Tim O’Brien has made a career of weaving his personal experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam War into fictional accounts of that war. Among his many writings on the subject is the short story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (first published in Esquire in July 1989), which appears in his 1990 collection, The Things They Carried. The book includes twenty-two short stories, all tied together by the characters and events of Alpha Company. Together, they tell a bigger story about the men who served in the company and how some of them adjust to life back home. The narrator is a character named Tim O’Brien who happens to be a Vietnam War veteran and an author. O’Brien is known for his intentional blurring of the lines between memoir and fiction, so the reader can assume that the narrator O’Brien is not exactly the same person as the author O’Brien.

In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” it is this narrator who introduces the story and gives the reader some context about Rat Kiley, who will tell the chilling story of Mary Anne. She is the girlfriend of a medic who flies her into the medical detachment where he is stationed. She is sweet and all-American, but within a short period of time she begins to change. This transformation goes much further than anyone could have predicted, until she has become a primal creature, with no trace of her former humanity. “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” moves back and forth between the story Kiley tells and the...
discussions Kiley has with one of the other men to whom he is telling the story. O’Brien explores complicated themes of storytelling, loss of innocence, and the mental ravages of war. It is a disturbing story, but it is also intended to be a cautionary tale.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

William Timothy O’Brien Jr. was born in Austin, Minnesota, on October 1, 1946, to an insurance salesman and an elementary school teacher who met in the navy during World War II. O’Brien is the eldest of three children. The O’Brien family settled in a typical 1950s small town, Worthington, Minnesota. O’Brien loved to read and do magic tricks.

As a “baby boomer” (a man or woman of the generation born right after World War II), O’Brien’s teenage and early adult years were influenced by the activism and youth culture of the 1960s. O’Brien attended Macalester College, where he studied government and politics. He was a serious student who became an opponent of the Vietnam War. While working on Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 presidential campaign, O’Brien set his sights on working in the State Department someday. He was such an outstanding student that when he graduated, he was admitted to a doctoral program at Harvard, where he planned to study political science. However, a few weeks after graduating from Macalester, he received his draft notice for military service.

That summer, O’Brien worked in a meatpacking plant while privately expressing in writing his fears and anger about his forced participation in the war. As much as he hated the fact that he was going to have to fight in a war he opposed, he could not consider escaping by running to Canada. Added pressure came from his patriotic small-town community and his parents, who had been in the navy.

On August 14, 1968, O’Brien reported for duty in the army and went to Fort Lewis, Washington, for basic training. After his individual training, he started his thirteen-month tour in Vietnam (1969–1970). There, he served with the Alpha Company, Fifth Battalion of the Forty-sixth Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division. He was a foot soldier who worked as a rifleman and also as a telephone operator. He received a Purple Heart for being wounded twice, and he advanced to the rank of sergeant.

In March 1970, O’Brien returned home with plans to resume graduate school. He studied at Harvard for five years but did not complete his dissertation. After a short stint in 1974 with the Washington Post covering national affairs, O’Brien realized he wanted to pursue writing fiction. His books explore the complexities of war as he draws from his own experiences and insights. He uses his own life extensively in his work, but he intentionally blurs the line between fiction autobiography and war memoir.

After completing three books, O’Brien published “The Things They Carried” in Esquire magazine in 1987. It caught the attention of a lot of readers and critics and earned awards and honors. He took that short story and combined it with others to create The Things They Carried (1990), in which “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” appears. Again, O’Brien found himself receiving numerous honors and awards, including having

Tim O’Brien (© Peter Power / Getty)
the novel selected as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. O’Brien has continued writing since then, publishing two more novels to date. He lives in central Texas and is married with two sons.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator begins by telling the reader that the Vietnam War has generated a lot of wild stories, and this is one that he never forgets. It was told by the medic Rat Kiley, a man known for his extravagant embellishments of stories. Several times, however, the narrator emphasizes that this was a story from which Kiley never wavered. He insisted that it was true. He claimed to be an eyewitness to it and actually became upset when one of the other men did not believe it.

Before being assigned to Alpha Company, Kiley was sent to a small medical detachment in the mountains near the village of Tra Bong and a river called the Song Tra Bong. He and eight other men worked at an aid station for emergency cases that were flown in by helicopter. They would treat patients and stabilize them enough to go to a hospital. Kiley liked it because they were not on the move, carrying everything around all the time, and there were no officers. Security was very minimal. It had originally been a Special Forces outpost, and when Kiley got there, a squad of six Green Berets still had their base of operations there. They had their own supplies and kept to themselves most of the time. Kiley said that sometimes they would disappear for days or weeks at a time before mysteriously reappearing in the night.

Kiley said that the base felt safe, despite being in a war zone. They were exposed, but they never took any fire, and the war felt as if it was at a safe distance. Except for occasional flurries of activity when a helicopter arrived, the men spent their days resting and playing games. During a late-night drinking session, Eddie Diamond (the drug-addicted highest-ranking man of the detachment) made a joke about pooling their money to bring some women in from Saigon. They continued to talk about how easy it would be to do, but nobody was serious about it. One medic, Mark Fossie, however, kept bringing up the subject. He claimed that if you were bold enough, it really would not be that difficult to do. He left to write a letter, and six weeks later, his girlfriend arrived in a helicopter with a shipment of supplies. Kiley described her as a tall blonde with long legs, wide shoulders, blue eyes, and a creamy complexion. Fossie greeted her and introduced her to the other men before taking her to put away her luggage. That night, Fossie explained the logistics of how he did it.

Fossie and Mary Anne had been sweethearts for many years and always knew they would get married and live out the American dream. They were in love and full of hope for their future. Kiley said that under ordinary circumstances, that is likely what would have happened. For the next two weeks, the couple was always together, laughing and holding hands. The other men were envious because Mary Anne was a pretty, friendly girl who liked to have fun.

Mary Anne was very interested in everything about military life and the country that surrounded them. She asked a lot of questions and listened intently as the men answered about weapons, the mountains, how to cook over a Sterno and anything else relevant to their unique situation. She even started to learn a little bit of Vietnamese. When she persuaded Fossie to take her into the village so she could see how the people lived, she delighted in it and seemed wholly oblivious of the danger around her. On the way back, she swam in the river despite warnings about snipers. The men were impressed with her nerve even as they called her naive. When someone suggested that she would learn, Diamond said ominously, “There’s the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn.”

The narrator says that even though there were parts of the story that were funny, Kiley would just wait for the listeners to finish laughing. There was always something troubling him when
he told it. He reminded his listeners that Mary Anne was not dumb when she came to Vietnam; she was just young and innocent, just as they were when they came to Vietnam. And like the soldiers, she learned quickly when she got there.

As Mary Anne continued to immerse herself in life at the outpost, she started helping with bloody surgeries, and Fossie was amazed and proud of her composure and intelligence. Still, he was not sure what to think about the changes he was seeing in her. Within a short period of time, she was no longer worried about keeping herself pretty, but she was very interested in using and disassembling an M16. When Fossie suggested it was time to think about going home, she responded that she had everything she wanted right there. Fossie noticed that her demeanor had changed and that where she once was bubbly, she had become brooding and dark.

Mary Anne started to come in later at night, and then she did not come home at all. Fossie was convinced that she was sleeping with someone else, and he enlisted Kiley's help in finding her. After an exhaustive search of the bunks, the mess hall, and the entire perimeter, Kiley became extremely concerned that Mary Anne was nowhere to be found. As it turned out, Mary Anne was out on an ambush with the Green Berets.

Upon her return, Mary Anne was in full fatigue, with blackened face, and carrying an M16. She told Fossie she did not want to talk about it, but he insisted. Kiley said that the men never knew exactly what was said, but when Mary Anne showed up in the mess hall for dinner, she had fixed herself up to look as she had looked when she first arrived. She was also very quiet and careful not to do what Fossie did not want her to do. Fossie told Kiley that they had made compromises and were officially engaged. Over the next few weeks, they behaved like a couple in love, but they were both obviously tense and cautious. On the third week, Fossie started making arrangements for her to go back home, and she became very solemn and withdrawn. Then one morning, she and the Green Berets were gone. Fossie was devastated.

By chance, Kiley saw the group return late at night three weeks later. Mary Anne did not, however, go to Fossie's bunker. She continued on to the Green Berets' housing. Kiley recalled how she did not look like the same person anymore.

After hearing that Mary Anne had returned, Fossie waited all day outside the Green Berets' area. Kiley brought him something to eat and cautioned him against being too pushy with the Green Berets. After midnight, Kiley and Diamond went back to check on Fossie. They heard strange music coming from the dark, and there was a woman's voice singing or chanting along with it. Diamond tried to convince Fossie that it was a radio, but Fossie insisted that it was Mary Anne. Finally, Fossie forced himself into the one hut that had a light. Kiley and Diamond followed him.

