one of those author questionnaires that publishers use to solicit basic information from its writers, in which he notes that he has been working on *The Things They Carried* "since 1985"—the same year he starts corresponding about *In the Lake of the Woods*. Today's talk could have been titled "A Tale of Two Novels," and in fact Houghton-Mifflin brought out an edition with both novels under one cover in 2011.

Those of you who have read *In the Lake of the Woods* know the reason John Wade's life implodes: he had been a member of Charlie Company, Task Force Barker, the unit that perpetrated the massacre at My Lai 4, and had covered it up for the sake of his political ambitions. According to one of O'Brien's major sources, Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim's *Four Hours in My Lai*,

On March 16, 1968, they entered an undefended village on the coast of Central Vietnam and murdered around five hundred old men, women, and children in cold blood. The killings took place, part maniacally, part methodically, over a period of about four hours. They were accompanied by rape, sodomy, mutilations, and unimaginable random cruelties. (3)

From the archival evidence alone, it would seem that O'Brien did not envision My Lai as a part of the novel—My Lai or even Vietnam—until after the 1990 publication of *The Things They Carried*. It isn't mentioned in any of the correspondence between him and his agent or his publisher, or in other letters I have seen talking about the novel in process.<sup>12</sup> And in a March 1990 interview for *Minnesota Monthly* on the occasion of *The Things They Carried*'s publication, O'Brien has this to say about his next book:

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<sup>12</sup> Tim O'Brien to Robert Warde, 6 November 1987; Tim O'Brien to Andy McKillop, 5 November 1987 (HRC Box 25 Folder 9).

I'm working on a book called *Lake of the Woods*, set up in that boundary area near the Rainy River, about a defeated politician who goes up there to lick his wounds. I'm about 150 pages into it, so it'll be another couple of years....It feels good to get away from Vietnam and back to Minnesota. It's really nice now to be writing about that.<sup>13</sup>

*It feels good to get away from Vietnam.* The story I wanted to tell today, then, is that Tim O'Brien, like John Wade, did not want to deal with Vietnam but couldn't finally keep Vietnam at bay. Those war stories kept coming while he was supposed to be writing a Minnesota novel, and then came the 1989 documentary film and its 1992 book form, Bilton and Sim's *Four Hours in My Lai*, inspiring a significant revision to *In the Lake of the Woods*, the revision that delayed publication from shortly after *The Things They Carried* in 1990 until 1994.<sup>14</sup> Bilton and Sim's book shouts out the very message that O'Brien's novel will dramatize: "National consciousness consists of what is allowed to be forgotten," yet no country is "free of the implications of its terrible past," and "My Lai is now almost completely forgotten, erased entirely from the national consciousness" (4). PBS's thirteen-part 1983 *Vietnam: A Television History* gave the event only a few seconds, in the "Homefront USA" episode, about whether it was atypical and whether Calley became a scapegoat.

But O'Brien has assured me that the idea of employing My Lai for John Wade's story came very early in the writing process, after drafting the first chapter, and that he spoke about it several times with Lawrence even though he wasn't yet ready to write or talk about it to others.<sup>15</sup> And on closer inspection, the archives bear this history out. That early sketch to his agent adumbrates the absent presence of My Lai:

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13 Jeff Johnson, "'Vietnam Made Me a Writer': An Interview with Tim O'Brien" p.41, *Minnesota Monthly* (March 1990), 40-41 (U.Miss. Box 53 Folder "Tim O'Brien 1989-1991").

14 O'Brien's undated chronology of the novel's events, listing Wade's departure to and return from Vietnam over a time period inclusive of My Lai (but with no direct reference of My Lai), references pages that almost match the printed first edition's (HRC Box 7 Folder 1). And the photocopied *National Geographic* article about the area, with a discussion of the winter 1735-1736 beheading of twenty-one French soldiers by Sioux on what came to be called Massacre Island, has no indication of when O'Brien found it. The article also mentions the city of Warroad, named because of its use as an Indian warpath, and cited as the closet village the Northwest Angle of the novel's setting (William H. Nichols, "Men, Moose, and Mink of Northwest Angle," *National Geographic* XCII No. 3 [September 1947], 265-284 (HRC Box 7, Folder 1).

15 Personal email, 13 August 2015.



For the purposes of this letter, the reasons behind his defeat are unimportant. (2)

Roughly here, around page 70, Kathy disappears. I'm hesitant about saying much more. Clearly, however, John Wade is haunted (and the reader too, I hope) by the possibility that he himself had a part in it. At the very least he feels responsible. Maybe something more. ...

