

Tim O'Brien

AUTHOR OF *GOING AFTER CACCIATO*



The Things They Carried

"A marvel of storytelling . . . [*The Things They Carried*] matters not only to the reader interested in Vietnam but to anyone interested in the craft of writing as well." —*New York Times*

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The Things They Carried

a work of fiction by

Tim O'Brien

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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.

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Of these stories, five first appeared in *Esquire*: "The Things They Carried," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "The Ghost Soldiers," and "The Lives of the Dead." "Speaking of Courage" was first published in *The Massachusetts Review*, then later, in a revised version, in *Granta*. "In the Field" was first published in *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. "Style," "Spin," and "The Man I Killed" were first published, in different form, in *The Quarterly*. "The Things They Carried" appeared in *The Best American Short Stories* 1987. "Speaking of Courage" and "The Ghost Soldiers" appeared in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards* (1978 and 1982). "On the Rainy River" first appeared in *Playboy*. The author wishes to thank the editors of those publications and to express gratitude for support received from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Acclaim for
The Things They Carried

"With *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien adds his second title to the short list of essential fiction about Vietnam. As he did in his novel *Going After Cacciato*, which won a National Book Award, he captures the war's pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers. . . . High up on the list of best fiction about any war . . . A stunning performance. The overall effect of these original tales is devastating."

—Robert B. Harris, *New York Times Book Review*

"In prose that combines the sharp, unsentimental rhythms of Hemingway with gentler, more lyrical descriptions, Mr. O'Brien gives the reader a shockingly visceral sense of what it felt like to tramp through a booby-trapped jungle, carrying 20 pounds of supplies, 14 pounds of ammunition, along with radios, machine guns, assault rifles and grenades. . . . With *The Things They Carried*, Mr. O'Brien has written a vital, important book—a book that matters not only to the reader interested in Vietnam, but to anyone interested in the craft of writing as well."

—Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"When *Going After Cacciato* appeared out of nowhere to win the 1979 National Book Award, it seemed to many, myself included, that no finer war fiction had, as of then, been written in the closing half of the 20th century—or was likely to be in the remaining years to come. *The Things They Carried* disposes of that prediction. . . . Tim O'Brien is the best American writer of his generation."

—Tom Dowling, *San Francisco Examiner*

"The integrity of a novel and the immediacy of an autobiography . . . O'Brien's absorbing narrative moves in

circles; events are recalled and retold again and again, giving us a deep sense of the fluidity of truth and the dance of memory.”

—*The New Yorker*

“Rendered with an evocative, quiet precision, not equaled in the imaginative literature of the American war in Vietnam. It is as though a Thucydides had descended from grand *politique* and strategy to the calm dissection of the quotidian effects of war. . . . O’Brien has it just right.”

—*Washington Post*

“Powerful . . . Composed in the same lean, vigorous style as his earlier books, *The Things They Carried* adds up to a captivating account of the experiences of an infantry company in Vietnam. . . . Evocative and haunting, the raw force of confession.”

—*Wall Street Journal*

“O’Brien’s meditations—on war and memory, on darkness and light—suffuses the entire work with a kind of poetic form, making for a highly original, fully realized novel. . . . Beautifully honest . . . This book is persuasive in its desperate hope that stories can save us.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“O’Brien has written a book so searing and immediate you can almost hear the choppers in the background. Drenched in irony and purple-haze napalm, the Vietnam narrative has almost been forced to produce a new kind of war literature. *The Things They Carried* is an extraordinary contribution to that class of fiction. . . . O’Brien’s passion and memory may have been his torment all these years, but they have also been his gift. . . . *The Things They Carried* leaves third-degree burns. Between its rhythmic brilliance and its exquisite rendering of memory—the slant of sunlight in the midst of war, the look on a man’s face as he steps on a mine—this is prose headed for the nerve center of what was Vietnam.”

—Gail Caldwell, *Boston Globe*

"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. . . . It is an ultimate, indelible image of war in our time, and in time to come."