The scene inside the hut was bizarre and assaulted the senses. There were candles, tribal music coming from a tape deck, Mary Anne's high chanting, incense, and another smell like death that was overpowering and unsettling. On a post was a decaying black leopard head; above were strips of animal skin hanging from the rafters; and there were piles of bones. Fossie called to Mary Anne, and she appeared barefoot, wearing a pink and white outfit. As she stared at Fossie, he realized that even though she looked peaceful, her eyes had gone flat and emotionless. She wore a necklace made of human tongues laced together on copper wire. She told Fossie that she knew he thought it was bad, but it was not, and he did not belong there. She then blankly explained to him that she had an insatiable appetite for the place and being out in it at night. She felt that only there could she really feel like herself. Kiley took Fossie back outside, and Fossie said he could not just leave her there. Kiley told Fossie that it was too late because she was already gone.

Sanders asked what happened next because Kiley paused at this point in the story. Kiley shrugged and said that it was hard to say what happened to her. He flew out to join Alpha Company a few days later, and that was the last he ever heard or saw of the place. Sanders became angry because Kiley was not following the rules of storytelling; Kiley was telling a story without an ending. Kiley reminded him that up to this point, everything in his story was firsthand, so the rest was just what he heard from others.

Kiley said that he heard from Diamond that Mary Anne continued with the Green Berets, especially liking night patrol. She was skilled and could move silently wherever she pleased. Over time, she stopped wearing shoes and then stopped carrying her weapon. She took risks that even the Green Berets thought were too much. When they were under fire, she just smiled as she watched rounds go by her. Sometimes, she disappeared on her own for hours or days. One morning, she
left for the mountains and never returned, and no sign of her was ever found. A search was made, but the military failed to find any clues at all. According to the Green Berets, she was still out there somewhere. They felt watched sometimes when they were out in the jungles. The story ends with the statement that she had become part of the land, wearing her culottes, sweater, and tongue necklace. The narrator states that she was dangerous and ready for the kill.

Fossie clearly loves Mary Anne and is desperate to save her from what the war is doing to her. He reluctantly realizes, however, that his best efforts cannot change anything, and he is devastated. He knows he has lost her for good.

**Rat Kiley**

Rat Kiley is the medic of Alpha Company. He is prone to telling wildly embellished stories, to the point that the other men know to believe about a quarter of what he says in his stories. Still, with this story, he steadfastly maintains that it is absolutely true and that he saw it with his own eyes. He has an emotional attachment to the story and especially to the character Mary Anne. He clearly feels sorrow about what happened to her, but he defends her as being a sort of victim of the war.

Kiley is very defensive when Sanders challenges him on anything. He stands by his statements about the veracity of the story, and he does not change the way he tells the story just because Sanders objects. When he finishes all of the story he personally witnessed, he makes it clear that everything else in the story is second-hand and, therefore, less reliable.

**Narrator**

The narrator, Tim O’Brien, is a member of Alpha Company and records Rat Kiley’s story, but not without adding his own introductory statements about the questionable reliability of Kiley’s storytelling. Beyond that, the narrator interjects nothing but his observations about the interactions between Kiley and Sanders. He does not make any judgments about the story or its characters, and he does not advance any themes.

**Mitchell Sanders**

Mitchell Sanders is one of the men in Alpha Company with Rat Kiley and the narrator. He rejects the premise of the story, that a soldier could fly his girlfriend into Vietnam in the first place. When Kiley gets upset, swearing it is true, Sanders simply crosses his arms and gives the narrator an amused look.

Sanders also challenges Kiley’s storytelling periodically as Kiley tells it. He chastises Kiley for interrupting the story with commentary, and he gets very angry when Kiley attempts to finish the story without providing an ending. Sanders’ role in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is to act as a foil to Kiley, while keeping the subject of storytelling alive. The art of storytelling frames
the content of the story itself, and Sanders is the one who makes that happen.

**THEMES**

**Wars**

Taking place during the Vietnam War, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” offers a vivid setting for the events of the story. O’Brien introduces the reader to life in a medical detachment, where the gut-wrenching work of field surgeons is described alongside descriptions of their lengthy periods of rest between patients. The presence of the Green Berets shows the separateness of Special Forces from regular troops. They are independent, cocky, and closed off to the other men. The dangers of being in a foreign country at war are depicted in Mary Anne’s insistence on going to the village to see how the people live, and in swimming in the river despite the danger of snipers.

**TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

- From its muddled beginning, the Vietnam War was a complex and layered war and one that met with consistent opposition in virtually every public forum. Research the war, looking to compile as objective a history as possible that includes a time line, major events, and differing points of view. Using Adobe Voice, create a video complete with visuals, such as photographs and headlines.
- The Vietnam War was the subject of much debate, songwriting, protest, impassioned defense, and flag waving. It was a dominant subject in the public square. Imagine if social media had been available at the time. Choose a Twitter handle and write at least twenty tweets you might have sent out at the time. It may help to listen to popular music of the time, read speeches, or watch video interviews to help you develop your voice.
- The cost of any war includes such factors as lives, money, and patriotic unity. Research some of the measurable costs of the Vietnam War and consider the outcomes of the war. Write an article for a special edition of a magazine remembering the war, and make a case for why the war was or was not worth the cost.
- Read back through “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and look for references to speech, tongues, words, and language. What point do you think O’Brien is making? Write a poem about the insight you gain.
- It is important to remember that the people of Vietnam during the war were going through their own experiences. Take on the persona of one of them (for example, a Viet Cong soldier, a Vietnamese farmer, or a spy), and write a one-week diary.
- Go back and read the descriptions of the country and its landscape. Using paint, chalk, pencils, or any other flat medium, create a piece of artwork showing Vietnam as Rat Kiley describes it.
- In her wildly popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, author Suzanne Collins offers an extraordinary heroine in Katniss Everdeen. Katniss is forced into an unimaginable situation in which she must use her giftedness as an archer, her survival instinct, and her sharp mind to survive and stand up for what is right. However, brutal situations require brutality to survive, and Katniss finds herself doing things that are not in her nature. Read at least the first book of the trilogy and compare Katniss to Mary Anne. In what ways are the two young women similar, and in what ways are they different? How do you account for their differences? Prepare a speech for teenage girls that inspires them to be more like Katniss in unpredictable situations and warns them against losing their moral center, as does Mary Anne.
Most of all, the story portrays the many ways war changes people and their aspirations. Mary Anne goes from an all-American teenager to a primal killer who has no place in society. Eddie Diamond becomes a drug addict. The Green Berets are all-business, lacking warmth or compassion. Fossie desperately clings to his childhood hopes and dreams but has his heart broken by what becomes of the woman he loves. Nobody leaves the war the same as they came into it.

**Storytelling**
Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien explores the interrelatedness of fiction and non-fiction. He also explores memory and remembrance. All of this is tied together in the theme of storytelling that is dominant across the twenty-two stories that make up the book, including this story, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” The story opens with a profound statement about the stories of the Vietnam War:

> Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane. This one keeps returning to me.

This opening lets the reader know that what will follow will be an incredible story with elements that may be hard to believe. When the narrator says that the story came from Rat Kiley, a man whose stories could only minimally be believed, he is letting us know that the process of telling a story is central to the story itself. The reader is put on alert that not everything in the story is reliable because Kiley intentionally embellished to make stories bigger. However, the narrator adds that this is a story on which Kiley stood steadfast.

Later in the story, Sanders guesses that Mary Anne was with the Green Berets when she went missing. His reasoning is that the Green Berets were mentioned, so they had to be part of the story because that is how stories work. He also criticizes Kiley for interrupting the story with his own commentary because it “breaks the spell. It destroys the magic.” He adds, “What you have to do . . . is trust your own story.” He also claims that it interferes with the story’s tone,
Innocence
The horror of the story is how the war transforms an all-American innocent into a brutal killer who seems to revert to a primal state. Mary Anne is not the only one who is affected by the war this way. The story is never meant to suggest that what happens to her is isolated. Although her story is darker and more intense, becoming harsher and colder is typical of the soldiers’ experience. Other stories in the collection bear this out, but O’Brien makes the point clear within “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” Kiley tells his listeners that Mary Anne was not dumb when she first arrived, and he never intended to portray her that way. He reminds them that she was just young and innocent, like all of them, and that she learned quickly, just as they did. He seems adamant that they not think of Mary Anne as being completely different from themselves.

