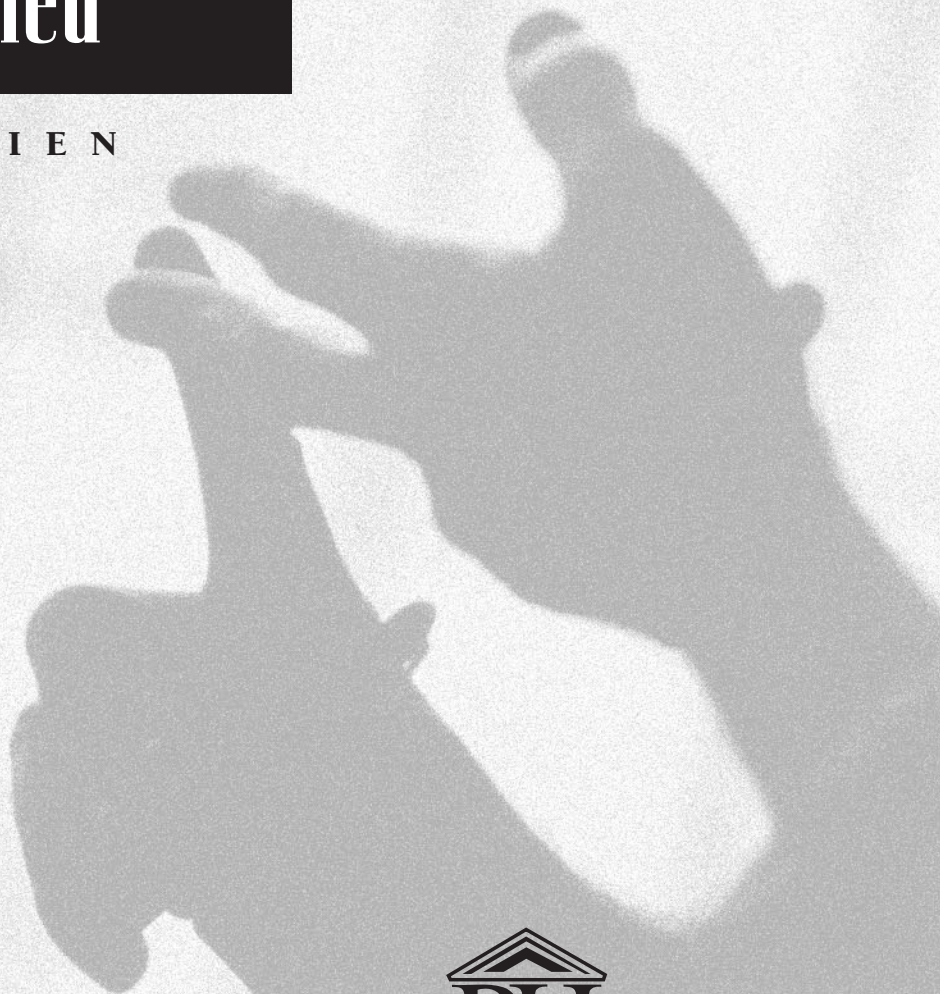


INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PACKET/TEACHING UNIT

The Things They Carried

T I M O ' B R I E N



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Teaching Unit

The Things They Carried

by Tim O'Brien

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The Things They Carried

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.

The Things They Carried

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

Terms and Definitions

Anecdote - a brief story that is usually illustrative or humorous, similar to a vignette.

Autobiography - the relating of a person's life by that person. **Example:** *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Conflict - the struggle that moves the action forward in a work of literature. There are three types of conflict, and most books include all three: *man versus man* (**Example:** a typical Western, in which the sheriff confronts the outlaws); *man versus nature* (**Example:** a story about someone surviving in a small boat on the ocean); *man versus himself* (**Example:** a character in a story fighting his or her own drug abuse).

Fiction - a literary work that is not true. **Examples:** *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Flashback - a scene that interrupts the ongoing action in a story to show an event that happened earlier. **Example:** The movie, *Citizen Kane*, tells its story almost exclusively through the memories of its characters, who all knew Kane before his death.

Imagery - the use of words to evoke impressions and meanings that are more than just the basic, accepted definitions of the words themselves. **Example:** The quotation, "Get thee to a nunnery," from *Hamlet* implies that Ophelia must regain her purity and chastity and does not simply mean that she needs to go to a convent.

Irony - a perception of inconsistency, sometimes humorous, in which the significance and understanding of a statement or event is changed by its context. **Example:** The firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic Irony* - the audience or reader knows more about a character's situation than the character does and knows that the character's understanding is incorrect. **Example:** In *Medea*, Creon asks, "What atrocities could she commit in one day?" The reader, however, knows Medea will destroy her family and Creon's by day's end.
- *Structural Irony* - the use of a naïve hero, whose incorrect perceptions differ from the reader's correct ones. **Example:** Huck Finn.
- *Verbal Irony* - a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. **Example:** A large man whose nickname is "Tiny."

Memoir - an account of one portion of a person's life, as told by that person; similar to an autobiography, but covering a smaller time period. **Example:** Nixon's *Six Crises*.

Metaphor - a comparison of two things that are basically dissimilar in which one is described in terms of the other. **Example:** The moon, a haunting lantern, shone through the clouds.

Narrator - the one who tells the story. The narrator must not be confused with "author," the one who writes the story. If the narrator is a character in the book, the proper term is "first-person narration." **Example:** *Moby Dick* is narrated by Ishmael, a crewmember. If the narrator is not a character in the book, the correct term is "third-person narration." **Example:** *Sense and Sensibility*.

Point of View - the position or vantage point, determined by the author, from which the story seems to come to the reader. The two most common points of view are First-person and Third-person. **Examples:** First-person point of view occurs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; the reader receives all information through Huck's eyes. An example of third-person point of view is Dickens' *Hard Times*, in which the narrator is not a character in the book.

Simile - a comparison between two different things using either *like* or *as*. **Examples:** I am as hungry as a horse. The huge trees broke like twigs during the hurricane.

Style - the way an author chooses and uses words, phrases, and sentences to tell the story. For example, in an action/adventure story, the author may use simple words and short, choppy sentences, because this style moves the story along quickly. In a story about a college professor, the same author may choose to use polysyllabic, unfamiliar words, and long, convoluted sentences.

Symbol - an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. **Example:** The sea could be symbolic for "the unknown." Since the sea is something that is physical and can be seen by the reader, and also has elements that cannot be understood, it can be used symbolically to stand for the abstraction of "mystery," "obscurity," or "the unknown."

The Things They Carried

Test

Multiple Choice

1. *The Things They Carried* can best be described as a/an
 - A. allegory.
 - B. biography.
 - C. memoir.
 - D. moral fairy tale.
 - E. fictional narrative.
2. Jimmy Cross's obsession is with a girl named
 - A. Nancy.
 - B. Lelia.
 - C. Martha.
 - D. Katherine.
 - E. Linda.
3. Through the death of Ted Lavender, Jimmy learns
 - A. how to bury a soldier.
 - B. which path to take up the mountain.
 - C. that he must give up his obsession with a girl.
 - D. he doesn't really want to be a soldier.
 - E. war is dangerous.
4. What are Freedom Birds?
 - A. birds of peace
 - B. awards given to brave soldiers
 - C. local bird the soldiers hunt for dinner
 - D. airplanes
 - E. toys for the Vietnamese children
5. Why does young Tim O'Brien decide to go to war rather than flee to Canada?
 - A. He wants to meet girls there.
 - B. He has no education and thinks the army can provide one for him.
 - C. His parents threaten to turn him into the authorities.
 - D. He knows it is his duty and is embarrassed to let his family down.
 - E. Elroy Berdahl threatens to turn him into the authorities.