(I'm especially looking forward to the atrocity scenario—Kathy in panic, John on the prowl.) (4)

In any event the setting itself will function as the book's dominant metaphor. As John Wade moves into this wilderness, he will also be moving deeper into his own psyche, a tangled and sometimes brutal region, and the waters of the Lake of the Woods will serve as both window and mirror, like layers of glass. (5)

Which really does bring us to *The Things They Carried*.

For those of you expecting to read atrocity stories in *The Things They Carried*, or those of you who wondered why you didn't read atrocity stories in *The Things They Carried*, just because it is novel about the American war in Vietnam, here is one explanation: O'Brien was tackling the biggest, most infamous atrocity story of the war in the other novel. (Another conversation we could have about the two novels would be to follow this letter's lead by interrogating them in terms of gender, more specifically how the veterans' hostility toward the war presents as hostility toward civilian American women, and of the possible significance of this dynamic beyond simple charges of misogyny.)

Let me get after O'Brien's method in *The Things They Carried* another way.

In the late 1970s, just after *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien wrote a handful of articles about the first wave of Vietnam war films. Already, he complained at the time, the clichés and stereotypes, the stock devices and plots and metaphors, have ensconced themselves (and he probably has some published memoirs and novels in mind too). With *The Boys in Company C*, for example: "Drugs, fraggings, tough drill sergeants, conscientious objectors, soccer metaphors, body-count imperatives, the callous stupidity of commanding officers, atrocities: It is all jammed into one package, and no one element is given the freedom and time necessary for emotional impact" ("Vietnam: Now Playing," 85). The Vietnam war as surreal nightmare

and the psychopathic violent veteran are two other established staple narratives O'Brien protests in these articles.

*In the Lake of the Woods* commits itself to one element, the atrocities. That's one strategy. But for a handful of passing mentions about dope, Darvon, and tranquilizers, *The Things They Carried* depicts nothing at all from this list. That's the other strategy. Its new wrinkles—and there are many—its new wrinkles, by virtue of being new, spur active reception. “One means of gulling an audience into believing in a film—one of the most important means—is to create a story so fresh, so compelling and so tied to the eccentricities of individual characters that the audience has neither the time nor the inclination to disbelieve. Drama. Uniqueness. Avoiding old roles, old modes. Focusing not on *war*, but on a *story* that happens to occur in war” (87). Remember O'Brien's hesitance to highlight the war when marketing the book. To get his audience to read beyond the war, to have *The Things They Carried* achieve and be recognized as something more than yet another Vietnam war novel—which already numbered in the hundreds if not the thousands—to have it read with any attention, to have it read at all, he had to purge the book of those stock elements that would have branded it as a characteristic Vietnam war novel. Observe also that he was turning an assortment of stories into the unified book of fiction in the wake of Oliver Stone's 1986 film *Platoon*, which drew on some of the war's usual suspects: drugs, race relations between blacks and whites, and especially atrocity, in a scenario designed by Stone to recall My Lai (followed by the lesser 1989 film *The Casualties of War*).

Nevertheless, as we know from the history of *The Things They Carried's* and *In the Lake of the Woods's* parallel writing processes, the My Lai massacre was never far from O'Brien's mind. And today I'd like to contend that My Lai has an absent presence in *The Things They Carried*. It haunts the book.

The closest we get in circumstance to My Lai in *The Things they Carried* is the burning of a village, Than Khe, “south of Chu Lai” (*Things* 10), although the narrator tells us that the platoon shot only “chickens and dogs” (16). This might be the same burned hamlet with the dead family in the story “Style,” although we aren't directly told the circumstances of the hamlet's burning (135-136). The closet we get in proximity to My Lai is the ambush where the narrator kills a young enemy Vietnamese soldier outside My Khe. What the book does not tell us is that the hamlets of My Khe belong to the same village, Son My, as the several My Lai hamlets, and were also on the target route for Task Force Barker's mission (see Bilton and Sim, 97, 109, 146, 150, 167, 290).

In other words, *The Things They Carried* takes place in O'Brien's Quang Ngai Province—the very province where the My Lai massacre occurred a year before his tour and presumably a year before the events of the novel. The utter absence of mention becomes a telling absence.

What Ernest Hemingway said about his story “Big Two-Hearted River,” that it's a war story with no mention of the First World War in it, one could rephrase about *The Things They Carried*: it's a massacre story with no mention of My Lai in it. Referencing Son My might have located the fictional events for some readers—the Son My memorial to the massacre was built in 1978—but the book won't even yield that information.

