The Things They Carried

Tim O'Brien

1986

First published in Esquire in August, 1986, and later collected in The Best American Short Stories 1987, "The Things They Carried" became the lead story in a book of the same name published in 1990 by Viking Penguin. Since Tim O'Brien had already established himself as a literary voice to be reckoned with, this collection of interrelated stories received a great deal of attention. The book quickly established O'Brien as one of the leading figures in Vietnam literature.

Critics and readers alike have paid considerable attention to the question of whether the events in the book are literally true or products of O'Brien's imagination. Though O'Brien has made it clear in interviews that he believes the truth in literature has nothing to do with what actually happened, the similarities between his writing and his experience in Vietnam are striking. When O'Brien published the disturbing and confessional article "The Vietnam in Me" in the New York Times Magazine in 1994, he sparked renewed interest in the connections between his life and his writing. His last two novels are set in the United States but still prominently feature the Vietnam veteran's experience.

Author Biography

O'Brien's life resembles many of his protagonists. Born October 2, 1946, and raised in the small town
of Wortington, Minnesota, by his insurance salesman father and elementary school teacher mother, O'Brien's childhood and adolescence was marked by loneliness and isolation. When he was a student at Macalester College in St. Paul, however, he found a place in the antiwar movement and attended war protests and peace vigils. After graduating with a degree in political science and plans to reform government from the inside, O'Brien was drafted instead. Resisting the impulse to defect to Canada, the twenty-two-year-old O'Brien found himself in the infantry. Despite being awarded the Purple Heart for wounds he received, O'Brien loathed the war and everything about it, but it would become the catalyst and continuing inspiration for his literary career.

O'Brien wrote his first book, the autobiographical series of vignettes If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home while a graduate student in government at Harvard University. Since its publication in 1973, O'Brien has been a full-time writer and Vietnam a constant theme. In addition to The Things They Carried, the collection of interrelated stories that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990, O'Brien has published five novels. The most recent, Tomcat in Love was published in 1998 after a well-documented period of personal turmoil and artistic burnout. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Plot Summary**

"The Things They Carried" recounts the experiences of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's infantry unit leading up to and following the death of one of the men, Ted Lavender, on April 16. A third-person narrator describes the individual soldiers by the items that they carry with them.

Lt. Jimmy Cross, the main character and platoon leader, carries the letters he receives from Martha, a sophomore English major at St. Sebastian's College in New Jersey. He uses the letters, photographs, and the small stone she has sent him as a way of connecting to the world outside of Vietnam. Though he is distracted and dreamy, he also carries "the responsibility for the lives of his men."

The other men in the platoon carry personal effects and good luck charms. They also share the burdens of combat, distributing the necessary equipment and weapons among them. Henry Dobbins, for example, the biggest man in the group, carries the M-60 machine gun, "which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded." He also "carried his girlfriend's pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter."

Lt. Jimmy Cross's platoon's mission in mid-April is to locate and destroy the tunnels in the Than Khe area south of Chu Lai that the Viet Cong used to hide in. Because they are required to search the tunnels before blowing them up, they draw numbers to see who will perform the dangerous and claustrophobic task of crawling through the enemy's tunnels. Lee Strunk draws the unlucky number, crawls down the opening and the rest of the men settle in to wait and hope. As hard as he tries to concentrate on Strunk and the tunnel, Cross can think only of Martha, imagining the two of them together "under the white sand at the Jersey shore." Strunk finally emerges, "filthy but alive," but "right then Ted Lavender is shot in the head on his way back from peeing."

The men put Ted Lavender's body on the chopper and take up their burdens once again. The first thing they do is march to the village of Than Khe and burn everything. Finally, after they stop
marching for the night they begin to try to come to terms with Ted Lavender’s death. Like the physical objects they carry, the men distribute the burden of Lavender’s death both individually and collectively.

Kiowa wants to talk about Lavender’s death, wants an audience for his memory of the event. Bowker wants to be left alone and not say a word about it. Lt. Cross weeps and digs furiously at his foxhole. He feels guilty ‘‘because he loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead.’’ He knows that this shame ‘‘is something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war.’’

The next morning Lt. Cross burns all his letters from Martha as well as the photographs of her, realizing that ‘‘it was only a gesture.’’ In the aftermath of Lavender’s death, Cross vows to give up the daydreams and focus on his job as soldier and platoon leader, ‘‘determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence.’’ He believes that this is only possible if he ‘‘would dispense with love.’’

Because of his size, however, he is exempt from taking his turn crawling in the enemy’s tunnels. He carries canned peaches and other extra rations on patrol.

Dave Jensen

David Jensen ‘‘practiced field hygiene’’ and therefore carried dental floss, ‘‘night-sight vitamins high in carotene,’’ and foot powder. He also brings soap stolen from a hotel in Australia where he had been for rest and relaxation, and a rabbit’s foot.

Rat Kiley

The medic for the platoon, Kiley carries all the necessary supplies for practicing emergency field medicine as well as some unconventional ones such as comic books, M & M candy, and brandy.

Kiowa

An Indian from Oklahoma, Kiowa is a devout Baptist and travels with the New Testament his father gave him. He also carries ‘‘his grandmother’s distrust of the white man,’’ a pair of moccasins, and a feathered hatchet.

Ted Lavender

Because he is scared Lavender always carries tranquilizers and ‘‘six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity.’’ He is shot and killed while the platoon waits for Lee Strunk to emerge from the tunnels.

Martha

Martha is a junior at St. Sebastian’s College in New Jersey. Before Lieutenant Cross was shipped to Vietnam she formed at least a superficial relationship with him, but her letters are more friendly than romantic.

Mitchell Sanders

The radio operator for the platoon, Sanders has the responsibility of calling for the chopper to pick up Lavender’s body. He gave Bowker the amputated thumb from the corpse of the dead Viet Cong boy.

