

Tim O'Brien

The Things They Carried



Biography of Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien was born in 1946 in Worthington, Minn., a small prairie town which he describes by saying, "If you look in the dictionary under the word 'boring,' you'll find a little pen-and-ink illustration of my hometown." "It was a town full of typical Kiwanis boys and holier-than-thou preachers: Mid-America," he recalls, at a time when the country was moving "out of one war and into another." The county library was "a kind of sanctuary from the relentless monotony" for O'Brien, and he believes that something "happened in that library that meant as much to me as anything that happened in Vietnam."

In 1968 after graduating summa cum laude from McAlester College in St. Paul with a degree in political science, O'Brien was drafted into the army. Already involved in anti-war demonstrations, he remembers the time prior to induction as "a horrid, confused, traumatic period—the trauma of deciding whether or not to go to Canada." "Horace's old do-or-die aphorism—*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—was just an epitaph for the insane," O'Brien wrote in his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), but the prospect of separation from family and friends, and alienation from the country he knew resulted in his service with the U.S. Army's Fifth Battalion, Forty-Sixth Infantry—the "America Division"—from January 1969 to March 1970. In a terse summary of his time "in country," O'Brien says, "I was a coward. I went to war."

Returning to the United States with a Purple Heart in 1970, O'Brien entered a Ph.D. program in government at Harvard University. During the time he was at Harvard, he spent two summers as a reporter for the *Washington Post*, learning "the discipline of the newspaper story, the importance of correct grammar and active verbs," and published the memoir which he calls, paradoxically, less autobiography than literary imagination. In 1975, he published his first novel, *Northern Lights*, "my training novel, my *Torrents of Spring*" (acknowledging Hemingway's influence). The reviews were mixed, but O'Brien left Harvard without a degree in 1976. "Instead of writing my dissertation," he commented, "I was writing what I needed to write."

Going After Cacciato (1978) won the National Book Award, and in spite of its wartime setting, O'Brien observed that "if I were to pick up my own book and read it, my feeling would be that I wasn't really reading a war novel... It's quirky. It goes somewhere else; it goes *away* from the war. It starts there and goes to Paris. A *peace* novel, in a sense." Seven years later, O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* dealt with the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation. From the early '80s, he had also been publishing stories in magazines, including "The Things They Carried" in 1986, "How to Tell a True War Story" in 1987, and "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and "The Lives of the Dead" in 1989. These stories formed the basis for *The Things They Carried* (1990), where a narrator named "Tim O'Brien," who is "forty-three years old and a writer now" expresses his intentions by asserting, "Stories are for joining the past to the future... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story." In an interview in 1991, O'Brien disclosed, "Ninety percent or more of the material is invented, and I invented ninety percent of a new Tim O'Brien, maybe even more than that."

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Following *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), which concerns a Vietnam veteran who carries memories of the My Lai massacre into a political campaign in Minnesota, O'Brien somewhat confounded expectations with the novel *Tomcat in Love* (1998), but he insisted "though I am known as a 'Vietnam writer,' whatever that may be, I always pegged myself more as a 'love writer,' and in that regard *Tomcat in Love* is no departure at all." Continuing, he explains:

"In a general sense, all of my books are about betrayal and loss of faith. Vietnam is an example. I mean you go over there with all these naive ideas, believing in country and your president and your fellow man, and you find yourself disillusioned in important ways...And that's my terrain as a writer, that sense of loss...Every book I've written is about that. In *Tomcat in Love*, this guy's got a hole in his heart the size of Idaho, that needs filling up with love."

O'Brien, who is currently Writer in Residence at Southwest Texas State University in the Creative Writing Program, has just published a new book titled *July July*. The subject of the book is the year 1969, which O'Brien says was "a big, pivotal year for me. I was wounded in battle that year, saw friends die. It was the scariest month of my life, May of '69, but it was also a watershed year for America. The whole hawks-at-the-throats-of-doves thing going on, and battles about the war. The beginnings of the sexual revolution and feminism. It was huge, huge month in American history." As in his other work, O'Brien will have as his goal "to try to make the reader really believe the things are happening. And I think in *The Things They Carried*, I, by and large, succeeded. That book is pretty much read as: that must have happened to that guy, in some form or another."