O'Brien writes about My Lai in the first book, the 1973 memoir, where he writes about how dangerous and terrifying an area it was for American soldiers, this area called Pinkville,<sup>16</sup> and how his unit experienced something of Lt. William Calley's platoon's maniacal, methodical response:

In the next days it took little provocation for us to flick the flint of our Zippo lighters. Thatched roofs take the flame quickly, and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk from Pinkville and see the fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate is good. ...

When a booby-trapped artillery round blew two popular soldiers into a hedgerow, men put their fists into the faces of the nearest Vietnamese, two frightened women living in the guilty hamlet, and when the troops were through with them, they hacked off chunks of thick black hair. The men were crying, doing this. An officer used his pistol, hammering it against a prisoner's skull.

Scraps of our friends were dropped in plastic body bags. Jet fighters were called in. The hamlet was leveled, and napalm was used. I heard screams in the burning black rubble. ... There were Viet Cong in the hamlet. And there were babies and children and people who just didn't give a damn in there, too. But Chip and Tom were on their way to Graves Registration in Chu Lai, and they were dead, and it was hard to be filled with pity. (*If I Die*, 119-120)

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<sup>16</sup> O'Brien explains the name as a geographical map feature: developed areas were colored pink (*If I Die*, 115-116). The name also became associated with the area as a VC (communist) stronghold.

Chip—Chip Merrick, who died with Tom Markunas on 9 May 1969, about 7.5 kilometers northeast of My Lai 4—becomes the fictional Curt Lemon in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien's hand-copied notes for that day, presumably from the military logs he requested for his 1994 return trip, simply say, "We pulled back & called in airstrike on hamlet." Six days later there's this entry: "At 1830 hours, A Co. had cordon around ville at 725876. 1 VC sticks head out of tunnel & fires at us. A Co. sees 20-25 VC moving around village as if to ambush us. We set fire to ville. Gets out of control. Suspect VC following us." By this point in the two-week operation, the battalion had 5 men killed and another 13 wounded, plus O'Brien himself (July would be another awful month). And sometime during this period, as reported in the memoir, Alpha Company ran across

[s]ome boys ... herding cows in a free-fire zone. They were not supposed to be there: legal targets for our machine guns and M-16s. We fired at them, cows and boys together, the whole company, or nearly all of it, like target practice at Fort Lewis. The boys escaped, but one cow stood its ground. Bullets struck its flanks, exploding globs of flesh, boring into its belly. ...I did not shoot, but I did endure, without protest, except to ask the man in front of me why he was shooting and smiling. (139)

Chip Merrick becomes the fictional Curt Lemon, and the vengeful punching of women and napalming of hamlets is combined with this target practice to become Rat Kiley's vengeful murder, after Curt's death, of "a baby VC water buffalo":

He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. ...He shot off the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs. All around us there was the smell of smoke and filth and deep greenery, and the evening was humid and very hot. Rat went to automatic. He shot randomly, almost casually, quick little spurts in the belly and butt. Then he reloaded, squatted down, and shot it in the left knee. Again the animal fell hard and tried to get up, but this time it couldn't quite make it. It wobbled and went down sideways. Rat shot it in the nose. He

bent forward and whispered something, as if talking to a pet, then he shot it in the throat.

The rest of the platoon “stood in a ragged circle around the baby buffalo. For a time no one spoke. We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it” (79). When the fictional platoon does start to talk about what they’ve witnessed, they focus on its unprecedented nature. “‘My whole life, I never seen anything like it.’ ... ‘A new wrinkle. I have never seen it before.’ ... ‘Over here, man, every sin’s real fresh and original’” (80).

The *new wrinkle* applies to the story *as a story*. Through the soldiers O’Brien addresses his readers about this fictional narrative move and brings them into that ragged circle. The originality belongs to O’Brien’s transmutation of the actual into something fictive which nevertheless, and perhaps due to its transmutation, in the story’s own words, “makes the stomach believe” (78) in a way that yet another Vietnam atrocity tale of the *ripped-from-the-headlines* genre might not have.

Later in the memoir O’Brien reports on his time as a clerk when the army investigation into My Lai hits the battalion, and on the entrenched if addled defense of the massacre by of one his superior officers. But you won’t find a single reference to My Lai or anything quite like it in *The Things They Carried*. To find atrocity in it, to find sin, look to the baby water buffalo. Look to the characters Azar’s binding a Claymore antipersonnel mine—the mines that work like shotguns by spraying hundreds of steel balls in a fan-shaped pattern—to a puppy to blow it away (36-37). Look to descriptions of the fictional soldiers squirming and huddling in fear, and go back to the memoir’s second description of O’Brien’s own wounding and review his confession of sorts:

But at a place east of My Lai, within smell of the South China Sea, bullets seemed aimed straight at you.

