

Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher:	Brown	School:	OHS
Book Title:	The Things They Carried	Genre:	Novel
Author:	Tim O'Brien	Pages:	246, 22 chapters
Publisher:	Broadway Books	Copyright:	1990

In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Book Summary and summary citation: (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

Plot Overview from sparknotes.com:

THE PROTAGONIST, who is named Tim O'Brien, begins by describing an event that occurred in the middle of his Vietnam experience. "The Things They Carried" catalogs the variety of things his fellow soldiers in the Alpha Company brought on their missions. Several of these things are intangible, including guilt and fear, while others are specific physical objects, including matches, morphine, M-16 rifles, and M&M's candy.

Throughout the collection, the same characters reappear in various stories. The first member of the Alpha Company to die is Ted Lavender, a "grunt," or low-ranking soldier, who deals with his anxiety about the war by taking tranquilizers and smoking marijuana. Lavender is shot in the head on his way back from going to the bathroom, and his superior, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, blames himself for the tragedy. When Lavender is shot, Cross is distracting himself with thoughts of Martha, a college crush. It is revealed in "Love" that Cross's feelings for Martha, whom he dated once before leaving for Vietnam, were never reciprocated, and that even twenty years after the war, his guilt over Lavender's death remains.

In "On the Rainy River," the narrator, O'Brien, explains the series of events that led him to Vietnam in the first place. He receives his draft notice in June of 1968, and his feelings of confusion drive him north to the Canadian border, which he contemplates crossing so that he will not be forced to fight in a war in which he doesn't believe. Sitting in a rowboat with the proprietor of the Tip Top Lodge, where he stays, O'Brien decides that his guilt about avoiding the war and fear of disappointing his family are more important than his political convictions. He soon leaves, going first back home to Worthington, Minnesota and later to Vietnam.

In addition to Ted Lavender, a few other members of the Alpha Company are killed during their mission overseas, including Curt Lemon, who is killed when using a grenade to play catch with the medic, Rat Kiley. Though O'Brien is not close to Lemon, in "The Dentist," he tells a story of how Lemon, who faints before a routine checkup with an army-issued dentist, tries to save face by insisting that a perfectly good tooth be pulled. Lee Strunk, another member of the company, dies from injuries he sustains by stepping on a landmine. In "Friends," O'Brien remembers that before Strunk was fatally hurt, Strunk and Dave Jensen had made a pact that if either man were irreparably harmed, the other man would see that he was quickly killed. However, when Strunk is actually hurt, he begs Jensen to spare him, and Jensen complies. Instead of being upset by the news of his friend's swift death en route to treatment, Jensen is relieved.

The death that receives the most attention in *The Things They Carried* is that of Kiowa, a much-loved member of the Alpha Company and one of O'Brien's closest friends. In "Speaking of Courage," the story of Kiowa's death is relayed in retrospect through the memory of Norman Bowker, years after the war. As Bowker drives around a lake in his Iowa hometown, he thinks that he failed to save Kiowa, who was killed when a mortar round hit and caused him to sink headfirst into a marshy field. O'Brien realizes that he has dealt with his guilt over Kiowa's death differently than Norman Bowker in "Notes." Just before the end of the war, O'Brien receives a long letter from Bowker that says he hasn't found a way to make life meaningful after the war. O'Brien resolves to tell Bowker's story, and the story of Kiowa's death, in order to negotiate his own feelings of guilt and hollowness.

Like "Love" and "Notes," several of O'Brien's stories are told from a perspective twenty years after the Vietnam War, when he is a forty-three-year-old writer living in Massachusetts. Exposure to the guilt of old friends like Jimmy Cross and Norman Bowker prompts him to write stories in order to understand what they were going through. But two stories, "The Man I Killed" and "Ambush," are written so that O'Brien can confront his own guilt over killing a man with a grenade outside the village of My Khe. In "The Man I Killed," O'Brien imagines the life of his victim, from his childhood to the way things would have turned out for him had O'Brien not spotted him on a path and thrown a grenade at his feet. In "Ambush," O'Brien imagines how he might relay the story of the man he killed to his nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen. In this second story, O'Brien provides more details of the actual killing—including the sound of the grenade and his own feelings—and explains that even well after the fact, he hasn't finished sorting out the experience.

In the last story, "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien gives another twist to his contention that stories have the power to save people. In the stories of Curt Lemon and Kiowa, O'Brien explains that his imagination allowed him to grapple successfully with his guilt and confusion over the death of his fourth-grade first love, Linda.

Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s): (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Reading Applications Informational

How does text determine the application of reading strategies?

