

# Summer reading assignment: book review of tim o'brien's the things they carried

[Life](#), [Hobby](#)



I believe the novel benefits from such a nontraditional sentence structure because it creates depth and detail about what is happening during the war at that time in a particular moment. The anecdotes (short stories) create scenery throughout the novel letting the reader have a better view in their minds of what is happening throughout the read. " But Ted Lavender who was scared, carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside the Khe, and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and the helmet and the rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus the unweighted fear." (page 6) When O'Brien says this, he is using a run on sentence and explaining all the things Ted had with him without any pause other than commas. He uses the word " Plus" more than once to emphasize the addition of what was carried. The level of detail O'Brien offers throughout the novel is to portray each character. As he explains what each of them carries it gives us the reader a better idea of that character's personality is like. " At various times, in various situations, they carried M-14s and CAR-15s and Swedish Ks and grease guns and captured AK-47s and Chi-coms and RPGs and Simonov carbines and black market Uzis and . 38 Caliber Smith and Wesson handguns and 66mm LAWs and shotguns and silencers and blackjacks and bayonets and C-4 plastic explosives." (O'Brien Page 7). Saying all these items creates a picture in the reader's mind that will continue to grow throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel on page 4 Tim O'Brien explains his love for Martha; his interior thoughts and feelings. " He remembered kissing her goodnight at the dorm door. Right then, he should've done something brave.

He should've carried her.... He should've risked it...." Added repetition of what should have been.

Tim O'Brien has many tones throughout the novel, it goes from being happy when he talks about Martha or thinks about her then to sad, emotional because of the war or the past, devastating and careless. Page 8, " His mind wandered. He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war. On occasion he would yell at his men to spread the column, to keep their eyes open, but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey Shore, with Martha, carrying nothing" (page 8). What do I make of these tone shifts and O'Brien's odd use of tones that don't seem to fit situations? Well I think he is just trying to let us as the readers feel what he felt in that moment. He talked about Jimmy loving Martha to the talking about why the men carried the things they did; as superstitions. Some dark humor used by Mitchell Sanders making jokes relating Ted Lavender's death to a TV show, " there was no blood. Smiling he kicked the boy's head, watched the flies scatter, and said, it's like that old TV show-Paladin. Have gun, will travel" (Page 13). The tonal shifts are very dramatic, the word " carried" used on page 14 really created a sad tone. " They carried each other, the wounded or the weak." " They carried the sky." O'Brien really makes you feel what the soldiers had to endure, the hardships they faced. The people they had to leave behind to save themselves, their friends. It is very emotional context and makes you question how they all conquered such tasks. " They carried their own lives" page 15.

The effects of life after war play a major role in the retired soldiers lives. They become paranoid, afraid, feel guilt of the people who got killed. Norman Bowker committed suicide because he felt guilt about Kiowa's death, it followed him home to Iowa. The war transforms these people in a traumatic way, they do things they wouldn't normally do in a normal state of mind. These things cause them to break down and feel uncontrolled inside. PTSD is something many soldiers face (post traumatic stress disorder) this can lead to substance abuse, depression or even like Norman suicide. Many soldiers relive the same moment over and over again even though they aren't even in war and they think the only way to cope with it and make it end is to take their own lives. " He would've talked about this, and how he grabbed Kiowa by the boot and tried to pull him out. He pulled hard but Kiowa was gone, and then suddenly he felt himself going, too" (O'brian page 143). The soldiers in their daily lives after war would go throughout their daily lives and the smallest things would trigger a big memory from war. Here's a quote explaining the intensities the soldiers faced, " Curt Lemon took a peculiar half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. 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 it stays with me" (O'Brian 79). This quote really explains into full detail how much is remembered, every single bit of the story is told, nothing left out.

