

ANALYSIS

The Things They Carried (1990)

Tim O'Brien

(1946-)

“The story of a war must be a large story, no? From the *Iliad* to *War and Peace*, from *Wings* to *Apocalypse Now*, those who have tried to present a coherent narrative of armed conflict have invariably found their accounts bursting at the seams. And even after the final page, we are frequently left with the uneasy sense that only a small microcosm of reality has managed to step forth from the battlefield and testify. So much remains mute, buried, forgotten.

And the Vietnam War, which respected no boundaries—whether in Southeast Asia or back on the home front—presents special challenges to the teller of tales. Where do you draw the line? The Tet Offensive? The genocide in Cambodia? The Kent State shootings? The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Henry Kissinger? The military action on the ground provides just the opening spiral in the widening concentric circles that still twist and turn, in varying ways, even today. Put bluntly, a book that tries to grapple with ‘Nam is unlikely to be a compact one.

Unless its author is Tim O'Brien. *The Things They Carried* belongs on any short list of great war fiction, and is one of the most compelling books yet written about the Vietnam experience. Yet O'Brien has given us the exact opposite of *War and Peace*. And I'm not simply talking about the length of the work (a scant 233 pages). The very substance of this book operates on a micro-scale. On the second page, O'Brien even offers up a list:... P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water.

In many instances, the items are small enough to fit into a pocket. And for good reason—because O'Brien is describing the little things the soldiers brought with them on their missions. Often O'Brien specifies the weight, since everything here has a price—and one that is measured more in ounces carried than dollars spent. This litany of the little, which takes up the opening 25 pages of *The Things They Carried*, could serve as a case study for wannabe writers on the disproportionate power of the telling detail in narrative fiction.

This book breaks the rules of war fiction in many other ways. For a battlefield book, there is little actual combat, but this too enhances the verisimilitude. Recalling his own war experiences, O'Brien has related that he saw only one enemy soldier during the course of an entire year. But death is ever present even when it can't be assigned to a specific opposing individual. Flashes of gunfire from hidden places, land mines and other impersonal dangers can prove no less fatal than a flesh-and-blood assailant. It is one of the defining characteristics of this book that its most memorable combat death comes when a character, the gentle Native American soldier Kiowa, sinks into the muck of a sewage field in the midst of a mortar attack. O'Brien emphasizes the almost anti-heroic nature of the death in a follow-up story that recounts the nausea inducing efforts to recover the soldier's body, and the consternation of the commanding officer who needs to draft a letter to Kiowa's father, but wants to skip over the unsavory details of the cesspool where his son met his fate.

Tim O'Brien is both the author and a character in this work. The author as character is a familiar post-modern ploy, and usually imparts a sense of playful experimentalism to the proceedings. Paul Auster relies on this device in *The New York Trilogy*; Philip Roth does the same in *Operation Shylock*. And Martin Amis remarks that when a character named Martin Amis showed up in his wickedly funny novel *Money*, the author's father (the equally brilliant writer Kingsley Amis) stopped reading the book and hurled it across the room. That was breaking the rules of fiction, and just wasn't cricket, according to the older scribe. Yet there is nothing subversive or fanciful about O'Brien acting out a role in his own book. For once, the

realism and intensity of the underlying narrative are reinforced by the authorial intervention, and nothing could seem like less of a gimmick than the writer actually being there when ugly things start happening.

As these remarks no doubt make clear, *The Things They Carried* does not fall easily into the typical pigeonholes. It is not memoir, although it has many of the qualities of autobiography. It is not quite a novel, although the same characters and themes reappear in the different stories that constitute the book. It is hardly non-fiction, although it comes across as a reenactment of real historical events. The author mixes in shifts of chronology and geography that further disrupt the narrative flow. Yet these exceptions to familiar formulas all work to further the power of the finished product.

If anything, *The Things They Carried* will remind you less of other war books or movies, but rather will bring to mind the actual Vietnam vets you may have encountered in your life. Imagine you have just settled down next to a troubled former soldier at the local bar, and after a few drinks he decides to tell you the real inside stuff about what went down in Southeast Asia—a little rambling perhaps, and likely to focus on the small things instead of geopolitics, but intensely vivid and believable. That is the genre at work here—it is the kind of story that reminds you of the people you’ve met, not the other stories you have read. And Tim O’Brien’s success at this, the toughest genre of all, is why his slender book still stands out as a classic of war fiction a half-century after the American troops carried their small things off to Vietnam.”

Ted Gioia
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