

Questions for *The Things They Carried*

General:

1. Given that *The Things They Carried* was the unanimous choice of the selection committee for the 2002 Summer Reading Program, why do you think this particular book was chosen?
2. What aspect of the collection of short stories was most meaningful to you?
3. What are some things you carry—family, history, tragedy, heartbreak, guilt, love?
4. What is the significance of the book's title?

Style:

1. Why do you feel O'Brien chose to write this book as fiction? Why does he call the book fiction when so many of the stories seem autobiographical? What is the relationship between facts and truths?
2. Describe the humor that often accompanies these stories. What is the form this humor takes? What function does it perform? Describe a time when you used humor to deal with a difficult experience.
3. List two concrete objects that help to characterize the soldiers (such as the photo or the Bible). Explain what these details imply.
4. In addition to their gear, the soldiers carry such abstract qualities as distrust of the white man, all they could bear, grief, terror, love, fear. How does O'Brien use so many abstractions successfully in these stories?

Interpersonal Relationships:

1. Describe the "tribe" formed by those in combat. How does the role of death and danger contribute to their shared vision?
2. Why did Norman Bowker and others have a difficult time returning to the lives they had left behind in the United States? What knowledge did the soldiers find impossible to convey to their home communities?
3. The average age in O'Brien's fictional platoon was 18 or 19. Describe the "exotic reform school" playfulness that often emanated from this age group in wartime. Why would this age group react in ways older soldiers would not?
4. How do the stories in the book help you in understanding the frustration and/or disillusionment of so many U.S. troops who fought in Vietnam?

Storytelling:

1. Why does O'Brien tell incidents several times and why are his "recollections" different each time? Describe how stories you've told change over time.
2. O'Brien often suggests that "words were insufficient" to explain both inner emotions and outer experience. How effective are his "words" in capturing his experience? How close can language come to describing the truths of our lives?
3. "By telling stories, you objectify your experience," O'Brien writes. "You pin down certain truths" (157). Describe at least one truth you feel O'Brien pins down.

Philosophy and Personal Choice:

1. Describe the distinction between "being braver than [one] ever thought possible" and "not being so brave as [one] wanted to be" (153). Has there ever been a time in your life when you had to distinguish between those two types of bravery?
2. Norman Bowker learns in "Speaking of Courage" that sometimes "the difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid." Explain O'Brien's insistence on showing how courage, cowardice, love, and hate can exist side by side within individual soldiers.
3. What choice does Jimmy Cross in "The Things They Carried" make on the first page of the story? The last page? How would you describe the change in Jimmy from beginning to end?
4. After reading "On the Rainy River," how do you think you would have reacted to the possibility of being drafted for the Vietnam War? Would you have made the same decision O'Brien made?

War:

1. Why do some men love war? Could a woman love it as well? Point to passages in the book that help support your answer.
2. Why do some men who don't love war still consider war the best time of their lives?
3. In one of the stories the narrator writes that he was a "coward" because he went to war. How do you think Tim O'Brien feels about war?

4. O'Brien says: "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever." Explain.
5. What is the role of a citizen during war? If you think a war is unjust, should you say so, or is that unpatriotic? Describe the various forms patriotism can take during wartime, including protesting the war.

Gender/Class/Culture

1. Describe your reaction to Mary Anne's rejection of stereotypical gender roles in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong."
2. Describe the different roles of women in the stories in which they appear.
3. The soldiers in *The Things They Carried* note cultural and ethnic differences, but these differences seldom seem to inhibit communication and cooperation. Why do the differences that often provoke hostility (at home) mean so little in war?
4. The overwhelming and surreal "otherness" of the Vietnamese culture, climate, and landscape often frightens and overwhelms the soldiers. How can ignorance about a culture create a barrier of misunderstanding?

Popular culture:

1. What Vietnam War films do you think are the most accurate?
2. How do the Vietnam War films that you have seen compare to other war films?
3. The subject of the Vietnam War continues to resurface in music, literature, and film. Why do you think this is so?