Isolated, a stretch of meadow, the sound going into the air, through the air, right at your head, you writhe like a man suddenly waking in the middle of a heart transplant, the old heart out, the new one poised somewhere unseen in the enemy’s hands. ...

I was not at My Lai when the massacre occurred. I was in the paddies and sleeping in the clay... a year and more later. But if a man can squirm in a meadow, he can shoot children. (135-136)

O'Brien's wounding, by a grenade during an ambush, is rewritten for *The Things They Carried* as the narrator's killing a Vietnamese soldier by a grenade during an ambush--both happening outside a My Khe hamlet.<sup>17</sup> The circumstances of the ambush differ radically, as obviously do the outcomes. In the fictional version—placed in the physical center of the book—the narrator imagines the man he killed as very much someone like himself: born in 1946, bookish, not an ideologue or much of a warrior at all, but there by force of tradition and an inability to turn his back on the land that reared him (125). In concert with the fictional narrator's imagining the man he killed, the author O'Brien uses the fiction to imagine the man who almost killed him, creating something of a double-mirror effect. While in one sense the difference is negligible, in another sense we can see O'Brien taking some responsibility for his own near-death. That we later learn that the narrator didn't kill a man in an ambush with a grenade is moot. As the narrator tells us, his presence at the scene was "guilt enough" (179), his presence in country was guilt enough, just as O'Brien's was guilt enough as well as the cause of his wounding.

For references to My Lai, look to the absent present, to Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's cryptic remark to the narrator, the fictional writer of the book: "Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever. ... And do me a favor. Don't mention anything about—." About what, we readers are never told.

Thus far I've been introducing *The Things They Carried* by discussing how Tim O'Brien's personal experiences inform the book without its being an autobiographical novel. Those of you new to the book will find it perhaps strange, then, that one of the other wrinkles to *The Things They Carried* is the presence of a fictional character-narrator named Tim O'Brien inside the text, the same age as the writer who made the book in our hands, and like him the author of a memoir called *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and a novel called *Going After Cacciato*, both inspired by his year with 5<sup>th</sup> of the 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry in Quang Ngai, 1969-1970. Character-Tim at times directly addresses the reader about the story-telling, book-making process of

<sup>17</sup> The memoir and the fiction cite My Khe. The memoir provides a second description of the event in Chapter 16, "Wise Endurance" (134-135). The man whose body Mad Mark throws onto a helicopter, Arnold (117), is called by his nickname, Arizona, in the second description. Sgt. Roy Arnold was from Phoenix. The Vietnam Virtual Wall confirms his death on 3 May 1969, characterizing it as "hostile, died outright" from "multiple fragmentation wounds" (<http://www.virtualwall.org/js/profile.htm>). A map and O'Brien's annotations and notes at the HRC also date the day as 3 May 1969 and provide military grid coordinates: 733768 (HRC Box 22, Folders 6-7). None of these documents mention his wounding, though the other details match the memoir's account: it occurred after a helicopter insert ("CA," or combat assault), and Arnold was killed. O'Brien was evacuated a few days later, when the wound became infected, for a tetanus shot and a thorough cleaning and dressing of the wound, as well as for new glasses, returning to the operation a day or two later (personal email, 23 August 2015).

the book in her hand. To hang with a text that plays such head games, the trained reflexes of literature students will have them reach for their trump vocabulary: metafiction and postmodernism. Indeed there is excellent scholarship applying these critical terms in regards to *The Things They Carried* (and *In the Lake of the Woods*), but as predictable classroom and scholarly staples, they've also turned trite.

Yet *The Things They Carried* never truly breaks the fourth wall. Character-Tim is a fiction. He shares a name and some biographical details, but the rest of his story writer-Tim has invented. O'Brien has attested as much in several interviews, and initial drafts of the book openly confess this fiction within the fiction. In the archives there's a drafted chapter called "Good Form," for example, that differs a great deal from the "Good Form" in the published book, and fesses up:

I don't have a daughter named Kathleen. I don't have a daughter. I don't have children. ...

Jimmy Cross never visited me at my home in Massachusetts, because of course Jimmy Cross does not exist in the world of objects, and he never did. He's purely invented, like Martha, and like Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders and all the others. ...

