



 Prestwick House

# Activity Pack

## THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BY TIM O'BRIEN



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ISBN 978-1-60389-304-6

Item No. 201201

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Pre-Reading****Research and Context**

**Objective:** Researching the events of 1969 to provide an historical context for our reading of *The Things They Carried*

**Activity**

The events in *The Things They Carried* take place primarily in 1969. Having some knowledge of what was going on in the world politically and culturally will provide an historical context for our reading. Use the Internet, an encyclopedia, or some other reference source to thoroughly fill in the chart on the next page. One cultural event has been provided for you as an example.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“The Things They Carried”****Euphemism**

Objective: Understanding euphemism

**Activity**

A *euphemism* is, at best, a more gentle or tactful term for a difficult, painful, or embarrassing subject. One who says “We had the dog *put to sleep*” instead of “We had the dog killed” is using a euphemism. Far less innocently, euphemisms are sometimes used by militaries or politicians to intentionally mislead or appease the public. These euphemisms may distance citizens from a harsh reality, as when the Nazis’ massacre of Jews in the Holocaust was referred to as “The Final Solution.”

List four euphemisms the soldiers use for “killed” in “The Things They Carried.”

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Complete the chart on the next page by providing, in the left column, the literal meanings for the military euphemisms in the right column. It may be necessary to do some research on the Internet or at the library.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“Love”****Interviews**

**Objective:** Interviewing a subject who lived through the Vietnam War

**Activity**

In “Love,” O’Brien and Cross meet to look back over their experiences in Vietnam.

Interview a person who was either a teenager or an adult in America or Vietnam during the war. During your interview, ask your subject the following three **Required Interview Questions** and another **five** questions of your own devising. When finished, you will be responsible for turning in:

- a list of the additional five questions you asked your subject, and
- a one-page write-up of what you learned from your subject.

Be prepared to share details and anecdotes from your interview in a class discussion to take place on \_\_\_\_\_.

**REQUIRED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Did you support or oppose American involvement in the Vietnam War? How did you show your support or opposition?
2. Were you drafted, or did you know anyone (even as an acquaintance) who was? How did you or your acquaintance handle being drafted?
3. Since the Vietnam War, do you think the United States has gotten or ever will get into “another Vietnam”?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“On the Rainy River”****Point of View****Objective:** Recognizing and working with point of view**Activity**

Read the below selections—from *The Things They Carried* and other novels—and complete the chart that follows them. Then answer the question below the chart.

Selection from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book—which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before.

Selection from *Night* by Elie Wiesel:

At nine o'clock, Sunday's scenes began all over again. Policemen with truncheons yelling: "All Jews outside!" We were ready. I was the first to leave. I did not want to see my parents' faces. I did not want to break into tears. We stayed sitting down in the middle of the road, as the others had done the day before yesterday. There was the same infernal heat. The same thirst. But there was no longer anyone left to being us water. I looked at my house, where I had spent so many years in my search for God; in fasting in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah; in imagining what my life would be like. Yet I felt little sorrow. I thought of nothing.

Selection from *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle:

The house shook.  
Wrapped in her quilt, Meg shook.  
She wasn't usually afraid of the weather. —It's not just the weather, she thought.—It's the weather on top of everything else. On top of me. On top of Meg Murry doing everything wrong.  
School. School was all wrong. She'd been dropped down to the lowest section in her grade. That morning one of her teachers had said crossly, "Really, Meg, I don't understand how a child with parents as brilliant as yours are supposed to be can be such a poor student. If you don't manage to do a little better you'll have to stay back next year."  
The window rattled madly in the wind, and she pulled the quilt close about her.  
Everybody was asleep. Everybody except Meg.  
How could they sleep? All day long there had been hurricane warnings. How could they leave her up in the attic in the rickety brass bed, knowing that the roof might be blown right off the house, and she tossed out into the wild night sky to land who knows where?  
—You asked to have the attic bedroom, she told herself savagely.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“On the Rainy River”****Survey****Objective:** Taking a survey and summarizing its results**Activity**

O'Brien challenges us to decide how we would respond to the draft and the opportunity to escape military duty by fleeing to Canada:

You're at the bow of a boat on the Rainy River. You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest.