6. Why do the men talk to the dead bodies and play games with them?
 - A. They talk to the bodies in order to lighten up the situation and make death seem less real.
 - B. They enjoyed the blood and gore of war.
 - C. They are ordered to do so by Lt. Cross.
 - D. They are young and do not know any better.
 - E. None of the above
7. The medic in Alpha Company is a man named
 - A. Mitchell Sanders.
 - B. Jimmy Cross.
 - C. Rat Kiley.
 - D. Mark Fossie.
 - E. Ted Lavender.
8. Rat Kiley overcomes the grief of Curt Lemon's death by
 - A. killing a water buffalo.
 - B. drinking all night long.
 - C. finding a girl in the village.
 - D. killing himself.
 - E. abandoning his company and going AWOL.
9. Why does Curt Lemon have a healthy tooth pulled out?
 - A. He'd lost a bet.
 - B. To prove he is not afraid of the dentist.
 - C. He wants to send it home.
 - D. He wants to play a joke on some of the guys with it.
 - E. The dentist does not like him and wants to torture him.
10. Who tells Kiowa he wanted to be a minister when he was younger?
 - A. Mitchell Sanders
 - B. Norman Bowker
 - C. Henry Dobbins
 - D. Lee Strunk
 - E. Dave Jensen
11. Where is Mary Anne from?
 - A. Chu Lai
 - B. New Jersey
 - C. Cleveland Heights
 - D. Texas
 - E. Saigon

12. Why does Norman Bowker drive around the lake all night?
- A. He is looking for his friend.
 - B. He is waiting for the fireworks to start.
 - C. He is remembering his youth when he would drive around the lake at night.
 - D. He doesn't relate to anyone anymore and doesn't know what to do with himself.
 - E. He can't go home and face his father.
13. Which of the following is NOT a characteristic of a true war story, according to the author?
- A. it is moral; encourages virtue
 - B. it embarrasses the listener
 - C. it never seems to end
 - D. it is difficult to separate what really happened from what seemed to happen
 - E. it does not matter if it is true or not
14. Why does Henry Dobbins pick Azar up and threaten to throw him in a well?
- A. Dobbins stole Azar's knife.
 - B. Azar is making fun of the way a village girl danced.
 - C. Dobbins is tired of Azar's attitude.
 - D. Azar is responsible for Kiowa's death.
 - E. Dobbins has finally gone crazy and is sent home.
15. Why does young Tim O'Brien cry in the boat with Elroy Berdahl?
- A. He does not want to go to Vietnam.
 - B. He cannot decide if he will go to Vietnam.
 - C. He is crying for his freedom because he has decided to go to Vietnam.
 - D. He is embarrassed.
 - E. He misses his parents.
16. What is important about the story of Mary Anne?
- A. The story shows that war changes everyone.
 - B. The story is about love lost.
 - C. It is an example of a true war story.
 - D. It shows the struggles of women in war.
 - E. It proves that 'Greenies' corrupt everyone.
17. According to the author, what is important about telling stories?
- A. Stories help the teller forget his/her experiences.
 - B. Stories are good for writing books in order to make a good living.
 - C. Stories make things present, help the teller to feel again.
 - D. Stories help your children understand who you are.
 - E. Stories preserve memories and experiences.

18. Why does O'Brien want to get back at Jorgenson?
- A. He is mad because Jorgenson almost let him go into shock.
 - B. He wants to feel like a soldier again, be part of the group.
 - C. The war has changed him into a vengeful person.
 - D. Jorgenson is really a jerk and needs to be taught a lesson.
 - E. None of the above
19. What is the author's, Tim O'Brien's, daughter named?
- A. Linda
 - B. Martha
 - C. Katherine
 - D. Kathleen
 - E. Mary Anne
20. Why is the story of Linda included in this book?
- A. It is a love story.
 - B. The story shows how we all have to deal with death in our lives.
 - C. It is supposed to make the reader feel sorry for young Timmy.
 - D. The book needs a happy ending.
 - E. It is another example of a true war story.
21. The narrative in this story is
- A. in the first person by a character within the story
 - B. from the point of view of Jimmy Cross
 - C. in the third person by an all-knowing narrator
 - D. from the point of view of Norman Bowker
 - E. Both A and C

Short Answer Questions

22. How does Tim O'Brien feel about the Vietnam War when he is drafted?
23. Give two characteristics of a true war story.
24. Why does Tim O'Brien return to Vietnam twenty years after the war?

Essay Questions (Answer any two.)

1. Characterize Tim O'Brien's understanding of the purpose of fiction. How does fiction relate to life, that is, life in the journalistic or historic sense?
2. In many ways, this book is as much about stories, or the necessity of stories, as it is about the Vietnam War. According to O'Brien, what do stories accomplish? Why does he continue to tell stories about the Vietnam War, about Linda?
3. Assume that the writer, Tim O'Brien, created a fictional main character, also called Tim O'Brien, to inhabit this novel. Why would the real Tim O'Brien do that? What would that accomplish in this novel? How would that strengthen a book about "truth"?
4. If O'Brien is trying to relate some essential details about emotional life—as opposed to historic life—is he successful in doing that? Is he justified in tinkering with the facts to get at some larger story of truth?

The Things They Carried

Answer Key

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. A | 11. C | 16. A |
| 2. C | 7. C | 12. E | 17. C |
| 3. C | 8. A | 13. A | 18. B |
| 4. D | 9. B | 14. B | 19. D |
| 5. D | 10. C | 15. C | 20. B |
| | | | 21. E |
22. He is angry because he has plans for college and he is opposed to war.
23. True war stories are not moral or happy, they embarrass the listener, their events are mostly untrue, and they never seem to end.
24. He returns to resolve his feelings from the war and to pay his respects to Kiowa.

The Things They Carried

Study Guide Teacher's Copy

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?

Martha, Jimmy's pen pal, is an English major in her junior year at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. Jimmy is in love with Martha to the point that he obsesses over her, and she becomes a distraction from the war for him. Martha treats Jimmy as a friend; her letters are nonchalant and they avoid the topic of love.

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

Answers will vary. Example: Martha may be ignoring the realities of war because she is uncomfortable or unfamiliar with them. She represents Jimmy's carefree life before the war.

3. List some items that the men carry. How do certain items reflect the individual?
Answers will vary. Example: The men carry necessities such as P-38 can openers, heat tabs, dog tags, salt tablets, canteens of water, and pocketknives. Field specialty determines certain items; for instance, Rat Kiley, the medic, carries medical supplies and Henry Dobbins, the machine gunner, carries the M-60. The men also carry personal items, such as Kiowa's New Testament, Dave Jensen's oral hygiene items, and Rat Kiley's comic books.

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

The author wants you to understand how much the soldiers have to physically endure.

5. What is the opening setting of the novel?

The story begins in mid-April in the Than Khe area of Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

6. Explain what the author means about Martha's world when he writes, "She belonged to another world, which was not quite real." (Pg. 17)

Answers will vary. Example: Martha lives in a world untouched by the war. Jim can never return to her world because he has been exposed to the horrific realities of war.

7. What does it mean that the men use "a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness"? (Pg. 20) Why is it terrible to be internally soft?

Answers will vary. Example: The men act tough and nonchalant to disguise their fear, doubts, and sorrows. It is terrible to be vulnerable and soft because the men are embarrassed in front of their peers. Also, vulnerability may detract from fighting efficiency and lead to injury or death.

8. Describe some of the intangible things that the men carry.

Answers will vary. The men carry fear, memories, grief, love, hatred, longing, and regret.

9. What are freedom birds? Why do the men feel guilty for dreaming about them?

Freedom birds are the jet planes that take injured men back to America. Men feel guilty for dreaming about freedom birds because, in returning home, they are abandoning their friends and fellow soldiers.

10. Why does Jimmy burn Martha's letters and pictures?

Jimmy was distracted by thoughts of Martha, and he blames himself for Ted Lavender's death.

11. What does throwing away the good-luck pebble symbolize?

To Jimmy, discarding the pebble represents distancing himself from Martha and his life before the war. Jimmy is determined to improve his duties as an officer.

Chapter Two

Love

1. How does the point-of-view in chapter two differ from chapter one?

Chapter one is written in a third-person omniscient narrative, but chapter two begins in a first-person narrative.

2. Jimmy sees Martha at a college reunion and they spend the day together. What does Martha's body language towards Jimmy imply?

Answers will vary. Example: Martha's countenance is calm, her eyes are expressionless and neutral, and she does not return pressure when Jimmy holds her hand.