Norman Bowker never wrote me any letters .He did not commit suicide. The letters are made-up, and the suicide, too, and Norman Bowker himself.

And finally it has to be said outright that the Tim who appears in this book, even at this instant, is not the Tim who sits here pecking away at a typewriter. The writer-Tim invents outlandish lies in the service of his stories, but the character-Tim swallows those lies and lives them and feels the truth below.<sup>18</sup>

The story "On the Rainy River" is followed by one of several sections called "Notes," this one another bit that does not appear in the published book, and which asserts that

The major incidents in the story, while true in spirit, did not occur in the world of everyday reality, and even the story's narrator, who bears my name, is almost entirely a creature of invention. The Tim on the Rainy River is not the Tim who wrote the story. The poor kid crying in the bow of a boat twenty yards off the Canadian shore is, at best, just a

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<sup>18</sup> *The Things They Carried* typescript with revisions, HRC Box 15 Folder 11.

shadow from the year 1968, a ghost who exists partly in memory, partly in imagination.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, after the story “The Sweetheart of The Song Tra Bong,” the one written for women readers, the early drafts have a piece called “The Real Mary Anne”—another piece removed during editing and revision—which swears that story, though the most fantastical of all the stories in the book, “comes most directly from actual events.”<sup>20</sup>

For the suggestion to excise these moments we have an editor at Houghton-Mifflin to thank, Camille Hykes, and I really do mean thank. First, the three confessions I’ve shared are overkill. More importantly, the “I” in the published text is consistently and assuredly character-Tim. Having two distinct referents for the first-person singular, character-Tim and writer-Tim, would have truly muddied the waters. Plus it would have backfired. It would have undermined writer-Tim’s intent of rendering the fiction-nonfiction distinction as irrelevant because he would actually be asserting that distinction. How can it be a “work of fiction”—the book’s subtitle—“written in the *guise* of nonfiction” if it removes the guise and shows its face?<sup>21</sup>

Here is Hykes’ own language in making the case:

The main problem, though, for me at least with *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED* is that the three “Notes” sections & “The Real Mary Anne” set the work off-balance. Rather than abetting this notion of—the mutability of truth, this retooling of self & author through language—these stories undercut, detract from the overall work. The play & construct of these “Notes” as just being stories, too, seems gratuitous, unnecessary. Why should the author seemingly intercede and overtly explain to the reader that—See, look, I’m writing about the making of art; I’m writing about where myth comes from; I’m writing about how the author makes himself up as he goes along; I’m writing about Alchemy, about Metamorphosis. Why do it if it’s clear already? We perpetually weave fictions about ourselves—whether as individuals or as a given

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19 *The Things They Carried* typescript with revisions, HRC Box 15 Folder 11.

20 *The Things They Carried* typescript with revisions, HRC Box 15 Folder 11.

21 Undated letter from Tim O’Brien to “Sam” (Seymour Lawrence), U.Miss. Box 53, Folder “Tim O’Brien 1989-1991.” See also two undated memorandums to Seymour Lawrence (“Sam”) from “Camille” (Ole Miss, Box 53, Folder Tim O’Brien 1989-1991). Hykes appears on the book’s acknowledgements page.



country (if I read you right). Truth is relative, to a point. What a man (or woman) carries into war, all those seeming truths & jazz, sure isn't what he carries when & if he comes out. In gunning for an equation between truth & fiction—the work overall loses out in holding onto the obvious that's in these Notes and in “The Real Mary Anne.” Why should the magician pull up his sleeve & tell us—Look, this is where the birds come from—when really, deep down, we knew it anyway? These stories—those outside the Notes—are, too, not only about sunlight but about the crafting of art. Anyway, when you have a truly great story, a story that lives inside the reader, even getting down to dreams, why set it off-balance by placing it alongside a story that not only can't approximate it in comparable strength, but also, again, just states the obvious, just states what was in the prior work. Each story (aside from the Notes) operates beautifully not only alone but in conjunction with the other stories—a perpetual interweaving, echoing & harmonious once amidst the other. Time shifts, memory convulses and what the reader gets ultimately is a great writer who has gathered the pieces up & tempered the same into art. So. Which is more real? THE THINGS THEY CARRIED without the Notes, without the author circumscribing his craft for the reader.<sup>22</sup>

My own favorite discovery about the differences between character-Tim and writer-Tim is that while the former hates the Jane Fonda of the sci-fi classic *Barbarella*, the latter loved her: “I saw her playing *Barbarella* in a movie theater at Fort Lewis, Washington. The year was 1969, and I was not a month away from being shipped to Vietnam. I loved her. Every soldier in the theater loved her: sexy, tough, hard-muscled, intriguing, oddly-guileless. She took our minds off Nam. Diverting. Jane Fonda was good for what ailed us” (“Vietnam: Now Playing,” 85).