—Richard Eder, *Los Angeles Times*

"Simply marvelous . . . A striking sequence of stories that twist and turn and bounce off each other . . . O'Brien has invented a tone of voice precisely suited to this war: it conveys a risky load of sentiment kept in check by both a chaste prose and a fair amount of comedy. . . . Wars seldom produce good short stories, but two or three of these seem as good as any short stories written about any war. . . . Immensely affecting."

—Peter S. Prescott, *Newsweek*

"*The Things They Carried* is as good as any piece of literature can get. . . . The line between fiction and fact is beautifully, permanently blurred. It is the perfect approach to this sort of material, and O'Brien does it with vast skill and grace. . . . It is controlled and wild, deep and tough, perceptive and shrewd. I salute the man who wrote it."

—Asa Baber, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"Consummate artistry . . . A strongly unified book, a series of glimpses, through different facets, of a single, mysterious, deadly stone . . . O'Brien blends diverse incidents, voices, and genres, indelibly rendering the nightmarish impact of the Vietnam experience."

—Andy Solomon, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"O'Brien has brought us another remarkable piece of work . . . The stories have a specificity of observed physical detail that makes them seem a model of the realist's art. . . . What finally distinguishes *The Things They Carried* is O'Brien's understanding of the nature of memory."

—William Robertson, *Miami Herald*

"This is writing so powerful that it steals your breath. . . . It perfectly captures the moral confusion that is the legacy of the Vietnam War. . . . *The Things They Carried* is about more than war, of course. It is about the human heart and emotional baggage and loyalty and love. It is about the difference between 'truth' and 'reality.' It is about death—and life. It is successful on every level."

—*Milwaukee Journal*

"O'Brien's stunning new book of linked stories, *The Things They Carried*, is about the power of the imagination. . . . I've read all five of O'Brien's books with admiration that sometimes verges on awe. Nobody else can make me feel, as his three Vietnam books have, what I imagine to have been the reality of that war."

—Robert Wilson, *USA Today*

"I've got to make you read this book. . . . A certain panic arises in me. In trying to review a book as precious as *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, there is the nightmare fear of saying the wrong thing—of not getting the book's wonder across to you fairly—and of sounding merely zealous, fanatical, and hence to be dismissed. If I can't get you to go out and buy this book, then I've failed you. . . . In a world filled too often with numbness, or shifting values, these stories shine in a strange and opposite direction, moving against the flow, illuminating life's wonder, life's tenuousness, life's importance."

—Rick Bass, *Dallas Morning News*

"O'Brien has unmistakably forged one of the most persuasive works of any kind to arise out of any war."

—*Hartford Courant*

"O'Brien succeeds as well as any writer in conveying the free-fall sensation of fear and the surrealism of combat."

—*Time*

"It's a marvelous and chilling book, and something totally new in fiction. A dramatic redefinition of fiction itself, maybe. It will probably be a bestseller and a movie, and deserves to be. It will be nominated for prizes, but I wonder if any prize will do it justice. Maybe a silver star for telling the truth that never happened, passionately, gracefully."

—*Charlotte Observer*

"*The Things They Carried* is more than 'another' book about Vietnam. . . . It is a master stroke of form and imagery. . . . *The Things They Carried* is about life, about men who fought and die, about buddies, and about a lost innocence that might be recaptured through the memory of stories. O'Brien tells us these stories because he must. He tells them as they have never been told before. . . . If *Cacciato* was *the* book about Vietnam, then this is *the* book about surviving it."

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"Throughout, it is incredibly ordinary, human stuff—that's why this book is extra-ordinary. . . . Each story resonates with its predecessors, yet stands alone. The soft blurs with the hard. The gore and terror of Vietnam jungle warfare accumulate into an enormous mass."

—*Houston Chronicle*

"Even more than *Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried* is virtually impossible to summarize in conventional terms. If anything, it is a better book. . . . The novel is held together by two things: the haunting clarity of O'Brien's prose and the intensity of his focus. . . . O'Brien's stories are like nobody else's. His blend of poetic realism and comic fantasy remains unique. . . . In short, critics really can't account for O'Brien at all. At least in part that's because his Vietnam stories are really about the yearning for peace—aimed at human understanding rather than some 'definitive' understanding of the war. . . . Just by imagining stories that never happened, and embroidering upon some that did, O'Brien can bring it all back. He can feel the terror and the sorrow

and the crazy, jagged laughter. He can bring the dead back to life. And bring back the dreaming, too."

