

In a true war story
holm sees



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In *How to Tell a True War Story*, author Tim O'Brien directs the reader's attention to the idea of truth, not simply in the telling and retelling of certain events from the Vietnam War that forms the narrative of the story, but on a deeper, more fundamental level about how reality is constructed, not simply within the context of a war but in general. Tim O'Brien's story simultaneously constructs and deconstructs itself several times over the telling; this action destabilizes the narrative, and gives the reader the sense that the narrative may give way at any time - as indeed it does. The inherent fluidity of the work - this constantly shifting form - positions the story more as an example of a deconstructed text as opposed to the traditional war narrative, and in this act of deconstruction, we glimpse O'Brien's larger purpose. Essentially Tim O'Brien's *How to Tell a True War Story* asks about the nature of truth itself: is truth that which we experience, or that which we remember, a composite of the two, or something different altogether? The consensus of many critics who have approached this work appears to be that Tim O'Brien's *How to Tell a True War Story* endeavors to make plain the distinction between "story-truth and happening-truth" - truth that is made up or fictionalized, and truth that is unequivocal, or what "really happened" (Henningfeld n.

p.). Critic Rosemary King points to the fact that Tim O'Brien's title itself has multiple purposes and implications for the readers (King 182) In the first instance, *How to Tell a True War Story* concerns itself with defining that which is "true", yet Tim O'Brien applies two meanings to the word: one "he uses alternately throughout the story to mean either factually accurate," and the other meaning applies to that which is "higher and nobler" (King 182).

Tim O'Brien's *How to Tell a True War Story* follows three different narratives: the first concerns the soldier Mitchell Sanders's recounting of the events surrounding another soldier – Curt Lemon's – death; the second story follows the narrator as he listens and comments on Sanders's depiction of the events; and the final narrative is the author Tim O'Brien's explanation and series of tips directed toward the reader detailing how to distinguish a true war story from a false one (O'Brien 174). In each story, each individual narrator takes pains to prove that his version of the story represents the authentic recounting of events exactly as they took place in Vietnam, and all three narrators also declare the validity of their narratives using history as proof (O'Brien 174; King 182).

In King's opinion, the ultimate marker of a true war story is the one that “capture[s] the genuine experience of war because truth registers only through gut instinct” (King 183). Through these three narrators, King argues, Tim O'Brien presents the thesis that facts perhaps do not warrant the ultimate measure of authority simply because they happened in someone's remembered past (King 183). Rather, of more value than the actual “historical artifact” of the events that occurred is “the significance, or truth, of the experience” (King 183). In King's words, Tim O'Brien's concept of truth as delineated in *How to Tell a True War Story* “has deep implications for story telling because he suggests that altering facts may be more significant than clinging to the story of what actually transpired” (King 183). Critic Catherine Dybiec Holm, on the other hand, believes that for Tim O'Brien “there is no stable sense of truth or reality when it comes to war” (Holm n.

p.). In *How to Tell a True War Story* Holm sees an author who presents his readers with the truth of this statement over and over. O'Brien, in Holm's understanding, does this both through the straightforward use of passages such as the following: When a guy dies, like Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (O'Brien 176) Or, Tim O'Brien uses "indirect means," such as employing constantly variable narration to recount an event and offering a different take and conclusion on the event with each new version (Holm n.

p.). Holm also agrees that the title offers a sense of irony and layered meaning, "since he suggests that it may actually be impossible to accurately tell a true war story" (Holm n. p.).

In *How to Tell a True War Story* Holm observes the impact of the war itself on all of the narrators as they struggle with the subject matter of their stories. In Holm's opinion, Tim O'Brien's goal in the story is to elucidate directly how the monstrous experience inherent to combat can and will affect the discernment of reality, "even for a narrator" (Holm n. p.). In Holm's words: O'Brien emphasizes the nebulous nature of truth when it comes to war stories by taking one story and telling it four different ways.

Additionally, he starts several of the story versions with statements that make readers question whether the narrator realizes that he has told the story before. O'Brien's device could lead an astute reader to wonder whether

the reality of war and the retelling of this particular war story has become confusing, at least in this narrator's head. And O'Brien's narrator backs this up with prose that directly questions what is and is not real regarding memories of war (Holm However, as critic Diane Andrews Henningfeld aptly observes, the possibility that Tim O'Brien's story " is demonstrating...the impossibility of any truth at all" represents an equally legitimate interpretation of the work (Henningfeld n. p.). The affect of war on the perception of reality and truth may certainly be one of the underlying messages of the story, however in Henningfeld's opinion, How to Tell a True War Story is actually about nothing less than how people - soldiers or otherwise - construct meaning through language. " Rather than being an epistemological tool, this story serves to demonstrate how language only seems to provide knowledge, when all it really provides is more text" (Henningfeld n. p.

) The reader witnesses a glimpse of this phenomenon when Tim O'Brien as the narrator warns the reader that " 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 incredible craziness. In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling" (O'Brien 179). In How to Tell a True War Story, Tim O'Brien seems less interested in giving the reader a straight answer and more about posing the question in numerous ways.

He also challenges the idea that a war story has to mean something, or that it has to make sense on some level. " 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 they 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 (O'Brien 174). The fact that story builds itself up and then tears itself apart again several times over the course of the narrative speaks to its proper understanding as a text of deconstruction or "metafictional story" (Henningfeld n. p.

). Tim O'Brien in Henningfeld's opinion "is a deconstructive master. While it appears that he is saying one thing about true war stories, what he is really doing is undermining not only the entire quest for truth, but also the possibility of truth existing in any knowable form" (Henningfeld n. p.). It follows then that *How to Tell a True War Story* has a much broader application than as a "war story," but rather a critique of the construction of reality through language, memory and historicity.

At no point in any of the three narratives does Tim O'Brien allow the reader to "forget that the story the reader is reading is a story, not reality," because he and the other two narrators "constantly comment on their own construction" (Henningfeld n. p.) Tim O'Brien allows each character in the story to admit that the stories they have told are fictions - some or all of the details have been "made up" (Henningfeld n. p.).

An example occurs when Mitchell Sanders tells a story about his patrol that climbs a mountain: “ Last night, man, I had to make up a few things.” “ I know that.” “ The glee club. There wasn’t any glee club.” “ Right.” “ No opera.

” “ Forget it, I understand.” “ Yeah, but listen, it’s still true. Those six guys, they heard wicked sound out there. They heard sound you just plain won’t believe.” (O’Brien 180) This admission by Sanders “ calls attention to the entire story as a work of fiction” and the fact that all the narrators participate in this seemingly endless revision speaks to Tim O’Brien’s overall point – that reality is what we say it is (Henningfeld n. p.). Tim O’Brien’s *How to Tell a True War Story*, though it appears to be centered around the events of the Vietnam War from the perspective of the soldiers who fought there, is actually about “ the quest for truth, the use of the imagination in telling the truth, and the art of storytelling in creating the truth” (Henningfeld n. p.).

Works Cited

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