

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Things They Carried

by Tim O'Brien

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A Short Summary of Tim O'Brien's Life

Tim O'Brien, (1946-?), is credited with writing the essential fictional book about Vietnam. *The Things They Carried* is the winner of France's prestigious Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger and the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize; it was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. O'Brien was raised in small-town Minnesota; his father was an insurance salesman, and his mother was an elementary school teacher. He served as an infantryman in the Quang Ngai province from 1969-70. Many stories had been published by the time he returned home. In 1973, he published *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and began working for the *Washington Post*. After a year with the *Post*, he began writing books. His other titles include *Going After Cacciato*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, *The Nuclear Age*, and many other short stories and articles.

Note to teachers: There is strong language and very gory, graphic scenes in this novel. Due to the subject matter, the Vietnam War, the language and detail is necessary to depict the emotion and confusion the soldiers must have felt during such a painful period. The language, wartime, violence, and gore should be discussed before beginning the book.

All references come from the Broadway Books edition of *The Things They Carried*, copyright 1990.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the author's writing style
2. recognize the dual first-person narration of Tim the character and Tim the author
3. discuss the pros and cons of going to war
4. define and cite instances from the book of the following literary terms:
 - flashback
 - sensory images
 - irony
5. place *The Things They Carried* in its correct chronological period and understand how the events helped mold O'Brien's life
6. discuss various aspects of O'Brien's writing style
7. recognize the importance of "story truth" and "historical truth."
8. discuss the purpose of storytelling
9. understand a soldier's experience at war
10. recognize some elements of a "true war story."

The Things They Carried

Chapter One

The Things They Carried

VOCABULARY

confiscate—to seize
dysentery—a disorder of the lower intestinal tract
foxhole—a shallow pit dug by a soldier in combat
grunts—infantrymen
hump—to carry on the back (slang)
interval—a space between
laxity—laziness
malaria—an infectious disease spread by mosquitoes
platoon—subdivision of a company of troops
rucksack—backpack

1. Give a description of Martha. How do Martha and Jimmy Cross feel about each other?

2. Why is it significant that Martha never mentions the war in her letters? What does she represent?

3. List some items that the men carry. How do certain items reflect the individual?

4. What does the author intend by relaying the weights of all the items the men carry?

Chapter Seven

How to Tell a True War Story

VOCABULARY

c-rations—food issued by the military
detonator—a device used to set off an explosive charge
humane—characterized by kindness, mercy, or compassion
leech—blood sucking worm
LZ—landing zone (slang)
paddy—a field for rice
rectitude—moral uprightness; righteousness
truism—a self-evident truth

1. Discuss the opening line, “This is true.” How does this line prepare the reader for the story?

2. Who does Rat Kiley write a letter to? Why does he put so much detail and effort into the letter?

3. Does Rat receive a response to his letter? How does it make him feel?

4. How does Curt Lemon die?

Chapter Thirteen

Ambush

1. O'Brien does not tell his nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen, that he killed someone in the war because it seems the right thing to do. Do you agree with him?

2. O'Brien tells the same story twice; one version is brief and the other is detailed. How does this explain his comment, "This is why I keep writing war stories"?

3. O'Brien writes about throwing the grenade and killing the man, saying, "It was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by." What is his reason for killing the man?

Chapter Nineteen

Field Trip

1. Why does O'Brien return to Vietnam?

2. Why does O'Brien return to the field?

3. What does O'Brien accuse the field of doing to him?