When Kiley is telling the ending of the story he heard from Diamond, he says that what happened to Mary Anne was the same thing that happened to all of them. It is just a matter of degree, he says. They come to the war innocent, clean, and pure, and they leave changed. They become tainted, cynical, and dark. For Mary Anne, he speculates that the combination of unknown terror and unknown pleasure was irresistible. It took her to places and situations and a mindset that she never could have predicted for herself.

STYLE

Verisimilitude
Verisimilitude is the appearance of truth and realism in a work. It is at the heart of O’Brien’s mixture of fiction and nonfiction. He uses nonfictional details, for example, to bring verisimilitude to fictional accounts. In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” this is the ironic reason the narrator gives for Kiley’s wild embellishments of his stories. He says that Kiley “wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt.”

O’Brien incorporates a lot of realistic detail in the story and is so effective at developing characters (even those with minor roles) that the story has a very realistic feel. Details about the landscape and daily life in the detachment make the reader feel what it must have been like to be there. Even scenes as unfamiliar to the reader as the visit to Tra Bong have enough detail to make the strange setting accessible. The dramatic transformation of Mary Anne is portrayed so methodically that her gradual descent into madness does not seem sudden, yet it is disturbing as each step gets progressively darker.

Story within a Story
“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is not just the story of Fossie and Mary Anne. The narrator sets it up as the telling of the story by Kiley. The effect is that there is the narrative of Kiley telling the story, and there is the narrative of the story itself. The narration goes back and forth, reminding the reader that Kiley’s role is an important one. The debates between Kiley and Sanders are significant, and the narrator intends for the reader to be just as pulled into the action going on there as he is into the action going on in the story of Mary Anne.

Imagery
O’Brien draws on quite a bit of sense imagery to bring the reader deeper into the story. He paints a verbal picture of the landscape, describes what it looks and feels like to do battlefield surgery, and includes the fog and weather in eerie nighttime scenes. The pink-and-white outfit Mary Anne wears when she arrives at the outpost is a very different picture from the dark green fatigues and black face paint she wears when she goes out with the Green Berets. Most notably, he brings sight, sound, and smell into his description of Mary Anne in the hutch toward the end of the story. It makes the reader feel that his own senses are being assaulted as he takes in the horror of the whole scene.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Vietnam War
The history of the Vietnam War is long and complicated, but it had its origins around the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. The Cold War’s main players were the United States and the Soviet Union, and the division was ideological in nature; it was over democracy versus communism. The possibility of communism’s spread was considered quite threatening by the United States. Consequently, when France’s colonial holdings in Vietnam led to the French Indochina War, America stepped in to help the French. Vietnam’s position, although it was not major in global politics,
represented to many the first domino that could fall, leading to the establishment of communism in Asia. Ultimately, France could not win its war, so America took over, trying to crush the spread of communism.

A turning point came in August 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin incident that led Congress to grant President Lyndon B. Johnson authority to use military force in Vietnam. Motivated by the urgent need to stop communism from gaining a stronghold in Asia, the United States took action. There are volumes written about the Vietnam War, and there is a great deal of controversy in many areas. However, most authors and commentators agree that a huge problem with waging war in Vietnam was the absence of an exit strategy.

The Vietnam War was a defining issue of its generation. Debates, writings, songs, and protests of all kinds were impassioned. Those who supported the war regarded themselves as patriotic, but so did the war’s opponents. The reasons for the war, the events of the war, the casualties of the war, and government secrecy all helped to create a deep tension in the country. During the war, there was a draft in place, meaning that young men of eligible age were required to register with the Selective Service and could be drafted into military service. As a result, many young men were shipped off to fight whether or not they liked it, which only made resentment worse.

The war officially ended in January 1973, and it took two years to remove American resources from Vietnam. Considering that most

**COMPARE & CONTRAST**

- **1969:** Americans are sharply divided over the Vietnam War and whether or not America should be fighting the war at all. Selective Service requires young men to register for possible draft duty, which is very unpopular with opponents of the war. Between 1965 and 1973, 1,728,344 young men are drafted into military service to fight the war.

- **1990:** In August 1990, the United States leads thirty other nations to defend Kuwait against Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi invasion, an initiative called Operation Desert Shield. By January 1991, the situation escalates, thus launching Operation Desert Storm. Public opinion is largely in favor of this military move. Since the draft was abolished in 1973, the American forces are all volunteers.

- **Today:** Americans are divided over America’s military presence in the Middle East and what should be done to pursue peace in that part of the world. After being in Afghanistan for over a decade and Iraq for almost a decade, American troops recently started returning home for good. There is still no draft.

- **1969:** Most Americans see the spread of communism as a serious ideological threat that should be contained globally.

- **1990:** Emerging from the relative security and comfort of the 1980s, America is not faced with any particular ideological threat.

- **Today:** Many Americans see radical Islam as a serious ideological threat that must be contained in the Middle East and around the world.

- **1969:** During the Vietnam War, the role of women in the military is limited to nursing, clerical, intelligence, and transportation work. Women do not fight in combat roles.

- **1990:** The role of women in military operations has expanded to include roles like flying aircraft and refueling planes. A total of forty-one thousand women are deployed during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

- **Today:** As of 2013, the ban on women serving in combat roles is lifted.
historians put the start of the war in 1954, it is little wonder that a twenty-year war would take a toll on the nation.

**Period of Confession and Postmodernism in American Literature**

The period of confession and postmodernism in American literature began in 1960 and lasted until 1989. “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” was first published in a magazine in 1989 and then in *The Things They Carried* in 1990. Besides the time line placing the work in this literary period, the characteristics of the period are relevant to O’Brien and his work. The period of confession and postmodernism embodied the cynicism and rebellion of the 1960s and saw many American authors become more introspective and philosophical. Writers sought meaning more within themselves than in society or politics. As American moved into the 1970s and survived an energy crisis and the ongoing civil rights struggle, people questioned the systems and leaders making the decisions. Cynicism toward capitalism deepened as the 1980s brought in the “yuppie” generation and the mantra “Greed is good.”

Among the dominant novelists of the time were William Styron, Saul Bellow, John Updike, and Norman Mailer. Other fiction writers, such as Thomas Pynchon, produced work that found freedom in experimentation. That spirit of throwing off the rules and embracing imagination and possibility was typical of the youth culture of the time. O’Brien’s unique point of view as an author is anchored in the violence and unrest of the Vietnam War era, and his voice is one that tells stories the way he wants to tell them. Rules of storytelling are not as important to him as the results of the storytelling. His content, style, and purposes put him right at home among the writers of this period.

**CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

Critical reception of O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* has been overwhelmingly positive; critics have found the book to be an important addition to Vietnam War literature and war literature in general. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Robert R. Harris places the book “high up on the list of best fiction about any war.” Harris explains that O’Brien “not only crystallizes the Vietnam experience for us, he exposes the nature of all war stories.” He calls the collection “a stunning performance” and says that “the overall effect of these original tales is devastating.” D. J. R. Bruckner of the *New York Times* is also drawn to the storytelling importance of O’Brien’s collection, as he notes: “For Mr. O’Brien the stories are larger than the war, and considerably more important,” adding that they are “at least as much about storytelling as about men at war.” In *Harper’s Magazine*, reviewer Vince Passaro connects this storytelling with memory. He writes, “In *The Things They Carried*,” O’Brien plays with the embattled terrain of a soldier’s memory, with his embellishments of memories in conscious reconstructions—stories told, then corrected—to startling and intriguing effects in narrative and language.”

In her list of books she recommends most often, Jennifer Epolito of *Bookmarks* includes *The Things They Carried* because it is a “magnificent tale or loss, grief, guilt, and love.” Sybil Steinberg of *Publishers Weekly* describes the book as “beautifully honest,” and she concludes that the stories “are rooted in a need to rekindle an innocence—of buddies, of victims, of himself—snuffed out by war and history.” Richard Eder of *Los Angeles Times Book Review* takes a longer view of *The Things They Carried*, commenting, “But the best
of these stories—and none is written with less than the sharp edge of a honed vision—are memory as prophecy. They tell us not where we were but where we are; and perhaps where we will be.” He goes on to end his review, “It is an ultimate, indelible image of war in our time, and in time to come.”

Many critics have taken special note of “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” as an exceptional story in an excellent collection. In Contemporary Literature, Tina Chen deems the story “one of the most powerful . . . in the collection.” Chen takes a special interest in Mary Anne as a character study, noting, “Mary Anne becomes other than Mary Anne, turning instead into some new, unidentifiable entity who simultaneously registers displacement and substitution through her physical transubstantiation into the imaginative landscape of Vietnam.” She adds, “It becomes impossible to distinguish between Mary Anne and Vietnam. As woman and land merge, their fusion complicates easy categorical distinctions. Both are alive with possibilities and imbued with the capacity to signify beyond themselves.”

