

Discussion Questions



1 Identify some of the physical objects that seem key in the title story.

What role do those objects play in the story?

What role do "things" play in how we think about or remember war?

Where else in O'Brien's autobiographical narrative do you see objects as important and why or how so?

2 What do you think about the idea of "carrying" in O'Brien's work?

What objects/things (both material and intangible) are carried, and by whom?

Does O'Brien see them as burdens or benefits?

3 How is the idea of weight developed in the story?

What are some of the items he mentions, and what are some of the personal things each soldier carries, from items to expectations?

What is O'Brien implying by discussing weight as both physical and emotional?

4 What pop culture items does O'Brien reference and what is their significance in framing the way readers think and talk about war and good and evil?

What items do soldiers carry to represent their own cultures?

5 Who is the audience for this?

How does the title story and the book elaborate or conflict with ideas we have about young people going to war, especially the way we often see it portrayed in popular films and television?

Does it tell us something about cowardice or bravery?

6 "The girl next door" is a common trope in war films during the Vietnam War and often presented as one of the reason soldiers were off fighting- it often became representative of support at home.

How does O'Brien address this and what is he saying about its portrayal in the way Jimmy Cross obsesses over Martha?

Discussion Questions



7 War stories are traditionally stories of men.

Yet who are the women of *The Things They Carried* and what is their role in the narrative?
What do they suggest about male-female relationships?

8 How does O'Brien contrast the social norms and expectations at home

with what becomes normal as they spend time in Vietnam, for instance burning houses and killing livestock in retaliation?

What is he saying about these changes and the ability for people at home to relate to the experiences, or for soldiers to seamlessly reintegrate upon their return?

9 If you have personal experience of military service, did the ways in which O'Brien talked about the war seem familiar? Strange?

Why or why not?

10 Do you have any objects that you or your family members carried during wartime or brought back from military service?

What were they?

Did they have special meaning for your family member?

What memories or feelings do they evoke for you?

Resources

Additional books, essays, films, and other resources about this book and about the Vietnam War compiled by USU Faculty – Clayton Brown, Molly Cannon, Dustin Crawford, Evelyn Funda, Susan Grayzel, Keri Holt.



BOOKS

On the Vietnam War

Appy, Christian G.

Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides

especially interviews with Henry Prunier, Vo Nguyen Giap, Rufus Phillips, Chester Cooper, and Dennis Deal

(brief but very revealing oral histories from some key figures.)

Elliott, Mai.

The Sacred Willow

especially chapter 8: Into the Resistance Zone

(a long but very engaging firsthand account of Vietnam from the imperial period through today with focus on the war. Published by Oxford in its second edition, it was a finalist for the Pulitzer. Chapter 8 describes what life was like in the communist era.)

Hayslip, Le Ly.

When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace

(memoir of a Vietnamese-American woman who lived through the war as a child before coming to the United States)

Herr, Michael.

Dispatches

(one of the groundbreaking journalistic accounts of the war by an American reporter, first published in 1977)

McCain, John.

Faith of My Fathers

especially chapter 16: Prisoner of War

(a very engaging and accessible firsthand account of McCain's experience in Vietnam, including his time at the POW camp.)

Neill, Susan.

Don't Mean Nothing

(short stories from a Vietnam Veteran serving in as a nurse in a combat hospital)

Williams, William Appleman et al.

America in Vietnam: A Documentary History

(key primary sources related to the war)

Resources



BOOKS

**Brief, reliable
war summaries**

Duiker, William.

Sacred War

(gives the North Vietnamese perspective)

Herring, George.

America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 6th Edition

On War and Objects:

Auslander, Leora and Tara Zahra (eds).

Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement

Chicago, 2018

(essays that place objects at the center of studying war)

Portland Art Museum's Object Stories Initiative – Combat Paper

<https://portlandartmuseum.org/learn/programs-tours/object-stories/combat-paper/>

Washingtonian Article "The Things They Leave Behind:

Artifacts from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial" by Rachel Manteuffel October 24th, 2012

<https://www.washingtonian.com/2012/10/24/the-things-they-leave-behind-artifacts-from-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial/>

Resources



FILMS AND TELEVISION

Utah-Focused:

PBS Utah (2017)

<https://www.pbs.org/show/utah-vietnam-war-stories/>

40 years after their experience in Vietnam, Utah veterans share their stories as soldiers during the Vietnam War.

For the Vietnam War and the US experience more generally:

Apocalypse Now (1979)

Born on the 4th of July (1989)

Coming Home (1978)

Da Five Bloods (2020)

The Deer Hunter (1978)

Full Metal Jacket (1987)

Hearts and Minds (1974)
documentary

Platoon (1986)

Regret to Inform (1998)
documentary

The Vietnam War
Ken Burns (2018)
documentary

We Were Soldiers (2002)

ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

PBS Learning Media

<https://utah.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/93fa027e-f03f-469e-8ef4-668114ba3b88/the-things-they-carried-lesson-plan-ken-burns-lynn-novick-the-vietnam-war/>

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125128156>

How to Tell Your Own True War Story

By Evelyn Funda, Emeritus Professor of English, USU



INTRODUCTION:

Note: While the following exercises, in keeping with O'Brien's book about Vietnam, are mostly geared for veterans or active military members, those who have not served can also use most of these writing exercises to write about their own "battles"—those intense or traumatic life experiences. Family members of armed forces and war protesters can also adapt these prompts.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a book that seems to invite readers to tell their own stories. Not only does he have a chapter entitled "How to Tell a True War Story" where he meditates on how to narrate in an authentic way, but he also models ways to approach telling traumatic stories. The following writing prompts, based on O'Brien's book, are meant as ways that you can approach telling your own story of war and trauma. They start with a relatively easy listing exercise and progress to more emotionally challenging tasks. The prompts can be used in a variety of ways in writing groups.