Women play a vital role in the war for the soldiers psychologically. Some men hold onto things from their past relationships that give them a feeling of hope. Henry Dobbins girlfriend dumped him yet he still wears her panty-hose like a good-luck charm. He does this to feel “ protected” and it gives him a safe feeling that he might have something to go back to once he gets home from war in this fantasy world he longs for. Women are like the soldiers angels. They think of them as being so pure and waiting/ looking down on them to come home from war. Many of the soldier’s dream of life after war and what everything could be like. This allows the soldiers to an escape when they feel anxious or distressed during the war. It is tension between reality and fantasy. While Jimmy Cross was fantasizing about Martha’s “ love” for him Ted Lavender is killed, Cross didn’t keep his focus. Mary Anne and Mark Fossie are a couple in the novel. Unlike some of the other women Mary Anne is in Vietnam with Mark. “ The war intrigued her. The land too, and the mystery. At the beginning of her second week she began pestering Mark Fossie to take her down to the village at the foot of the hill. In a quiet voice, very patiently, he tried to tell her that it was a bad idea, way too dangerous, but Mary Anne kept after him” (O’Brian page 91). This quote is arguing how women should act towards the war. To be scared and not be able to go out and do and see things. When Mark Fossie says “ it is a bad idea, way too dangerous” he is inferring that women aren’t capable or strong enough to endure the war.

In the things they carried the soldiers had many ways ( hobbies) of distracting themselves from the war. Mitchell Sanders told a war story about

the six men who hear voices in the jungle. In the Chapter "Spin" "I remember Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins playing checkers every evening before dark. It was a ritual for them. They would dig a foxhole and get the board out and play long, silent games as the sky went from pink to purple" (O'Brien 31). Rat Kiley made up a rhyme and eventually the soldiers all started singing it "Step out of line, hit a mine; follow the dink, you're in the pink" (O'Brien 32). The soldiers all seem to do things together whether it's a "ritual" or a chant of some sort that unifying element they all had in common. To be together even when they wanted to be alone. To feel alive and doing things that brought them back to some kind of reality. It gave them a sense of relief. "The war was nakedly and aggressively boring. But it was a strange boredom" (O'Brien 33). The boredom was not the kind of boredom you have when you sit in a doctor's office waiting for your turn to be called. It was more of a being tense all the time boredom. Day in and day out hearing gunfire just when the soldiers might begin to let their thoughts go. The basic needs soldiers seem to share in common in their quest for sanity is and/or peace is needing something from the real world to hold onto. Like checkers or singing or storytelling. Objects that provide them with an escape. Objects that provide them of memories back at home. Things to remind them that they will be ok even when they feel as though they won't.

This book is nonfiction because it has a link of short stories told by novelist Tim O'Brien about his experiences in the Vietnam war. Some of the things Mitchell Sanders shares with O'Brien that he wrote aren't true and help to make the novel fiction as well. You can tell through the way they stories are

portrayed through the characters in the way they present them. O'Brian even quotes " I remember Mitchell Sanders smiling as he told me that story. Most of it he made up, I'm sure" (O'Brian 34). I believe the novel does a decent job of conveying the war in Vietnam. O'Brian definitely goes into a lot of detail into explaining what life is like, but sometimes gets too much into what goes on in the other soldiers lives rather than his own. The novel to some extent fails because it does not provide all clear factual information, lots of stories take place. The stories in the novel follow one another about life of war, then switch to something completely not about the war like Jimmy's love for Martha. O'Brian literally lists everything, like all the machinery they use the list goes on and on and yes it just begins to become words that have no meaning to the reader. O'Brien talks about in the chapter of How To Tell a True War Story Bob Kiley's letter to a sister of one of his friends who is killed. He begins explaining that " it's a terrific letter, very personal and touching. Rat almost bawls writing it. He gets all teary telling about all the good time they had together..." (O'Brian 64) he just goes on and on about this letter that has nothing to do with what's taking place in Vietnam at that moment. Some of the novel just doesn't tie together very well. There aren't enough literal experiences.

