

Reading Questions for *The Things They Carried*

Chapter 1: “The Things They Carried”

1. In the list of all the things the soldiers carried, what item was most surprising? Which item did you find most evocative of the war? Which items stay with you?
2. In what sense does Jimmy love Martha? Why does he construct this elaborate, mostly fictional, relationship with her: What does he get out of it?
3. Why do the soldiers tell jokes about the war, about killing?
4. How is the idea of weight used and developed in the story? How do you, as a reader, feel reading those lists of weight? What effect does it have on you?
5. How has Jimmy changed by the end of the story? How will he be a different person from this point on? What has he learned about himself? Or to put it another way, what has he lost and what has he gained?

Chapter 2: “Love”

1. What could Jimmy Cross never forgive himself for?
2. How did Jimmy get a new picture of Martha playing volleyball?
3. What does Jimmy ask Tim to do when he writes his story?
4. What does he tell Tim NOT to mention?
5. What does it tell us about Tim O’Brien, the narrator, that he reveals character traits of Cross’s that Cross would prefer to have remain unknown?

Chapter 3: “Spin”

1. What do we learn about Azar’s character in this story?
2. How was the war NOT like a game of checkers?
3. How did the “old poppa-san” help the platoon? What was his special skill?
4. What does Norman Bowker wish for, more than anything?
5. What does Kiowa say when his rain dance doesn’t work?
6. What did Azar do to Ted Lavender’s puppy?
7. What does Azar say about his action?
8. Identify in this story moments of beauty and/or serenity.
9. How is this story structured? What can you say about all these short sections?
10. According to Tim, what are stories for?

Chapter 4: “On the Rainy River”

1. How did Tim feel about the Vietnam War while he was at college? Do his actions and language support the idea that he “hated” the Vietnam war?
2. What were Tim’s options once he received his draft notice? Who did he hold responsible for his situation? Who did he think should go to war instead of him?
3. What does Tim say is Elroy Berdhal’s role in his life? What sort of person was Elroy? How did Tim know?
4. How do the opening sentences prepare you for the story?: “This is the one story I’ve never told before. Not to anyone.” What effect do they have on the reader?
5. Why does O’Brien relate his experience as a pig declotter? How does this information contribute to the story? Why go into such specific detail?
6. At the story’s close, O’Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but doesn’t: “I did try. It just wasn’t possible.” What has O’Brien learned about himself, and how does he return home as a changed person?
7. In this chapter, we learn the 21-year-old O’Brien’s theory of courage: “Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. It was a comforting theory.” What might the 43-year-old O’Brien’s theory of courage be?

Chapter 5: “Enemies”

1. Who broke whose nose?
2. What was the effect of the fight on Jensen?
3. What did Jensen finally do to resolve the conflict between them?
4. What is the irony of this chapter’s title?

Chapter 6: “Friends

1. What was the pact that Dave Jensen & Lee Strunk made together?
2. What was Lee afraid of when he saw Jensen, and what did he make him promise?
3. The phrase that inspires these two chapters is normally characterized as “friends and enemies.” Why does O’Brien (the author) reverse this traditional order when sequencing these chapters?
4. Using both chapters “Enemies” and “Friends,” explain how war distorts the normal social codes.
5. What is the irony of this chapter’s title?

Chapter 7: “How to Tell a True War Story”

1. According to O’Brien, how do you tell a true war story? What does he mean when he says that true war stories are never about war? In what sense is a “true” war story actually true? That is, in O’Brien’s terms, what is the relationship between historical truth and fictional truth?
2. Why does this story begin with the line: “This is true.” How does that prepare you, as a reader, for the story? In what sense is “this” true?
3. Find a few of O’Brien’s elements of a “true war story.” (such as, “A true war story is never moral.”) Why does O’Brien believe these elements are important to a “true” war story?
4. Why is the baby water buffalo scene more disturbing than the death of one of O’Brien’s platoon members, Curt Lemon?
5. O’Brien explains that this story was “not a war story. It was a love story.” In what sense is this a “love story”? Why?

Chapter 8: “The Dentist”

1. Characterize Curt Lemon and why he behaves the way he does. How does this affect your reading of the previous chapter?
2. How did Curt Lemon’s visit to the dentist affect him?
3. What is the purpose of placing this chapter directly after “How to Tell a True War Story”?

Chapter 9: “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”

1. Characterize Rat Kiley. After reading the entirety of the story, why does this story seem particularly “true” to Rat? What meaning might he derive from it?
2. Characterize Mark Fossie and Mary Anne Bell.
3. Describe the changes in Mary Anne Bell from the time she arrived in Vietnam to be with her boyfriend until the end of the chapter. Be specific and record moments from the text (page numbers and descriptions) that demonstrate how she changed.
4. Why do you think she changed? What did the change symbolize? How long did this metamorphosis take?
5. Look up the definition of the word *metamorphosis*. In what ways (note that this a plural noun) does this word apply to the transformation of Mary Anne?
6. Does it matter that Mary Anne is a woman? How so? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?
7. Does it matter what happened, in the end, to Mary Anne? Would this be a better story if we knew, precisely, what happened to her after she left camp? Or does this vague ending add to the story? Why?
8. “You’re in a place where you don’t belong.” Any parallels to today? How does our lack of understanding of a people and their place destroy us (as it does Fossie)? How does it make monsters of us?

Chapter 10: “Stockings”

1. Why did Henry Dobbins continue to carry his girlfriend’s stocking even after she broke up with him?
2. Consider the comparison O’Brien makes between Dobbins and America. Does O’Brien like America? Does he respect it?

