

# Tim O'Brien Biography

Source: [litlovers.com](http://litlovers.com)



Tim O'Brien has said it was cowardice—not courage—that led him, in the late 1960s, to defer his admittance into Harvard in favor of combat in Vietnam. The alternatives of a flight to Canada or a moral stand in a U.S. jail were too unpopular.

He has since explored the definitions of courage—moral, physical, political—in his fiction, a body of work that has, at least until recently, dealt almost exclusively with America's most unpopular war and its domestic consequences. His first book,

*If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* looked at the war through a collection of war vignettes that he had written for newspapers in his home state of Minnesota, and his second book was a novel, *Northern Lights*, that he later decried as overly long and Hemingwayesque—almost a parody of the writer's war stories.

Born in Austin, Minn., to an insurance salesman and schoolteacher, O'Brien grew up as a voracious reader but didn't find the courage to write until his experiences in Vietnam. After the war, he studied at the Harvard University's School of Government and was a staff reporter at the *Washington Post* in the early 1970s. He writes from early in the morning until the evening and has a reputation for discarding long passages of writing because he finds the effort substandard. He also can do extensive revisions of his books between editions.

## Book Summary

Source: [litlovers.com](http://litlovers.com)

Selected as a New York Times Book of the Century

One of the first questions people ask about *The Things They Carried* is this: Is it a novel, or a collection of short stories? The title page refers to the book simply as "a work of fiction," defying the conscientious reader's need to categorize this masterpiece. It is both: a collection of interrelated short pieces which ultimately reads with the dramatic force and tension of a novel. Yet each

*The Things They Carried* depicts the men of Alpha Company: Jimmy Cross, Henry Dobbins, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Norman Bowker, Kiowa, and of course, the character Tim O'Brien who has survived his tour in Vietnam to become a father and writer at the age of forty-three. They battle the enemy (or maybe more the idea of the enemy), and occasionally each other. In their relationships we see their isolation and loneliness, their rage and fear. They miss their families, their girlfriends and buddies; they miss the lives they left back home. Yet they find sympathy and kindness for strangers (the old man who leads them unscathed through the mine field, the girl who grieves while she dances), and love for each other, because in Vietnam they are the only family they have. We hear the voices of the men and build images upon their dialogue. The way they tell stories about others, we hear them telling stories about themselves.

With the creative verve of the greatest fiction and the intimacy of a searing autobiography, *The Things They Carried* is a testament to the men who risked their lives in America's most controversial war. It is also a mirror held up to the frailty of humanity. Ultimately *The Things They Carried* and its myriad protagonists call to order the courage, determination, and luck we all need to survive. (From the publisher.)

## Discussion Questions

Source: [books.wwnorton.com](http://books.wwnorton.com)

1. Why is the first story, "The Things They Carried," written in third person? How does this serve to introduce the rest of the novel? What effect did it have on your experience of the novel when O'Brien switched to first person, and you realized the narrator was one of the soldiers?
2. In the list of all the things the soldiers carried, what item was most surprising? Which item did you find most evocative of the war? Which items stay with you?
3. In "On The Rainy River," we learn the 21-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage: "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. It was a comforting theory." What might the 43-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage be? Were you surprised when he described his entry into the Vietnam War as an act of cowardice? Do you agree that a person could enter a war as an act of cowardice?

4. What is the role of shame in the lives of these soldiers? Does it drive them to acts of heroism, or stupidity? Or both? What is the relationship between shame and courage, according to O'Brien?

5. Often, in the course of his stories, O'Brien tells us beforehand whether or not the story will have a happy or tragic ending. Why might he do so? How does it affect your attitude towards the narrator?

6. According to O'Brien, how do you tell a true war story? What does he mean when he says that true war stories are never about war? What does he mean when he writes of one story, "That's a true story that never happened"?

7. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," what transforms Mary Anne into a predatory killer? Does it matter that Mary Anne is a woman? How so? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?

8. The story Rat tells in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is highly fantastical. Does its lack of believability make it any less compelling? Do you believe it? Does it fit O'Brien's criteria for a true war story?

9. Aside from "The Things They Carried," "Speaking of Courage" is the only other story written in third person. Why are these stories set apart in this manner? What does the author achieve by doing so?

10. What is the effect of "Notes," in which O'Brien explains the story behind "Speaking Of Courage"? Does your appreciation of the story change when you learn which parts are "true" and which are the author's invention?

11. In "In The Field," O'Brien writes, "When a man died, there had to be blame." What does this mandate do to the men of O'Brien's company? Are they justified in thinking themselves at fault? How do they cope with their own feelings of culpability?

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

13. On the copyright page of the novel appears the following: "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary." How does this statement affect your reading of the novel?

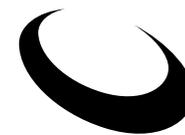


# Book Club in a Bag

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## *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

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KALAMAZOO  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY

[www.kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag](http://www.kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag)



### *The Things They Carried* Contents and Sign-out Sheet

Kits include one bag, 10 books, and a pocket folder of materials.  
Use this sign-out sheet to keep track of who takes which copy of the book. Groups may keep the folder when returning the books and bag.

Copy	Name	Returned
1	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
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10	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

Due Date:



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