3. What is Martha's response when Jimmy tells her that he still loves her? How is her response explained?

Martha remains quiet after Jimmy's profession of love, and then she looks at her watch and implies that she wishes to retire for the evening. The author suggests that Martha is not interested in men because she does not understand how they can do "the things men do." (Pg. 29)

4. Why do you suppose Jimmy still loves Martha after she makes it clear that she has no interest in him?

Answers will vary. Example: Jimmy is still in love with the image he had of Martha through the war.

5. How does the chapter's title relate to events in the chapter?

Answers will vary. Jimmy and the author share a love for the men and the memories from Vietnam. Also, Jimmy still loves Martha, and Martha cannot love men.

Chapter Three

Spin

Vocabulary

ammo—ammunition

AWOL—absent without official leave

monotony—tedious, sameness, or repetitiousness

poppa-san—old man

tranquilizers—sedatives

vacant—empty

1. The chapter opens with an anecdote about Azar and a Vietnamese boy with one leg. What do you suppose Azar's reaction to the boy means?

Answers will vary. Example: Azar may make his comment about the ammo because he sympathizes with the boy and feels the boy would be better off dead than with only one leg. Azar may sympathize with the soldier who ran out of ammo because he knows the soldier must live with crippling the boy.

2. What does Mitchell Sanders do with his body lice?

He puts each one in an USO envelope, seals it up, writes FREE in the upper right hand corner and addresses it to his draft board in Ohio.

3. How does the author compare checkers to Vietnam and the war?

Checkers is orderly and planned, unlike the unorganized wanderings of the men. The checkerboard is laid out in a strict grid, unlike the changing terrain of Vietnam's tunnels, mountains, and jungles. The game has red and black checkers but, in Vietnam, it is hard to distinguish whether someone is a friend or foe. Unlike the Vietnam War, checkers has a winner, a loser, and rules.

4. Explain how the following passage about boredom in the war is ironic.
“Even in the deep bush, where you could die any number of ways, the war was nakedly and aggressively boring. But it was a strange boredom. It was boredom with a twist, the kind of boredom that caused stomach disorders.” (Pg. 34)

The concept of being bored is ironic because, even while sitting and waiting, the soldiers must deal with a deep fear and anxiety of not knowing what will happen next or if they are going to die. This impending danger and constantly being on guard is contradictory to the concept of boredom.

5. The author relays a story about a soldier who goes AWOL and finds peace, but then he returns to battle, saying, “All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*.” (Pg. 35) What does the soldier mean by this statement?

Answers will vary. Example: Now that the soldier has a fresh perspective of peace, he returns to fight spitefully because he knows how good life is without war.

6. Who is the narrator of the novel?

The narrator is the author of the book, Tim O'Brien.

7. Why is this chapter called Spin?

The author writes: “On occasions the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance.” (Pg. 32) This chapter is about some of the ways the author and his friends deal with the war. The author is telling his story; he puts his own ‘spin’ on his experiences.

Chapter Four **On the Rainy River**

Vocabulary

acquiescence—passive assent or agreement without protests

adrenaline—a hormone

cold war—a state of tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union

nationalist—devoted to the interests or culture of a nation

pacifist—one opposed to using war

schizophrenia—a psychotic disorder

SEATO—Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

1. Describe the tone in the beginning of the chapter.

The chapter begins in a serious and secretive tone.

2. What view on war has O'Brien maintained since he was in college?

He believes “that when a nation goes to war it must have reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative of its cause.” (Pg. 40-41) He sees no purpose in the Vietnam War.

3. How does O'Brien react when he receives his draft notice, and why?

He is angry about being drafted for a war that he doesn't believe in. He recently graduated from college and has a scholarship for grad studies at Harvard, and the war poses as an inconvenience to his happy lifestyle.

4. Describe the author's job during the summer of 1968. How is his job ironic when compared to his earlier statement, "The sight of blood made me queasy." (Pg. 41)

He spends the summer working in an Armour meatpacking plant washing blood clots out of pig carcasses with a water gun. One excuse for not wanting to go to war is that he cannot stand the sight of blood, but, ironically, he works "for eight hours a day under a lukewarm blood-shower." (Pg. 43)

5. Who is Elroy Berdahl? How does he help O'Brien?

Elroy is the eighty-one year old innkeeper of the Tip Top Lodge. Answers will vary. Elroy never mentions the obvious fact that O'Brien is in trouble, but instead gives the boy a quiet place to stay and figure out his problem.

6. What does the author mean when he says, "The man knew." (Pg. 54)

The author means that Elroy knows what Tim is struggling with and that Tim already knows the decision he must reach.

7. What keeps O'Brien from running to Canada?

Answers will vary. Example: Even though he feels the war is wrong, O'Brien is afraid of shaming himself before his family, friends, and neighbors by running away.

8. What is the significance of the "Emergency Fund" that Elroy gives O'Brien?

The money is Elroy's silent way of helping O'Brien with his problem, as well as making him confront the reality of his situation.

9. On the sixth day, when Elroy and O'Brien go fishing, Elroy takes the boat twenty yards off the Canadian coast. O'Brien faces the decision of staying on the boat or swimming to shore, which he describes as "the wooded frontier." (Pg. 56) Explain how O'Brien's description of the Canadian coastline is symbolic of this juncture in his life.

Answers will vary. Example: If O'Brien chooses to swim to shore, he is leaving his old life and starting a new one. He will be facing an unknown frontier alone if he goes to Canada.

10. O'Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but does not. What reason does he give for not jumping?

O'Brien says he does not jump because he is embarrassed: "It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was." (Pg.59)

11. Are there other reasons for going to the war that O'Brien does not list?

Answers will vary. Example: In the last lines, the author writes, "I was a coward. I went to the war." (Pg. 61) Another reason he goes to war is because he is afraid not to go. He is afraid to stand up for what he believes in and to stand against the rest of the country.

Chapter Five

Enemies

1. Who are the enemies in this chapter?

Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen are the enemies.

2. What do they fight about?

Dave Jensen accuses Strunk of stealing his jackknife.

3. Who wins the fight? How does the winner act after the fight?

Dave Jensen wins by breaking Lee Strunk's nose. Jensen's guilt for hurting Strunk causes him to become paranoid and extremely skittish.

4. Why does Dave Jensen break his nose with a pistol?

Since he broke Strunk's nose in the fight, Jensen breaks his own nose to make things even between them.

5. What is ironic about the end of the chapter?

Strunk did steal the jack knife and harbors no bad feelings toward Jensen for breaking his nose.

Chapter Six Friends

Vocabulary

dustoff—a helicopter picking up dead bodies from the war (slang)

tourniquet—a device or tightly encircled bandage used to stop bleeding

1. Who are the friends in this chapter?

Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen are the friends.

2. What is the contract that the two friends make with each other? How is this contract peculiar?

The two make a pact that if either should ever sustain “a wheelchair wound,” the other “would automatically find a way to end it.” (Pg. 65)

Answers will vary. Example: Jensen and Strunk were enemies in the previous chapter, but now they are close enough friends to make such a pact. The idea of friends making promises to kill each other may be difficult to understand.

3. What happens to Strunk?

Strunk steps on a mortar round and loses his right leg.

4. Do Strunk and Jensen keep their pact with one another?

No, Strunk begs Jensen not to kill him, so Jensen does not. Strunk dies on the helicopter.

5. Explain why the news of Strunk’s death “seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous relief.” (Pg. 66)

Answers will vary. Example: Jensen is relieved that he did not have to kill his friend. He is also glad that his friend will not have to suffer any longer.

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.” (Pg. 67) How does this line prepare the reader for the story?

Answers will vary. Example: If not in actual events, then in the moral lesson, is the essence of what O’Brien is about to discuss true.

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

Rat writes to the dead soldier, Curt Lemon’s, sister.

Answers will vary. Example: Writing the letter is a form of therapy for Rat because he can release his frustration over his friend’s death.

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

Lemon’s sister never responds to Rat’s letter. He becomes frustrated and angry, and calls her a bad name.

