

Opening a Trapdoor in Your Soul: Tim O'Brien's Pursuit of a True War Story

by
Molly Jane Gallagher

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology
(Honors Associate)

Presented August 26, 2019
Commencement June 2020

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Molly Jane Gallagher for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology presented on August 26, 2019. Title: Opening a Trapdoor in Your Soul: The Power of Fiction in Tim O'Brien's Pursuit of Telling a True War Story.

Abstract approved: _____

Robert Drummond

This thesis project explores Tim O'Brien's use of fiction to go beyond simply recounting an experience in the Vietnam War to write a true war story through examination of his writing, interviews, and their impact on me as a reader. I dissect three of O'Brien's fictional narratives for their similarities to and differences from his nonfictional account and investigate the evolution of those differences and what they mean as part of O'Brien's search for how to best convey the truth and find meaning in his life. The epitome of everything O'Brien wants to offer is realized in his final short story, "On the Rainy River", where he most powerfully and succinctly captures a true war story.

Key Words: Tim O'Brien, Vietnam War, fiction, nonfiction, literature, writing storytelling, war story, truth

Corresponding e-mail address: gallagher.mollyj@gmail.com

©Copyright by Molly Jane Gallagher
All Rights Reserved
August 26, 2019

Opening a Trapdoor in Your Soul: Tim O'Brien's Pursuit of a True War Story

by
Molly Jane Gallagher

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology
(Honors Associate)

Presented August 26, 2019
Commencement June 2020

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology project of Molly Jane Gallagher presented on August 26, 2019.

APPROVED:

Robert Drummond, Mentor, representing Sch of Wrtg Lit & Film

Neil Browne, Committee Member, representing American Studies

Elizabeth Delf, Committee Member, representing Sch of Wrtg Lit & Film

Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes the release of my project to any reader upon request.

Molly Jane Gallagher, Author

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family and friends, for supporting me during my time in college and while writing this thesis. Your love, encouragement, and reminders to take care of myself kept me going even when I wanted to give up. My cat, Luke, deserves some thanks too for reminding me that breaks are important (especially if they involved me giving him attention).

I also want to thank the wonderful members of my thesis committee, Liz and Neil, for their great suggestions and enthusiasm for my project along the way. My thesis defense was not nearly as stressful as I had anticipated; we had a wonderful conversation about the material that made all the hard work worth it.

Finally, I need to thank my thesis mentor, Rob, who I first met in an Honors colloquia class that I never knew would change the course of my final year entirely. Thank you for teaching me that it is important (and possible) to “unbend the map” and that my thesis project could be anything that I wanted it to be. It is thanks to your advice on how changing my thesis direction so late in the game would be completely doable that I gave myself the opportunity to create something I will always value.

Thank you.

Introduction

My time as a college student is coming to an end. I spent years trying to become educated, well-rounded, and respected, enjoying my time learning the practices of science and being fascinated by how the human body works. I first became attached when I learned about DNA and extracted it in the form of a white goop from strawberries my sophomore year of high school. It was magical; that stringy gunk being the code of *life* itself. Since then, I have only continued to be blown away by genetics and biochemistry and physiology. Sometimes that fascination slipped away as life threw challenges my way; the world of adulthood was not always pleasant. I struggled to maintain an interest in school when I wanted to be out exploring. Along the way I was in a lab that stressed me out despite learning all kinds of amazing things and I found the school system to be convoluted. Then there were the good times: an internship that brought me friends as well as the opportunity to use some of the latest genetic editing technologies, where I uncovered research areas that blew my mind, and found understanding on a higher level about how to think critically.

During my final stretch in college, I started realizing I was missing something. After focusing on science for so long and knowing soon that more free time will be coming, I found myself longing to return to my love of reading books. I read many novels growing up; they offered me an escape from reality when I needed it and shaped who I am today. I noted that I had not taken any literature or English courses while in college, only doing technical writing and reading textbooks. The things a story can do to a person are boundless. It was another magical element of my life that I realized had slowly disappeared as responsibilities had taken over. Fiction is an asset to me. I used to read many more books back in middle and high school but once I reached college, I began to mainly watch shows whenever I had downtime instead. By

writing this thesis, I hope to reacquaint myself with reading literature because something about a book brings more to the table. It is not just physical appeal; holding a book and smelling its pages is attractive but not what gives it an edge. Reading fiction allows room for personal analysis and creation by the reader, which draws me back to reading novels because of their ability to engage my imagination and sharpen my critical thinking skills. Books offer room for continuous growth by sharing new perspectives and ideas, and as much as many writers want to grab the attention of their audience, they do not need to maintain constant action to keep attention as television shows and movies do.

Fiction permeates most people's lives, though by its very nature, fiction is not associated with fact. The genre is built on the premise of fabrication and invention. Yet we find ourselves drawn to fiction for a variety of reasons, the main one being we acknowledge there is value to be found in a story we know not to be true. Truth is subjective. As an aspiring scientist, I recognize that even data must be analysed and interpreted by someone who is only human, susceptible to mistakes and personal biases. A person with a scientific lens that has been developed over the years is trusted to be competent enough to pick out the right information to get across their point because the whole record is too much to be informative. Pieces need to be picked and placed carefully to elicit understanding in others who may not be so well informed. Not always is a whole truth able to be digested by an audience; it simply is not always appropriate.

This concept applies very well to fiction. A whole factual truth is not always the best delivery method to get across a message, thought, or concept. We see this even in everyday storytelling by our peers. Their subtle details draw us in, pulling us along for the ride. Often times the details are exaggerated, like a dangerous encounter with a giant spider that was actually a puny one just checking out the thing that just destroyed its web. The spider was likely the one

actually in danger there. Why do humans like to add these sorts of embellishments to their stories? Are we simply trying to attract attention or is there something deeper about the experience of hearing a story that we tap into through fabricated and exaggerated specifics?

I browsed my meager book collection in my room, which included my childhood favorite Warriors series, a variety of different teen novels, and my leftover IB English books from high school. One in particular, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, stood out. Shortly after reconnecting with the book, I recommended it to my grandmother and began talking about it again; what parts had stuck even after 6 years, thinking about the book that touched me in ways I did not expect or really understand. *The Things They Carried* was fascinating me so much more than the research project I was currently struggling to work on. I did not grow up in the time of the Vietnam War, only the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and though my dad was in the navy for some time it was not during those years. Sometimes I would hear snippets of stories from family members, hardships faced both in and out of war, but not much. Nevertheless, O'Brien's stories still resonated with me. Maybe the draw was due to curiosity because I had seen hints of the impact of war and wanted to know more. Maybe it was how O'Brien writes, or because I was just so perplexed by the idea of a fictional nonfiction book.