Characters

Norman Bowker

The member of the platoon who is described as ‘‘gentle,’’ Bowker carries a diary with him. The other unusual thing that he carries is a thumb from the body of a dead Viet Cong boy.

Jimmy Cross

Lieutenant Cross is the main character of the story and the one whose inner thoughts the narrator most often presents to the reader. He is more educated than the rest of his men but seems reluctant to assume the burdens of leadership. He carries photographs, letters, and a pebble given to him by Martha, a college girl he knows back in New Jersey and with whom he believes himself to be in love.

Henry Dobbins

The biggest man in the platoon, Dobbins carries the heaviest physical load, the M-60 machine gun.
Introduced late in the story, Strunk draws the unlucky number seventeen and has to inspect the tunnels at Than Khe. Among the personal items that he chooses to carry are a slingshot and tanning lotion.

Themes

War and Love

Readers might expect the story to articulate the tension between war and peace, but O'Brien's point in this story and in his other writings is that the real connection is between war and love. Lt. Cross believes, for example, that because he loves Martha, he does not fulfill his duty toward his men. He literally thinks that because he chose love over war, Ted Lavender is dead. O'Brien believes, however, that love comes with the territory of war. In an article for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1994 he explains: "Intimacy with death carries with it a corresponding new intimacy with life. Jokes are funnier, green is greener. You love the musty morning air. You love the miracle of your own enduring capacity for love."

According to O'Brien, however, love is also what drove him to Vietnam. In the same article he confesses: "I have done bad things for love, bad things to stay loved." Describing his reaction to being drafted he writes: "I thought about Canada. I thought about jail. But in the end I could not bear the prospect of rejection: by my family, my country, my friends, my hometown. I would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love."

The Individual and the Collective

One of the central themes of all war narratives, and particularly Vietnam war literature, is the dynamic between the individual soldier and the unit, or collective, of which he or she is a part. The object of military training is to meld individuals into a functioning group, a platoon, by instilling in them both fierce loyalty to and dependence upon the others. Properly trained soldiers know that their lives depend on the actions of others, and at the same time they are also willing to risk their own lives for the sake of the rest. In "The Things They Carried" the members of Lt. Cross's platoon act collectively in several ways. They share the burdens of carrying necessary equipment and draw lots to see whose turn it is to search the tunnels.

Collective action during wartime has a dark side, however. The official language of war uses collective nouns like troops, in order to disguise the involvement of individual bodies. For example, news that Alpha Company suffered "one casualty" is more palatable than news that Ted Lavender is dead, shot in the head on the way back from peeing. O'Brien's narrative explicitly engages this theme by contrasting the plurality of the platoon with the singularity of the men. In other words, they are all legs and grunts and they all must carry heavy burdens as well as each other, but in the privacy of their thoughts and the inner sections of their backpacks and pockets they are singular men with hometowns and girlfriends and fathers and mothers.

Storytelling: Fact or Fiction

Like most of the literature of the Vietnam war, "The Things They Carried" is shaped by the personal combat experience of the author. O'Brien is adamant, however, that the fiction not be mistaken for factual accounts of events. In an interview with Michael Coffey of Publishers Weekly soon after the book was published, O'Brien claims: "My own experience has virtually nothing to do with the content of the book." Indeed the title page of the book announces it as "a work of fiction." The book is dedicated, however, "to the men of Alpha Com-
pany, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa.” O’Brien himself was in infantryman in Alpha Company and was stationed in the Quang Ngai province in 1969-70. When asked about this device in an interview with Martin Narpasteck in *Contemporary Literature*, O’Brien explains: “What I’m saying is that even with that nonfiction-sounding element in the story, everything in the story is fiction, beginning to end. To classify different elements of the story as fact or fiction seems to me artificial. Literature should be looked at not for its literal truths but for its emotional qualities. What matters in literature, I think, are the pretty simple things—whether it moves me or not, whether it feels true. The actual literal truth should be superfluous.”

Clearly O’Brien wants readers to wrestle with the distinctions between fact and fiction. What matters for him, as he explained at a conference on the literature of the Vietnam War, is the “power of stories, whether they’re true, or embellished, and exaggerated, or utterly made up. A good story has a power . . . that transcends the question of factuality or actuality.” In the beginning of the last story in *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien reveals the reasons why he tells these tales: “Stories can save us.”
Offering a fuller explanation in an interview with Publishers Weekly, O'Brien says, "If there is a theme to the whole book it has to do with the fact that stories can save our lives."

**Style**

**Point of View and Narration**

The identity of the narrator in all the stories in *The Things They Carried* is of interest to critics and readers. In the title story, the narrator is unidentified, but in other stories he is a "fictional character named Tim O'Brien," explains the author, Tim O'Brien. The third person narrator in "The Things They Carried" is unnamed, but since the stories are interrelated, he may be the fictional Tim O'Brien. The narrator's job in this story is to describe the soldiers and the things that happen to them in the Quang Ngai province, particularly on and around the day that Ted Lavender dies. The narrator is technically omniscient, or all-knowing, since he is privy to the interior thoughts and feelings of the characters, especially Lt. Jimmy Cross. But O'Brien's narrator also behaves like a limited third-person narrator in that he only reveals partial, fragmented, or incomplete information about the characters and events of the story.

**Realism**

One of the stylistic features of O'Brien's story is its precise rendering of the physical realities of war. This style falls under the general literary category known as realism, one of the most elastic terms critics have to work with. The term applies both to the method of accurately describing the details of ordinary life as well as a general attitude, or philosophy, that favors confronting the realities of life instead of escaping or idealizing them. An example of realism in both senses is the way O'Brien portrays Ted Lavender's death. He includes considerable and precise detail (how much and what he was carrying, and that he had not even zipped up his pants, for example). O'Brien also goes to great lengths to characterize Lavender's death as a random and stupid accident, not as a heroic act.