4. How does Curt Lemon die?

Lemon and Rat Kiley are playing a game they made up called “yellow mother”. It involves throwing a smoke bomb back and forth to each other until it pops. Whoever is left holding the bomb is a yellow mother. Curt steps on a landmine and is blown to pieces. (Pg. 69)

5. List some of the elements that, according to O’Brien, compose a true war story.

Answers will vary. Example: A true war story is never moral or uplifting, and it embarrasses you. The details are more likely to be what seemed to happen as opposed to what actually happened, so not every detail is completely true. A true war story also seems to never end.

6. O'Brien writes about true war stories in the following passage:

“In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.” (Pg. 71)

Why are normal details necessary in a war story if they are not true?

A true war story consists of unbelievable and surreal events. Normal events must be added to make the listener more likely to believe the legitimacy of the story.

7. Summarize the story that Mitchell Sanders tells O'Brien?

Sanders talks about six men who go on a listening-post operation in the mountains for a week. The men begin to hear music, talking, and party sounds coming from the rocks, trees, and ground. They start to go crazy, so they have the terrain napalmed.

8. What details does Sanders add to his story in order to make it more believable?

He adds details about the glee club and the opera.

9. What does Sanders mean when he gives the moral of his story by saying, “That quiet—just listen. There's your moral.” (Pg. 77)

Answers will vary. Example: There is no moral to his story, it is just a part of life.

10. Why does Rat Kiley kill the baby water buffalo? Describe the emotions he experiences.

Killing the water buffalo is Kiley's way of mourning his friend's death. Answers will vary. Example: Kiley is angry and frustrated about his friend's death; he wants to cause pain because he is in so much pain. Kiley is seeking a way to vent his frustration while, at the same time, saving face in front of the other soldiers.

11. Why is the scene where Kiley brutally murders the baby water buffalo so disturbing?

Answers will vary.

12. Explain what the author means about the beauty of war in the following passage:

“The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat.” (Pg. 80)

O'Brien is discussing “the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty.” (Pg. 81) While death is horrific, the sights of symmetrical troop formations and bright explosives are pleasing to the eyes.

13. Explain how “proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life.” (Pg. 81)

Answers will vary. Example: When faced with death, life becomes more precious and desirable. One feels more alive and aware of surrounding life.

14. Why does the author say that this story is not a war story, but a love story?

Answers will vary. It is a love story about friends and pain and grief. Rat Kiley loves Curt Lemon as a best friend, and he loses his best friend in the blink of an eye. The story may be a message to not take friends for granted, and to appreciate the time we have with each other.

15. O’Brien explains that he can change all the details in his story, such as the names, places, and events, because they are irrelevant in relaying the truth. What kind of truth is O’Brien trying to communicate if not actual fact?

Answers will vary. Example: What historically happened does not matter because he is trying to explain the actual feelings and emotions of war.

Chapter Eight

The Dentist

1. Describe the dentist and what he does for the men.

The Army dentist is “a tall, skinny young captain with bad breath.” (Pg. 87) He sets up a makeshift dental work area to give brief, systematic exams to the men.

2. Who is afraid to visit the dentist? Why is this ironic when compared to his description?

Curt Lemon is afraid of the dentist because he had past bad experiences. It is ironic that he is afraid of the dentist because he has “a tendency to play the tough soldier role.” (Pg. 86) Also, Lemon is not bothered by blood or pain.

3. How does this person act in the dentist’s office? What does he do to redeem himself?

*Lemon faints before the dentist touches him.
Late that night, Lemon wakes up the dentist and insists that he pull out a healthy tooth.*

Chapter Nine

Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong

Vocabulary

ambush—lying in wait to attack by surprise

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam

coy—shy; reserved

morale—the state of the spirits of a person or group

mundane—commonplace; ordinary

1. Does the author believe the story of the sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong? Cite evidence supporting your answer.

The author does not believe the story is true. He writes, “Among the men in Alpha Company, Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts, and for most of us it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say.” (Pg.89)

2. Who is Mark Fossie? What does he do?

Rat Kiley serves with Fossie in a small medical detachment in the mountains west of Chu Lai.

Fossie flies his girlfriend, Mary Anne, to the war for a visit.

3. Give a description of the outpost, which the narrator describes as “isolated and vulnerable,” and the surrounding terrain. (Pg. 92)

The medical outpost is located in the mountains west of Chu Lai, near Tra Bong, overlooking a river called the Song Tra Bong. Emergency and trauma care are handled at this facility. Meager base security and a wire fence around the perimeter serve as little protection. Thick jungles, mountains, ravines, and rivers enclose the facility.

4. Describe the Greenies.

The Greenies are six Special Forces Green Berets who still use the facility. They live in their own hootch, which is blocked off by sandbags and a wire fence, at the end of the outpost. The Greenies keep to themselves, and often disappear for days on secret missions.

5. Describe Mary Anne when she arrives at the medical unit.

Mary Anne is “a tall, big-boned blonde. At best, Rat said, she was seventeen years old, fresh out of Cleveland Heights Senior High. She had long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream. Very friendly, too.” (Pg. 93)

6. How does Mary Anne behave after she arrives?

Mary Anne is outgoing and curious. She asks a lot of questions and begins learning about military equipment and Vietnamese culture.

7. How does Mary Anne begin to change?

Mary Anne starts helping treat the wounded. She stops wearing make-up, filing her nails, and wearing jewelry. She cuts her hair short and starts wearing a bandana. She learns to use weapons and her attitude towards Mark Fossie begins to change.

8. Mary Anne cannot be found one night. Where does Fossie believe she is? Where is she and what is she doing?

Fossie believes Mary Anne is with another man, cheating on him. She is actually on ambush with the Special Forces Green Berets.

9. What is the compromise that Mary Anne and Mark make after her night on ambush?

Mark must have given Mary Anne an ultimatum because, the next morning, she is dressed back to normal and the two are officially engaged

10. Does their compromise last? What happens to Mary Anne?

No, the compromise does not last. After a few days of strained relations, Mary Anne leaves for three weeks with the green berets.

11. After Mary Anne returns from her trip with the Greenies, the author writes, “In a sense she never returned. Not entirely, not all of her.” (Pg. 105) What does this statement mean?

Mary Anne physically returns, but her old personality is gone. The war changes her into a completely different person.

12. The author leaves Mary Anne’s fate unknown. Would knowing exactly what happens to her after she leaves camp make this story better? What is the moral of the story?

Answers will vary. Example: Mary Anne makes some major changes and that is what is important. It does not matter exactly what happens to her in the end. The moral of the story is to illustrate how war changes everyone.

Chapter Ten Stockings

Vocabulary

talisman—a charm; an object marked with magic signs

1. How is Henry Dobbins “like America itself?” (Pg. 117)

According to O’Brien, Dobbins is like America because he is physically powerful, well intentioned, reliable, sentimental, and “a believer in the virtues of simplicity and directness and hard labor.” (Pg. 117)

2. Where and why does Dobbins wear stockings?

Dobbins wraps his girlfriend’s stockings around his neck. He considers them a good luck charm to protect him from harm.

3. How does the platoon react to Dobbins’ superstitious behavior?

At first, the men viewed Dobbins’ ritual with humor. After Dobbins is almost killed twice and escapes without injury, the platoon begins to believe in the “magic” of the pantyhose.

Chapter Eleven

Church

1. Why does Kiowa say it is wrong to set up in a church?

Kiowa's father teaches Sunday school and Kiowa has respect for church. To Kiowa, a church is a sacred place and should not be used to house a platoon of killers.

2. Why does Kiowa want to be a minister? How is part of his reasoning ironic?

Kiowa wants to be a minister for material and humanitarian reasons. He likes that ministers receive a free car and house, and he wants to help people. Religion has very little to do with it.

It is ironic for Kiowa, a man at war, to say that his goal for life is "just being nice to people, that's all. Being decent." (Pg. 121)

3. The monks often make a "strange washing motion" (Pg. 120) with their hands. What do you suppose the motion means?

Answers will vary. Example: Perhaps the motion is an attempt to wave "hello" in an American style.