After taking some time to consider why O'Brien was writing the way he did and looking at what parts stood out, although he and I had extremely different struggles, the position I am in felt very similar to his. He was drafted for the war shortly after college and during that time he had been struggling to find answers within himself about who he was, what he wanted, and where he was going. Searching for the truth of our lives involves struggling to wade through a sea of memories and thoughts to make sense of them: trauma, beautiful things, guilt, happy times, and uncertainties. In a TED Talk I stumbled upon earlier this year, "There's more to life

than being happy”, Emily Esfahani Smith discusses that many people are not very satisfied with their lives, despite living in an age where our lives should be so much better. Her sentiment echoed what I was feeling. She declares that “what predicts this despair is not a lack of happiness. It's a lack of something else, a lack of having meaning in life” (Esfahani Smith). After tons of interviews, Esfahani developed her four pillars of building a meaningful life. Belonging: having valuable and supportive relationships. Purpose: how and why you are giving back. Transcendence: clearing your headspace and rising above if only for a few moments. Storytelling: defining your life and framing it in a more meaningful way for yourself. I realized I needed to find more meaning in my life and O’Brien was someone who had come to the same conclusion.

In one of the stories of *The Things They Carried*, there is a description about the gory but light-filled death of Curt Lemon and about his friend shooting up a baby buffalo in grievance. Often just hearing the word lemon reminds me of it. But I was not spooked by the haunting, gruesome descriptions; it was what was said about someone reacting to the story. With a flair of metafiction, O’Brien decides that his narrator has told that story before and mentions a woman in the audience who does not understand his telling of the comrade who was blown to bits and the brutally murdered buffalo. She despises the focus on gore but “this [story] she liked,” even though the buffalo part made her sad, and offers him the advice to “put it all behind [him]”. But the reader is told that “she wasn’t listening,” that “it *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 80-81). When first encountering this, I balked and felt criticized. I was this woman; I agreed with her and felt conflicted about how to understand what love was to be found in this story. It was a statement that challenged me. It was meant to. Upon later reflection, after reading it over again along with his other, older books, I realized that

O'Brien wanted to bring more meaning into his war stories. His purpose was to look at them from a new lens and invite others to do the same. It took O'Brien many tries to get it right, an evolution that can be seen in three of his books as he tries to make sense of the trauma he survived, tells his story, and finds his meaning.

O'Brien strictly follows chronological order in his first attempt to capture that period of his life. *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, originally published in 1975, is his nonfiction memoir about the ordeal. We join him as he looks back at leaving for basic training, the battles of his mind, meeting new faces, the brutality he encountered, his fears, and his regrets. It was written in a time where he is freshly off the battlefield and out of the military. This memoir is where we first are introduced to many themes that he expands upon in his later writing: coping with the cruelty of war and dealing with the resulting guilt, challenging conventional definitions of courage and cowardice, and witnessing the wrongness of war but searching through for the transcendental moments within. O'Brien has been reflecting on his thoughts for years, developing them further in his following books as he ages and reconsiders his encounters, continuing to try for the right balance and the right words because the memoir was not enough.

O'Brien favored facts in his first book, but fiction dominated his second, challenging the so-called truth. His second book from 1978, *Going After Cacciato*, is the first of his fictional renditions of the Vietnam War experience. It is extremely different from the straightforward memoir, shifting between war and a fanciful dream in a surreal manner that left me questioning what exactly was going on until over halfway through the novel. For the duration of the plot, the main character, Paul Berlin, entertains "what happened, and what might have happened" (29) with Cacciato, a boy from his company who deserted. The invented mission he and some of his

war comrades undertake deviates towards an alleviating trip back to normalcy for Berlin as they are led by Cacciato to the promising city of Paris, frequently flashing between devastating war scenes and a journey full of color, adventure, and people. “An idea to develop... to draw out as an artist draws out his visions... Just a possibility” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 27) of a brighter future for Cacciato, Berlin, and their fellow men. However, this is daydream being entertained while the main character is at an observation post in the night at a time beyond when Cacciato ran. The group was unable to bring the deserter back and Berlin is wrestling with the fact that it seems he might have killed Cacciato in actuality, coming to the conclusion that because of obligations “imagination, like reality, has its limits” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 321).

The Things They Carried, a collection of his published fictional short stories released in 1990, is the culmination of years of O’Brien’s search for meaning and truth when writing about the Vietnam War. One of his first short stories that he published in *Esquire* was “How to Tell A True War Story”, where we read about the death of Curt Lemon in detail and find O’Brien’s metafictional questioning how the truth of a war story is best told. The last of his short stories, first published in *Playboy* in January of 1990, was “On the Rainy River”, which this thesis focuses on in particular. It is about the character of Tim O’Brien almost fleeing after finding out he was drafted for the Vietnam War. The narrator decides to reveal his truth about how he grappled with receiving a draft notice and almost ran away to hide in Canada in response. In a daze of “moral confusion” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 38), much like how O’Brien described feeling in his nonfiction memoir, the narrator battles with himself about whether or not to go fight in a war he believed was “wrong” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 42). Throughout the course of the story, the content parallels O’Brien’s nonfictional memoir with

how he processes the grief that came along with being drafted, debates fleeing, and yet again revisits courage and cowardice.

Tim O'Brien draws from his personal history in order to create new people and details, using fiction as a powerful tool to explore, grow, share, write about and come to terms with the Vietnam War. This thesis project looks at how fiction is used to go beyond simply recounting an experience in the Vietnam War through examination of O'Brien's writing and interviews and their impact on me as a reader. I dissect three of O'Brien's narratives for their similarities to and differences from the nonfictional account and investigate the evolution of those differences and what they mean as part of O'Brien's search for meaning. Writing these books, as much as reading them, was a trek of growth and understanding. Part of O'Brien's journey was to discover the best way to convey the truth to his readers and the epitome of everything he tries to offer is realized in his final short story, "On the Rainy River".

The nonfictional account

Tim O'Brien did not feel that his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was sufficient enough for telling the truth for himself and his readers. As his first attempt, it serves as an introduction to him and provides context for what actually happened while he served in Vietnam. It is only the beginning of building the thoughts O'Brien wants to convey with his writing, and that beginning method of trying to clarify and release his messages for readers is an important part of exploring his evolution of writing. The style of nonfiction was something O'Brien quickly and firmly rejected in favor of fiction that we see in full force as he moved onto his next books. Later on, I use "On the Rainy River" as a case study to demonstrate

his finest and most powerful writing in action where he finally is able to tell his truth in a way he deems sufficient. Examining O'Brien's memoir is vital to proving this point because of the context it offers for the final short story that is the fictional counterpart to his real-life depiction of being drafted.

From the beginning, O'Brien claims that "the war . . . was wrongly conceived and poorly justified" (18) and declares the war, the draft board, and his town that accepted the draft all "evil" (20). These sentiments continue to appear as the story progresses, started by these explicit statements that the war itself is "wrong" and he "should not fight in it" (56) before favoring descriptions instead to portray the shortcomings of his experience and the wrongness of the war. O'Brien offers narratives about destructive actions, whether they be accidental or stemming from malicious intent, that are brought forward from the war without direct assertions of condemnation. People die and are abused, major losses are sustained on all sides, and the way people behave varies wildly, fluctuating between emotions. There is kindness when O'Brien offers water from his canteen to a captive that was whipped earlier (131) or a blind "old Vietnamese farmer" (99) offering milk and helping the soldiers shower. We see apathy and cruelty when a soldier nails the said old man's face with a milk carton for no real reason (99-100). Then there is guilt and pity from soldiers reacting to a woman they just shot (113-114), and fear and paralysis when facing a minefield (122-126) that possibly may "[create] problems for you and your future" (125).

O'Brien's friend, Erik, also experiences uncertainty about how he feels towards the war, worrying that "all the hard, sober arguments . . . against the war are nothing but an intellectual adjustment to my horror at the thought of bleeding to death in some rice paddy" (36). During a conversation with an army chaplain, O'Brien considers, "assuming . . . that I truly believe the

war is wrong. Is it then also wrong to go off and kill people? If I do that, what happens to my soul? And if I don't fight, if I refuse, then I've betrayed my country, right?" (60). Due to O'Brien's uncertainty about being drafted, he made an attempt to flee. After basic training, he educated himself about different countries' attitudes, rules, and regulations regarding harboring U.S. deserters. O'Brien then put together a well-researched escape plan that involved first taking a bus to Vancouver, Canada from Seattle, Washington followed by a flight out to Dublin, Ireland and finally a boat to Sweden (54).

Ultimately, O'Brien only made it to Seattle where he spent a few unsettling days wrestling with his conflicting thoughts until he reached the final realization that he "simply couldn't bring [himself] to flee" and "burned the plans" he had made along with letters he had written to his family about it (68). His "problems of conscience in participating in the war" and desire to desert were conflicting with "how difficult it is to embarrass people you love" (64). O'Brien found himself feeling physically "sick" about the ordeal due to the stress of wrestling with the opposing sides his mind (68). Even while struggling with these deeper questions, ultimately most of the decision to not desert came from fear of judgement, shame, and a lack of certainty about his stance; not from his deeply held beliefs. O'Brien deems himself cowardly for choosing to go to war rather than running away, especially because of those reasons behind it. Family and community pulled him "like magnets . . . in one direction or the other . . . so that, in the end, it was less reason and more gravity that was the final influence" on his decision to not go AWOL (18). He then calls himself a "coward" for going to war because of the resulting disappointment in not following his conscious (68).

After making this statement, O'Brien then spends time explaining his exploration and development of the definition of courage, for himself and for the reader, over the course of his

time in Vietnam. He pulls from philosophers as well as his own experiences, agreeing and arguing with his thoughts in order to piece it together for himself. “Proper courage is wise courage . . . the endurance of the soul in spite of fear,” (136) a sentiment he pulls from Plato that leads to more questions about the wisdom of conviction in relation to courage. Is a firm belief valuable or is it perhaps it is just “well-disguised cowardice” (137-139)? O’Brien comes to the conclusion that “courage is more than the charge” (141), it is “one part of virtue” accompanied by “love and justice” (142), and that it seems wrong to label someone as either courageous or cowardly (146-147). People fall in between, acting cowardly and courageous at times, both being redeemable, and that promising “to do better next time . . . itself is a kind of courage” (147).

How to get away with fiction

After visiting O’Brien’s first effort to try to process and convey his truth to readers, he makes his first attempt at writing fiction about it with *Going After Cacciato*. The main character Paul Berlin has a revelation about there being “no order” to his war stories (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 287). Though time might be linear, reality never seems understandable when portrayed as linear because the meaning of life events is altered in retrospect, making it hard to reach the so-called truth of the matter. “Events did not flow. The facts were separate and haphazard and random, even as they happened, episodic, broken, no smooth transitions, no sense of events unfolding from prior events,” a notion that is mirrored in the actual progression of *Going After Cacciato* (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 206). With the scattered memories and dreams of the plot, I was left unsure about what exactly was going on until it wraps up and hits you in the end with Berlin’s confirmed daydreaming and what seems to actually have happened – the suspected death of Cacciato at Berlin’s hands. By changing the structure and playing with order, time, and

reality, O'Brien was able to illustrate a message to his readers through a story more effectively than with his memoir.

For *Going After Cacciato*, the disorientation of the reader was an intentional choice that reflects on the chaotic nature of life and that interpretation of events often makes the most sense only when looking backwards. After all, when people reflect on their past they do not think in chronological order. When writing fiction, you are given more freedom to purposefully shape the order precisely how you want in order to build the reader's understanding in a particular way. It's the events and the final outcome that sticks in the end; as I started to realize where the story was going, it changed how I looked back on it. The dream parts became less real, making me feel the disappointment Berlin feels as we come to the conclusion together that even imagination has its limits. To my dismay, and Berlin's dismay as well, the focus was drawn back to the war.

Berlin, much like O'Brien, is "search[ing] for that point at which what happened had been extended into a vision of what might have happened" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 206). Berlin can attempt to order the facts to stitch the story together but that is not what really matters to him. Importance is found in "the critical point" instead, what *could* be done. We are taken alongside a daydream to what was possible. O'Brien use of fiction makes such an impact because it isn't merely a means to fill in the blanks. He himself, like his character Berlin, expands on his reality into the imagined because he wants to do more than share his own story. O'Brien wants to share the story of the Vietnam War itself. In an interview on Big Think with Austin Allen, O'Brien celebrates the 20th anniversary edition of *The Things They Carried* by answering questions about the novel and why he writes. He says that "novelists kind of have to imagine otherness" and go "outside oneself" with the goal of having a story "ring with some kind of authenticity" (Allen). Part of O'Brien's selection process of choosing where his stories take a

reader has to do with him wanting to give them a broader understanding and encouraging our questioning of what was going on for others dealing with the war, which is something he sees as a vital part of reaching the truth. This type of writing where other peoples' viewpoints can be explored is not found in nonfiction.