Because realism is such a large term, it includes several varieties. The two variants of realism most often associated with O'Brien's work are hyperrealism and magic realism. The story can be considered hyperrealism because O'Brien draws attention to the minutiae of the soldiers' lives in Vietnam, lingering over details smaller than an ordinary observer could perceive. The story also contains elements of magic realism. Magic realism is a kind of modern fiction that weaves fantastic or imaginary elements into a narrative that otherwise has all the features of an objective realistic account.

**Historical Context**

**The War in Vietnam**

Historians often refer to the Vietnam War as America's longest war because it can be dated from President Harry Truman's commitment of $15 mil-
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Compare & Contrast

• **1960s:** All young men are required to register for the selective service and face being drafted into the armed forces to serve in Vietnam. While some young men of wealth and privilege escape the draft by enrolling in college, other objectors who are less fortunate flee to Canada to avoid service, or openly defy the draft and face criminal charges. Former heavy weight champion Muhammad Ali, then Cassius Clay, is among those conscientious objectors who choose jail over military service.

• **1990s:** Though all young men are still required to register with the selective service when they turn eighteen, the United States armed forces have been strictly voluntary since Nixon ended the draft in 1972.

• **1960s:** With the Cold War at its peak, America’s foreign policy is aimed at stopping the spread of communism in every far-flung corner of the world. Military and political leaders use the domino theory to justify the enormous financial and human costs of involvement in Vietnam.

• **1990s:** With the Cold War finally thawed and the break-up of the once formidable communist foe, the Soviet Union, American citizens and their leaders are more reluctant to become involved in foreign wars in developing nations.

• **1960s:** Beyond the exotic sounding names they read about in newspapers or see on television, Americans know nothing of Vietnamese culture. Even major U.S. cities have few if any Vietnamese restaurants.

• **1990s:** Due to the influx of the so-called “boat people” in the 1970s, and the constant stream of immigration since, Vietnamese culture has made a permanent impact on America.

lion to aid the French forces in Indochina in 1950 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. The reasons the U.S. became involved in Vietnam are complex. Briefly, American policy makers beginning with the Truman administration believed that the spread of Chinese Communism in Southeast Asia threatened the world balance of power as construed by the cold war. The so-called “domino theory” held that the entire region would “fall” to communism if the U.S. did not support South Vietnam against incursions from the north.

For several years the U.S. aided the south Vietnamese with technology, material, and military advisors. Intensive American involvement in Vietnam began in 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson sent U.S. Marines to defend Danang airfield. More than 15,000 American military advisors were already in Vietnam. By the beginning of 1968, there were nearly a half million American troops in Vietnam, and bombing raids were heavy and frequent. Communist troops altered the course of the war early in 1968 when they launched a series of attacks on the eve of Tet, the Asian New Year holidays. Americans knew then that victory would come neither soon nor easily.

The years 1969-70, when “The Things They Carried” is set, mark the phase of the war called “Vietnamization.” In 1969, President Nixon began secretly bombing Cambodia, a strategy that inflamed anti-war protesters in the United States. American troops were steadily withdrawn while heavy bombing continued. Frustrations with the war escalated both at home and among the troops themselves. Though it was not revealed until a year later, in March of 1968 American troops burned the village of Mylai to the ground and killed “everything that breathed.” In the words of journalist and author Stanley Karnow: “In human terms at least, the war in Vietnam was a war that nobody won—a struggle between victims. Its origins complex, its lessons disputed, its legacy still to be assessed by future generations. But whether a valid venture or a
The War at Home

The years 1968 and 1970 were especially turbulent on the domestic front. As opposition to the war grew, protests became larger and more highly charged. In response to the threat of violence, authorities increased police presence on college campuses and at demonstrations. Within two months in the spring of 1968, both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. There were riots and arrests outside the Democratic convention in Chicago. Television viewers watched as heavy-handed police and national guardsmen beat and tear-gassed protesters.

Early in 1969, Nixon began withdrawing troops but also began secretly bombing Cambodia. Massive anti-war demonstrations took place in Washington in October and November. Also in November, Americans were shocked by the revelation of the massacre at Mylai. By 1970 the antiwar movement had spread cross the country and clashes between protesters and law enforcement were more frequent and highly-charged. In May, national guardsmen killed four students protesting the war at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.

By 1970, as Stanley Karnow explains, resistance to the war at home began to affect the troops in the field. "Antiwar protests at home had by now spread to the men in the field, many of whom wore peace symbols and refused to go into combat. Race relations, which were good when blacks and whites had earlier shared a sense of purpose, became increasingly brittle." Similarly, the image of the American GI began to suffer in the eye of the American public as more tales of brutality and drug use emerged from the battlefield.

Aided to a great extent by the erection of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington and a greater public understanding of the causes and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, the image of the Vietnam veteran has improved in the past twenty years. In the 1970s, however, returning soldiers faced unprecedented difficulties re integrating into their communities and families. Veteran John Kerry, later elected to the U.S. Senate from Massachusetts, recalls his own experience on a cross country flight: "I fell asleep and woke up yelling, probably a nightmare. The other passengers moved away from me—a reaction I noticed more and more in the months ahead. The country didn’t give a shit about the guys coming back, or what they’d gone through. The feeling toward them was ‘Stay away—don’t contaminate us with whatever you’ve brought back from Vietnam.’"

Critical Overview

Tim O’Brien made something of a splash in the literary world when his Going After Cacciato beat two much more high-profile books by John Cheever and John Irving to win the National Book Award in 1979. The Things They Carried more than lived up to the expectations of the critics when it appeared in 1990. Though reviewers debated whether the book was a novel or a collection of stories, there was little disagreement that it was an important and accomplished work.