For instance:

- A writing group leader can assign everyone the same prompt and then after 20 minutes or so of in-class writing, group members can talk, if they wish, about how they approached the prompt and perhaps share favorite selections from what they wrote.
- Writing group members can be given the full list of writing prompts below and asked to choose one approach for an at-home writing session. In the following meeting they can bring their piece to share with the group (in part or whole).
- If what group members wrote is too personal to share, they can talk more broadly about how they approached the assignment and how their technique was similar to or different from O'Brien's approach.

Important:

In spirit, O'Brien's book emphasizes that we should value of the act of storytelling as much or more than the "truth" or the literary quality of the tale. O'Brien consistently demonstrates, through his stories and the ones his characters tell, that there are no hard-and-fast rules, no one "right" way to tell a story. Thus, as you use the following writing prompts, remember to suspend judging your own work or the writing of others in your group. Your only goal: get words and message on paper. Don't worry about grammar, structure, your audience, whether or not your story is "true," whether you've used offensive language, whether you can't write more than a single paragraph, or whether your narrative jumps around from one topic or scene to another. Self-censoring will only lead to silencing yourself. Remember that O'Brien's narrative starts and stops, defies strict chronology, mixes fiction and nonfiction, retreats, repeats, circles back, contradicts itself, and so on. Feel free to do the same.

Writing Prompts



1 Lists (a brainstorming activity):

The title chapter of O'Brien's book, "*The Things They Carried*," uses a list as a way to tell his story. Enumerating the objects the soldiers carry, both the tangible and the intangible, transforms from a list into a meditation on the notion of burdens. The chapter's list also acts as a kind of "warm-up exercise" for the rest of the book and models a way for writers to begin writing their own stories.

Think about a story from your own life and brainstorm a list about that story. Don't worry right now about trying to structure a cohesive story from your material. Just begin with a list, focused on one thing. For instance, you may choose to center your list, as O'Brien does, on things you/others carried or you may choose to list things you said, ate, photographed, made, attacked, or heard. Imagine yourself in one place and one moment of your story: what things do you see? Perhaps your list could be of, as O'Brien writes, "the odd little fragments [of conversations] that have no beginning or end."

Or your list could focus on the times you laughed, cried, or failed. You can list superstitions, routines, or slang of that time.

If the things you list seem to have symbolic meaning, take note of it and move on to the next thing on your list. Aim to list 25 things, or 50 things, or 100 things! Challenge yourself.

2 What You Carry:

Tell a story of your military experience by telling the story of one tangible object that you value. Where did you get it? Do you have rightful possession of it (remember how O'Brien kept Kiowa's moccasins for twenty years)? Is it something you earned, stole, made, remade or decorated? Is it something sentimental— in what way? Is it something grotesque (like Mary Anne's tongue necklace)? Is it something you *almost* got (like Norman Bowker's Silver Star)? Is it something that helped/helps you cope (like Ted Lavendar's tranquilizers, Jimmy Cross's photos of Martha, Henry Dobbin's girlfriend's pantyhose)?

As you write the story of your object, look back at the way O'Brien tells the full stories of these items and what they say about that person's character.

3 Sense Story:

Sensory perception is key in a number of stories in the book. In the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story," Mitchell Sanders tells the story of the "listening patrol" that was assigned to monitor enemy movement. The patrol goes out into the mountains where, after several days, they begin to hear strange sounds, as if the enemy are throwing a wild cocktail party. In the chapters where O'Brien talks about the Vietnamese man he killed, there is a strong emphasis on visual details about the body (for instance, he writes and repeats, "His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole").

Pick a moment from your life to tell a story about and focus your writing on just one of your five senses.

Writing Prompts



4 Someone Else's Story:

Sometimes O'Brien implies a key theme or aspect of his own story by telling the story of others. For instance, in the chapters about the Vietnamese man he kills, he imagines the story of the man's life— a mathematics scholar with a wife who only goes to war because "he was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village." Notice how this line echoes O'Brien's story of why he ultimately did not go to Canada to avoid the draft. In "The Lives of the Dead," he even tells a story about Linda, his childhood friend who died of brain cancer, as she comes back to life and accompanies him on ice skating adventures.

Likewise, you can tell the story of someone adjacent to your own main story. Explore that person's motivations and actions. Give yourself the license to imagine what that person is thinking and feeling at any given moment. This person could be your hero, your gravest enemy, someone you believe was misunderstood, even someone who is dead.