I began to wonder what makes *nonfiction* so truthful because I question the reliability of nonfiction books if they are supposed to be based on a truth that is subjective. How reliable can memory be when writing a memoir? O'Brien must have had to invent some dialogue for what he remembered discussing with others and made educated guesses about when and where a particular incident happened. Trying to depict the past objectively when it was first witnessed subjectively seems like an impossible task. O'Brien himself acknowledges that "memory's a strange thing. . . [it consists of] a few snapshots . . . and we attach this word 'memory' to it, which has a sound of encompassing all, but it doesn't" (Allen). Although this originally was in reference to *The Things They Carried*, it really is a larger comment on the ability of people to recall actual events that can be applied to his so-called nonfiction writing of *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. But when considering O'Brien's intention for ". . . the reader . . . [to] be transported," leaving their physical environment, this limited capacity of memory ends up not being very relevant (Allen). Books, and the genre of fiction in particular, invite readers to step into a foreign world and allow them to investigate their new surroundings. O'Brien hopes "that through the story, the reader lying in bed at night, or reading the book on the subway, or bus, will sort of leave the bus or leave the bed . . ." (Allen).

I will be exploring O'Brien's motives as well as the opinions of the author and critic Gilbert Sorrentino to better understand how fiction writing works. Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* offered me insight into the process of writing fiction that I apply to

my understanding of O'Brien's works. Sorrentino explains that, when writing, he wants his audience to "remember [his] book the way you remember a drawing" (27). This retention of an image, one assembled by the thoughts a writer inspires within a reader throughout the course of a novel, is guided by a personal lens deciding what is important. Sorrentino explains, "I'll muddle around, flashes, glints, are what I want. It's when one is not staring that art works" (34). Fiction, as an art, is reaching for a deeper part of your mind. The memory of what you read is not always exactly all that you witnessed happen. Usually it is clouded by the opinions you formed about the characters and the small details that stood out to you. The composition of the big picture you build comes from your personal interpretation of the story.

O'Brien has been writing over and over again about the same war in different books, ending with a collection of short stories written at different times. Sorrentino explains that "prose is endless . . . Art is selection. Which doesn't mean that the writer is content with what he selects" (47). Selecting details and characters to use for each story, choosing where it begins and ends, and what questions to leave the reader lingering on are important decisions for a writer. This ties into prose as being endless because nonfiction is frequently told in chronological order, a summary of events in its entirety that is shared with an audience. On the other hand, fiction artfully requires picking and choosing what is revealed to the reader and when. The fabricated and embellished details, the intended emotions to be elicited, the highlighted moments, and the order of it all is to be manipulated as the creator sees fit. These choices are what evolved over time for O'Brien as he experimented to find out what works.

This selection of material to use and shape is not a completely controlled process either. Sorrentino rhetorically asks if ". . . you think for a moment an artists selects his theme?" (61). According to O'Brien, "stories have a way of pulling you along" throughout the writing process;

sometimes a bit of dialogue “seems to appear” and he is “partly a participant and partly a witness” (Allen). Creating this art and following the impulse to write about something that seemingly comes to you on some subconscious whim stems from a desire to look at the meaning of it all for yourself. The subconscious is a powerful motivator. O’Brien’s comments that “art . . . it’s for cutting through rhetoric and cutting through politics and cutting through convention to open a trapdoor in your soul” (Allen). He wants to reach beyond facts and words on a page in order to inspire the reader to feel what he is trying to get across in their core.

Going After Cacciato introduces characters very different than Paul Berlin, the main character who has a similar attitude found in the narration of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and that of the fictional O’Brien character seen in *The Things They Carried*. Here, O’Brien does an excellent job of moving between characters with differing perspectives to give the reader insight into the war as a whole. The lieutenant, Sidney Martin, “considered war a means to ends, with a potential for both good and bad, but his interest was in effectiveness and not goodness” where “effectiveness requires an emphasis on mission over men” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 163). He also believes that there is an “enduring appeal of battle . . . that through repetition men might try to do better” and “that the mission . . . was even more important as a reflection of a man’s personal duty to exercise his full capacities of courage and endurance and willpower” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 166). This colder, less humane perspective contrasts heavily with that of Paul Berlin and both the fictional and nonfictional voices of O’Brien.

The novel also includes Berlin musing about what the people of Quang Ngai, the locals, thought about the Vietnam war and soldiers like him while also mulling over how their language might work and what their “emotions and beliefs and attitudes, motives and aims, [and] hopes” are (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 262). These types of moments in the book are reflective of

the other novels; concern and care is present for the people of the land and it is questioned how others experienced this war. The capturing and questioning of other perspectives is vital to O'Brien's storytelling because, after all, "...a soldier sees only a tiny fragment of what is available to be seen" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 196). Lives outside of his as a soldier play a large role in his search for meaning within the war because it touched far beyond American soldiers and he is trying to put himself in the shoes of the others.

What O'Brien does directly pull from his own memories stem from his experience that has been interpreted through his own personal, clouded lens. He acknowledges this by explaining that the stories he writes are not intended to be taken literally. In "How to Tell a True War Story" from *The Things They Carried*, the narrator explains that "it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (67) and that a true war story "represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*" (68). There he drives home the fact that "absolute occurrence is irrelevant" (79-80) to reaching the truth of the matter because "in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (78). What O'Brien actually witnessed is unimportant to the telling of his tale because "what you remember is determined by what you see, and what you see depends on what you remember" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 206).

Importantly, *The Things They Carried* is not meant to portray O'Brien's actual war experience; it is about so much more. In an interview for the New York Times, O'Brien discusses why he wrote for an episode of the show "This Is Us" on the Vietnam War. He has taken time to consider how different the current war is while writing a show for the current generation of people. O'Brien feels that "[this] generation of soldiers is bearing a much heavier burden than [his] did" because they have to face the consequences of actively deciding to go to

war and hurt or kill people whereas he was able to blame others for deciding his fate with a draft (Komatsu). O'Brien's motivation for assisting in the writing of the show was that it is "important for America to get a shot of" the incredible bereavement that trails a war path, especially the aftermath on "the edges of things" (Komatsu). "The war is not over" for many people in this world, including him, and "that ripple effect is what interests [him] about what the show is trying to do" (Komatsu). There is more to a war story than the tale of one soldier humping through Vietnam. That all-encompassing account is something O'Brien is attempting to capture within his fictional pieces.