When Robert Harris reviewed the book for New York Times in March, 1990, he called the book a "collection of interrelated stories." More importantly, however, Harris also claimed that The Things They Carried belonged "on the short list of essential fiction about Vietnam," and "high up on the list of best fiction about any war." Harris puzzles a little over O’Brien’s blurring of fact and fiction in his use of a narrator also named Tim O’Brien, but concludes that the author "cuts to the heart of writing about war. And by subjecting his memory and imagination to such harsh scrutiny, he seems to have reached a reconciliation, to have made his peace—or to have made up his peace."

O’Brien’s reputation has continued to grow in literary circles. Two full-length studies and several critical articles on his work have been published in the 1990s. Martin Naparsteck in Contemporary Literature calls O’Brien "the best of a talented group of Vietnam veterans who have devoted much of their writing to their war experiences," and suggests that The Things They Carried will soon
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surpass O'Brien's Going After Cacciato as the best work of fiction to come out of the war. Writing in Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, Maria S. Bonn praises the "elaborate interlocking pattern of truth and fiction" in The Things They Carried.

More recently, O'Brien generated considerable interest in his work and his personal experience when he accepted an assignment from New York Times to return to Vietnam in 1994 and write about it. The article called "The Vietnam in Me" renewed interest in The Things They Carried because it described O'Brien's real-life experiences in the Quang Ngai province as a member of the 46th Infantry. The New York Times article also stirred interest in O'Brien's fictionalized accounts of his Vietnam experience because in it he confessed his own suicidal thoughts as he wrestled with the memories of the war, a divorce, and the break-up of another relationship. O'Brien received quite a bit of attention for this bit of self-revelation and in a 1998 interview with New York Times writer Bruce Weber, he explains: "I'm glad I wrote it, but I wish I hadn't published it. [...] It's a perceptive piece, about the inner penetration of love and war, and eerie uncanny similarities between the two. But it hurt people I love, and probably me too, a little. Though it saved my life, in one way."

Criticism

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton has a Ph.D. in American literature. In this essay she discusses the blending of the real and unreal, the tangible and the imaginative, in "The Things They Carried."

The title story of The Things They Carried, which O'Brien himself describes as "sort of a half novel, half group of stories," dramatizes the lives of foot soldiers in Vietnam during the later years of the war. O'Brien characterizes them as "legs," or "grunts," as those who carry burdens both literal and figurative: from photographs and tranquillizers to shame and responsibility. The story, like the lives of the men in Lt. Cross's platoon, depends on a delicate balance, upon "poise," to use O'Brien's term. Walking a blurred line between fact and fiction, the story requires readers to balance the physical and the metaphysical worlds as well and challenges their definitions of reality.

The narrator guides readers throughout the story, sometimes just describing and enumerating the soldiers' world, and sometimes departing from the path of realism to dwell in the soldiers' imaginations. The narrator carries the burdens of the men's stories and implicitly asks readers to take them up as well. As critic Thomas Myers writes in Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam: "The soldier's own testimony was a story waiting for a storyteller, a tale whose ultimate message would reside in its tone and style as much as its content. If the Vietnam War was a dark monument to the powers of American imagination, so would imagination be the most necessary tool for its faithful recording." Because the particular qualities of the Vietnam war experience "defied conventional attempts to record it," in Myers's words, O'Brien, like other writers of the war, must find forms outside "the well-worn contours and conventions of the traditional war [narrative]," Myers continues. One of the new techniques O'Brien employs is to describe the grunt's experience not in terms of how he carries on, but simply in terms of what he carries. For example, because Jimmy Cross out-ranks the others, his "humping" duties are lighter: "a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45 caliber pistol that weighted 2.9 pounds fully loaded." Compared to machine-gunner Henry Dobbins, he gets off easy. Lt. Cross, however, also carries "the responsibility of the lives of his men." Ted Lavender, the narrator notes, "went down under an exceptional burden" when he was shot and killed. After listing all the heavy objects that Lavender carried, the "more than twenty pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers," O'Brien adds one more item, even heavier than all that precedes it because it lacks a specific weight and therefore is infinitely heavy—"the unweighed fear." Readers apprehend the weight of fear because its intangibility contrasts with the specified and quantified weights of his other burdens.

The soldiers in Lt. Cross's platoon are what they carry. They are grunts because they carry ammunition and flares and water and rations and guns. The things they carry also holds the group together. Each man depends upon the other to share the load. But they are also defined as men, differentiated from the group because of the things they carry. The objects that comfort them individually may also alienate them from the others. Rat Kiley, for example, as medic must carry all the necessary supplies, but he also carries M&Ms "for especially
Vietnam: A History (1983) by Stanley Karnow. This lengthy and exhaustive account is still the benchmark and is a surprisingly readable piece of scholarship.

Dispatches (1977) by Michael Herr is one of the centerpieces in the journalist and personal narrative genre of Vietnam writing. Unflinching and realistic, it was one of the first books of its kind.

A Rumor of War (1977) by Philip Caputo is often mentioned in the same breath with Herr’s Dispatches. This dark narrative pays particular attention to the way individual soldiers functioned as groups in the war.

In Country (1985) by Bobbie Ann Mason is a novel about the effects of the Vietnam War on those who remain at home.

Shallow Graves: Two Women and Vietnam (1986) by Wendy Larsen Wilder and Tran Thi Nga is a collection or sequence of poems written by the wife of an American journalist and a former employee in the magazine’s Saigon office. Using alternating sections the book offers a startling and moving picture of the war.

Robert Olen Butler’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain (1992) addresses the Vietnam War and its aftermath from a variety of narrative perspectives.

