

Fiction works and conceiving of creative writing in literature

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Fiction is the most malleable, diverse and infinite form of writing. Namely, because of the limitless nature of the imagination, and our inherent love of stories. Mark Twain once penned, "It's no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense." Though jesting, Twain touches upon a point that is at the heart of fiction writing. In a world that is ever changing and difficult to understand, fiction is often used by writers to critique, adore and revel in reality, and oblige their readers to do the same. Since literature's inception, readers, authors, critics and philosophers have contemplated the implications reality has on fiction. But in the post-modern age there has been a growing popularity of a self reflexive form of storytelling that focuses more on how fiction affects itself: metafiction. This makes the true value of metafiction its ability to elicit appreciation of the work from both the author and the reader, as a new level of understanding and recognition is reached by the work demonstrating its own unfolding.

Going After Cacciato is a complex work by Tim O'Brien that mixes reality with fantasy, and memory with imagination. It tells the story of Paul Berlin and his experience of the war in Vietnam. The book is told through three lines of fragmented perspective: Berlin's horrific memories of battle, the fantastical journey of chasing AWOL platoon member, Cacciato, and brief periods of escape from these two conflicting but equally exhausting narratives in the form of Berlin's reflections at the Observation post, where we experience his present state and perception. Though Berlin's descriptions of his wondrous and exotic chase of the rogue Cacciato are often dismissed as his attempts to cope with the horrors of war through fantasy, the post modern interpretation of these portions of the novel is that they serve as a

means for O'Brien to question the story as he tells it. Berlin's thoughts shared at the Observation post bear striking similarities to the thought process of a writer attempting to deliberate elements of a story.

Berlin is the one to announce Cacciato's departure, and even at the start O'Brien makes no effort to hide Berlin's insight into the rest of the plot. When asked where Cacciato is headed by Lieutenant Carson, Berlin replies "Cacciato says he's going through Laos, then into Burma and then India and Iran and Turkey, and into Greece. he had it all doped out" (O'Brien 5). However, it is Berlin who has things "all doped out." However, Doc Peret, the medic, tells Cacciato that it is impossible to get to Paris the way Cacciato is going. So, Berlin and O'Brien recognize these constraints and say to the reader, "Where is it going? Where would it end?" (O'Brien 14).

In the beginning of the journey, O'Brien continues to attempt to plan the remainder of the story, using Berlin as a device to intimate this deliberation to the reader. He shares with Berlin an image of Cacciato, murdered. This frightens Berlin because he can not help but see it as an inevitability. Berlin/O'Brien "hopes for a miracle" to rationalize the "crazy idea" (O'Brien 15). "Or was there a chance that it might truly be done? He considered this, figuring the odds, how in the end they might reach Paris. He smiled. It was something to think about" (O'Brien 16). Both the author and Berlin continue to try and decide a "proper ending" (O'Brien 23), but it evades them. Berlin thinks about this employing literary language, deliberating on a "climax" to the fighting.

These sorts of allusions to the craft of fiction, and specifically to the writing of *Going After Cacciato*, appear throughout the fantasy portion of the novel, the “Cacciato-chase-sections,” but the majority of the allusions to writing appear in the segments that take place at the Observation Post, the more grounded third of the novel. Berlin even designates symbols for the story, articulating that “Cacciato’s round face became the moon” (O’Brien 26), and that he was satisfied with this symbol, that it suited Cacciato well. Berlin ponders the bounds and limits of his own imagination, and expresses a wish to explore and to push them. O’Brien confessed to the *Journal of Contemporary Literature* in an interview that his character’s feelings on this subject alluded directly to his own during the process of composing *Going After Cacciato*: “What Berlin is doing is what I do with a typewriter” (*Contemporary Literature* 11).

When viewed this way, when heard from the “author’s mouth,” it is impossible to refute the validity of the role of Berlin’s reflections in O’Brien’s writing. When Cacciato is first spotted, both O’Brien and Berlin question where the story stands, and where to go from there.. “Had it ended in tragedy? Had it ever ended?” (O’Brien 27). Berlin finds his necessary “writer’s confidant,” his “backboard for ideas” in Doc Peret. Peret questions him, beckons him to answer which parts are “fact” and which parts are “an extension of fact” (O’Brien 27). Doc tells Berlin to “look for motives, search out the place where fact ended and imagination took over” (O’Brien 28). Doc also serves as a way for O’Brien to dictate the purpose of his writing through beautiful, insightful, thought provoking quotes that lend themselves to the

conveyance of O'Brien's message. " No it was not daydreaming, it was a way of asking questions" (O'Brien 28).