Chapter Twelve

The Man I Killed

1. Why does O'Brien begin the chapter with a vivid description of the dead man's wounds?

Answers will vary. Example: O'Brien starts with a detailed description in order set the mood for the reader of the severity of the scene. The memory that he is writing about is serious and disturbing.

2. O'Brien gives a hypothetical, detailed description of the dead man's life. What is the significance of writing this?

Answers will vary. O'Brien creates an identity because he wants to relay the impact of really killing a person. The dead man is more than just another face—he has family, friends, and dreams. In a sense, O'Brien makes the man just like him, a soldier. The man loses his life defending his country, just as O'Brien is defending his country.

3. What does Kiowa say to make Tim feel better and to stop staring at the body?

Kiowa reminds Tim that they are at war and the man also had a gun. He points out that, if Tim had not shot the man, someone else would have. Kiowa encourages Tim to stop staring at the body.

4. How does the reader know that Tim O'Brien is still bothered by this incident when he writes this book?

Answers will vary. O'Brien repeatedly gives vivid details of the dead man's wounds and features, signifying that these images are engraved in his memory.

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?

Answers will vary.

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"? (Pg. 131)

Answers will vary. Example: Writing war stories is a therapeutic way for Tim to work out his feelings. Also, by rewriting stories, O'Brien is hoping to clear his confused memories and find the truth of what really happened.

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." (Pg. 133) What is his reason for killing the man?

In both versions of his story, O'Brien admits to being afraid. In the longer story version, he says that his actions are automatic and without thoughts of killing.

Chapter Fourteen

Style

1. Why is the girl dancing?

Answers will vary. Example: The girl's family is dead and her town is destroyed. She is likely very frightened and is dancing to calm herself down, or else she has gone insane.

2. Why does the girl cover her ears when she is dancing?

Answers will vary. Example: The girl may be so traumatized that she still hears the sounds of the gunships or her family screaming, so she is trying to block out the sound.

3. Why does Dobbins get upset with Azar?

Dobbins gets upset with Azar for making fun of the girl's dancing. Dobbins feels sorry for the girl and wants Azar to show a little respect.

4. Why does Tim O'Brien include this chapter?

Answers will vary. Example: Stories like this help the reader understand some of the traumatic and surreal experiences of the war. The author is trying to relay the disturbing emotional issues that the soldiers, as well as the Vietnamese, endure.

Chapter Fifteen

Speaking of Courage

Vocabulary

affluent—wealthy

pedal pushers—calf-length slacks worn by women and girls

phosphorescence—a glowing in the dark

shrapnel—metal fragments from an exploding shell

1. Describe the area around the lake.

One side of the road has handsome, brightly painted lake front houses with docks and boats. The other side of the street has handsome but less expensive houses that overlook the cornfields. Every house has a well-maintained garden.

2. List a few of the things Norman Bowker passes during his many laps around the lake.

Norman passes two boys hiking, a guy in a motorboat, picnickers and a high school band, water skiers, a woman in pedal pushers casting for bullheads, and four men setting up a fireworks display.

3. How do Norman's thoughts correspond with driving around the lake?

Norman's thoughts about his life are going in circles, just as he is driving in circles around the lake. His thoughts keep rotating from before the war to during the war to the current time.

4. Norman does not stop to talk to Sally Gustafson because "there was really nothing he could say to her." (Pg. 139) What does he mean by this?

Answers will vary. Example: Norman feels that he has nothing in common with his old friends because he has been through the war while they remained home. Norman believes the people in town do not know anything about the war; they just keep to themselves and ignore reality.

5. Why is the title of this chapter ironic?

The title is ironic because Norman Bowker never can bring himself to tell his story out loud. He just rides around in his car retelling the story in his mind, and planning how he would tell it to his father if he had the courage.

6. Why can Norman not tell anyone about how he almost won the Silver Star? Does he really care about the Silver Star?

*Norman cannot get himself to talk about Kiowa's death, which is the real story surrounding the Silver Star. He also knows that no one would want to hear the truth about what happened because it does not have a happy ending.
Norman does not care about the Silver Star; he already has seven metals.*

7. Describe the events surrounding Kiowa's death.

On a rainy night, the platoon set up camp in a field that becomes flooded. The men realize that the field is a cesspool. Suddenly, the platoon is under attack and, while attempting to hide in the sludge, Kiowa sinks and drowns.

8. Why does Norman blame himself for Kiowa's death?

Norman feels guilty because he could not stand the smell and taste of the mud long enough to pull Kiowa out. He blames himself for letting Kiowa drown.

9. How does this chapter speak of courage?

Answers will vary. Example: Courage is described as “not always a matter of yes or no. Sometimes it came in degrees, like the cold; sometimes you were very brave up to a point and then beyond that point you were not so brave.” (Pg. 147) Norman feels brave for enduring the harsh field conditions, but then he loses his bravery when Kiowa is drowning.

10. Identify a flashback in this chapter.

Much of this chapter consists of flashbacks. For instance, Norman breaks from his hypothetical conversation and begins to reminisce about “how the mortar rounds seemed to come right out of the clouds. Everything was black and wet. The field just exploded.” (Pg. 148)

Chapter Sixteen Notes

Vocabulary

catharsis—relief of emotional tensions

complicity—involvement as an accomplice

tangible—able to be felt

1. What is Norman’s letter to O’Brien about?

Norman writes about his life after the war, saying that he cannot find any meaning in his life. He tells O’Brien that he lives with his parents, he cannot hold a job, and he dropped out of junior college.

2. In an excerpt from his letter, Norman talks about “whiner-vets” and “patriotic idiots.” (Pg. 156) What is his complaint about these people?

Norman cannot understand why some Vietnam vets want to be welcomed back from war with parades and celebrations. He cannot stand the idea of receiving congratulations from people who did not go to war and who cannot possibly know what war is like.

3. Why does Norman ask O’Brien to write about Kiowa’s death?

Norman feels that Kiowa’s story needs to be told, but he does not have the skill to write the story himself. Telling Kiowa’s story may help Norman to rid himself of some of his guilt.

4. Does O'Brien consider his writing therapeutic? Explain your answer.

O'Brien does not think his writing is therapeutic. He comments, "Writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience." (Pg. 158)

5. Why is Norman disappointed with O'Brien's short story "Speaking of Courage"?

Norman is disappointed that O'Brien omits the details about Vietnam and Kiowa. By removing the location and crude details, O'Brien changes the effect of the story and makes it "a shadowy, idealized recollection." (Pg. 160)

6. What happens to Norman Bowker?

Norman hangs himself in a YMCA locker room in 1978.

Chapter Seventeen In the Field

Vocabulary

fatigues—military uniforms

hootch—a dwelling, especially a thatched hut (slang)

MIA—missing in action

1. What are the men looking for in the field?

They are looking for Kiowa's body, which is buried somewhere in the mud.

2. Why is Lt. Jimmy Cross determined to find Kiowa's body?

Lt. Cross is determined to find Kiowa's body because he feels responsible for Kiowa's death. He also does not want to leave an honorable man behind, especially buried in sludge.

3. What tip does the platoon receive that the field is a bad place to set up camp?

The local women warn the men by saying, "Evil ground. Not a good spot for good GI s." (Pg. 168)

4. How does Lt. Cross become a first lieutenant?

Lt. Cross joins the ROTC in college because all his friends join, but he does not expect to go to war and become an officer.

5. Why does Lt. Cross believe that Kiowa's death is his fault?

Lt. Cross believes that he should have moved the men to higher ground, but he instead chose to follow orders.

6. What does Lt. Cross think about while he is searching the field?

Lt. Cross drafts a letter to Kiowa's father in his head. He apologizes to Kiowa's father for the death of his son.

7. Why does the boy believe Kiowa's death is his fault?

The boy uses his flashlight to show a picture of his girlfriend to Kiowa. His light gives away their location and they are attacked. The boy believes that if he had not used his flashlight to show the picture, Kiowa would still be alive.

8. What is the boy looking for in the field? Why is he looking so frantically?

*The boy is searching for the picture of his girlfriend, Billie.
Answers will vary.*

9. Who finds Kiowa's body?

Bowker finds Kiowa's body by spotting the heel of his boot. He retrieves the body with the help of Azar, Sanders, Dobbins, and Kiley.