Going After Cacciato (1978) is Tim O’Brien’s award-winning novel about an infantryman who decides to walk from Vietnam to Paris for the peace talks.

bad wounds.” His intimate knowledge of death—that sometimes candy is the only comfort in a dying man’s final minutes—separates him from the men who hope and pray that they never ask for the M&Ms. Ted Lavender’s heaviest burden, his crippling fear, is a burden he shares with the others, but his means of coping with that fear, his tranquilizers and “six or seven ounces of premium dope,” set him apart. Carrying drugs would certainly not make Ted Lavender exceptional in Vietnam, but his dependence upon the drugs makes his fear visible and that is what distances him from the others. All of them “carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide.” Ted Lavender makes his own fear, and therefore everyone’s fear, visible. The most poignant example is Lt. Cross himself, whose love for Martha pulls him away from Vietnam on imaginative flights: “Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and he smothered.” After Lt. Cross blames himself for Lavender’s death and burns the letters and photographs from Martha, he realizes “you couldn’t burn the blame.” His alienation from the group now derives from his understanding that “you could die of carelessness and gross stupidity,” and that he is responsible for the others. He experiences this choice between Martha and his duty as a loss: “It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do.” In other words, the things they carry on their bodies creates the illusion of unity and collaboration, but the fragile collective is always compromised by the things they carry inside and by the meanings and emotions attached to the smallest and most private of artifacts.

One of the most effective techniques O’Brien uses in “The Things They Carried” is to juxtapose the physical and the metaphysical burdens, the real and imaginative experiences of the men of Alpha Company. Vietnam literature has sought to move away from the heroic, or romanticizing, war narratives of the past. This has resulted in a literature that privileges gritty realism and attempts to describe the intimate details of the material and bodily condi-
The soldiers in Lt. Cross's platoon are what they carry. They are grunts because they carry ammunition and flares and water and rations and guns. The things they carry also holds the group together. Each man depends upon the other to share the load.

O'Brien creates a dizzying sense of unreality: "They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections." After O'Brien lists some of the ordinary items that the soldiers carried, "chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries," he wrenches the reader beyond the tangible world: "They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity."

In the end, Lt. Cross is not carried away to a world without gravity; he still has the burden of his responsibility to his men as well as the weight of grief and shame from Lavender's death. He decides to do the only thing that he can: repack and shift the weight so that it will be more bearable. After he burns Martha's' letters and photographs he vows "to do what they had always done," but this time with "no more fantasies." In the same way that they often discarded in the field what they no longer needed, Lt. Cross swears to "dispense with love," to put it aside as an unnecessary burden.

When the weight of their burdens, both concrete and psychic, become too much for them, Lt. Cross and the other men take off on imaginative flights. Because real escape is impossible, the only alternative is imagination, and in this story they dream of "freedom birds," of becoming the thing carried instead the grunt. Literally, freedom birds are the planes that take a soldier out of the country, either at the end of his one year tour of duty or to the temporary relief of the hospital or some rest and relaxation. But like the things the men carry, the bird itself is both real and unreal: "it was more than a plane, it was a real bird, a big sleek silver bird with feathers and talons and high screeching." The soldiers dream of having "nothing to bear," of inhabiting "the vast, silent vacuum where there were no burdens and where everything weighed exactly nothing." O'Brien's language specifically invokes the image of putting aside burdens, of weightlessness: "at night, not quite dreaming, they gave themselves over to lightness, they were carried, they were purely borne." Of course, O'Brien also means to suggest that the men dream of being "born" as well, of being delivered and returned to innocence.


Rena Korb

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the physical and emotional weight of the Vietnam War on a group of soldiers.

Tim O'Brien first emerged on the literary scene with his starkly moving portrayals of men involved in the Vietnam War. When his award-winning novel Going After Cacciato was published, John Updike wrote that O'Brien was "reaching for a masterpiece." The Things They Carried, an intense, heart-
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felt, moving experience of the war, published almost a decade later, may well be that masterpiece. At first critics did not know how to view The Things They Carried—as a collection of short stories or a novel? Neither, says O'Brien, who prefers to look at it simply as a work of fiction. In truth, it stands as a unified narrative, made up of chapters that can work on their own, but which, together, provide a deeper meaning and look into the lives and battles of the soldiers. The Things They Carried relates the stories of the men in Alpha Company. It features a narrator, called Tim O'Brien, who has many commonalities with the author Tim, but O'Brien maintains that the story is "all made up."

Along with several other stories that would be incorporated into the book, "The Things They Carried" first appeared as a short story in Esquire. As the opening piece for The Things They Carried, it sets the stage for the narratives that will follow. It does more than introduce the reader to many of the soldiers of Alpha Company and establish their unity, however; it also introduces the reader to the completely unimagined world that is war. In this world anything can get turned around. A gentle man can carry a thumb of an enemy boy-soldier as a talisman or a man can get shot to death in clear sight of all his fellow company.

"The Things They Carried" presents dual narratives: numerous lists of the things, both tangible and intangible, that the soldiers carry with them on their march, intermingled with the guilt felt by Alpha Company's commanding officer, Jimmy Cross, over the death of the soldier Ted Lavender. In many ways, the lists form a framework on which the rest of the narrative hinges, but the two story lines are inextricably linked. Jimmy feels that he has put his love for a college girl back home ahead of his men; as atonement and as prevention, Jimmy must burn her letters and photographs, physical symbols of his destructive love.

Through the burdens carried by Jimmy Cross and the rest of the men, "The Things They Carried" successfully juxtaposes the soldiers' physical reality against their emotional reality. So the things they carry are not limited to the tools of war, such as weapons, jungle boots, and mine detectors, but also to what each man finds to be a personal necessity—dental floss for one man, comic books for another. O'Brien's deliberate prose, here sounding like parts of it could have been lifted from a military report, emphasizes the physical load of the soldier—"P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water." It also puts emphasis on the sheer weight of the soldier's load: the M-16 gas-operated assault rifle that "weighed 7.5 pounds unloaded, 8.2 pounds with its full 20-round magazine"; Mitchell Sanders's PRC-25 radio was "a killer, 26 pounds with its battery"; and Henry Dobbins, a big man and the machine gunner "carried the M-60, which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded." As Steven Kaplan points out, the way in which O'Brien "catalogues the weapons the soldiers carried, down to their weight [makes] them seem important and their protective power real." This is simply an illusion; Lavender, killed by sniper fire, "carried 34 pounds when he was shot," 9 more than the typical load carried by most of the soldiers, as well as more than 20 rounds of ammunition.