What would you do?

Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?

Take a survey of twenty people you know that are *not* in this class. Phrase your survey question as follows:

If you were drafted into a war you did not believe your country should be fighting, and you could not claim exempt or conscientious objector status, would you choose to leave the country illegally, knowing that it may mean you can never come back, or to fight in the war, knowing that you will be made to kill people and may get seriously injured or die?

When you have gotten twenty answers, tally up how many of your subjects would leave the country illegally and how many would fight. Record them below, then answer the questions that follow.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## “How to Tell a True War Story”

### Collage

**Objective:** Interpreting a principle artistically

#### Activity

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purple orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.

—from “How to Tell a True War Story”

In a sentence or two, describe what you think O'Brien means by the phrase “the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference.”

Using images you have created yourself, images from magazines and the Internet, or both, create a collage that articulates the “beauty” of one of the following:

- illness (in general or in particular)
- war
- poverty

Your collage must measure at least 11x17 inches and must not include any text. Rather allow the juxtaposed images to speak together and for themselves.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“The Dentist”****Motivation**

**Objective:** Exploring embarrassment as a motivating factor in our own lives

**Activity**

Curt Lemon has a tooth pulled out of embarrassment. More shockingly, O'Brien reports for military duty rather than fleeing to Canada out of embarrassment.

To what extent is fear of embarrassment a motivating factor in your own life? Complete the questionnaire by circling the answers that most closely reflect your feelings.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“Stockings” and “Church”****Superstition**

**Objective:** Thinking critically about the significance and uses of superstition

**Activity**

Henry Dobbins wears his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck for luck. O'Brien writes, "Like many of us in Vietnam, Dobbins [feels] the pull of superstition." With your group, complete the chart below and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

What impact do superstitions have on the members of your group? One common superstition has been supplied for you in the chart below; fill in the first column with nine more. Then note down the number of members who do now or used to believe in each superstition in the second column. Note down the number who *never* subscribed to each superstition in the third column.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“Ambush”****Dramatic Recitation****Objective:** Reading and dramatically performing poetry written on Vietnam**Activity**

“Ambush” is concerned with a writer’s attempts to make sense of what he saw and did in the Vietnam War. In addition to fiction and memoir, an amazing body of poetry has been written by veterans and others in response to Vietnam. Reading and listening to some of it in class will enrich our study of *The Things They Carried* and the individual’s response to the war.

Each group is responsible for finding—using the library or the Internet—a poem that deals with the Vietnam War and for performing the poem for the rest of the class. Listed below are just a few of the many print sources for poetry about the war; using “Vietnam War poetry” as a search term at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) will also yield a wealth of possibilities. **IMPORTANT:** Once you have chosen a poem, provide me with a typed copy of it so I can approve it and make sure that no two groups have selected the same poem.

After I have approved your poem, you will need to make many choices concerning your group’s performance of it. Will you read your poem in unison? In turns? Will one person read it alone while the others do something else (play a drum, hold a prop, hum a hymn)? Will you start out at full volume and end up in a whisper? Dim the lights in the classroom? These options and any others you might come up with are all up to your group. Just make sure to remember the *reasons* behind your choices. After your performance, your group must turn in a brief summary and explanation of your dramatic interpretation of the poem.

**PARTIAL LIST OF POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR POETRY RELATED TO THE VIETNAM WAR**

*Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* ed. Carolyn Forché (W.W. Norton and Company: 1993)

*Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars, 1948-1993.* ed. Kevin Bowen, Ba Chung Nguyen, and Bruce Weigl (University of Massachusetts Press: 1998)

*60 on the 60’s: A Decade’s History in Verse.* ed. Robert McGovern and Richard Syder (Ashland Poetry Press: 1970)

*Voices From the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of America and Vietnam, 1965-1993* ed. Larry Rottman (Event Horizon Press: 1993)

*The Oxford Book of War Poetry* ed. Jon Stallworthy (Oxford University Press: 1984)

– poems by Yusef Komunyakaa, Denise Levertov, Bruce Weigl, and Howard Nemerov