10. Why do the men not want Lt. Cross to help them retrieve Kiowa's body?

Most of the men are angry with Lt. Cross for choosing a poor camp location. They feel he is incompetent.

11. Whose is responsible for Kiowa's death?

No one is responsible for Kiowa's death—it was an accident. Unfortunate deaths are a part of the harsh reality of war.

Chapter Eighteen

Good Form

1. What does O'Brien mean by "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth"? (Pg. 179)

Answers will vary.

2. How does O'Brien differentiate between "happening-truth" and "story-truth"?

O'Brien's version of the "happening-truth" is when he writes, "I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look." His version of the "story-truth" adds fictional details to the same structure: "He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty." (Pg. 180)

3. What is the truth in this book? Is this a work of fiction or non-fiction?

The truth is in the emotions that the soldiers feel. Knowing how the actual events occur is not important because O'Brien relays his message through the feeling of the experience. This is a work of fiction.

4. According to O'Brien, what function do stories serve?

Writing stories gives him courage to face the past and resolve his issues. By assigning faces and names to his memories, O'Brien addresses his feelings from the war.

Chapter Nineteen

Field Trip

1. Why does O'Brien return to Vietnam?

O'Brien returns to Vietnam to find "signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer." (Pg. 181) He also wants to expose his daughter to a different culture, as well as share some of his history with her.

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

He returns to the field for a sentimental reason—to make peace with himself.

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

He claims that the field took his fiend, his pride, and all his "old ambitions and hopes." (Pg. 184-185) O'Brien is a different man because of his experience on the field.

4. What does O'Brien do when he reaches the marshland along the river, and why?

O'Brien strips to his underwear, puts on Kiowa's moccasins, and wades into the water. Next, he sits down, wedges the moccasins into the mud, and releases them. His actions are a memorial for Kiowa, which he ends with the words, "There it is." (Pg. 186)

5. After his mission is complete, how does O'Brien feel?

O'Brien feels as if he has released emotions that he did not know he had. He writes, "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out." (Pg. 187)

6. Describe the old farmer's behavior. What occurs between him and O'Brien?

The farmer solemnly watches O'Brien from the dike, then raises his shovel above his head in the manner of holding a flag.

Answers will vary. Example: Even though they fought on opposing sides, both men share the knowledge of the horrors of war. The men silently make a peace pact, and O'Brien comes to terms with Vietnam.

7. O'Brien admits in the previous chapter that, other than his age and profession, "almost everything else is invented." (Pg. 179) Suppose that his daughter, Kathleen, is also a fictional character. Why would he put her in his story?

Answers will vary. Example: Kathleen may represent his naïve, innocent self before the war, or perhaps she is a modern character making comments about the book.

Chapter Twenty

The Ghost Soldiers

Vocabulary

compress—a soft pad applied to a part of the body for various medical treatments

gangrene—decay of body tissue

SOP—standard operating procedure

stand-down—to go off duty

1. Describe the author's first wound.

During a battle near Tri Binh, O'Brien is shot in his side. Rat Kiley treats his wound, which causes O'Brien little pain. O'Brien then takes medical leave for twenty-six days.

2. How does Rat Kiley ease O'Brien's anxiety about being shot?

Kiley checks on O'Brien four times, he uses humor to ease the tension, and he gives O'Brien a hug before the helicopter takes off.

3. Who is Bobby Jorgenson?

Jorgenson is the new medic who replaces Rat Kiley.

4. Describe the author's second wound.

The second shot hits O'Brien in the backside. Jorgenson takes awhile to gather the courage to come to O'Brien's aid and, by the time Jorgenson reaches O'Brien, he has gone into shock. Jorgenson neglects to treat O'Brien for shock, and he does a poor job on the shot wound, which eventually almost turns gangrene.

5. Where is O'Brien stationed after he is shot the second time?

O'Brien is transferred to Headquarters Company in the battalion supply section.

6. Why does the author envy the guys from Alpha Company?

O'Brien feels like a civilian now that he is not in the bush with the guys. He still feels close to the company, but he cannot share in the stories and is now somewhat of an outsider. He envies the connection, not necessarily the combat.

7. How does Morty Phillips die?

Morty goes swimming in a river and contracts a fatal disease.

8. Why is O'Brien mad at Jorgenson?

O'Brien blames Jorgenson's incompetence for his wound, which is a source of embarrassment and extreme discomfort for O'Brien.

9. What changes does O'Brien experience after seven months in the bush?

O'Brien says that the bush turns him into a cold, mean person who is capable of evil.

10. Describe the trick that Azar and O'Brien play on Jorgenson.

In order to get revenge, O'Brien plans to psychologically traumatize Jorgenson while Jorgenson is keeping watch at night. Randomly throughout the night, O'Brien and Azar set off noisemakers around the bunker. Next, they set off flares and tear-gas grenades to scare him. Finally, they fire another flare and drop a white sandbag in front of Jorgenson's bunker.

11. How does O'Brien feel while he is conducting the prank on Jorgenson?

At first O'Brien is pleased with his plan. As the night progresses, he begins to regret the extent of his prank and wishes he could stop Azar from following it through.

12. Is the prank successful, or does it somehow backfire on O'Brien?

The prank backfires because O'Brien is affected more than Jorgenson. Jorgenson emerges from his bunker unshaken, but O'Brien is uncontrollably trembling.

13. Do O'Brien and Jorgenson make peace?

Yes, this settles the score between the two men. O'Brien feels bad and apologizes to Jorgenson, and the two agree that Azar needs to learn a lesson.

Chapter Twenty-one Night Life

1. What is the “night life?”

“Night life” is the phrase used to describe when soldiers move only at night and sleep during the day. Lt. Cross’ platoon lives the “night life” for almost two weeks.

2. What does the “night life” do to the soldiers?

The strain of moving around in complete darkness begins to affect men’s nerves. They suffer from sore eyes, paranoia, panic attacks, and bad dreams.

3. What happens to Rat Kiley?

Kiley suffers an extreme mental breakdown. For a few days he does not talk, and then he begins talking nonstop about bugs. He begins to hallucinate about bugs crawling all over his body, and he scratches his skin to the point of creating scabs. Kiley starts imagining what people look like dead, and he sees images of body organs.

4. Why does Rat Kiley shoot himself?

Kiley shoots himself in the foot in order to be flown out of Vietnam and escape the “night life.”

Chapter Twenty-two The Lives of the Dead

Vocabulary

blatant—totally or offensively conspicuous or obtrusive

embalming fluid—preservatives treated to corpses to prevent decay

1. Why do the men in the platoon shake the dead man’s hand?

The men greet the dead as a way to keep them alive. It seems like mockery, but it is more than that. O’Brien writes, “There was a formality to it, like a funeral without the sadness.” (Pg. 227)

2. Who is Linda?

Linda is O’Brien’s first love from when he is nine years old.

3. Describe their date.

The two double date with O'Brien's parents. They go to the movies and hardly speak all night. Tim is so nervous that all he can do is look at her and think of how beautiful she is.

4. Why does the author include the story of Ted Lavender?

The author includes the story of Ted Lavender to illustrate how stories give the dead a sense of aliveness. Stories animate the bodies and make them talk.

5. What is the name of the movie Timmy and Linda see on their date? What is the irony of this title?

*The name of the movie is The Man Who Never Was.
Answers will vary. Example: O'Brien's book is full of fictional characters who are based on reality, and even he is altered in his writing.*

6. What does Nick Veenhof do to Linda? Why is this incident shocking?

*Nick breaks his pencil in order to get up and use the sharpener. On his way back to his seat, he pulls Linda's red hat off.
Linda's head is mostly bald, except for a few tufts of hair, and she has stitches in the back of her head.*

7. How does Linda react when her hat is removed in class?

Linda calmly stares straight ahead at the blackboard and then looks across the room at Timmy. Later, she cries.

8. What is wrong with Linda?

She has a brain tumor.