At times the men choose to "discard things along the route of the march." The text states that they do this "Purely for comfort," knowing that a resupply chopper would arrive by nightfall, but this action functions symbolically as well. Only by stripping themselves of the physical gear of the war can they achieve a feeling of freedom, however momentary it might be, and catapult themselves out of Vietnam. Truly, the men recognize the delusional nature of their fantasy, for they know that "they would never be at a loss for things to carry." The implication that they will be carrying their experiences once they return also appears here, in the narrator's evocation of "the great American war chest," which includes Fourth of July sparklers, Easter eggs, and the forests of Minnesota.

The weight under which the men struggle cannot be lightened by the discarding of war equip-
ment, for it extends far beyond the physical reminders; hardest of all, they carry "all the emotional baggage of men who might die" and "shameful memories" and the "common secret of cowardice barely restrained." These they carry on the inside. On the outside they are hardened men, tough, able to joke about Lavender’s death. "A pisser, you know?" says Kiowa. "Still zipping himself up. Zapped while zipping." They bitterly deride men who leave the war by shooting off their own toes or fingers, but "even so the image played itself out behind their eyes." Only in their sleep can they truly let down their guard. This night-time fantasy includes what they called a "freedom bird," a big bird that carries them away from Vietnam. Then "the weights fell off; there was nothing to bear"; they no longer carry their weapons or each other, instead "they were carried, they were purely borne." Only in these fantasies can they free themselves of their many burdens; instead of carrying the weight of the war, they are now carried by a creature that is larger, more powerful, and more mystical than themselves.

Because this is only fantasy and the men cannot escape the realities of war, they are forced to carry with them their ideals of home. In Kiowa’s case, this comes in the form of an illustrated New Testament. Jimmy Cross’s ideals of home, fantasies of a girl back home, simply serve as deadly distractions. He carries a "compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45-caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded . . . a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men." Yet, most important to Jimmy Cross are the letters he carries from a college girl named Martha. For Jimmy, Martha represents the world of peace; she is unsullied by the war experience—"she never mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy take care of yourself!"—and unmoved by it—"She wasn’t involved" (either in the war itself, Jimmy’s experience of it, or the relationship between she and Jimmy). Despite her position outside of Vietnam, Martha plays an important role in Cross’s perception of the progression of events played out in the story. After Lavender is shot "on his way back from peeing," Jimmy Cross decides that he is at fault. For just as Lavender was about to be shot, Lieutenant Cross "was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore." In response to Lavender’s death, Jimmy Cross burns Martha’s letters and resolves to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war." Cross will become a real solider; that is the only way to carry the weight of his guilt.

Jimmy Cross concludes that his imagined world has put the lives of his men at risk. "Imagination was a killer," states the text, and here the imagined world and the world of battle are starkly differentiated. Cross’s self-perceived negligence and his guilt provide what Lorrie Smith calls an "inexorable equation: imagination = women = distraction = danger = death." Smith suggests that Cross’s dramatic resolution at the end of story is his recovery of masculine power achieved only through the suppression of the femininity within himself. Because the emotion of love becomes a feminine characteristic in times of war, Cross’s rejection of it requires his embrace of the ultra-masculine. Thus after Lavender’s body has been taken away, "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything." This wanton act of destruction, itself reminiscent of the actual My Lai massacre, exemplifies not the violence of the war but what can happen when the soldiers stray from the masculine sphere and allow themselves to feel.

The reader may disagree with Cross’s conclusion that his fantasies about Martha leads to Lavender’s death. The text merely says that at the time that Lavender was shot, "Lieutenant Cross nodded and closed his eyes" while the other men cracked jokes. The crucial issue here, however, is not the physical realities of the circumstances surrounding one soldier’s death but its emotional implications. Cross sees the events in stark, black-and-white terms: Martha or his men. There is no room for compromise in the world he now inhabits. Only 24 years old and not a risk-taker, as demonstrated by his chaste relationship with Martha, Cross has the safety of his men in his hands, and he cannot juggle two priorities; as the text states, "He was just a kid at war, in love." Cross’s method of symbolic reasoning finds further emphasis in his digging of a foxhole that night and crawling inside, thus repeating the fantasy playing out in his head in the moments before Lavender’s death. There he comes to the realization that Martha "did not love him and never would," a fact obvious to the story’s readers.

With his love for Martha forbidden to him—or at the least, transformed into a "hard, hating kind of love"—Jimmy Cross turns to what can substitute as its closest opposite. He decides to initiate a new start for Alpha Company. Determined to mold both himself and his men into ideal soldiers, he will
demand more discipline of them. He will no longer let them "abandon equipment along the route of march" although he acknowledges that "there would be grumbling . . . because their days would seem longer and their loads heavier." Cross's recognition that the men have lost their soldierly comportment comes at the same time as his recognition that it is his world, not Martha's world, that is real. Cross has allowed his men to carry too much of the world of peace with them, where feelings and emotions do not carry with them the power of death. "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor."

When asked in an interview to choose his favorite story from *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien said that "on most days, or three days out of seven in a week" he would choose "The Things They Carried." O'Brien likes "the cadences of the story, the sounds and rhythms . . . the physical items that form the story's structural backbone . . . the absence of much of a plot in the thing." In many ways, "The Things They Carried" is a pure warstory. It has camaraderie, despair, violence and death, duty, longing and desire. "It was very sad," Jimmy Cross thinks, "the things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do." In the world of Vietnam and the world of "The Things They Carried," there is little room for anything else.