Chapter 11: “Church”

1. What was Kiowa’s reaction to setting up camp in a pagoda? Why? How does this differ with Dobbin’s conception of faith/religion/spirituality?
2. What is the meaning of the washing motion of the younger monk? Is it the same when Dobbins does it?
3. The image of the monk cleaning an M-60 is incongruous and jarring. What purpose does it serve in the story?

Chapter 12: “The Man I Killed”

1. How did the narrator react to the fact that he killed another human being? What evidence in the story leads you to this conclusion?
2. This story describes fairly intimate aspects of the dead man’s life. Where do these details come from? How can Tim O’Brien know them? What is going on here?

Chapter 13: “Ambush”

1. Tim O’Brien’s daughter, Kathleen, asks if he ever killed a man: “ ‘You keep writing these war stories,’ she said, ‘so I guess you must’ve killed somebody.’ ” Following this, O’Brien relates two possible scenarios of the death described in “The Man I Killed” to explain “This is why I keep writing war stories.” In your opinion, why does O’Brien keep writing war stories?
2. Where does truth reside in this book? What is the connection between O’Brien’s actual experiences and the events in this book? Why is O’Brien using lies to get at “the truth”?

Chapter 14: “Style”

1. What symbolism lies in the woman’s dance?
2. What does Dobbins mean when he says “Dance right!”?

Chapter 15: “Speaking of Courage”

1. What narrative point of view is used in “Speaking of Courage”? What problems does Norman confront when he returns home? What seems to prevent him from dealing with them successfully?
2. Why is this story called “Speaking of Courage”? Assume the title does **NOT** hold any irony. In what sense does this story speak of courage?
3. Like other male characters in this novel, Norman Bowker develops an active fantasy life. Why do these men develop these fantasy roles? What do they get from telling these fantasy stories to themselves? What does this tell you about O’Brien’s understanding of the way fiction relates to real life?
4. Why is Norman unable to relate to anyone at home? More importantly, why doesn’t he even try?

Chapter 16: “Notes”

1. What is the effect of “Notes,” in which O’Brien explains the story behind “Speaking Of Courage”? Does your appreciation of the story change when you learn which parts are “true” and which are the author’s invention?
2. Why does O’Brien include Norman’s letter in the story?
3. What does O’Brien say about storytelling in “Notes”?

Chapter 17: “In the Field”

1. Briefly summarize the plot and style of the story. Is this story more of a “true” war story than the account in the chapter “Speaking of Courage”?
2. What point of view is used to narrate “In the Field”?
3. Why is the young man not identified in the story? What is the character’s purpose in the narrative?
4. In “In The Field,” O’Brien writes, “When a man died, there had to be blame.” What does this mandate do to the men of O’Brien’s company? Are they justified in thinking themselves at fault? How do they cope with their own feelings of culpability? Consider all of the following characters:
5. What, in the end, is the significance of the shit field story (or stories)?

Chapter 18: “Good Form”

1. In “Good Form,” O’Brien casts doubt on the veracity of the entire novel. Why does he do so? Does it make you more or less interested in the novel? Does it increase or decrease your understanding? What is the difference between “happening-truth” and “story-truth”?

Chapter 19: “Field Trip”

1. Why does O’Brien return to the shit field?
2. What is the point of putting Kiowa’s moccasins in the ground (burying them)?
3. Explain the significance of the final sentence. Who or what is “all finished”?

Chapter 20: “The Ghost Soldiers”

1. What does “The Ghost Soldiers” add to the book that we have almost completed? Does it provide any new insights, perspectives, or experiences about any of the characters? What do you think its function in the overall narrative might be?
2. Does your opinion of O’Brien change throughout the course of the novel? How so? How do you feel about his actions in “The Ghost Soldiers”?
3. “The Ghost Soldiers” is one of the only stories of *The Things They Carried* in which we don't know the ending in advance. Why might O’Brien want this story to be particularly suspenseful?
4. Explain the significance of the title of this chapter.

Chapter 21: “Night Life”

1. How did Rat Kiley get out of active duty in the Vietnam?
2. Consider the placement of this story in the novel. What is O’Brien’s purpose in including this story so late in the novel and immediately following “The Ghost Soldiers”?

Chapter 22: “The Lives of the Dead”

1. How does the opening paragraph frame the story we are about to read?
2. Why is O’Brien unable to joke around with the other soldiers? Why does the old man remind him of Linda?
3. What is the function of the Linda plot in “The Lives of the Dead”? Consider in particular what it teaches him about death, memory, storytelling.
4. What is the “moral” of the dead KIAs? Consider Mitchell Sanders' view.
5. In many ways, this book is as much about stories, or the necessity of stories, as it is about the Vietnam War. According to O’Brien, what do stories accomplish? Why does he continue to tell stories about the Vietnam War, about Linda?
6. Reread the final two pages of this book. Consider what the young Tim O’Brien learns about storytelling from his experience with Linda. How does this knowledge prepare him not only for the war, but also to become a writer? Within the parameters of this story, how would you characterize Tim O’Brien’s understanding of the purpose of fiction? How does fiction relate to life, that is, life in the journalistic or historic sense?

Overall:

1. Assume for a moment, that the writer, Tim O’Brien, created a fictional main character, also called Tim O’Brien, to inhabit this novel. Why would the real Tim O’Brien do that? What would that accomplish in this novel? How would that strengthen a book about “truth”?
2. Finally, if O’Brien is trying to relate some essential details about emotional life – again as opposed to historic life – is he successful in doing that? Is he justified in tinkering with the facts to get at, what he would term, some larger, story-truth?
3. On the copyright page of the novel appears the following: “This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary.” How does this statement affect your reading of the novel?