9. How does Timmy react to Linda's death?

Timmy walks home from school in the middle of the day and lies down on the couch. He begins dreaming about her nightly, and in his dreams she is healthy and happy. When he cries in his dream about her being dead, she tells him, "Timmy, stop crying. It doesn't matter." (Pg. 238)

10. Why do the soldiers use phrases such as “crispy critter” and “roasted peanut” to describe the dead?

The soldiers use insensitive phrases in order to remain detached from the horror of the situation. O'Brien writes, "I learned that words make a difference. It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead." (Pg. 238)

11. In a dream Timmy has about Linda, what does she say death is like?

Linda says death is like being inside an old book that nobody is reading. She says, "It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading." (Pg. 245)

12. Why does O'Brien include the story about Linda?

Answers will vary. Example: The author uses stories to work through his own grief and bring himself to the present moment. Maybe this story about Linda is a way for him to finally grieve for her death. He also wants to preserve Linda's memory.

The Things They Carried

Study Guide Student Copy

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?
5. What is the opening setting of the novel?

6. Explain what the author means about Martha's world when he writes, "She belonged to another world, which was not quite real." (Pg. 17)
7. What does it mean that the men use "a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness"? (Pg. 20) Why is it terrible to be internally soft?
8. Describe some of the intangible things that the men carry.
9. What are freedom birds? Why do the men feel guilty for dreaming about them?
10. Why does Jimmy burn Martha's letters and pictures?
11. What does throwing away the good-luck pebble symbolize?

Chapter Two

Love

1. How does the point-of-view in chapter two differ from chapter one?
2. Jimmy sees Martha at a college reunion and they spend the day together. What does Martha's body language towards Jimmy imply?
3. What is Martha's response when Jimmy tells her that he still loves her? How is her response explained?
4. Why do you suppose Jimmy still loves Martha after she makes it clear that she has no interest in him?
5. How does the chapter's title relate to events in the chapter?

Chapter Three

Spin

Vocabulary

ammo—ammunition

AWOL—absent without official leave

monotony—tedious, sameness, or repetitiousness

poppa-san—old man

tranquilizers—sedatives

vacant—empty

1. The chapter opens with an anecdote about Azar and a Vietnamese boy with one leg. What do you suppose Azar's reaction to the boy means?
2. What does Mitchell Sanders do with his body lice?
3. How does the author compare checkers to Vietnam and the war?
4. Explain how the following passage about boredom in the war is ironic.
“Even in the deep bush, where you could die any number of ways, the war was nakedly and aggressively boring. But it was a strange boredom. It was boredom with a twist, the kind of boredom that caused stomach disorders.” (Pg. 34)
5. The author relays a story about a soldier who goes AWOL and finds peace, but then he returns to battle, saying, “All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*.” (Pg. 35) What does the soldier mean by this statement?
6. Who is the narrator of the novel?
7. Why is this chapter called Spin?

Chapter Four On the Rainy River

Vocabulary

acquiescence—passive assent or agreement without protests

adrenaline—a hormone

cold war—a state of tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union

nationalist—devoted to the interests or culture of a nation

pacifist—one opposed to using war

schizophrenia—a psychotic disorder

SEATO—Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

1. Describe the tone in the beginning of the chapter.
2. What view on war has O'Brien maintained since he was in college?
3. How does O'Brien react when he receives his draft notice, and why?
4. Describe the author's job during the summer of 1968. How is his job ironic when compared to his earlier statement, "The sight of blood made me queasy." (Pg. 41)
5. Who is Elroy Berdahl? How does he help O'Brien?
6. What does the author mean when he says, "The man knew." (Pg. 54)

7. What keeps O'Brien from running to Canada?
8. What is the significance of the "Emergency Fund" that Elroy gives O'Brien?
9. On the sixth day, when Elroy and O'Brien go fishing, Elroy takes the boat twenty yards off the Canadian coast. O'Brien faces the decision of staying on the boat or swimming to shore, which he describes as "the wooded frontier." (Pg. 56) Explain how O'Brien's description of the Canadian coastline is symbolic of this juncture in his life.
10. O'Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but does not. What reason does he give for not jumping?
11. Are there other reasons for going to the war that O'Brien does not list?

Chapter Five

Enemies

1. Who are the enemies in this chapter?
2. What do they fight about?
3. Who wins the fight? How does the winner act after the fight?
4. Why does Dave Jensen break his nose with a pistol?
5. What is ironic about the end of the chapter?

Chapter Six Friends

Vocabulary

dustoff—a helicopter picking up dead bodies from the war (slang)

tourniquet—a device or tightly encircled bandage used to stop bleeding

1. Who are the friends in this chapter?
2. What is the contract that the two friends make with each other? How is this contract peculiar?
3. What happens to Strunk?
4. Do Strunk and Jensen keep their pact with one another?
5. Explain why the news of Strunk's death "seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous relief." (Pg. 66)

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.” (Pg. 67) 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?
5. List some of the elements that, according to O’Brien, compose a true war story.

6. O'Brien writes about true war stories in the following passage:
- “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.” (Pg. 71)
- Why are normal details necessary in a war story if they are not true?
7. Summarize the story that Mitchell Sanders tells O'Brien?
8. What details does Sanders add to his story in order to make it more believable?
9. What does Sanders mean when he gives the moral of his story by saying, “That quiet—just listen? There's your moral.” (Pg. 77)
10. Why does Rat Kiley kill the baby water buffalo? Describe the emotions he experiences.
11. Why is the scene where Kiley brutally murders the baby water buffalo so disturbing?

12. Explain what the author means about the beauty of war in the following passage:
“The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat.” (Pg. 80)
13. Explain how “proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life.” (Pg. 81)
14. Why does the author say that this story is not a war story, but a love story?
15. O’Brien explains that he can change all the details in his story, such as the names, places, and events, because they are irrelevant in relaying the truth. What kind of truth is O’Brien trying to communicate if not actual fact?

Chapter Eight

The Dentist

1. Describe the dentist and what he does for the men.
2. Who is afraid to visit the dentist? Why is this ironic when compared to his description?
3. How does this person act in the dentist's office? What does he do to redeem himself?

Chapter Nine

Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong

Vocabulary

ambush—lying in wait to attack by surprise

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam

coy—shy; reserved

morale—the state of the spirits of a person or group

mundane—commonplace; ordinary

1. Does the author believe the story of the sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong? Cite evidence supporting your answer.
2. Who is Mark Fossie? What does he do?
3. Give a description of the outpost, which the narrator describes as “isolated and vulnerable,” and the surrounding terrain. (Pg. 92)

4. Describe the Greenies.
5. Describe Mary Anne when she arrives at the medical unit.
6. How does Mary Anne behave after she arrives?
7. How does Mary Anne begin to change?
8. Mary Anne cannot be found one night. Where does Fossie believe she is? Where is she and what is she doing?
9. What is the compromise that Mary Anne and Mark make after her night on ambush?
10. Does their compromise last? What happens to Mary Anne?
11. After Mary Anne returns from her trip with the Greenies, the author writes, "In a sense she never returned. Not entirely, not all of her." (Pg. 105) What does this statement mean?
12. The author leaves Mary Anne's fate unknown. Would knowing exactly what happens to her after she leaves camp make this story better? What is the moral of the story?

Chapter Ten

Stockings

Vocabulary

talisman—a charm; an object marked with magic signs

1. How is Henry Dobbins “like America itself?” (Pg. 117)
2. Where and why does Dobbins wear stockings?
3. How does the platoon react to Dobbins’ superstitious behavior?

Chapter Eleven

Church

1. Why does Kiowa say it is wrong to set up in a church?
2. Why does Kiowa want to be a minister? How is part of his reasoning ironic?
3. The monks often make a “strange washing motion” (Pg. 120) with their hands. What do you suppose the motion means?

Chapter Twelve

The Man I Killed

1. Why does O'Brien begin the chapter with a vivid description of the dead man's wounds?
2. O'Brien gives a hypothetical, detailed description of the dead man's life. What is the significance of writing this?
3. What does Kiowa say to make Tim feel better and to stop staring at the body?
4. How does the reader know that Tim O'Brien is still bothered by this incident when he writes this book?

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"? (Pg. 131)
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." (Pg. 133) What is his reason for killing the man?