**Lorrie N. Smith**

In the following excerpt, Smith contends that the dramatic resolution of *The Things They Carried* "turns on recovering masculine power by suppressing femininity in both male and female characters," and that female characters in O'Brien's work are often only plot devices.

In both the opening and closing stories of *The Things They Carried*, imagination is linked to an idealized, unattainable woman—Martha, a girlfriend at home, and Linda, a childhood sweetheart who died at nine. The first story plays one of the many variations on the imagination-reality motif and picks up where O'Brien's earlier novel, *Going after Cacciato*, left off, with Paul Berlin imagining himself pleading for peace at the Paris Peace Talks but admitting: "Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits." "The Things They Carried" goes further to limit the imagination, asserting that in battle, "Imagination was a killer." What this means, on one level, is that the nerve-wracking tension in the field could lead soldiers to imagine the worst or make a fatal mistake. But the story also establishes an inexorable equation: imagination = women = distraction = danger = death. The story's dramatic resolution turns on recovering masculine power by suppressing femininity in both female and male characters. Survival itself depends on excluding women from the masculine bond. In this first story, the renunciation of femininity is a sad but necessary cost of war, admitted only after real emotional struggle. It establishes a pattern, however, for the rest of the book.

"The Things They Carried" introduces the cast of Alpha Company and establishes their identity as a cohesive group, each manfully carrying his own weight but also sharing the burden of war. The story features Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the platoon's 24-year-old C.O., who fell into the war via ROTC. He is presented as a man of integrity, honesty, and deep compassion for his men, a cautious, somewhat stiff and unseasoned commander with no inherent lust for death and destruction. The story is fundamentally an initiation narrative whose tension lies in Jimmy Cross's need to deal with guilt and harden himself to battle realities, which are here distinctly differentiated from the realm of imagination. Jimmy Cross's story alternates with lyrical passages cataloguing all the "things" men of war carry, including "all the emotional baggage of men who might die." These passages, echoing O'Brien's earlier constraints of "obligation," insistently repeat the idea that "the things they carried were largely determined by necessity . . . Necessity dictated."

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's survival and his coming of age as an effective soldier depend on letting go of all that is not necessary and immediate—here equated completely with the feminine, the romantic, the imaginary. Becoming a warrior entails a pattern of desire, guilt, and renunciation in relation to a woman. The story opens by describing in detail Jimmy Cross's most precious cargo:

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would
One possibility is that O'Brien means to expose and critique the social construction of masculinity, suggesting that soldiers' behavior in Vietnam is conditioned by years of John Wayne movies, as indeed numerous veterans' memoirs attest is true.

Martha's writing—and, implicitly, her reading of his war experience—are sexualized through association: her inability to respond to his love and his longing suggest the blank page of virginity in patriarchal discourse. Though Jimmy Cross tries to realize a connection with Martha through his sacramental/sexual ritual, she is represented as aloof and untouchable, a poet with 'grey, neutral' eyes inhabiting 'another world, which was not quite real.' Martha's words are never presented directly, but are paraphrased by the narrator, who reminds us twice that she never mentions the war in her letters. Like other women in the book, she represents all those back home who will never understand the warrior's trauma. In addition to the letters, Jimmy Cross carries two pictures of Martha and a good luck charm—a stone Martha sent from the Jersey Shore, which he sometimes carries in his mouth; he also "humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps." As the story progresses, Martha—rather these metonymic objects signifying Martha—becomes a distraction from the immediate work of war and caring for his men. His mind wanders, usually into the realm of sexual fantasy: "Slowly, a bit distracted, he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin." Memory and desire intertwine in a fantasy that fuses courage and virility and, by extension, fighting and writing upon her blank virgin page. In one of the book's several retrospective "should haves," Jimmy Cross remembers a date with Martha and thinks "he should've done something brave. He should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long. He should've risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, the thought of new things he should've done." We are meant to see the move from chivalry to sadomasochistic erotica as natural and understandable, because "He was just a kid at war, in love," after all. That Jimmy Cross's sexual "bravery" might have been earned through violation and coercion is not considered in the story. The focus is on the male's empowering fantasy.

Jimmy Cross's distraction climaxes with the sniper shooting of Ted Lavender "on his way back from peeing." Just before this incident, the company had waited tensely for Lee Strunk to emerge from clearing out a Vietcong tunnel. The language of sexual desire and union, coming just before Lee Strunk's "rising from the dead" and Lavender's death, link Jimmy's imagination of Martha—his merging with the feminine—with annihilation of the self. As he gazes suggestively down into the dark tunnel, he leaves the war and succumbs to a fantasy of perfect union between masculine and feminine, death and desire:

And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. The stresses and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crushing love. Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. He wanted his to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once. He wanted to know her.

Such unraveling of gender duality, however, is dangerous, such paradoxes unsustainable. At the moment of Jimmy's imagined dissolution, Ted Lavender is shot, as if to punish himself for daydreaming and forgetting "about matters of security"—but more deeply for abandoning his men in the desire to know the feminine—Jimmy Cross goes to the extreme of rejecting desire for Martha altogether. He reacts to the trauma of Lavender's death in two significant ways. The first is one of the book's parallel scenes of My Lai-like retribution, here bluntly told but not shown: "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything." The second is guilt,
entangled with anger that his love for Martha is unrequited. He reverts to a familiar binary choice—either Martha or his men: "He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry, like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war"—his good luck charm transformed to the weight of guilt. That night he cries "for Ted Lavender" but also for the realization, or perhaps rationalization, that "Martha did not love him and never would." Jimmy Cross regains a "mask of composure" necessary to survive war's horror, burns Martha’s letters and photographs in a purgative ritual reversing the opening blessing, and wills himself to renounce Martha and all she signifies: "He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love." With this rejection and a newly hardened, terse idiom, Jimmy Cross completes his transformation: "He was a soldier, after all.... He was realistic about it.... He would be a man about it.... No more fantasies.... from this point on he would comport himself as an officer.... he would dispense with love; it was not now a factor." His survival as a soldier and a leader depends upon absolute separation from the feminine world and rejection of his own femininity: "Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the day-dreams. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity."

