

# **The Things They Carried Book Notes**

## **The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien**

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## Author/Context

Though *The Things They Carried* is mainly fiction, Tim O'Brien did fight in Vietnam, and he has been telling "true war stories" since he returned from the war. His stories come from his own experiences, and his desire to blur the lines between reality and fiction, between created character and living person. He believes that stories are born from real events, and therefore are forever linked to them. He, like the narrator in *Carried*, grew up in a small town in Minnesota, in a town much like Norman Bowker's hometown: people were patriotic and hardworking, but not very thoughtful. O'Brien began writing at a young age, and soon after became interested in politics; both pursuits were supported by his family. O'Brien admired John F. Kennedy, and, like the Tim O'Brien of *Carried*, disliked the political ignorance of his hometown. He also admired his father, who read obsessively and had a great respect for knowledge. However, his father was an alcoholic, which strained their relationship at times, and made Tim insecure and lonely.

O'Brien escaped to college, where he learned to love literature and, for the first time, tried seriously to be a writer. He also began to protest the Vietnam War: he believed strongly that it was wrong, and wanted desperately to stop it. Two weeks after he graduated, he received his draft notice. That summer, he says, made him a real writer: the conflicting emotions and ideas in his head forced their way onto the page. Though he is sure that, looking back, he would find the prose terrible, he knows that the war had a central role in his development as a writer. Like Tim in *Carried*, he went to the war because he was ashamed not to, and he regrets it to this day. He refuses to accept any justification of his actions: he was young, yes, but he should have known better. He received honors in the war, but he refuses to talk about them or label himself "courageous." Not only were his deeds unremarkable, he says, but they were not done before he decided he was unlikely to get hurt doing them. He promised himself that after he returned home he would write books about why the war was morally wrong. He still thinks of the war as what made him a writer: it was his first and most important subject. O'Brien, quoted by Barth Healy, has said of his writings on the war,

*"It was like trying to pin the tail on the Asian donkey, but there was no tail and no donkey. In a year I only saw the living enemy once. All I saw were flashes from the foliage and the results, the bodies. In books or films it is desirable to have a climactic battle scene, but the world does not operate in those gross dramatic terms. In Vietnam there was a general aimlessness, not just in the physical sense, but beyond that in the moral and ethical sense."*

O'Brien has been a consistently successful author. He is also a determined and obsessive one: he has said that his dedication to perfection has taken a toll on his personal life, and that because of his writing habits, he can only write one book every four or five years. His commitment is evident in the critical reception of his body of work: his 1979 memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, won great acclaim, as did another novel about the Vietnam War, *Going After Cacciato*, which won the National Book Award in 1979. However, he has also written well-respected books that have little to do with Vietnam: *In the Lake of the Woods* received the James Fenimore Cooper Prize, and



*Tomcat in Love* was a bestseller. These books focus on more universal themes: humor, deception, control over one's own destiny. Indeed, even the "Vietnam books" are only partly about that specific time and place. They are also about war in general, and brotherhood, and courage, imagination, and shame. Robert Harris wrote:

*"By moving beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear, by questioning the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of truth, he places 'The Things They Carried' high up on the list of best fiction about any war."*

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## Plot Summary

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' platoon of soldiers are a group of very young men, most of whom are unprepared for the Vietnam War. They carry heavy rations and supplies, and pictures of their girlfriends, and fear and sadness and confusion. They often pretend that they do not feel as much as they do, because they don't want to look silly to the other soldiers. Jimmy Cross loves a girl named Martha who he knows will never love him back, and he continues to love her long after the war ends. The men do sometimes reveal their emotions, in heartfelt or comical ways. Tim O'Brien, the narrator, writes stories about his friends in his platoon. Mitchell Sanders mails lice he removes from his body to his draft board in Ohio. But there are many terrible memories Tim can't shake. He watched a man get blown up by a mine. He saw young men get hardened by grief and anger and injustice. He remembers believing the war was wrong, and wanting to run away to Canada. He even tries to go, and spends six days in a lodge at the border, but in the end he is too afraid of what his family and friends will think if he doesn't fight. He went to war, he says, because he was a coward.