In fact one of the most successful ambushes the book sets for readers is in unqualified acceptance of character-Tim's ideas about storytelling and the war as writer-Tim's, and particularly of reading the fictional story “How to Tell a True War Story” as a nonfictional essay. (Oddly and exasperatingly, this story is published in nonfiction essay anthologies).

Writer-Tim, for example, does not find war beautiful. Ever. I'm never sure what to do with the book's much touted privileging of “story-truth” over “happened-

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Camille Hykes at Houghton Mifflin to Tim O'Brien, 14 July 1989 (HRC Box 18 Folder 3).

truth,” essentially of the power of fiction over the power of documentation, when told by a fictional character-Tim justifying his own (fictional) existence, nor when told by writer-Tim, in actual nonfiction essays, that *The Deer Hunter* speaks truly but *Apocalypse Now* tells a dangerous lie—an untrue story-truth—in dismissing the war as an episode of temporary insanity instead of understanding it as a political decision.<sup>23</sup>

One statement in *The Things They Carried* that I trust the pair more-or-less shares about the war offers one explanation for the two Tim O'Briens: “You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity” (82). Creating ambiguity in the storyteller's identity, then, reflects the soldiers' situation in the war.

The result, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, is a book with “the raw force of confession.” The *London Observer* found it to be “fiction that feels utterly trustworthy.” The *New Yorker* similarly applauded the novel for having “the integrity of a novel and the immediacy of an autobiography.”<sup>24</sup> The novelist Bobbie Ann Mason wrote that “The way he distances himself with the persona of the writer makes it all the more poignant, really, because we see and feel the drama of someone wrestling with memory.”<sup>25</sup>

*The Things They Carried* appeared on pretty much every ‘best book’ list of 1990. It was a contender for the Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award,<sup>26</sup> and perhaps the fact that O'Brien had already won the National Book Award worked against his winning either of these. It did win the Melcher Book Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association as having made “the greatest contribution to religious liberation.”<sup>27</sup> I'm not exactly sure what that means, except perhaps to note that engaging the world through the sympathetic imagination is absolutely indispensable for individual growth and responsible human citizenship. Cultivating this ability is the whole point of literature, and the Melcher Book Award attests to Tim O'Brien's singular contribution to fostering his readership's sympathetic imagination.

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23 On *The Deer Hunter*: Tim O'Brien, “Keynote Address,” 7; on *Apocalypse Now*, Tim O'Brien, “The Violent Vet,” 100.

24 “THE THINGS THEY CARRIED Review Excerpts” (Ole Miss, Box 54, Folder “TIM O”BRIEN REVIEWS The Things They Carried”).

25 Letter to Seymour Lawrence, 1 February 1990, Ole Miss.

26 Seymour Lawrence to Dawn Seferian, 31 January 1991, Ole Miss.

27 Letter from Rev. Judith Meyer to Camille Hykes, Ole Miss (Box 102, Folder “Tim O'Brien: Correspondence '92”).

So there you have it, “Field Notes on *The Things They Carried*.” I considered titling the lecture “Measuring the Ground,” after a letter from William C. Woods to O’Brien when the book came out:

Do you remember that great line in *Henry V*—“Who hath measured the ground?” One of the French nobles says it the night before the Battle of Agincourt. Some knight has crept up to the English lines in the dark and actually paced off the distance between the armies, and when he’s identified, the other guy says, “A most expert and valiant gentleman.” It seems to me that’s what your new book does (as the others did as well) —measures the ground.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Letter, April 26, 1990, stamped up top W.C. Woods, Farmville VA. Signed William, and under it typed F. Scott Shitwilly. HRC, Box 18.2, *The Things They Carried*, “correspondence, personal, 1990-2000, undated”

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He carries extra rations and wears his girlfriend's pantyhose tied around his neck. "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried." —Tim O'Brien, in *The Things They Carried*. Tim-Obrien.jpg. Photo © Marion Ettlinger, courtesy of Houghton Mifflin. O'Brien published *The Things They Carried* in 1990. His many accolades include a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Book Award, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. He nearly stopped writing after his sixth book, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), due to a battle with depression.