How are we meant to read this rejection? O'Brien is not blaming Martha for male suffering, for of course, the story isn’t about Martha at all, though she introduces the book’s prototypical figure of the woman incapable of understanding war. Rather, he uses her to define "necessary" codes of male behavior in war and to establish Jimmy’s "proper" bond with his men. We are given no rationale for why Jimmy perceives his choice in such absolute terms, nor are we invited to critique Jimmy for this rigidity, though we do pity him and recognize his naiveté. Jimmy Cross’s rejection of the feminine is portrayed as one of the burdensome but self-evident "necessities" of war, and O’Brien grants Jimmy this recognition: "It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do." Most sad and ironic of all, Jimmy ends up suffering alone because of his status as an officer: "He would show strength, distancing himself." Jimmy Cross’s allegorical initials even encourage us to read his youthful renunciation in Christian terms.

At the very end, however, masculine bonds prevail and compensate for Jimmy’s losses. O’Brien places the men of Alpha Company in a larger cultural landscape of men without women by alluding to cowboy movies and Huckleberry Finn: "He might just shrug and say, carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward villages west of Than Khe." The narrative voice here is very carefully distinguished from the characters, and it is hard to know how to take the conditional "might" and the self-conscious fiction: as parody? as straight allusion? as Jimmy Cross’s self-deluding macho fantasy? One possibility is that O’Brien means to expose and critique the social construction of masculinity, suggesting that soldiers’ behavior in Vietnam is conditioned by years of John Wayne movies, as indeed numerous veterans’ memoirs attest is true. Likewise, the story unmasks the soldiers’ macho "stage presence," "pose," and "hard vocabulary": "Men killed and died, because they were embarrassed not to"; they do what they "felt they had to do." But these constructions are inevitably converted into behavior that seems natural and inevitable—"necessary"—within the ur-story underlying all war stories: the tragic destruction of male innocence. O’Brien’s depth as a writer allows him to reveal the socialized nature of soldiering and to show compassion for the vulnerable men behind the pose. But he stops short of undoing and revising these constructions. In the end, men are how they act, just as they are their stories and culture is its myths. The story rescues the humanity of men at war and consigns femininity to the margins, thus assuring the seamless continuity and endless repetition of masculine war stories.

Because Tim O’Brien’s characters live so fully for him he is impelled to follow up the story of Jimmy Cross and Martha with a vignette, "Love." Like George Willard, the lonely but ever-receptive narrator of Winesburg, Ohio, O’Brien portrays himself as the burdened repository of other people’s stories. Here Jimmy Cross comes to visit character-narrator Tim O’Brien "many years after the war" to talk about "all the things we still carried through our lives." One thing that Jimmy Cross still carries is a torch for Martha, and he shows the narrator a copy of the same photograph he had burned after Ted Lavender’s death. The story embedded in the story concerns his meeting with Martha at a college reunion. Now a Lutheran missionary nurse serving in Third World countries, she responds to Jimmy
with the same friendly but aloof demeanor that marked her letters during the war. She gives him another copy of the photo to gaze at and reveals "she had never married . . . and probably never would. She didn’t know why. But as she said this, her eyes seemed to slide sideways, and it occurred to him that there were things about her he would never know." Despite her continuing inscrutability and distance, Jimmy risks telling Martha that "he’d almost done something brave" back in college, and he describes his knee-stroking fantasy. Martha’s ambivalent reaction widens the gulf between men and women and hints, with Hemingway-like ellipses, that she is either repressed, fearful, uninterested, or a lesbian; in any case, she is unreceptive to Jimmy’s advances, which absolves him from any failings or flaws as a masculine sexual being:

Martha shut her eyes. She crossed her arms at her chest, as if suddenly cold, rocking slightly, then after a time she looked at him and said she was glad he hadn’t tried it. She didn’t understand how men could do those things. What things? he asked, and Martha said, the things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things. At breakfast the next morning she told him she was sorry. She explained that there was nothing she could do about it, and he said he understood, and then she laughed and gave him the picture and told him not to burn this one up.

What are "the things men do?" In the context of this pair of stories, these things are both sexual and violent. Jimmy passes this story on the narrator, joking that "maybe she’ll read it and come begging." But he leaves more concerned about the reader’s response than Martha’s, with a plea that Tim depict him positively, as if he still hadn't exorcised his guilt over Lavender’s death. "‘Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.’ He hesitated for a second. ‘And do me a favor, don’t mention anything about— ‘ ‘No,’ I said, I won’t.’” O’Brien teases us with an indeterminate ending; if he is true to his word, then he hasn’t revealed “anything about—” Jimmy’s secret, and we are left wondering. If the writer has, in fact, betrayed Jimmy in the course of the retelling, we cannot be sure what it is we were not meant to know and why Jimmy wants to suppress it. In either case, the men wordlessly understand each other, and the reader is an outsider. Like Jake Barnes hungering impotently after Lady Brett, Jimmy continues to suffer from Martha’s unattainability. As in the previous story, we are allowed to glimpse the gap between the mask and the face, the wounded man behind the masculine pose. But Martha is barely more than a plot device signifying Jimmy’s life of virility and innocence destroyed by the war.


Sources


Further Reading


This brief but comprehensive book is divided into clear sections that can be read separately and contains an extensive and invaluable bibliographic essay.


A useful overview of O’Brien’s career. Includes biographical information.