—Gene Lyons, *Entertainment Weekly*

"Brilliant . . . O'Brien again shows his literary stuff. . . . An acutely painful reading experience, this collection should be read as a book and not a mere collection of stories. Not since Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* has the American soldier been portrayed with such poignance and sincerity."

—*Library Journal*

"One hell of a book . . . You'll rarely read anything as real as this."

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* carries not only the soldiers' intangible burdens—grief, terror, love, longing—but also the weight of memory, the terrible gravity of guilt. It carries them, though, with a lovely, stirring grace, because it is as much about the redemptive power of stories as it is about Vietnam."

—*Orlando Sentinel*

"The author of the National Book Award-winning *Going After Cacciato* offers us fiction in a unique form: a kind of 'faction' presented as a collection of related stories that have the cumulative effect of a unified novel. . . . The prose ranges from staccato soldierly thoughts to raw depictions of violent death to intense personal ruminations by the author that don't appear to be fictional at all. Just when you thought there was nothing left to say about the Vietnam experience . . . there's plenty."

—Martin Brady, *Booklist*

"Astonishing . . . Richly wrought and filled with war's paradoxes, *The Things They Carried* will reward a second, or even a third, reading. . . . His ambitious, modernistic fable, *Going After Cacciato*, raised the American war novel to new artistic realms. *The Things They Carried* is also astonishing—in a whole new way."

—*Boston Sunday Herald*

"Eloquent . . . In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien expertly fires off tracer rounds, illuminating the art of war in all its horrible and fascinating complexity, detailing the mad and the mundane. . . . *The Things They Carried* joins the work of Crane and Hemingway and Mailer as great war literature."

—*Tampa Tribune & Times*

"*The Things They Carried* is distinguished by virtue of the novelty and complexity of its presentation. Mr. O'Brien is a superb prose stylist, perhaps the best among Vietnam War novelists. . . . The imaginative retelling of the war is just as real as the war itself, maybe more so, and experiencing these narratives can be powerfully cathartic for writer and reader alike."

—*Atlanta Journal & Constitution*

"The search for the great American novel will never end, but it gets a step closer to realization with *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien."

—*Detroit Free Press*

"His language is simple—no tricks, no phony subtlety, no 'artistic' twists. The writing is as clear as one of his northern Minnesota lakes. . . . *The Things They Carried* charts out a lot of emotional territory, gripping the reader from beginning to end. This is one of those books you should read. It is also one of those books you'll be glad you did. . . . This book—and these lives—will live for a long time."

—Ernst-Ulrich Franzen, *Milwaukee Sentinel*

"There have been movies. And plays. And books. But there has been nothing like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. . . . O'Brien's vision is unique. . . . All of us, by holding O'Brien's stories in our hands, can approach Vietnam and truth."

—*San Diego Union*

"His characters and his situations are unique and ring true to the point of tears. His prose is simply magnificent. . . . Unforgettable."

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A powerful yet lyrical work of fiction.”

—The Associated Press

“O’Brien’s new master work. . . . Go out and get this book and read it. Read it slowly, and let O’Brien’s masterful storytelling and his eloquent philosophizing about the nature of war wash over you. . . . *The Things They Carried* is a major work of literary imagination.” —*The Veteran*

“In *The Things They Carried*, a matchlessly literary book, O’Brien casts away any least pretense and writes straight from the heart. . . . *The Things They Carried* is an accomplished, gentle, lovely book.”

—John Mort, *Kansas City Star*

Books by Tim O'Brien

If I Die in a Combat Zone

Northern Lights

Going After Cacciato

The Nuclear Age

The Things They Carried

In the Lake of the Woods

Tomcat in Love

This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Erik Hansen, Rust Hills,
Camille Hykes, Seymour Lawrence, Andy McKillop,
Ivan Nabokov, Les Ramirez, and, above all,
to Ann O'Brien.

This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the "late war" or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest.

—*John Ransom's Andersonville Diary*

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