O'Brien "wanted to touch people in a way that stories can touch 'em," using fiction to "[touch] individual people with real lives in the real world and contribute to their lives" (Allen). As he states in an interview found at the back of my copy of *Going After Cacciato*, "a piece of fiction...may have some modest influence on public attitudes towards mass butchery" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 346) and calls it a peace novel rather than a war novel (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 337-338). I say that the peace we see in his works is summarized in a statement from the narrator in "How to Tell A True War Story": "proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 77). *The Things They Carried* "is not just a book about war . . . It's a book about love and storytelling" (Allen).

A true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.

(O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 81)

Fiction-forged connection

O'Brien's works are a progression as he struggles to process his service in the Vietnam War throughout the writing process and tackles what is meaningful in his life. His end goal, figuring out the best way to convey all of this to his readers, we find he attains in his final work *The Things They Carried*. However, before reaching that point, an intention he carried for his fiction novels was to go beyond the war but he continued to write about it directly in *Going After Cacciato* and in parts of *The Things They Carried*. Despite wanting to transcend above the violence and hardship, he found himself compelled to remain connected to it in his novels. O'Brien found that fiction was the way and fine-tuned it as time went on, playing with what worked and what did not.

O'Brien was able to integrate peace into stories of war by writing about each in different styles with the goal of allowing his antiwar opinions to come through and giving the reader a sensory experience to follow. I immediately noticed a stark difference in the portrayal of scenes of war and scenes of daydream in *Going After Cacciato*. War scenes had repetitive descriptions such as "endless firing ... firing and firing, automatically, firing and firing ... They would not stop. They cradled their white guns and fired and fired" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 131). There were chaotic thoughts and actions where he focused on men's reactions and the cacophony of varied noises. Berlin's truth that soldiers are "...thinking about how to keep breathing... not purpose" rings true for war scenes as they fight and react and focus on simple, physical things such as counting steps to get by (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 198). Meanwhile, for scenes such as when Berlin spots Paris, he focuses on "more important matters: Cacciato, the feel of the

journey, what was seen along the way, what was learned, colors and motion and people and finally Paris” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 125).

This intentional juxtaposition serves O’Brien’s purpose of subtly hinting at how awful the war experience was and how he felt it to be wrong and purposeless while also elevating the novel above the war. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone* O’Brien blatantly explains that he views the Vietnam War as being wrong but here he makes a similar comment by instead putting the reader into a different headspace for each type of setting. One scene in particular really captures this sentiment where his unit finds their comrade Buff dead after a battle. Berlin's thoughts were tumultuous; his memories of Buff alive, listening to tasteless comments from his unit about how their buddy’s dead body looks and the surrounding sounds of explosion, the smell of the “burning villages” reminiscent of home’s “bonfire smells [and] acorns popping” also mixing with the smell of peaches being eaten by Cacciato, and thoughts of “embarrassment” but also “relief” that it was someone else dead. Berlin “pretended he was deep in a green pool in summertime” and noted that “you couldn’t fake sadness” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 280-282) while making sense of the tragedy before him.

I was pulled back and forth with the character of Berlin, learning how he responded to the situation and wondering how I would react too. The parts about the smells really struck a chord; I can hardly fathom what kind of cognitive dissonance it would cause for me to smell a burning village and find myself thinking about the familiar smells of home. Details such as this make me feel closer to Berlin with a deeper appreciation for how living through something awful can also bring up more pleasant memories because the ups and downs of life are connected that way. A sense of relief the tragedy was not yours, a better appreciation for life because you still have it, and the ensuing embarrassment and the guilt that come along with those thoughts. It makes me

cringe and question whether or not my heart could bear such a scene. Even though the jokes often made by other characters in these types of situations are distressing for Berlin and me as a reader, I found them in all three of O'Brien's books that I investigated. He shocks readers with these blunt, crass comments because they are a vital part of understanding the need to desensitize yourself to the types of horrors he witnessed.

Another example of a distressing scene that also highlights this desensitization can be found in a part of "How to Tell A True War Story" that I mentioned earlier. The death of Curt Lemon was described by the narrator O'Brien in such a haunting manner, where even for him "the gore was horrible, and stays with me" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 79). Lemon was killed by a "booby-trapped 105 round" while playing a game with another man in his unit, his close friend Rat Kiley, where he was "...laughing, and then he was dead (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 74). O'Brien says "...and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 67). This elegance is paired with descriptions of hanging pieces of Lemon and how the character of O'Brien had to climb up and pick off his "pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 79). All of this is followed by the narrator's realization that "what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing 'Lemon Tree' as we threw down the parts" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 79).

This scene haunts me. I think about it from time to time, unprovoked. Mostly the part about singing the song; it seems so appropriate and yet also done in bad taste. While the rest of his men do the best they can to not shut down in these situations through what I see as harsh and inconsiderate comments, O'Brien makes light of the situation by looking for the light and color

here, much like Berlin does in his daydreaming. Transcendence is O'Brien's method of distancing himself to cope. I am brought back to the idea that death brings you closer to life. In the culture I live in, we avoid death as much as possible, but I think O'Brien, while also unsettled by death, has been learning to accept it slowly for himself by writing about it in a manner such as this. It's raw and real and awful but also natural and beautiful. Death is a part of life.

Then there is the matter of the baby buffalo who Kiley shot at with the intention of hurting mercilessly followed by the narrator's comment that "Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 75). Now is where I find myself reconsidering the woman who reacted to this story. I hope to think I have learned a few things about how to listen to a story in a more critical way. I have a few thoughts on this being a "love story" according to O'Brien (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 81). I think this can be talking about the love we feel towards people we bond with; it was a love story between close friends that had an appalling end and the one left standing reacted to the unbearable tragedy in a cruel but stress-releasing way. I also see this as a love story about O'Brien learning to find the beauty in something also quite traumatizing. Loving his war experience because it is a part of himself and loving that he can learn to accept things he never thought he could handle before. A point he touches on throughout his stories of war is about truths being contradictory, making it very difficult to generalize while trying to convey the truth (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 77). That is one of many reasons why absolute occurrence does not matter; sometimes the point needs to be driven home by fictional happenings because they are better suited to connect with a reader's emotions and empathy. Rat Kiley's murder cannot be generalized to being fully awful and careless because, although a reader might find themselves disturbed, they also stood alongside him to witness the horrible death of Curt Lemon.

