

FAST FACTS

Author's Works and Themes: Tim O'Brien

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Writings by Tim O'Brien

- *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me up and Ship Me Home* (memoirs) 1973
- *Northern Lights* (novel) 1975
- *Going after Cacciato* (novel) 1978
- *The Nuclear Age* (novel) 1985
- *The Things They Carried* (short stories) 1990
- *In the Lake of the Woods* (novel) 1994
- *Tomcat in Love* (novel) 1998
- *July, July* (novel) 2002

Major Themes

Critics assert that the central theme of *The Things They Carried* is the relationship of storytelling to truth. In this vein, they often discuss Tim O'Brien's interest in transcending reality to represent the truths of his traumatic Vietnam War experience as a defining characteristic of the book. Commentators note that for O'Brien, the question of authenticity and verisimilitude when relating war experiences is ambiguous; instead, a story's authenticity is often based on its effect on the reader. As O'Brien states, a story is truthful if it "makes the stomach believe." Reviewers assert that the stories address the effects of combat trauma and the struggle for redemption and recovery. The role of memory is an important theme in the stories in the volume. Another major thematic concern in *The Things They Carried* is cowardice: not only in combat, but also in the narrator's choice to participate in what he feels is an unjust war. Commentators have analyzed the representations of masculinity and femininity in the book. Exile and alienation also figure prominently in the stories, as returning American war veterans feel displaced from their old life and haunted by their wartime experiences.

Paper Topics

- What does O'Brien mean when he states a story is truthful if it "makes the stomach believe"? Explain how literal truth and literary truth might compare and contrast in *The Things They Carried*.

- Compare O'Brien's war experiences in Vietnam with those of veterans who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, and tie those observations to the theme of alienation.

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