The story has garnered special attention for its depiction of gender roles and the implications of O’Brien’s handling of them. For example, Lorrie N. Smith of Critique described “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” as “an elaborately far-fetched ‘what-if,’” saying that “the story unsettles and stretches our ability to suspend disbelief precisely because it is calculated to overturn gender roles.” Smith also makes note of how Mary Anne’s increased autonomy and transformation effectively rob her boyfriend of his initiation into manhood. In Massachusetts Review, critic Pamela Smiley asks, “Are women less warlike than men because they have breasts and give birth? Mary Anne is O’Brien’s argument that the kinder, gentler world of the feminine is nothing but an illusion.” She takes it a step further and asserts, “Mary Anne illustrates not just the release the war brings, but also how women (and this is gender-specific) are ‘freed’ when they travel outside of their culture and its definitions of what it means to be a woman.”

O’Brien is intentional in making sure that the story is not meant to judge her for her transformation but to show a little understanding and even compassion for her.”

Jennifer Bussey

Bussey is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she examines the short story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” in light of how author O’Brien uses contrast not to designate “other,” but rather to show difference and possibility.

“The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is one of twenty-two short, interrelated stories that make up O’Brien’s The Things They Carried. The book is about the men of Alpha Company, a platoon of young men serving in the Vietnam War. “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is a complex and chilling story, and O’Brien demonstrates great skill in his telling of it. His use of contrast in the story is subtle, but very effective. Through contrast, O’Brien shows the differences among groups of men in the army and between the Americans and the Vietnamese and, most important, the changes that overcome a single person. A basic rule of fiction writing is to show, not tell. O’Brien uses contrast to show the reader how people are different and why those differences matter. The contrasts are not meant to portray an “us” and a “them” or a “we” and a “she,” but instead portray the contrasts and capacity for change within each of us. These differences, whether between groups of people or within a person, destroy unity and continuity.

The first major contrast in the story is between the Green Berets and the medical team stationed to the detachment. Even though they are
living together, they are not really living as a
community. The medics are there because they
have been sent there to tend to emergency cases
coming in by helicopter. They live a pretty relax-
ing, undisciplined life most of the time. When a
helicopter arrives, there is a flurry of activity while
they give critical care to wounded men from the
field. Most of their surgeries are amputations, but
all of the surgeries are urgent and bloody. Once
their patients are stabilized enough for travel, they
are sent to a proper hospital. Then the men return
to their leisure. The highest-ranking man among

**WHAT DO I READ NEXT?**

- Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is
  the story of a sailor named Marlow, who tells
  a haunting story of his journey into the Afri-
can continent. What he sees is disturbing and
devastating, but he is fascinated by a man
named Kurtz who has somehow ascended to
power over the natives. What Marlow discov-
ers challenges everything he believes
about human nature and civilization.

- Joseph Heller’s 1961 classic, *Catch-22*, is a
  satire featuring bombardier Yossarian, who
  is bent on getting relieved of his wartime duty.
  He is constantly frustrated by the changing
  requirements of his position and by the non-
sensical insanity standard for dismissal. *Catch-22*
  is among the best war fiction for its irreverent tone, memorable protagonist, and
  treatment of the theme of madness in war.

- *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in
  Iraq* (2007), by Kirsten Holmstedt, addresses
  the often overlooked but very real stories of
  women in combat. Comprising various real-
  life tales of women serving in Iraq, the sto-
  ries’ content ranges from frontline battles to
  personal ones, including the experiences of
  the first African American female pilot, a
  nurse, a gunner, and others.

- Robert McMahon’s *Major Problems in the
  History of the Vietnam War* (1990) is a col-
  lection of multiple primary sources and scholar-
  ly essays covering the issues and dividing
  points of what is widely regarded as the most
  controversial war in America’s history.

- Written by a former North Vietnamese sol-
dier, *The Sorrow of War* (1990, published in
  English in 1994), by Bao Ninh, opens just
  after the Vietnam War. The main character,
  Kien, is a soldier who is helping with the job
  of recovering corpses, and his return to battle-
grounds forces him to face his painful memo-
rries. The book is known for its disjointed
structure as Kien’s thoughts and feelings go
back and forth from the past to the present to
the more distant past and back to the present.
The overall effect is a sense of the chaos of
war on a person’s psyche, and the story offers
a perspective most Americans miss.

- O’Brien’s *Going after Cacciato* (1978) won
  the 1979 National Book Award. It tells the
  intriguing story of a young soldier who
  leaves his post in Indochina and journeys
to Paris for the peace talks, but it is told
  from the perspective of one of the members
  of his squad as they search for him. The
  story is a strange mix of realism and some-
thing akin to surrealism. It is a favorite of
  readers of war fiction because of its
  unusual story and its treatment of typical
  war themes like fear and heroism.

- Harry Mazer’s and Peter Lerangis’s 2012
  *Somebody, Please Tell Me Who I Am* is about
  Ben, a popular senior in high school who
  decides to enlist instead of going to college.
  When his convoy is attacked, Ben suffers a
  brain injury that puts him in a coma. When he
  comes out of it, he suffers amnesia and has to
  find the inner strength to struggle and perse-
  vere through a situation more difficult than he
  imagined.
them, Eddie Diamond, is a heavy drug user who places no priority on bringing much military discipline to the medical team.

In contrast, the Green Berets seem to be at the outpost not so much because they have been sent there but because they never left. Before the detachment became a field emergency room, it had been a Green Beret station. The Green Berets live in their own area, have their own supplies, keep to themselves, and are on constant watch. Like the medical team, they have flurries of activity, but they are carefully planned and carried out in secret. O’Brien does not even give them names, even though there are only six of them. They are such a secretive group, and so unified, that they function as a single character in the story, whereas the men in the medical team have distinct personalities. The only character in the story who moves easily between the two groups is Mary Anne, and she eventually folds herself into the Green Beret group before disappearing altogether.

In setting up this contrast, O’Brien does not make the medical team out to be more important because they save lives or are more personable, nor does he make the Green Berets seem more important for their discipline and their carrying out of secret missions. Instead, O’Brien places these two very different groups side by side to show how, surprisingly, both groups are part of the same army and how both perform vital tasks. It seems there is a place for every kind of person and skill in the army.

Another contrast O’Brien depicts is between the Americans and the Vietnamese. Mary Anne is anxious to go see the neighboring village of Tra Bong, despite Fossie’s objections. Mary Anne brushes off his concerns by looking for similarities instead of differences. She says, “Listen, it can’t be that bad. They’re human beings, aren’t they? Like everybody else?” Her failure to recognize differences makes her unable to respect the very real danger of leaving the military compound. Once she and the medics who accompany her get to the village, O’Brien points out the ways in which the village is different from the outpost. He notes the hostile atmosphere, the thatched roofs, and the naked children. Interestingly, Mary Anne does not recognize any of these things as anything but quaint and charming. When she wants to stop to swim in the river on the way back, she fails to recognize the danger in that. Swimming in the river is not like going for a swim back home in America, where it is safe, but she disregards warnings of snipers and ambushes. Again, she fails to recognize the differences between what is familiar and appealing to her and where she actually is. Everyone else, however, from Fossie and Kiley to the narrator, is acutely aware of the contrast between being outside the military outpost and being safely within it.

The last example of contrast is the most significant one to the plot. There is a sharp contrast in Mary Anne before and after her transformation. When she arrives to see her boyfriend, Fossie, at his medical post, she is an all-American teenager. She is innocent, fresh-faced, and wearing pink and white. She is friendly and carefree, playing volleyball with the guys and excited to be with her boyfriend. The change is gradual but easy to track as she stops tending to her appearance and becomes increasingly inquisitive about everything from the country around them to using an M16. Outwardly, her appearance changes along with her activities, and eventually her entire demeanor changes. Fossie has known her for many years, as they have been small-town sweethearts for a long time. He knows her very well, and they plan to get married and have a typical American life together. He is troubled by her change. She becomes more introspective and mysterious, and the fun-loving part of her vanishes completely. It is more than being obsessed with war or with Vietnam; her transformation is not merely mental. She actually becomes a different person.

