The Things They Carried

a novel about the meaning and creation of stories

“Stories are about joining the past to the future… Stories are for eternity. When memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (O’Brien, 40). From the absence of memory is born *The Things They Carried*, the story of Tim O’Brien’s experience in Vietnam. But, as every reader soon finds out after she has bent the spine of this book, these are not necessarily the memories of Tim O’Brien, the novelist—although the author does make guest appearances—but, rather, Tim O’Brien, the invented character that the author created to tell a “truth” about Vietnam. The author, therefore, puts a particular spin on the truth describing this spin as akin to the spin put on a ping-pong when returning a serve—both are used to make their object “dance” in a particular way (35). But because *The Things They Carried* is about a soldier’s experience with the Vietnam War, we as readers are not expecting this pin and, when reading it, are apt to miss the truth completely.

O’Brien explains that truth is what takes place in the world when we are afraid to look. The result is that we are left with “faceless responsibility and faceless grief” (203). And so we invent. We create. We tell a story. And this story becomes, to use Jean Baudrillard’s famous phrase, “More real than real.” The actual event becomes lost in the memory’s print of the event. And each time the story is told, the memory breathes and, in its breathing, new stories are formed. Or to use O’Brien’s words, “The thing about a story is that you dram it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make the spirits in the head” (206).

Teaching the Novel Across the Curriculum: A Handbook for Educators

By Colin C. Irvine

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