This statement by Doc Peret speaks also to the larger responsibility and role of fiction in our reality. As mentioned earlier, fiction is more than a story, it is a critique of the world we inherit and the world we build.

An important element in the writing of fiction is that it is the author's independent decision to go on and to finish and share the story. After the reflection in the Observation Post chapters, the next segment of the Cacciato chase reflects the choices made by Berlin/O'Brien in the section that it follows. In one of the Observation Post chapters, Berlin and O'Brien decide that the tale is not too ludicrous to continue, that it serves a purpose. And, this is paralleled when the choice to continue the pursuit of Cacciato is left in a vote that comes to Berlin. He chooses to go on, validating himself and O'Brien, and demonstrating his faith that it is " more than daydreaming."

In the second scene at the Observation Post, a conversation begins concerning how the pieces fit together, how the chaos and the fantasy compliment each other, how the optimism and horror synergize. And this is all illuminated in the seventh chapter, when Berlin shares with us words that his father shared with him in his youth. " You'll see some terrible stuff I guess. That's how it goes. But try to look for the good things, too. They'll be there if you look. So watch out for them" (O'Brien 63). The illuminations in the chapters spent at the Observation Post and the flashbacks and storytellings continue to weave together in the following chapters. As he

watches two of his fellow soldiers die, Berlin concentrates not on the horror or the chaos, but instead on the efforts of Doc Peret to console the dying men with M&Ms. Through the redirection of Berlin's attentions, O'Brien allows himself to control the attention of the reader, obliging them to also "look for the good things," and speaking to the values of optimism which transcend the bleakness or severity of a situation. The reader is encouraged to focus on the kindness and spirit of the Doc instead of the turmoil and suffering. "Doc found a fresh pack of M&Ms. Very, carefully, like a pharmacist he shook out three green candies and began feeding them to Bernie Lynn. The men understood this" (O'Brien 70). Death is used in this instance to highlight these men's ability to care for other who they barely know and are only familiar with them by their position in the platoon that they, by order, share. But though sorrowful, this event in *Going After Cacciato* serves as a reminder to the goodness of humankind.

As Berlin's reflections at the Observation Post continue, there remains an omnipresence of metafiction coloring the text. As the men fall in-and somehow out-of tunnels, Berlin begins to build a curiosity of how his story would be critiqued as a war novel. "Oh, there would be skeptics. What about money, visas, passports, clothing and immunization cards?" (O'Brien 125). But central is the lack of these things to the proper telling of the story of *Going After Cacciato*. They are inconsequential, their absence is more significant than their presence could ever be. It allows it to be a story not of particulars and practicality, but instead of men: men who demonstrate human qualities that are more central to their journey and the telling of

O'Brien's message and the journey of these men than the assorted paraphernalia needed to take that journey in any world other than the mind of Berlin. Berlin decides that what is important is "Cacciato, the feel of the journey, what was seen along the way, what was learned, colors and motion and people and finally Paris" (O'Brien 125). Berlin's assumed criticism of the work could be seen as O'Brien defending his message before sharing it, like a measure of precaution. And then, content with the story where it stands, he allows it to do the rest of the work. For the next fifty five pages, we hear nothing from the Observation Post.

At a point in the novel, there is a shift in perspective. O'Brien details to us Berlin's past. This point is perhaps the most blatant instance of metafiction. Even though we are still reading in third person, we are no more beside or behind Berlin, but he is more a character in the distance. Perhaps O'Brien has removed himself from his character in order to gain perspective or share his message in a more forthright manner. Regardless, it is what is told to us in this manner that is significant. Berlin's history itself is not what is significant, but rather the fact that it is shared at all. Previously, the mayor says that Berlin's past is insignificant, so this could be seen as the author sticking up for his protagonist, the vessel for his message, and his novel as a whole, saying that it is "worth sharing."

Metafiction is more than an author's involvement in his story, more than him addressing his readers, it is the craft of self-conscious fiction: fiction that is aware of itself being fiction...ficception. Unlike standard metafiction, Tim O'Brien does not directly address his readers. Instead, through Berlin he

shares his opinions, passions and insecurities, all which contribute to the deliverance of his message and the purpose of his novel, all of this making *Going After Cacciato* a shining example of metafiction.