I think it's important for us as readers to understand what is going on in the war. Experiencing these scenes of death, and grotesque violence can help give people a better understanding the reality of what soldiers have faced and why they go through such problems mentally when they return home from war. Also it will help us understand current events and help us to relate

about what is occurring in the world around us. Romanticizing novels gives readers a false sense of encouragement and does not help individuals who are under-educated in the history and current acts of war in the world that shapes society. If we as readers never experienced this kind of reading and were “protected” from it we would not have any idea the major things our country has faced to get where it is today. The US was never just granted freedom, so many people had to fight hard for this country. Many soldiers suffered day in and day out fighting in harsh conditions, facing battle sounds and many deaths. With knowledge of what goes on outside average people’s reality, it changes who you are as a person. Makes you respect the country you were raised in and respect for the people who have fought for you to have that freedom. Of course it’s horrible to hear about the things soldiers go through and the paranoia that haunts them day in and day out when they come back from war. But, that is what makes us a strong nation, a nation that knows it’s history and understands the hardships so many soldiers faced to make our country the way it stands today.

It is very important for the soldiers to maintain a sense of self and individual identity because it will help them in the long run when they return home for war. So for the soldiers doing as much as their normal routine as possible during war might keep them stable. The reason it is so important for them to keep their own individuality during war is because they need to remember who they are. They are not murderers, they are humans fighting for and protecting their country. Yes the military might try to cut off each soldier’s individuality because it could be a cause of danger during the war. Someone



who might be scared to shoot a child carrying a bomb or any sort of case where danger is involved is a hazard. I mean who wouldn't, the soldiers are involved in very intense situations. They are almost expected to shut off their emotions during battle and remain bullet proof. Soldiers who are sensitive and have a lot of care in their hearts are dangerous during battle. They may not realize a situation when it could be life or death. In one moment they could lose everything without knowing the consequences of their own actions. In some ways I think the military is cruel for de-individualizing soldiers. They change who they are! Their minds, all the joy or fun they had in their personalities. It all gets switched to only focusing on war, nothing else. I think it is important for soldiers fighting in war to have a balance of real life back when they were at home. Of course it's not going to be exactly like when before they left for war, but the military could improve some things when it comes to bringing some life into the chaos they encounter each and everyday.

I don't think the novel is trying to criticize the war. O'Brian is simply trying to tell people what the soldiers lives including his were like through his eyes. It is nonfiction with a little fiction when it comes to storytelling and the made up characters being shared throughout the book. But the novel has very good factual based stories about the Vietnam war. O'Brian goes into great detail of all the gore that he faced along with the deaths, and how they happened. The novel seems to protest the Vietnam war because as O'Brian wrote in the book his character Tim O'Brien wanted to flee to Canada to try and avoid military service. Many people had disagreement over the war to

the inconsistent and unstructured war of attrition that soldiers were asked to fight. There just seemed to be a lot of conflict and confusion throughout the book. Rat Kiley both showed courage and bravery in the book, he saved Tim O'Brien therefore he was praised for that. The soldiers in the book praise American by showing courage in war and fighting for it's freedom. The soldiers wanted what was best for their country no matter what. Sometimes they wanted to give up, but then they would think back to their family and friends, lovers and strangers they don't even know. Give them a sense of strength to make them push through and continue to fight. The men fought to save each other, even if it was a deathly situation, but sometimes their bravery was just not enough. Norman won seven medals in Vietnam, including the Combat Infantryman's Badge, the Air Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart. Yes Norman won all these medals but in the back of his mind still stands the death of his best friend Kiowa and how he wasn't able to save his life.

My overall reaction to this novel is... I'm not much of a fan because of the way it was written. All the short stories really caught me off guard from the whole main point of why O'Brian really wrote the novel. From switching between what is reality and what is fantasy was confusing. I thought O'Brian's point in writing this novel was to give people a 1st person story about life during the Vietnam war? He also went in too deep when he shared his stories. One thing led to another and he wasn't even talking about the war. There are some things that us as readers can learn from the novel. Some things that I learned where, it is important to get to know your country

and what it stands for and be proud of where you come from. That soldiers face many hardships across the seas at war. They face death of friends right in front of them, they face loss of individuality, they even face mentality struggles when they return home from war. Something I think that could frustrate the readers is why play with the truth? Another thing that confused me as I started reading the book was O'Brien's fictional character Tim O'Brien. He used him as a protagonist allowing him to find his real emotions as if they were just created, or maybe they were true it's hard to tell. Also if he named one thing the soldiers carried like some sort of gun he would go into depth about all of the guns and equipment they had brought with them. Eventually being just a bunch of run of sentences making the reader lose focus and daze off.