Mary Anne after her transformation is almost monstrous. After she disappears with the Green Berets yet again, Fossie goes looking for her upon their return. What he finds is startling and disturbing. The girl who once arrived holding a cosmetic bag and wearing culottes is now surrounded by the stench of death, chanting among piles of bones and a decaying leopard head. As horrifying as all of that is, the worst of it is that she is wearing a necklace made of overlapping human tongues. Her demeanor is distant but calm, and she tells Fossie that it is not that bad and that he does not belong there. O’Brien emphasizes the contrast in who Mary Anne used to be and who she is now by portraying her in this scene wearing pink and white. The reader would expect her to be in fatigues and with black face paint, but her outfit is a chilling reminder that this is still Mary Anne and that her starting point was as a typical teenage girl.
The last we hear of her is that she left for the mountains and was never seen again. She became part of the jungle.

The use of contrast in Mary Anne’s character is the heart of “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” O’Brien’s use of it is brilliant in that he is not setting up a distinction between monster Mary Anne and the saner men of the outpost. She is not meant to be altogether “other.” Kiley’s speech about how everyone who comes to the war changes from clean to dirty is O’Brien’s way of reminding the reader that war changes people in profound ways. Kiley says it is just a matter of degree. It is impossible for anyone to go into that situation and come out innocent and optimistic. What Mary Anne became is just the extreme of what everyone else experiences. It is a cautionary tale in that Mary Anne never intended to go see her boyfriend and become a savage woman comfortable going on missions with Special Forces and eventually turning herself completely over to the setting. But nobody gets to choose how far they are willing to go. Perhaps that is why Kiley seems to have a sense of compassion for her.

While many authors use contrast to demonstrate that one person or one way is better than another, O’Brien does not do that in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” The contrasts he sets up in the story only inform and give insight, showing how differences create misunderstanding and distrust. The Green Berets and the medics have almost nothing in common, but O’Brien never gives the sense that one group is superior to the other in any way. The Americans and the Vietnamese are very different from each other culturally and in their present experience at this point in the war, but O’Brien does not castigate either group. He merely shows how the war is bringing together very different groups of people and how it is affecting them differently. Even in the case of Mary Anne, it certainly seems that the original Mary Anne, the innocent one, is much better than the animalistic one she becomes. Yet even here, O’Brien is intentional in making sure that the story is not meant to judge her for her transformation but to show a little understanding and even compassion for her. Kiley makes it very clear that what happened to her was just a more extreme version of what happens to them all.

what happens to her once she arrives in Vietnam and how her transformation from American suburban schoolgirl to nascent guerrilla affects Mark, Rat, and the others in their sense of who and where they are.

The story takes place near the village of Tra Bong, “in the mountains west of Chu Lai,” in the early 1970s. O’Brien isn’t specific about the date, but he indicates that “in the early 1960s, the place had been set up as a Special Forces outpost” and that “Rat Kiley [had] arrived nearly a decade later.” The critic Benjamin Goluboff explains that this story, as well as others in O’Brien’s work, takes place in Quang Ngai Province, the tactical area of operations for the United States Army’s Americal Division in 1968 and 1969. A likely source for O’Brien’s Quang Ngai was the work of the journalist Jonathan Schell in the New Yorker in 1967 and 1968, which later became a book, The Military Half: An Account of the Destruction in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin. Chu Lai is located south of Danang, at the point where Vietnam narrows between the South China Sea and the wild Annamite Mountains to the west and the border with Laos. The medical post where Rat and Mark are stationed is “clearly indefensible,” but Rat claims that “he always felt a curious sense of safety there” because “[n]othing much ever happened” and “the war seemed to be somewhere far away.” In fact, according to the historian Marilyn Young, the war, at least as far as American forces were concerned, was changing course and winding down beginning in 1970. (Although there were still 334,000 American military personnel in Vietnam at the end of 1970, the number would drop to 23,000 by early 1973.) The year 1970 marked the beginning of the “Vietnamization” of the war, in which the United States decreased its participation in ground combat and handed over the responsibilities of defending border areas to the South Vietnamese Army. During the first half of 1971, awareness of and resistance to the war in the United States was escalating; the Pentagon Papers were published in the New York Times, and the Winter Soldier Investigation, a protest organized by the Vietnam Veterans against the
War, took place in Detroit. That year also brought a pause from the bombing of North Vietnam and a reduction of the United States forces to 156,800 by December.

The haunting story of what happens when Mark Fossie imports his Ohio girlfriend to Vietnam is arguably one of the most powerful and memorable American literary responses to the Vietnam War. Ultimately, it is a story about transgression, about the costs and consequences of crossing over boundaries and perimeters on whose impermeability a great deal depends. It is also a story that transgresses the normal boundaries of storytelling.

If students have read some or all of the stories in The Things They Carried, they will be familiar with O’Brien’s metanarrative strategies and his deliberate blurring of the boundaries between truth and fiction. But even if “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is the only piece they read, it’s worthwhile here to refer briefly to a passage in “How to Tell a True War Story.” In that story, which functions as a kind of gloss for the book and a deliberately obtuse explanation of his technique, O’Brien deconstructs simple claims and offers instead a pluralistic and even contradictory model for evaluating the veracity of war stories. As Catherine Calloway explains:

O’Brien draws the reader into the text, calling the reader’s attention to the process of invention and challenging him to determine which, if any, of the stories are true. As a result, the stories become epistemological tools, multidimensional windows through which the war, the world, and the ways of telling a war story can be viewed from many different angles and visions. (“How to Tell”)

In a passage in “How to Tell a True War Story” that has particular resonance with “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien explains that “[f]or the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent.” Referring both to the war itself and to the acts of telling and reading war stories, O’Brien elaborates:

There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.

For readers of “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” the significance of this passage is its emphasis on the anxiety that surrounds fluidity and the breaching of boundaries thought to be fixed and impenetrable. At this point, it’s useful to ask students to map the topography of the story and identify some of the boundaries and perimeters that O’Brien and his narrator describe and then to ask students to discuss or write about the metaphorical boundaries or the ways in which the story offers a critique of the idea of the boundary itself. Some of the boundaries they may find productive to discuss are those between the world and the war, the domestic and the military spheres, women and men, (Western) soldier and (Asian) enemy, and civilization and nature. Students will soon see that their mapping of boundaries won’t hold, that O’Brien sets up expectations and then undermines them. The breach of perimeters, confusion of categories, and inversion of hierarchies cause tremendous anxiety among the men of O’Brien’s company because their already tenuous and contingent position is revealed to be completely unanchored. Readers are in an analogous position: They don’t know whom to believe or what to trust. The words in “How to Tell a True War Story” take on new meaning, as the sense of disorientation they describe becomes as intimately psychological as it is geographical: “You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there.” Readers might also add, “You don’t know who you are.”

Students should be encouraged to push their analysis of the text and interrogate O’Brien’s use of perimeter imagery. In what ways are these boundaries both literal methods of organizing the social world and metaphors for the metaphysical borders that are breached when Mary Anne Bell arrives in Vietnam? How do the boundaries get crossed and the positions inverted? Rat describes the outpost as being both “clearly indefensible” and “isolated and vulnerable.” And yet, as he says, “he always felt a curious sense of safety there.” As he goes on to describe the post in more detail, it appears that the sense of security derived, at least in part, from its high level of organization: people stay where they are supposed to stay and do what they are expected to do. This is analogous to the highly structured and segmented nature of the military in general. Rat’s duties are gory but predictable: casualties are flown in, have legs and feet amputated, then are flown back out. There’s “[n]o humping at all. No officers, either.” And yet this organization, which appears natural and organic, is, in fact, highly artificial and unstable. The entire compound is
surrounded by rolls of concertina wire and abutted on two sides by jungle, mountains, and gorges. At the outermost of the concentric circles are the Greenies (Green Berets, or Special Forces), with their own “hootch . . . fortified with sandbags and a metal fence.” It may appear that the Greenies are the defenders of the perimeter, but as the story unfolds, they are the boundary itself: porous, shifting, and illusory. They are liminal creatures, Rat suggests, whom it is best to avoid, as if whatever they have or know is contagious. Not only do they inhabit a space on the perimeter, they also instantiate a figurative perimeter, the last outpost of “civilized” behavior and values. All these boundaries and perimeters are threatened when Mark Fossie succeeds in flying Mary Anne Bell in from Cleveland Heights. What seems at first blush a story about a girl who comes to a remote part of Vietnam, takes up with a renegade band of Greenies, is last seen wearing a necklace of human tongues, and eventually disappears into the hills and the mists is, on closer reading, really a story about what happens to the men themselves—the men who witness, and are dislocated by, her transgression. As Alex Vernon argues, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is “a story of the male imagination” in which Mary Anne is an “abstraction” among O’Brien’s other fully drawn characters, on whom the men project their anxieties about the masculine enterprise of war making and about the women for whom they fight (Soldiers). Mark Fossie thought he could import Mary Anne into his world as if she were a care package or a personal USO tour. He regards her as an object, a prized possession, and his greatest fear is that she’ll be unfaithful to him with one of the other Americans inside the concertina wire, that he will lose possession of her. This kind of infidelity would be a threat to his masculinity, and he does his best to prevent it. Neither he nor apparently any of the other witnesses anticipates that Mary Anne’s actions are a threat to their very concept of masculinity. Insofar as American stories of the Vietnam War take up larger cultural narratives, the story of Mary Anne is about generalized anxiety regarding gender roles (both at the time the story is set, in the 1960s, and at the time of its publication). But the power of the story derives from more than its threat to gender roles. Because the concepts of masculine and feminine are integral to the entire chain of reasoning that justifies war, Mary Anne’s dangerous transformation threatens to unravel the already strained fabric of rationalization that makes the men’s missions in Vietnam appear worthwhile and purposeful. The taboo that’s violated is the one that contains the feminine in the domestic sphere and the masculine in the martial sphere. In Vernon’s words:

Mary Anne paradoxically represents Vietnam and the enemy, and the United States and that social bond that sends men to suffer the horrors of war and thereby earns their hostility. As the fresh-faced sweetie and bride and mother-to-be, she clearly represents the culture and values men are willing to fight to preserve. (Soldiers)

As many military historians and war theorists (John Keegan and Elaine Scarry chief among them) have pointed out, men do not fight in wars for the sake of the larger geopolitical reasons that leaders offer for the war. Instead, they fight for more intimate and immediate reasons, such as loyalty to fellow soldiers, and for an entire constellations of reasons back home. Like ancient knights, men fight for women—and for what women represent. The qualities embodied in women are those most conspicuously absent from the experience of war: purity, goodness, cleanliness, civilization, pink culottes. Like Lieutenant Cross’s beloved and remote Martha in the title story and the perpetually virginal child Linda in “The Lives of the Dead,” Mary Anne is, from Mark Fossie’s point of view, an object, a prized possession, a totem. Mary Anne’s transformation not only challenges Mark Fossie’s proprietary claim on her but, more important, exposes as a fiction or a lie the entire chain of reasons underpinning the idea “that men without women trip,” to borrow Michael Herr’s memorable phrase from Dispatches.

In the masculinist world of Mark Fossie and the others, Mary Anne’s body, which has been the object of each man’s gaze since she arrived, becomes the text on which her transgressions are inscribed. The pink sweater and culottes she wears when she arrives are an emblem of girlish American suburban innocence, and she looks to the men “like a cheerleader visiting the opposing team’s locker room” when she visits the hamlet with Mark, Rat, and the other medics. Soon, however, her outward appearance begins to change, and to Mark “[h]er body seemed foreign somehow.” With her hair cut short and “wrapped . . . in a dark green bandanna,” wearing “no cosmetics” and no jewelry, Mary Anne sheds her midwestern femininity, and she seems to move out of Mark’s reach. Eventually, she moves so far
beyond his tether that she stays out all night; she moves beyond the perimeter of war stories that would cloister her safely in Cleveland Heights. By the end of the story she has “moved through femininity and through masculinity to a place beyond gender” (Vernon, *Soldiers*).

Focused on her appearance and obsessed with her potential for sexual exploitation and his own cuckolding, Fossie concludes that Mary Anne has run off with one of the other men; or to put it more accurately, he thinks another man has taken her, since he views her as an object on which others act rather than an agent in her own right. Once Mark and Rat have searched the compound without finding her, Rat says, in a sentence that foreshadows the rest of the story, “Okay. . . . We got a problem.” The immediate problem—and the only one that Mark seems concerned about—is the mystery of Mary Anne’s whereabouts. Why has she disappeared? The bigger and thornier problem is that though she’s with the Greenies, it isn’t for “sex or anything.” She’s been out all night “on . . . ambush.” When she walks back into the hootch she shares with Fossie, she’s wearing “a bush hat and filthy green fatigues.” As Rat tells the story, Fossie hesitates, “as though he had trouble recognizing her.” Students should consider the significance of the conditional in this sentence: he doesn’t actually have trouble recognizing her—she’s the only civilian American woman for miles around—but he is unable to see her without her familiar outer attributes. In fact, when Mary Anne and Mark appear in the mess hall later that evening, it’s her traditional suburban girlish appearance that’s been reconstituted, as if she could be brought back under Fossie’s control as long as he can keep her in “a white blouse, a navy blue skirt, [and] a pair of plain black flats.” But no matter what she wears, Mary Anne has already moved beyond the perimeter, to shadowy places Rat and Mark haven’t been to, and she’s undergone an inner transformation that no schoolgirl outfit can disguise. In Vernon’s words, “[S]he is either a body in front of them or a mystery beyond them, either way teasing them in their desire to penetrate her” (*Soldiers*).

The truce that Mark Fossie achieves with Mary Anne is short-lived. After a few weeks, during which she appeared “as if she had come up on the edge of something, as if she were caught in that no-man’s land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle,” she disappears with the Greenies. Three weeks later, Rat happens to be awake the night she and the ghostly column slip back through the wire and into the Greenies’ hootch. With Mary Anne inside the hootch, Mark Fossie begins a vigil outside that dramatizes a version of the male gaze in which the object is not only hidden from sight but has wrested the power from the gazer. When he finally stumbles through the door of the hootch, he finds himself in terra incognita, a shadowy hut filled with “a weird deep-wilderness sound,” a miasma of smoke, and a smell “like an animal’s den, a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh—the stink of the kill.” Fossie’s first glimpse of Mary Anne as she emerges from the shadows suggests for a moment that she’s “the same pretty young girl who had arrived a few weeks earlier.” But her clothing—a “pink sweater and a white blouse and a simple cotton skirt”—which had in the past functioned as a sign of her reliably domesticated femininity, are now appropriated into a new and strange semiotics that discards the expected strand of pearls or girlish locket in favor of “a necklace of human tongues . . . one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable.” Mary Anne’s appearance in the bizarre setting of the hootch, a chilling retelling of the final spectacle of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, certainly signifies her crossing over from Cleveland Heights to a Vietnam that is beyond the bounds of even Fossie’s experience. As if her physical attributes weren’t sufficient evidence of her transgression and transformation, her explanation, framed in the language of desire, proves to Fossie that she’s escaped his gaze and his possession. As Terry Martin and Margaret Stiner point out, Mark Fossie, like Conrad’s Intended, “desperately clings to the romanticized image of his beloved.” Chiding him that “[y]ou’re in a place where . . . you don’t belong,” Mary Anne says, “Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me.” Her assertion reorganizes the economy of desire on which Fossie’s masculine identity depends: the object of desire has become the agent of desire, and the landscape of fear has been transformed into one of empowerment. Mark, whose daring act set in motion Mary Anne’s transformation, is reduced to a feminized passivity; he is rendered powerless and almost
speechless and has to be physically supported by Rat Kiley.

Rat tells Mark, “She’s already gone,” suggesting not only that Mary Anne is lost to Mark but also that the version of American femininity and the social world it represents is lost forever in the jungles of Vietnam. But Rat, who has been the proprietor of the story since the beginning, offers a coda that suggests the possibility of a reaction to the final vision of Mary Anne different from Mark’s paralysis and collapse. Conceding that the final chapter in the story is, in Mitchell Sanders’s words, “speculation,” Rat confesses that he “loved her.” He loved her, he says, because “[t]he way she looked, Mary Anne made you think about all those girls back home, how clean and innocent they all are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years.” While this declaration suggests that Rat loved Mary Anne in her Cleveland Heights, culottes-wearing incarnation, his further explanation hints instead that it’s the Mary Anne with the necklace of human tongues that he loves: “She was there. She was up to her eyeballs in it. After the war, man, I promise you, you won’t find nobody like her.”

For Mark, the story of Mary Anne is a story of loss: of a world of innocence and purity that she represents, of masculine authority that licensed him to regard her as a possession, and of faith that the savagery of war exists only in the arena of war rather than in the human psyche. Rat’s telling of the story suggests that Mary Anne’s disappearance into the jungle is at least as much a story of liberation as it is one of loss. His final words turn mythic and wistful, as if Rat envies Mary Anne her escape. Despite his claim to love her, he expresses no desire to rescue or possess her. Rather, he seems to simply want to be her: “She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill.”