3. Identify, explain and analyze how the author appeals to an audience and develops arguments or viewpoints.

10RAIA

4. Critique content from different sources on a single topic. 10RAIE

Reading Applications Literary

How does reading a variety of literature representing different authors, cultures and eras enhance the reader's understanding of the human story?

How does the reader apply the reading process to a variety of genres to achieve deeper understanding?

6. Critique an author's style. 12RALE

7. Evaluate the use of figurative language, sound devices and literary techniques in literary works. 10RALF

9. Identify similar and recurring themes across different works. 10RALD

10. Explain how symbolism enhances a literary text. 12RALD

This novel is high interest for high school students. The topic of the Vietnam War is both intriguing and timely. Though it is sometimes frightening and uncomfortable, it is honest and a good look at the art of storytelling.

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

Amazon.com

"They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing--these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice.... Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to."

A finalist for both the 1990 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *The Things They Carried* marks a subtle but definitive line of demarcation between Tim O'Brien's earlier works about Vietnam, the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and the fictional *Going After Cacciato*, and this sly, almost hallucinatory book that is neither memoir nor novel nor collection of short stories but rather an artful combination of all three. Vietnam is still O'Brien's theme, but in this book he seems less interested in the war itself than in the myriad different perspectives from which he depicts it. Whereas *Going After Cacciato* played with reality, *The Things They Carried* plays with truth. The narrator of most of these stories is "Tim"; yet O'Brien freely admits that many of the events he chronicles in this collection never really happened. He never killed a man as "Tim" does in "The Man I Killed," and unlike Tim in "Ambush," he has no daughter named Kathleen. But just because a thing never happened doesn't make it any less true. In "On the Rainy River," the character Tim O'Brien responds to his draft notice by driving north, to the Canadian border where he spends six days in a deserted lodge in the company of an old man named Elroy while he wrestles with the choice between dodging the draft or going to war. The real Tim O'Brien never drove north, never found himself in a fishing boat 20 yards off the Canadian shore with a decision to make. The real Tim O'Brien quietly boarded the bus to Sioux Falls and was inducted into the United States Army. But the truth of "On the Rainy River" lies not in facts but in the genuineness of the experience it depicts: both Tims went to a war they didn't believe in; both considered themselves cowards for doing so. Every story in *The Things They Carried* speaks another truth that Tim O'Brien learned in Vietnam; it is this blurred line between truth and reality, fact and fiction, that makes his book unforgettable. --Alix Wilber --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Review #2

Library Journal

Winner of a National Book Award in 1979 for *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien again shows his literary stuff with this brilliant collection of short stories, many of which have won literary recognition (several appeared in O. Henry Awards' collections and Best American Short Stories). Each of the 22 tales relates the exploits and personalities of a fictional platoon of American soldiers in Vietnam. An acutely painful reading experience, this collection should be read as a book and not a mere selection of stories reprinted from magazines. Not since Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* has the American soldier been portrayed with such poignance and sincerity.-- Mark Annichiarico

School Library Journal

A series of stories about the Vietnam experience, based on the author's recollections. O'Brien begins by sharing the talismans and treasures his select small band of young soldiers carry into battle. The tales, ranging from a paragraph to 20 or so pages, reveal one truth after another. Sometimes the author tells the same story from different points of view, revealing the lingering, sometimes consuming, effect war leaves on the soul. In the end, readers are left with a mental and emotional sphere of mirrors, each reflecting a speck of truth about the things men carry into and out of war. --

Barbara Hawkins, West Potomac High, Fairfax County, Virginia

This is a collection of stories about American soldiers in Vietnam by the author of Going After Cacciato. All of the stories "deal with a single platoon, one of whose members is a character named Tim O'Brien. Some stories are about [their] wartime experiences....Others are about a 43-year-old writer--again, the fictional character Tim O'Brien--remembering his platoon's experiences and writing war stories (and remembering writing stories) about them. -- The New York Times Book Review

...[B]elongs high on the list of best fiction about any war....crystallizes the Vietnam experience for everyone [and] exposes the nature of all war stories.

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

Title: **Johnny Got His Gun**

Author: **Dalton Trumbo**

Title: **Hiroshima**

Author: **John Hersey**

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Document any potentially controversial content:

Frequent uses of the words "fuck", "shit", "hell", "ass", "bitch", "Jesus Christ", "God". This models the authentic coping methods and dialog during the Vietnam War.

There are multiple violent scenes including war battles, shootings, and accidental deaths.

There are brief references to smoking marijuana.

There are multiple references to sexual situations, slang, and discussions. A character calls a woman a "cooze" because she disappointed him.

Tim O'Brien reference to the Vietnam War claims, "If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth." This novel uses profanity in an attempt to support the authenticity of the soldiers' comments and language.

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading level of this title (if applicable):

Date Submitted to Department Chair: 23 May 2007

Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults