

Philip Roe

Dr. Browne

AMS 350

04DEC17

We Hear You Now

Picking Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried* as the top American book about the Vietnam War was not an easy decision to come to. There are a multitude of factors to consider and even then, they must place themselves in some order of importance. Is it better to pick a book that focuses on soldiers or civilians? Vietnamese or Americans? Pre or post-Vietnam? I don't know if there is a right answer, or if I picked the right one. I do feel that to better understand what someone from another country went through, we must first understand what one of our own went through. We should first understand our own perspective. This is accomplished by listening to veterans' stories in hopes to gain a little understanding of something we most likely will never fully grasp. O'Brien carries us through his experience and switches the lenses out multiple times, revealing the loss of innocence, love, youth and an identity. We witness his discovery of fear, hatred, confusion and rejection. His way of storytelling is effective and powerful. We learn through O'Brien and we listen to him. That is why his book is prominent.

The Things They Carried holds its place among the top for more reasons than one. We only had the opportunity to read a handful of books about Vietnam, but after some time of debating between O'Brien's book and W. D. Ehrhart's *Passing Time*, it soon became apparent why I leaned towards the former. Other options, such as Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* was unique in the fact that it took place much earlier than the others, but it did not

make me feel as intensely. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* was interesting in giving a perspective from a non-combatant, but it fell short of what I imagine would be the most effective or accurate portrayal of the events in Vietnam. Robert Olen Butler's sensitive collection of short stories, *A Good Scent from A Strange Mountain*, is a powerful book in its ability to describe and share the stories of Vietnamese people after a war, in America, with people who invaded their country.

Once I narrowed my choices down between *The Things They Carried* and *Passing Time*, I realized, as much as I enjoyed *Passing Time* for all the wrong (or right) reasons, it felt more like a post-war struggle and an identity crisis than anything else. I loved how bashful and raw *Passing Time* was, but I have been around some of these veterans and I know that they are not effective at communicating with a large group of civilians, on any sort of platform. O'Brien seems to have a subliminal way to bring us in as readers and keep us there. We can almost relate, just enough to pretend as if we knew what that experience he is talking about might feel like. He activates a variety of emotions in the reader that is not only paced well from beginning to end, but necessary to connect on a much deeper and intimate level.

O'Brien's first chapter is highly effective in setting the pace and tone very early, while, at the same time, not over-whelming the reader. He describes the physical objects that the men carry with them while in war. These objects start off light, weighing in at under a pound. However, they grow heavier with each page. They jump up to a few pounds, some in the double digits and one at an almost palpable weight of 28 pounds for a mine-detector. You learn what the infantrymen must carry and what they choose to carry. These unique items are present in both physical and psychological weight. These descriptors are key in inviting the audience in, to take shape of any one of the soldiers. There is a strong possibility that we can identify, on some level, to one of them. Readers begin to feel what it is like to carry that weight. We begin to relate to it,

as if on a hiking trip. There is no separation between us and them, not yet, not until O'Brien mentions death in a distanced manner, "In the first week of April, before Lavender died, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross received a good-luck charm from Martha" (7). It is a warning sign for what is to come although we already knew someone was going to die; it is, after all, a book about Vietnam.

This relation that O'Brien creates in the very early stages of his book allows readers to engage with O'Brien in a comfortable environment. This environment becomes the discussion we are essentially having with him as we progress. We are beginning, or hoping to begin, to understand just a fraction of what he and many others experienced in Vietnam. We feel welcomed into this foreign world, wanting to know more about what happened. There are no moments of push-back or regret. There are no in-your-face war stories. This happens to be the key to understanding the stories not only of veterans from Vietnam, but also of veterans from current wars as well. The truth is, veterans cannot describe what war is like in every detail because the rest of the world would be overwhelmed with questions, confusion, anger and any other emotion that would get in the way of listening to the story. O'Brien manages to hold our hand from the beginning and ensure we are not lost from the start. This enables O'Brien to share with us the things of war that most of us will never understand, but that we can at least listen to.

While O'Brien allows the reader to make this basic connection, he simultaneously creates a unique atmosphere for each soldier in the book. They each have their individual story, and he shapes a world accordingly, so we can develop a better understanding of who they are. Civilians often just see soldiers as soldiers. They see the same uniform, haircut, attitude, confidence and the military way of life. They don't often take the time (no one expects them to) to think of them as anything more than that. This made it is easy to shift the image from "American Hero" to

“Baby Killer” or “Murderer” during the Vietnam War. O’Brien has a subtle way of removing the uniform and dog tags to reveal how human everyone is. For example, after Ted Lavender dies and Lt. Cross burns his letters, O’Brien writes, “Lavender was dead. You couldn’t burn the blame. Besides, the letters were in his head. . . He could see her moving in the rain” (2). This is an important element in O’Brien’s writing to further level out the perceived differences between soldiers and civilians. This aspect allows the reader to transition from relating to soldiers on a physical level, to making a psychological or emotional connection with how the soldiers dealt with their environment. O’Brien shows you that they are not just killers. They are not identical men in uniforms. They all carry more than the gear on their backs, and if it were not for being in Vietnam and wearing a uniform, they would most likely be someone just like you. They experience loss. A loss of a brother—the loss of love.

O’Brien presents a stark comparison with how Lieutenant Cross deals with the loss of Ted Lavender with the story of how Rat Kiley deals with the death of his best friend, Curt Lemon. Kiley takes his anger out on a water buffalo, a creature that is objectively innocent. A non-factor of the war. Yet, it is dealt the harshest of punishments. As O’Brien describes, “He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn’t a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo” (75). As horrific as the story is, it is necessary to tell. It creates a wide range of how soldiers coped with the weight they carried. Lt. Cross burned the letters from Martha. Kiley tortured a water buffalo. The haunting part is that *no one* does anything to stop it. This part of the writing reveals much about the feelings and disconnect that soldiers faced in Vietnam. It is something that we feel compelled to judge them for, but there is no way for us to do so. We must resort to simply listening and not questioning the events the men had to go

through to come to this point. O'Brien frames this entire scene in a way that requires us to place ourselves in their position, as we were positioned to do in the beginning of the book. This is where he challenges us as readers to see how far we are willing to let ourselves go, to connect to these soldiers, to these people, to imagine how well we would cope with this kind of deadly chaos. The power of this scene moves his writing from being simple and comfortable, to extremely complex and tense.

The emotions that take place during both scenarios are almost palpable. Love, hate, and fear are probably the most intense. There is a sense of confusion and bewilderment that seems to stall everyone, almost into a trance. We realize that we are most likely one of the soldiers *not* doing anything about the water buffalo dying, because we really don't know what we would do in that situation. Just like them. This idea is shared by Alex Vernon, who writes in his "Field Notes on The Things They Carried," "Through the soldiers O'Brien addresses his readers about this fictional narrative move and brings them into that ragged circle." (Vernon 17). This sort of trance, or feeling of acceptance, that nothing is worth doing to stop it, nor do you have any reason to stop it, is a unique feeling that most go without in their lives. O'Brien can convey this during these two scenarios without jamming it down your throat.

The balance that O'Brien creates is methodical and well placed. He reveals intimate details not only of others, but most importantly, himself. These details are a strong part of what helps readers realize that many of the men and women that had to go over there really did not want to. Perhaps there were some that enjoyed killing and fighting, but it is safe to say a majority probably did not want to kill anyone. O'Brien shares his predicament before the war; whether to flee to Canada or remain loyal to patriotism and ship off to boot camp and ultimately Vietnam. He asks us, "Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your

family and childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?" (p. 54). We can feel how close to the brink he is. We feel how torn and weak he is. We feel his helplessness and confusion. We feel his frustration and anger. Yet, he still cannot flee. He cannot run while others obey the draft and serve their country. This entire chapter invites readers, again, to resonate with O'Brien and see if they could do it differently. Whatever your thoughts, ideas, or actions you had against the war, could you jump? Again, most of us, after some serious consideration, would say no. He crafts his words and scenarios in a way that is not demanding us to believe what he is saying. He enables us to listen and he does so by bringing us *out* of the war and to his home. A place all of us can say we have had. We can easily relate to being home and making difficult decisions, but not one as severe as his. He shifts the focus to you and your family. It makes you question what you would be willing to sacrifice.

The questions that arise from these details that O'Brien shares with us come from a truth not entirely factual. There are no data sheets for us to consume and visualize. There are no black and white photos displaying the death in Vietnam. For O'Brien, truth arises through the telling of the story. The stories will be considered fiction, but the experience and message that is conveyed through his writings can be more important than fact. These moments will never be completely factual to us, but for O'Brien and countless others, it will always remain a truth. If we can accept this truth from him, we can take a step closer to understanding Vietnam – not as numbers and reports, but as the human experience.

One of the most curious chapters in *The Things They Carried* is "How to Tell a True War Story". O'Brien retells the death of Curt Lemon multiple times and in different fashions. The first iteration starts off with, "A handsome kid, really. Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow-waisted,

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.” (p .67) These retellings become slightly more graphic and haunting to think of as it progresses. But, O’Brien goes on to paint a different scenario each time, because he cannot figure out how to deal with Lemon’s death. He cannot comprehend what happened, how that ‘peculiar step’ turned out to be a land mine and how he is gone forever. He paints the scene with complete innocence. After all, Lemon and Kiley were playing ‘Hot Potato’ with a smoke grenade. They were young and did not understand the severity of their situation. He cannot get it out of his head and the story will never be the same. It is a sad, but stylistic approach in revealing a level of PTSD that he must deal with. He can share what it is like to have that memory, without us asking and without him losing complete composure and focus.

It seems selfish, almost snobby of me to acknowledge him for not losing his focus. However, it is often impossible to listen to those kinds of stories from war veterans. When you compare this approach to Ehrhart’s, you realize why it was so hard for people to listen. They did not want to. Not because they lacked empathy or compassion, but because they do not know how to react, or what to say. They do not know anything. It is overwhelming and almost unfathomable. But, O’Brien crafts his memories and thoughts in a way that is easy for us to read, yet still incredibly difficult to ponder and comprehend.

Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien has been able to share multiple fragments of the war through a variety of stories, some of them detailing the death of his friends and brothers. Some of them are at home, or during his childhood and the death of his friend Linda. Some of them convey the simple actions that take place in war and others, the harsh and nearly unspeakable events that leave most with a haunting memory. The thing is, he does not just cover

the parts of war we expect to hear about. He talks about some of the simple things, stories away from combat, and he brings life to the people around him. He brings the stories home or to his childhood. He does not hide anything. He does not want to. The intimacy in these details allows the reader to craft a world that they are completely foreign to, in hopes to create an idea of how tragic war truly is. O'Brien shares one of the most difficult moments of his tour, describing the death of a Vietnamese soldier he killed. He describes the soldier in graphic detail, "...his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him." (118). He goes on to describe the life he imagined the Vietnamese soldier had before the war, the stories he was told, the importance of patriotism and the acceptance of these beliefs. He also shares what the soldier enjoyed, longed for and aspired to be and most importantly O'Brien says, "He hoped in his heart that he would never be tested." (119). At this moment we begin to realize that O'Brien is speaking for himself and the dead soldier. We realize the stories he has shared with us have invited us not only to view O'Brien's world, but the Vietnamese's as well. We begin to question how many hoped to never be tested. We begin to question whether any of it was worth it.

The Things They Carried showed everything it could and gave the reader a better idea of what war was like, we can think about what the war was like for the Vietnamese as well. Everyone lost innocence. Everyone lost love, friendship and family. Someone always suffered. O'Brien can contextualize that emotion in his book, which enabled the rest of us to form a better understanding of the soldiers we sent to Vietnam, but the soldiers that were sent to fight us. The deeper you go into the book, the more you witness, understand and empathize. These characteristics make O'Brien's book prominent and, most importantly, effective in the way we perceive the Vietnam War and those who participated, willingly or not.

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction*. First Mariner Books edition. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

VERNON A. *Field Notes on The Things They Carried*. War, Literature & The Arts: An International Journal Of The Humanities [serial online]. January 2016;28:1-20.