As O’Brien does in much of his work, he thwarts readers’ desires to tame the narrative, to find the moral of the story of Mary Anne and her disappearance into the jungles of Vietnam. “A true war story is never moral,” he tells us in “How to Tell a True War Story.” “It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done.” Students should ask if O’Brien’s warning in “How to Tell a True War Story” applies to their own readings: “[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.” Many students will be troubled by the difficulty of reading “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” as a feminist text because Mary Anne is less a real person than an abstraction or a device and because her moral position at the end is highly ambiguous. Other students may want to explore how the narrative register of the story moves further and further away from Rat’s “truth” to a fourth-hand account and is taken over by the unnamed narrator, who finally posits Mary Anne as a kind of mythic and allegorical creature:

Late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, the whole rain forest seemed to stare in at them—a watched feeling—and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side.

Like Mary Anne herself, the story slides through the shadows of our understanding, barely discernible, hauntingly familiar, yet strange, always eluding our interpretive grasp and continuing to seduce us into its dangerous enclosure.


**Tobey C. Herzog**

In the following excerpt, Herzog defends O’Brien’s work against charges of racism and sexism.

. . . O’Brien also unifies this novel of stories, as he does with the nonfictional If I Die, through the limited center of consciousness and observation of a first-person narrator, who carries with him guilt and disturbing memories from distant and recent events in his life: “The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over” (Things). As O’Brien has noted on several occasions, Things is intended to be read as a memoir, a writer’s memoir. Therefore, everything in the book (stories, interpolated stories, confession, commentary, fragments, and sketches) is filtered through the eyes, memory, and imagination of Tim O’Brien, a fictional 43-year-old narrator recalling people, events, and stories.
from his life and Vietnam War experience. This fictional O’Brien also creates new stories and comments on his career as an author.

Since *The Things They Carried* exhibits some of the same content, structure, narrative strategies, and themes of O’Brien’s previous books, the work receives similar criticism: charges of perceived racism (absence of the fully developed Vietnamese perspective) and sexism (objectifying, excluding, or silencing women). It should also be noted that such criticism is certainly not targeted at O’Brien alone but has been directed generally at many modern war authors, particularly male American authors writing about the Vietnam War. As in *If I Die* and *Going After Cacciato*, O’Brien devotes minimal space in *The Things They Carried* to developing Vietnamese characters, examining war experiences from the Vietnamese perspective, or exploring the larger political issues involved in this war. Granted, in this novel and in his two previous war narratives, the land of Viet Nam plays a prominent role, becoming a character—threatening, ever changing, mysterious: “The whole country, Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam—it truly talks” (*Things*). Only a few native inhabitants of this land, however, appear in *The Things They Carried*: a poppa san who leads American troops through a dangerous minefield, two Buddhist monks living near an abandoned pagoda, a dancing Vietnamese girl traumatized by the burning of her hamlet and the killing of her family, a corpse of an old Vietnamese man, and a Vietnamese farmer described in the narrator’s story about his return to Viet Nam 20 years after his tour of duty. Yet, as is particularly true in *If I Die*, the roles of these individuals in the book are insignificant, either as victims of the war or background figures in the war stories.

Perhaps narrator Tim O’Brien’s most noticeable attempt to humanize and understand these mysterious others occurs in his description of a young Vietcong draftee killed in an ambush. This death-recognition story, told in “The Man I Killed” and repeated with variations in two other sections, seems a prose version of Thomas Hardy’s famous World War I poem “The Man He Killed.” It connects with a tradition in war literature of a protagonist engaging in a sympathetic identification with the enemy, but an experience always presented from the protagonist’s point of view. In O’Brien’s story, narrator Tim O’Brien imagines his enemy—a Vietnamese citizen-soldier—being the same age as the narrator (born in 1946), beginning college in the same year (1964), and responding to the war in a similar fashion: “The young man would not have wanted to be a soldier and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle” (*Things*). Although linking the two soldiers, such a self-centered perspective of this other soldier suggests an effort at projecting the narrator’s own traits onto this unknown Vietnamese rather than imagining a separate person. As noted earlier, author O’Brien responds to criticism about his excluding the Vietnamese voice in *Things* and other books by arguing that he is neither capable of presenting a Vietnamese perspective he is unfamiliar with nor required to speak for people who can speak for themselves.

If, for the most part, O’Brien excludes the Vietnamese from meaningful roles in this novel, he does include more women in this book when compared with their presence in the earlier war narratives. Specifically, females figure prominently in several of the stories: Kathleen, narrator Tim O’Brien’s nine-year-old daughter; Linda, the narrator’s nine-year-old girlfriend from his childhood in Worthington, Minnesota; Martha, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s girlfriend; and Mary Anne Bell, a 17-year-old who has a “heart-of-darkness” experience at a fire base in Vietnam. In addition, the narrator briefly refers to Curt Lemon’s sister, a woman in an audience listening to one of the narrator’s war stories, a dancing Vietnamese girl, and Norman Bowker’s girlfriend and his mother.

But such inclusions do not diminish some feminist criticism of this book. Significantly, all of these female characters, along with the war itself, are presented through the words of male storytellers, and only Kathleen and Linda are
given a voice of their own in the stories. For these and other reasons, a few critics view O’Brien’s portrayal of the female characters in *Things* as antifeminist, in particular because they lack an “agency and sensibility of their own” and instead are “projections of a narrator trying to resolve the trauma of war” (Smith 1994, 19). Specifically, Lorrie Smith in examining *The Things They Carried* notes the verbal and emotional hostility directed toward women in the story “How To Tell A True War Story” and their exclusion from the war throughout O’Brien’s book because of their supposed inability to understand the male war experience. She comments that the story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” which becomes O’Brien’s attempt at deconstructing gender differences within the context of war by describing a woman’s violent battlefield experiences, simply “portrays the woman as more masculine than the men, hence monstrous and unnatural” (Smith 1994, 32).

O’Brien’s response to such criticism is a cryptic “I think I often am much more a feminist than the so-called feminists criticizing me” (McNerney, Interview, 17). In a 1994 interview he characterizes some of the objectionable language and comments directed toward women in his stories as a realistic “recording” of details rather than an “endorsing” of such language and views. Furthermore, O’Brien disagrees that “Sweetheart” is an antifeminist story; in fact, he sees it as just the opposite, an “utterly feminist” story promoting gender equality. He argues that the story promotes the notion that American women, who are currently excluded from serving in ground combat, would have the same experiences and feelings on the battlefield as their male counterparts, given the chance: “They would be going to the same dark side of the human hemisphere, the dark side of the moon, the dark side of their own psyches” (McNerney, Interview, 21).

Within this context of critical debate and this novel’s place within O’Brien’s efforts at interconnecting his books, we will examine the specific form and content of *The Things They Carried*. Because of the diverse content and structure within the 22 sections, finding a workable approach to synthesizing the whole book may appear problematic. But as noted previously, the numerous thematic and character links among the chapters, as well as the first-person point of view, create an integrated novel based on an interdependence Philip Beidler characterizes as “each story needing another or others for completion” (Beidler, 33).

Also linking the different stories is a loose tripartite structure somewhat paralleling the form of O’Brien’s other two war narratives. For example, drawing upon the relationships of past, present, and future time so artfully manipulated and intertwined in *Going After Cacciato*, the author establishes roughly equivalent time relationships in this novel. Similar to the present time in the observation-post chapters of *Cacciato*, the narrator’s commentary, constituting separate chapters or appearing within other chapters, represents the present time in *Things*. Yet unlike the fixed present time in the observation-post chapters, which is restricted to a six-hour period, the sections and passages in *Things* devoted to present-time commentary range over an imprecise period during the fictional narrator’s 43rd year of life. During this time, Tim O’Brien assesses his life up to this point; he considers his current state of mind (“I feel guilty sometimes. Forty-three years old and I’m still writing war stories”: *Things*). He comments on the stories he is about to tell (“This is one story I’ve never told before”: *Things*) and analyzes the purposes and nature of stories (“By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths”: *Things*). . .


**Steven Kaplan**

*In the following excerpt, Kaplan examines O’Brien’s narrative strategy.*

. . . However, when Rat Kiley tells a story in another chapter the reader is warned that he “swore up and down to its truth, although in the end, I’ll admit, that doesn’t amount to much of a warranty. Among the men in Alpha Company, Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts, and for most of us it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say.”

Rat Kiley is an unreliable narrator, and his facts are always distorted, but this does not affect storytelling truth as far as O’Brien is concerned. The above passage on Rat Kiley’s credibility as a storyteller concludes with the statement that “It wasn’t a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he
wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt.” This summarizes O’Brien’s often confusing narrative strategy in *The Things They Carried*: the facts about what actually happened, or whether anything happened at all, are not important. They cannot be important because they themselves are too uncertain, too lost in a world in which certainty has vanished somewhere between the “crazy and almost crazy.” The important thing is that any story about the war, any “true war story,” must “burn so hot” when it is told that it becomes alive for the listener/reader in the act of its telling.