Chapter Fourteen

Style

1. Why is the girl dancing?
2. Why does the girl cover her ears when she is dancing?
3. Why does Dobbins get upset with Azar?
4. Why does Tim O'Brien include this chapter?

Chapter Fifteen

Speaking of Courage

Vocabulary

affluent—wealthy

pedal pushers—calf-length slacks worn by women and girls

phosphorescence—a glowing in the dark

shrapnel—metal fragments from an exploding shell

1. Describe the area around the lake.
2. List a few of the things Norman Bowker passes during his many laps around the lake.

3. How do Norman's thoughts correspond with driving around the lake?
4. Norman does not stop to talk to Sally Gustafson because "there was really nothing he could say to her." (Pg. 139) What does he mean by this?
5. Why is the title of this chapter ironic?
6. Why can Norman not tell anyone about how he almost won the Silver Star? Does he really care about the Silver Star?
7. Describe the events surrounding Kiowa's death.
8. Why does Norman blame himself for Kiowa's death?
9. How does this chapter speak of courage?
10. Identify a flashback in this chapter.

Chapter Sixteen

Notes

Vocabulary

catharsis—relief of emotional tensions

complicity—involvement as an accomplice

tangible—able to be felt

1. What is Norman's letter to O'Brien about?
2. In an excerpt from his letter, Norman talks about "whiner-vets" and "patriotic idiots." (Pg. 156) What is his complaint about these people?
3. Why does Norman ask O'Brien to write about Kiowa's death?
4. Does O'Brien consider his writing therapeutic? Explain your answer.
5. Why is Norman disappointed with O'Brien's short story "Speaking of Courage"?
6. What happens to Norman Bowker?

Chapter Seventeen

In the Field

Vocabulary

fatigues—military uniforms

hootch—a dwelling, especially a thatched hut (slang)

MIA—missing in action

1. What are the men looking for in the field?
2. Why is Lt. Jimmy Cross determined to find Kiowa's body?
3. What tip does the platoon receive that the field is a bad place to set up camp?
4. How does Lt. Cross become a first lieutenant?
5. Why does Lt. Cross believe that Kiowa's death is his fault?
6. What does Lt. Cross think about while he is searching the field?

7. Why does the boy believe Kiowa's death is his fault?
8. What is the boy looking for in the field? Why is he looking so frantically?
9. Who finds Kiowa's body?
10. Why do the men not want Lt. Cross to help them retrieve Kiowa's body?
11. Whose is responsible for Kiowa's death?

Chapter Eighteen

Good Form

1. What does O'Brien mean by "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth"? (Pg. 179)
2. How does O'Brien differentiate between "happening-truth" and "story-truth"?
3. What is the truth in this book? Is this a work of fiction or non-fiction?
4. According to O'Brien, what function do stories serve?

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?
4. What does O'Brien do when he reaches the marshland along the river, and why?
5. After his mission is complete, how does O'Brien feel?
6. Describe the old farmer's behavior. What occurs between him and O'Brien?
7. O'Brien admits in the previous chapter that, other than his age and profession, "almost everything else is invented." (Pg. 179) Suppose that his daughter, Kathleen, is also a fictional character. Why would he put her in his story?

Chapter Twenty

The Ghost Soldiers

Vocabulary

compress—a soft pad applied to a part of the body for various medical treatments

gangrene—decay of body tissue

SOP—standard operating procedure

stand-down—to go off duty

1. Describe the author's first wound.
2. How does Rat Kiley ease O'Brien's anxiety about being shot?
3. Who is Bobby Jorgenson?
4. Describe the author's second wound.
5. Where is O'Brien stationed after he is shot the second time?
6. Why does the author envy the guys from Alpha Company?

7. How does Morty Phillips die?
8. Why is O'Brien mad at Jorgenson?
9. What changes does O'Brien experience after seven months in the bush?
10. Describe the trick that Azar and O'Brien play on Jorgenson.
11. How does O'Brien feel while he is conducting the prank on Jorgenson?
12. Is the prank successful, or does it somehow backfire on O'Brien?
13. Do O'Brien and Jorgenson make peace?

Chapter Twenty-one

Night Life

1. What is the “night life?”
2. What does the “night life” do to the soldiers?
3. What happens to Rat Kiley?
4. Why does Rat Kiley shoot himself?

Chapter Twenty-two

The Lives of the Dead

Vocabulary

blatant—totally or offensively conspicuous or obtrusive

embalming fluid—preservatives treated to corpses to prevent decay

1. Why do the men in the platoon shake the dead man’s hand?
2. Who is Linda?
3. Describe their date.
4. Why does the author include the story of Ted Lavender?

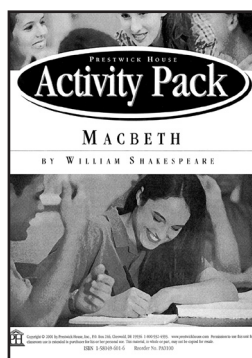
5. What is the name of the movie Timmy and Linda see on their date? What is the irony of this title?
6. What does Nick Veenhof do to Linda? Why is this incident shocking?
7. How does Linda react when her hat is removed in class?
8. What is wrong with Linda?
9. How does Timmy react to Linda's death?
10. Why do the soldiers use phrases such as "crispy critter" and "roasted peanut" to describe the dead?
11. In a dream Timmy has about Linda, what does she say death is like?
12. Why does O'Brien include the story about Linda?

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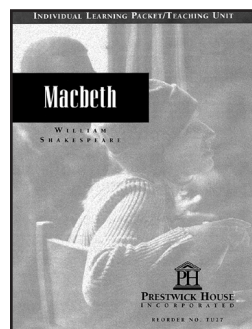
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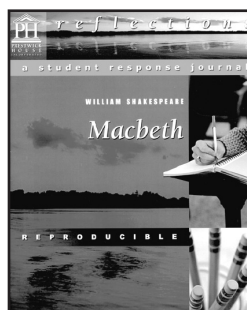
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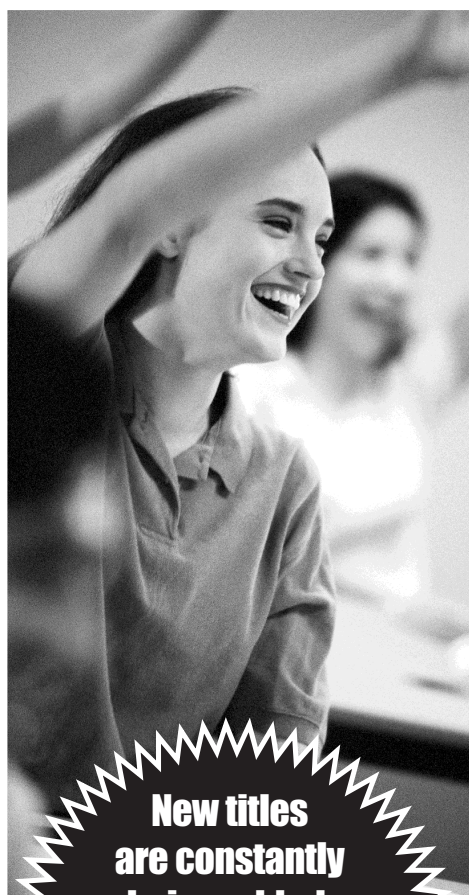
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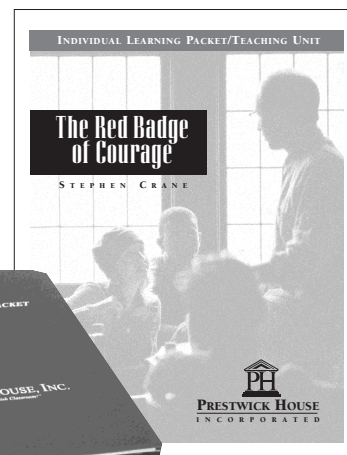
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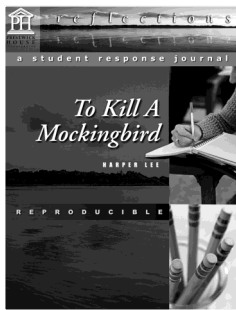
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