After exploring O'Brien's evolution in writing, I come to "On the Rainy River" from *The Things They Carried* as a case study of where he finally captured a true war story with his fictional rendition of being drafted. It is one that remained in my mind years later despite O'Brien's drafting process all around not being something particularly relatable for me to read about. The war I grew up in did not use a draft; instead, participation was voluntary. O'Brien comments on the current war by explaining how ". . . there's no draft and the people that are fighting are in the armed forces out of volition or of their own will . . ." compared to his experience with Vietnam where "the bulk of us were draftees who probably more or less went reluctantly. And in my case, a lot more than less" (Allen). He goes on to share his encounters with maimed soldiers from my generation:

I felt great compassion for these young men and one young woman. But out of their mouths, there was none of the irony that accompanied the war from my generation.

There's no questioning of the rectitude of the war whatsoever. It was just—it wasn't even thought about as far as I could tell.

(Allen)

These young soldiers did not seem to face the moral uncertainty that O'Brien did. Even so, he discovered that his book is being passed around and felt hopeful about them being exposed to the different perspectives and commentary he made, directing them to question their war too. One of the reasons he hits home with "On the Rainy River" is because it is about facing being forced to do something scary and deadly and wrong. A story that gives readers no other choice but to react to it with empathy and outrage.

On the Rainy River

My first encounter with the novel *The Things They Carried* was back in high school around the year 2013. Six years have passed, and the experience of reading has stayed with me since. Many of the different stories found there touched me, but “On the Rainy River” in particular captured my heart, likely because of my lack of exposure to a draft system of army recruitment. I started here with this story before realizing I needed to look back at his other works for clarification and came full circle right back to this one. While *The Things They Carried* is his best and most complete work, I felt that “On the Rainy River” encapsulates all that O’Brien was trying to convey in one short story and forces readers to react. It is a story that I use as a case study to illustrate the power of fiction because I argue that it succinctly and powerfully drives home what I saw O’Brien building in his interviews, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, *Going After Cacciato*, and the other short stories found in *The Things They Carried*. His magnum opus.

The opening sets up the story as a reflection of someone looking back in time. “This is one story I’ve never told before . . . [it] makes me squirm” (37). Right away feelings of shame, embarrassment, and wistful regret are hurled straight at the reader. The narrator, a fictional Tim O’Brien, invites us to a private look at an untold story, causing us to brace ourselves for an unhappy ending and raising interest in what he could have done that would be so distressing to share. He describes a hesitation to share what happened and a “sudden need to be elsewhere” when ruminating on it, a relatable urge we have all felt ourselves when dealing with an uncomfortable situation (37). O’Brien then directs attention to once-upon-a-time, naive thoughts of the narrator reaching out to us about how we all “like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth” when the time comes, hinting at the disappointment this narrative holds in store (37). However, the fact remains that O’Brien did in fact write about his

actual desire to desert, but by approaching the story with a cautious but ready-to-come-forward narrator, readers are given room to sympathize as the narrator expresses hope that finally talking about it will “relieve . . . some of the pressure” he feels (37). We are able to help him by receiving what he has finally decided to put down on paper.

At 21 years old, the character Tim O’Brien received a draft notice in June 1968 to “fight a war [he] hated” (38). He feels that “you don’t make war without knowing why,” driving him to feel angry, upset, and conflicted about needing to become a soldier in a war he does not see as justifiable (38). There was also a sense of superiority about being “too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything” followed by alarming realizations that “[he] was no soldier” and did not have the skill set or tolerances needed to do well practically (39). It was a transition from “rage . . . to a smoldering self-pity . . . to numbness,” (40) echoing the first stage of grief, denial (Kübler-Ross and Kessler). The narrator’s sense of emptiness and shock, apparent in these details of wandering thoughts, pull a reader through an emotional rollercoaster with him and remind us of what it feels like to be trapped by expectations and obligations set by others you disagree with. O’Brien captures the true feeling of the overwhelming injustice of it all that he was not quite able to express in his memoir. We all recognize ourselves in this naive young man who was terrified by what future he faced.

Handling the shocking news of a draft in “On the Rainy River” after “[assuming] that the problems of killing and dying did not fall within [his] special province” (39) is a tedious, difficult process that O’Brien captures through describing the character’s “Declotter” job at a slaughterhouse (40). This grueling, grisly work “eight hours a day under a lukewarm blood-shower” (40) follows the narrator home at the end of a shift with “a greasy pig-stink that soaked deep into [his] skin” (41). This job working out both the clots in those dead pigs, not to mention

those found in his conflicted mind, took a toll on his everyday life by leaving him “isolated” and making it “tough getting dates that summer” (41). His position at the slaughterhouse, alongside “that draft notice tucked away in [his] wallet,” made him feel as though “[his] life seemed to be collapsing towards slaughter” (41). However, the narrator, despite earlier claims of feeling “queasy” at “the sight of blood” (39) and deeming this work “not pleasant”, was able to acclimate to the work he was doing (41). An expert who has the repetitive actions memorized and knows what tricks to use, the feeling of the water gun in hand a familiar thing even many years later (41).

O’Brien’s intentional fabrication of the narrator working as a Declotter is used as a way to illustrate the weight on the narrator’s shoulders. By writing about the clinging sensations of this job, he depicts the unsettled feeling that was hanging over the narrator at this time in his life. It also reveals some insight into the troubling burden that exposure to the slaughter of war has left the character with, including how he became accustomed to it all. The job itself may not be a particularly relatable experience for most readers, but the impact is found in a universal understanding that these are not ideal conditions for anyone to work in. Our current world is so detached and censored from the reality of butchery and death that descriptions such as these leave readers, including myself, feeling uncomfortable and conflicted. We are left shifting in our seats as we are forced to envision it, much like O’Brien was forced to live it. For those who have been exposed to this type of brutality, sensory imagery found in this character anecdote might trigger relatable memories for them to recall and associate this scene with. It is a place where we really see O’Brien figuring out how to bring forth sensations within readers.

Even though the narrator felt so strongly against the war, his family, friends, and neighbors indirectly were the source of his discord. The moral strife he faced was an internal

struggle, like a “real disease” (43), paralleling the sensation of sickness O’Brien describes in his memoir (O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* 68). He blamed his community for sending him off to possibly die, calling them out on their ignorance and describes them in a condescending manner as “polyestered . . . pious . . . [and] chatty” (42). The narrator expressed a fear of “the law,” “exile,” “losing . . . respect,” and “ridicule and censure” if he were to desert (42). By the end, he straight-up declares that he is “bitter” and full of “outrage”, and this extensive ramble offers a place for the reader to react not only to the words he says but also to his manner of speaking that hints he is panicking.

The way O’Brien writes almost stream-of-conscious style about the narrator expressing his contempt for his community throws me into a scattered, agitated state. I do my best to keep up with what is being said and begin questioning the reliability of the narrator in this moment due to his seeming unsoundness. He is babbling on at this point, aiming his frustrations towards the forces that he feels are pushing him into doing what he thinks is wrong. The anger the narrator directs at the people he is so afraid of receiving judgement from is clearly coming from a place of stress and mourning about being drafted. When unchecked, stress can lead to chaotic and irrational trains of thought that are difficult to tame. The second stage of grief, anger, is reflected in this space, the source of which being fear, shame, and a sense of abandonment by his own community (Kübler-Ross and Kessler).

However, before making the fateful decision, the narrator had made a break to the north. During this adrenaline-fueled attempt to flee, O’Brien intentionally (or perhaps even unintentionally) uses a small detail that grabs my attention. In under 10 words a deeper sense of meaning and grandeur is offered to me from such a seemingly mundane moment of a story. The narrator says, “For awhile I just drove, not aiming at anything” (45). His escape and moral

confusion leads him to driving aimlessly, a moment that was captured in just the right way to evoke a rush of feelings and memories within me. This honestly makes such a large impact on my understanding of the narrator's situation because it is so familiar to me. A reason that O'Brien did really well with this story worked to reach a reader was because moments like these are outside of war, something I can easily relate to.

Driving is an everyday thing for many Americans, but I frequently find myself unconsciously and distractedly taking the long way home or feeling the urge to just get out there and coast the back roads, especially when I have something on my mind to contemplate. Reading that short statement leads me to recall moments where I too have found myself sailing down the roads without a real purpose. I am not alone in this feeling; a musician I personally enjoy, Maren Morris, captures this sentiment in her lyrics for the songs "My Church" and "I Could Use a Love Song" respectively: "But I find holy redemption/When I put this car in drive/Roll the windows down and turn up the dial" and "A long gone drive/You know the kind where you take a turn/And you don't know why/But it clears your mind, a surefire cure".

After the drive, he finally stops by the Rainy River between Minnesota and Canada, which "separated one life from another" (45), at the Tip Top Lodge fishing resort due to exhaustion and fear where he meets the old Elroy Berdahl. During this time, the two hardly exchanged words. The narrator describes Elroy as having a "willful, almost ferocious silence," a man who never pries into the personal lives of others (47). As the narrator sorted out his thoughts, he was "wired and jittery," likely to flee at any time, but he believes Elroy must have sensed this impulsiveness and in turn handled the situation with care, a blessing to him in the form of a quiet guardian (48). As a trusted figure, the narrator was able to blurt out that the slaughterhouse found him in his dreams, "wild hogs squealing . . . the sounds of butchery" (51).

A haunting and clear representation of what he endured in that job echoing the impact war must have on a person's psyche. Talking about wanting to bolt is an impossible thing for the narrator, even now in reflection. He recounts struggling so much that if he were to say something, he would explode into an impulsive mess. Careful steps needed to be taken and the Tip Top Lodge offered a safe space for the narrator to sort out his thoughts and discover what it is like to stand on the edge of choosing what he really wants. When it comes to making big decisions, it can be helpful to have support nearby, even if they are not weighing in on the choice themselves.

In the end, "what it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame" (49). Humiliation that stems from the same place O'Brien describes it coming from in his nonfiction account because what ultimately won for both the fictional and real Tim O'Brien was the desire to avoid being labelled "a damn sissy" or "treasonous pussy" (43) by a society that he did not want ". . . to think badly of [him]" (49). This "crisis" while on the Rainy River left him feeling "ashamed of [his] conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing" (49). O'Brien makes readers reach inward for when they have felt regret and shame and apply those emotions as part of their understanding with the invented final confrontation about whether or not to go.

This stage of the story represents the stage of bargaining where the narrator's mind wanders into thinking about "what ifs" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler). Visually and mentally, the narrator was allowed to inspect all that stands in the way of his decision. The Rainy River, running water that he could easily cross, symbolizes the simplicity of this nerve-wracking choice. As the narrator puts it, by taking him on a boat to the place separating Canadian and U.S. soils ". . . [Elroy] meant to bring [him] up against the realities, to guide [him] across the river and to take [him] to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as [he] chose a life for [himself]" (53). Not

everyone wants or needs advice, only to be understood to some extent and left to choose their path. O'Brien has us sit with his fictional self, taking on a role like Elroy; a silent witness.

“A moral freeze” is what the narrator Tim O'Brien faced on the Rainy River, a “paralysis” that glued him to the boat (54). “I would not do what I should do . . . I would not be brave” (55). When reflecting back on this time, the shame is no longer about what others thought of his desire to flee, the original source of his struggle. It is now about the shame he feels about his final decision he made. “It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was” (57). Here I see the second to last stage of grief reflected, depression as the narrator backs out of trying to desert and limps home, defeated (Kübler-Ross and Kessler). He, like O'Brien in reality, was disappointed with himself.

The narrator's confidence about his courage changed drastically over the course of this short story. He originally viewed courage as an account he could make investments into so that one day, when he really needed to, he could make a withdrawal (38). However, that day on the river, there was no theorized account to take from. With a very unconventional attitude, the narrator deemed himself a coward for deciding to go to war. The norm is that those who go to war are brave and courageous and deserting is looked down upon, but he felt that betraying his conscious was actually more cowardly. The narrator views courage in a way that seems to reflect a summary of O'Brien's musings from *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and *Going After Cacciato*.

From the start, I had accepted that “On the Rainy River” was not going to end well, but I understood that the narrator had made it through whatever rough time he was about to share. Through reflection, he had reached the final stage of grief; acceptance (Kübler-Ross and

Kessler). By means of the narrator, O'Brien carried me along through the stages of grief that he faced when wrestled with the Vietnam War. He is able to write about this process of handling being drafted and adds embellishments to the story to make it more concrete and relatable to his audience. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, I wade through bits and pieces of struggling with his feelings about the war and how he handled being drafted, trying to piece them together as it goes on. *Going After Cacciato* was also quite chaotic, even though that chaos did serve its own purpose of showcasing how life actually feels. In "On the Rainy River", O'Brien is able to succinctly describe the struggle of processing the news through the lens of the narrator and added extra elements to the story of being drafted in the fictional counterpart, the job as Declotter and the time at the Tip Top Lodge in particular. These fabricated details were more effective in allowing the reader to paint a picture of the character's state of mind and understand the truth of war from a completely different perspective from before he was actually in war.