In Rat Kiley’s story about how he wrote to Curt Lemon’s sister, for example, the details the reader is initially given are exaggerated to the point where, in keeping with O’Brien’s fire metaphor, they begin to heat up. Curt Lemon, according to O’Brien, “would always volunteer for stuff nobody else would volunteer for in a million years.” And once Lemon went fishing with a crate of hand grenades, “the funniest thing in world history . . . about twenty zillion dead gook fish.” But the story does not get so hot that it burns, it does not become so “incredibly sad and true,” as O’Brien puts it, until Rat tells the reader at the story’s close that “I write this beautiful . . . letter, I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back.” It is these words and not the facts that come before them that make the story true for O’Brien. These words make a reader feel Rat’s loss and his anger.

At the beginning of this chapter, O’Brien asks his readers several times to “Listen to Rat,” to listen more to how he says things than to what he is saying. And of all of the words that stand out in his story, it is the word “cooze” that makes his story come alive. “You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.” This is just one of the many ways O’Brien gives for determining what constitutes a true war story in an unending list of possibilities that includes reacting to a story with the ambiguous words “Oh” and “There it is.” Like these two phrases, Rat Kiley’s word “cooze” is an attempt in an unending sequence of attempts to utter some truth about the Vietnam experience and, by extension, about war in general. There is no simplistic moral to be derived from this word, such as that war is obscene or corrupt. “A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct.” There is simply the very real and true fact that the closest thing to certainty and truth in a war story as in life is a vague utterance, a punch at the darkness, an attempt to momentarily rip through the veil that repeatedly returns and covers the reality and truth of what actually happened.

It is thus no coincidence that right in the middle of this chapter on writing a true war story, O’Brien says that the main thing he can remember from the short time encompassing Lemon’s death, “Even now, at this instant,” is Mitchell Sanders’s “yo-yo.” This toy can be seen as a metaphor for the playful act of narration that O’Brien practices in this book, a game that he plays by necessity. The only real way to tell a true war story, according to O’Brien, is to keep telling it “one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth,” which is ultimately impossible because the real truth, the full truth, as the events themselves, are lost forever in “a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent.” The only way to “tell a true war story” is “if you just keep on telling it” because “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant.”

“How to Tell a True War Story” ends with the narrator’s finally telling how he and Dave Jensen were ordered to climb up into a tree and remove the parts of Curt Lemon’s body: “I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must’ve been the intestines.” He makes six attempts to tell this story before he can finally confront the “truth” as opposed to the mere facts of this story, and the “truth” of the story is that which speaks to a person’s heart and stomach: “But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as we threw down the parts.” Important in this story,
as in all of the stories in the book, is not what happened, but what might have happened.

Following the narrative technique of this book, a story’s truth is clearly not something that can be distinguished or separated from a story, and the veracity or falseness of a story cannot be determined from a perspective outside the story. As Geoffrey Hartman says regarding poetry, “To keep a poem in mind is to keep it there, not to resolve it into available meanings.” Similarly, for O’Brien it is not the fact that a story actually happened that makes it true and worth remembering, any more than the story itself can be said to contain a final truth. The important thing is that a story becomes so much a part of the present that “there is nothing to remember except the story.” This is why O’Brien’s narrator feels compelled to tell and then retell many variations of the same story over and over and over again. This is also why he introduces each new version of a story with such prefatory comments as “This one does it for me. I have told it before many times, many versions but here is what actually happened.” What actually happened, the story’s truth, is contained in the way the story is told and in how it makes a reader feel—it must take a person beyond the mere facts. A story is true when it entertains, “but entertain in the highest way, entertain your brain and your stomach, and your heart, and your erotic zones, and make you laugh.”

There is nothing new in what O’Brien demonstrates here about trying to tell war stories—that the “truths” they contain “are contradictory,” elusive, and thus indeterminate. Two hundred years ago, Goethe also reflected on the same inevitable contradictions that arise when one speaks of what happened or might have happened in battle, when he tried to depict the senseless bloodshed during the allied invasion of revolutionary France in his autobiographical book *Campaign in France*; and, of course, Homer’s *Iliad* is the primal statement on the contradictions inherent in war. However, what is new in O’Brien’s approach to depicting war in *The Things They Carried* is that he makes the axiom that in war “Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true” the basis for the act of telling a war story.

The narrative strategy that O’Brien uses in this book to portray the uncertainty of what happened in Vietnam is not restricted to depicting war, and O’Brien does not limit it to the war alone. *The Things They Carried* opens, as it closes, with a love story. The book also ends as it begins: with a man thinking of someone he loved in the past. Besides these two women, the reader is also introduced to the Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong, who is idealized and worshiped as are Martha in the first chapter and Linda in the last. There is also Henry Dobbin’s girlfriend, whose nylon stocking continues to protect him even after he learns she has dumped him. In each of these instances, the reader is shown someone conjuring up memories of a person from the past and then telling themselves stories about that person. Moreover, the stories remembered and told in the chapters just mentioned are remembered and told *precisely* to make the present and future bearable and even possible. Storytelling, in short, becomes a means for survival in this book, much as it is in *Going After Cacciato*. When O’Brien tells the story of the death of Curt Lemon, for example, he informs his readers that this story “wasn’t a war story. It was a love story.” As I said above, there are several other love stories in this book, and I would even argue that this entire book can be seen as a love story. It is O’Brien’s expression of his love of storytelling as an act that can wrestle tolerable and meaningful truths from even the most horrible events.

O’Brien concludes his book with a chapter titled “The Lives of the Dead,” in which he moves from Vietnam back to when he was nine years old. On the surface, the book’s last chapter describes O’Brien’s first date, with his first love, a girl named Linda who died of a brain tumor a few months after he had taken her to see the movie “The Man Who Never Was.” What this chapter is really about, however, as its title suggests, is how the dead (which can also include people who may never have actually existed) can be given life in a work of fiction. In a story, O’Brien says, “memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness.” Like the man who never was in the film of that title, the people that never were except in memories and the imagination can become real or alive, if only for a moment, through the act of storytelling.

When you tell a story, according to O’Brien, “you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself.” And by doing this, you can externalize “a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse.” The storyteller does not, however, just escape from the events and people in a story by placing them on paper. The act of telling a given story is an
ongoing and never-ending process. By constantly involving and then reinvolving the reader in the task of determining what “actually” happened in a given situation, in a story, and by forcing the reader to experience the impossibility of ever really knowing with any certainty what actually happened, O’Brien liberates himself from the lonesome responsibility of remembering and trying to understand events. He creates instead a community of individuals immersed in the act of experiencing the uncertainty of all events, regardless of whether these events occurred in Vietnam, in a small town in Minnesota, or somewhere in the leader’s own life.

O’Brien thus saves himself, as he says in the last sentence of his book, from the fate of his character, Norman Bowker, who eventually kills himself in a chapter called “Speaking of Courage,” because he cannot find some lasting meaning in the horrible things he experienced in Vietnam. O’Brien saves himself in that he demonstrates through the narrative strategy of this book that the most important thing is to be able to recognize and accept the fact that events have no fixed or final meaning and that the only meaning events can have at all is one which momentarily emerges, then shifts and changes each new time they come alive when they are being remembered and portrayed in stories. . . .


FURTHER READING


Conservative author Bennett reviews American history from the decline of communism in the late 1980s to the present threat of radical Islam. Bennett considers how these major ideologies have factored into American history and politics.


Regarded by many as one of the best accounts of combat life in the Vietnam War, The Killing Zone recounts Downs’s personal experiences during the war. In addition to describing the intensity of fear and hope, he includes postwar accounts of what happened to the men in his platoon.

Grossman and Christensen review the history and evolution of war as they present research about the impact of wartime experiences on people’s bodies and minds. It is at times practical, discussing specific breathing techniques, the importance of debriefing, and the latest information on posttraumatic stress disorder. However, the authors also consider issues like guilt, religion, and justice.

*The Vietnam Wars: 50 Years Ago—Two Countries Torn Apart*, LIFE, 2014.

*LIFE*’s collection of photographs represents the first time a war was documented in color photography, many of which became famous and even iconic of the war. Here, the magazine compiles photos of the war years, both abroad and at home. The book also includes veteran interviews, a look at Vietnam today, and an essay about the Vietnam Memorial.

### SUGGESTED SEARCH TERMS

- Vietnam War
- Tim O’Brien
- Tim O’Brien AND The Things They Carried
- Tim O’Brien AND “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”
- gender expectations
- women in military
- stress AND insanity
- soldiers becoming savage
- PTSD
- traditional gender roles
- gender roles in America
- psychotic break