5 Pre- Or Post-Story:

While O'Brien's service in Vietnam is the crux of his book, there are times when he tells a story that occurs before or after his main story (for instance, the story of his childhood friend Linda, the story of working in the pig slaughterhouse, or the story of Norman Bowker's return to his hometown after the war).

Instead of telling your most difficult or challenging story, write a prequel or sequel. As you write, keep in mind how the prequel or sequel relates to the story at the heart of your experience. Are there echoes between these stories?

6 Stranger than fiction:

While *The Things They Carried* is semi-autobiographical, based on O'Brien's own experience in Vietnam, on the title page he does call the book "a work of fiction," and near the end of the book, he writes, "It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented.... I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth."

Imagine that O'Brien's statement gives you the license to completely fictionalize your own experience. Either write a fictional piece about your experience or write a meditation about how a fictional version would be "truer than happening-truth."

How would the fiction be different than the "reality"?

7 Surreal:

Some of the stories in *The Things They Carried* have a surreal feel to them, like the story of the listening patrol or of Eddie Diamond's girlfriend Mary Anne Bell, who transforms from the "nice girl back home" into a wild fighter who wears a necklace of tongues.

Use surrealistic elements to write a scene from your story. Stay true to the spirit the story or person, but use your imagination to stretch the limits of perception, exaggerate details, and add extraordinary or grotesque elements.

Writing Prompts



8 "War is Also Beauty":

In the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien writes,

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty.... At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life. After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness.

Using this quote as inspiration, write a story that flips the script of expectations about a war story. Write a scene that accepts the contradictory nature of war.

9 Dear Sir or Madame:

O'Brien talks about letters in several chapters, and in two cases, he describes letters written to a stranger about a close colleague. Rat Kiley proudly writes a long, detailed (and rather troubling) letter to Curt Lemmon's sister and Jimmy Cross imagines writing a letter to Kiowa's father in which he takes responsibility for Kiowa's death.

Write a letter to a stranger that is not present in the action of your main story about someone else who does figure large in your war time story. For instance, write a letter to the parents/partner/child of someone you distrust/dislike, someone who died, someone who was saved.

Or you could write a letter to a stranger you saw during your experience (for instance, O'Brien could write a letter to the pig farmer with one arm).

Your letter should reveal something about yourself and your own character.

10 Secrets:

O'Brien's chapter "On the Rainy River," which portrays his aborted flight to Canada to dodge the draft, begins with the statement: "This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone."

What is your "story I've never told before"? Remember that O'Brien admits his story is embarrassing and hard to tell because in it, he knows he isn't the "hero" of his own tale. Do you have story that makes you feel that way?

11 Bears Repeating:

Throughout the book, O'Brien circles back to some version of the line, "I am forty-three years old now and a writer." In doing so, he uses a device that literary scholars call "incremental repetition"—that is, a line is repeated in a changed context or with minor changes in a way that progresses the story, reveals new or crucial information, takes the story in an entirely different direction, or accumulates nuanced and sometimes contradictory meaning. Find a line in your own writing that you've done thus far that, as they say, "bears repeating."

Use the technique of incremental repetition to take your story in a different direction.

Writing Prompts



12 "Just a Moment:

There are several times when O'Brien writes the story of a single split second. For instance, he writes about the medic Jorgenson in the moment he was shot:

Those boots: I remembered them from when I got shot. Out along the Song Tra Bong, a bullet inside me, all the pain, but for some reason what. Stuck to my memory was the smooth unblemished leather of his fine new boots. Factory black, no scuffs or dust or red clay. The boots were one of those vivid details you can't forget. Like a pebble or a blade of grass, you just stare and think, Dear Christ, there's the last thing on earth I'll ever see.

Write the story of a single moment of your experience. Dig for every detail and nuance of that moment. Challenge yourself to write a full page about it or, maybe, even five pages! That kind of goal forces you to really be observant as you relive the moment.

13 "And the Moral of the Story Is..."

In his chapter "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien writes,

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. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil....

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you.

Using O'Brien's admonition, write a story that avoids a moral.

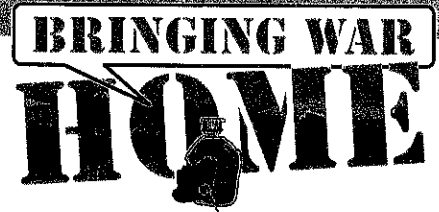
Also look at other things you've written about your experience and ask yourself if you have followed O'Brien's instructions.

14 "How to Tell a True War Story":

Throughout the book, O'Brien instructs the reader about how to tell an authentic story of traumatic events. Look over the instructive quotes from his book on the next page and think of your own O'Brien-inspired writing prompt.

"How to Tell a True War Story":

Tim O'Brien's Additional Lessons



"In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredibly craziness." (71)

You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end." (76)

"In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe 'Oh.'" (77)

"True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe." (78)

"Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again." (82)

"All you can do is tell [your war story] one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth.... You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it. And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. 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 love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen." (85)

"I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet when I received Norman Bowker's letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You may up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain." (158)

"But this too is true: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon and a slim young man I killed.... They're all dead. But in a story, which is kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world." (225)