Conclusion

Imagination is a powerful thing to tap into. We know war is bad. We know death is real and grim and ugly. These are things we know and facts we can read on a page that makes sense. They are easy to face and recognize. What is harder is capturing how a situation feels and relaying that to someone else, but O'Brien found a way. "A textbook might make your head respond. A decent story will make your stomach respond" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 346). Fiction builds a bridge, crossing over to our sense of empathy with imagery and by mingling details with our own memories. These fiction-forged connections increase a reader's ability to feel a story, making the messages easier to digest. O'Brien's fictional writings on the Vietnam

War touched me more deeply than his nonfictional account and better presented his feelings on courage and beauty and the experiences given to him by the Vietnam War.

The most powerful uses of O'Brien's fictional stories are found in his ability to make a reader experience emotion alongside his characters. "Literature makes you feel . . . [it] does touch people" (Allen). O'Brien distracts the wandering mind with depictions of physical surroundings, demands attention with stinging rhetorical questions, and probes for sore spots in my soul through flashback details that are likely only partially invented. Reading through much of his work elicits feelings of frustration, hope, fear, anger, and anguish inside me. I felt for the characters of Paul Berlin and Tim O'Brien, lived through their experience with them, and solidified within myself the importance of personal values and defining oneself. Fiction is how O'Brien cuts through facts and takes the reader into the feelings of being human. Paul Berlin desperately finds ways to cope with the reality of war by hoping for better possibilities and I am hoping for him, dreaming with him. The daydream keeps his chin up and the flame of hope alive. The narrator of "On the Rainy River" is so caught up in a battle of wills that tears him apart, and I am torn apart with him, recognizing the torment of internal struggle he faces and mulling over how it must feel to be on the brink of death.

An important consideration when comparing nonfiction to fiction that I must come to is that question of truth. I argue that, because of the connections I made and where the stories took me, there is more authenticity and truth found in O'Brien's fictional works about the Vietnam war than in his nonfiction memoir. *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was very organized chronologically but unorganized with respect to the development of O'Brien's identity and theories, which may be more realistic because life itself is complex, confusing, and nonlinear. With that being said, it did not pack as much of a punch as *The Things*

They Carried or *Going After Cacciato* did for me. I connected more with the characters and stories, some of them from *The Things They Carried* staying with me even 6 years later after first reading them.

The spirit of O'Brien's stories touched me in a more meaningful way via his fictional short stories than his memoir because he can deliberately integrate features that help a reader like me be a part of the narrative, not merely an observer. In "On the Rainy River" in particular, I found myself able to grow and mature with the character of Tim O'Brien, develop opinions about his actions and beliefs, make educated guesses about what may come next, be offered passageway through his situation, and put my imagination to the test by building original illustrations of what I see going on. The art of fiction is found in how many ways it can be interpreted and therefore inspire its audience.

O'Brien's experience was heartbreaking, but he made it through and has more than war stories to tell about war. His work feels important to read; there is a motivation greater than sharing an account of his personal experience. Tim O'Brien writes bigger than that and fiction is the tool he uses to open a trapdoor into your soul. He wanted to make a change in how people think. One of his more obvious messages is his criticisms of war. When being interviewed at the end of my copy of *Going After Cacciato*, he shares his belief that "if you support a war, you must go" and how "America gave me Vietnam. I want to give it back" (O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 347, 349). He was a coward for going to war and not listening to himself. Even if he outright found meaning in making a difference in how people think about war, I argue that he also had an intention even grander than that. O'Brien has been telling "war stories" for so long, but those were not war stories for him. Those were his life stories.

O'Brien was writing about life, a message best conveyed by embellishment and going beyond absolute occurrence to reach what was actually meaningful. He shares the importance of empathy and going outside oneself as well as the importance of self-acceptance and exploration both within and beyond to what is possible. That requires more than facts. This is why I think O'Brien hit home with "On the Rainy River". It is very clear that his last short story was not a story about being drafted for the war, whereas his other stories can be ambiguous. It is a story about loss, internal struggle, learning to accept what has come to pass, and living with the choices you make. This is the journey of Tim O'Brien trying to come to terms with his decisions and how challenging they have been to accept. His exploration of how to cope with a harrowing war and making the most of what happened, which takes time, reflection, and rewriting.

I return to Esfahani's pillars of building a meaningful life for oneself: belonging, purpose, transcendence, and storytelling. O'Brien builds himself a community by forging connections even with people who lead completely different lives. His purpose is to influence opinions about war and deromanticize it by urging people to understand what it is really like via gut-wrenching, impactful statements and descriptions. All the while, O'Brien transcends by seeking out the beauty and peace that can be found in war, accepting the good with the bad, and allows his imagination to roam free. Finally, he tells his story in a way he sees fit, processing and sharing along the way, allowing himself to grow and challenging himself as he writes and rewrites.

The works of Tim O'Brien reached me because they teach me about life. They offer insight on how to make tough decisions. How to stand up for myself and why that is important. How to face grief and fright. How to be okay with my past decisions and think about the ones to come. A message about how to not let society shape you when you can shape society. I need to be more empathetic, to consider more sides than my own, and to stand my ground from time to

time too. It is important to make meaning of your life and stories can mean just as much as fact, though sometimes you need to look at them a bit more critically. Imagining the possibilities by daydreaming is an asset and the critical point is not what I have done that may be regrettable but what I can do moving forward. I should be creative and challenge what is conventional. How it is really good to be alive.

Works Cited

- Allen, Austin. Big Think Interview with Tim O'Brien. 2010, <https://bigthink.com/videos/big-think-interview-with-tim-obrien>. Accessed 11 May 2019.
- Esfahani Smith, Emily. *There's More to Life than Being Happy*. https://www.ted.com/talks/emily_esfahani_smith_there_s_more_to_life_than_being_happy/transcript#t-175656. TED2017.
- Komatsu, Matthew. "Why Tim O'Brien Agreed to Write for 'This Is Us.'" *The New York Times*, 20 Mar. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/magazine/tim-obrien-this-is-us-vietnam.html>.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and David Kessler. *Five Stages of Grief*. <https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/>. Accessed 18 May 2019.
- Morris, Maren. "Lyrics to 'I Could Use A Love Song.'" *Genius*, 2016, <https://genius.com/Maren-morris-i-could-use-a-love-song-lyrics>.
- . "Lyrics to 'My Church.'" *Genius*, 2016, <https://genius.com/Maren-morris-my-church-lyrics>.
- O'Brien, Tim. *Going After Cacciato*. reprint, Broadway Books, 1978.
- . *If I Die in a Combat Zone; Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. First Broadway Books trade paperback edition, Broadway Books, 1999.
- . *The Things They Carried*. First Mariner Books edition, Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.
- Sorrentino, Gilbert. *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*. First Dalkey Archive edition, Second printing, Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.