Strange things happen to soldiers in Vietnam: they get paranoid, and they lose their sense of morality and justice. They become hardened and angry, because no one back home understands what they are going through. After his best friend dies, Rat Kiley, a medic, writes a letter to the friend's sister, telling her what a wonderful man her brother was. The sister never writes back, and Rat's grief turns to hard anger. Tim explains that this is a true war story, because there is no moral, only ugliness and cruelty. One particularly strange story Tim heard from Rat Kiley: a soldier brought his girlfriend to Vietnam. She arrived fresh-faced and very young, but she quickly became absorbed into life in the jungle. Gradually she lost all of her attachment to her old life. She disappeared into the jungle. The soldiers understand this story, because they believe there is magic in Vietnam. Superstitions are real, and the truth is relative. There are moments and feelings that Tim cannot forget. One of them is of the man he killed: a young Vietnamese soldier who was walking down a trail when Tim threw a grenade at him. Tim will never forget the man's exploded face. Nor will he lose the image of a young girl dancing outside of her destroyed village, as American soldiers carry her dead family away.

Norman Bowker, one of Tim's friends and fellow soldiers, returns from the war unsure of what to do with all his terrible knowledge and memories. He finds he can't talk to anyone--no one will listen, or could understand if they did listen--and everything he does seems silly and irrelevant. He eventually kills himself. Tim tells Norman's story to try to do his life justice.

After one of the best men in their company dies in a night attack, the men search for him in the mud. Each of them feels somehow to blame. The narrator-Tim explains that all these stories are made up, but they are true anyway, because they explain what Vietnam was like. Besides, Vietnam makes it difficult to know just what is true: Am I to blame for the death of this man? Each soldier asks this question, but there are no



answers. Twenty years later, Tim brings his young daughter to the riverbank and buries his friend's shoes in the mud. He doesn't know what to feel.

Tim was shot twice: the first time he was taken care of by a good medic, but the second time, the medic was inexperienced and Tim nearly died. Tim gets revenge: he pretends to be the enemy one night when the medic is on watch. He later hates himself for doing this, but he feels close to the man, because he watches him cower in fear, just as Tim did when he was shot and thought he was dying.

Rat Kiley lost his mind in the field. He thought bugs were trying to kill him. When he shoots himself in the foot so he can leave the field, no one blames him. He was a good soldier, but combat was eventually too much for him.

Tim knows that stories can bring the dead back to life. Telling stories about people can make you feel like they're there with you. The soldiers do this so that they don't have to think about the fact that their friends are actually dead, or that they just killed a real person. Tim has been doing it since he was a child, when the first girl he ever loved died of a brain tumor. The stories change--names, dates, and even events transform--but the memories are kept alive by the storyteller.



## Major Characters

**Jimmy Cross:** A sensitive, dreamy Lieutenant, Cross must lead his men through the rice paddies of Vietnam. He would rather be back in New Jersey with Martha, a girl he loves who does not love him back. He knows she never will, and this tortures him, and distracts him from his work. When a man dies and Cross thinks he could have prevented it if he hadn't been thinking about Martha, he abruptly decides that he has to learn to think only of his job in the field. He never forgives himself for forgetting his responsibility to his men. Still, after the war he continues to love Martha, who never marries and remains mysterious and distant.

**Kiowa:** A devout Baptist, and an American Indian. The other men tease him about both these things often, but Kiowa does not respond. He is kind to everyone and tries to have appropriate moral reactions to the war--he wants to feel bad about Ted Lavender's death, for example. He tries to comfort Tim after Tim kills a man, something no one else in the company might think to do. His death is one of the worst events of the war for his entire company: they all loved him and knew he was a good person, and his death seems pointless.

**Norman Bowker:** A quiet, polite soldier who hates the pressure of trying to be brave. When Kiowa dies, Bowker feels he died with him. When he returns to his hometown, Bowker no longer feels he can talk to people there: no one understands what he went through. He is intelligent and his parents support him, but he cannot find any meaning in a job or in school. He tries to pretend nothing is really wrong, but he desperately wants to tell his story and asks Tim to write it for him. The story is a failure, and he eventually kills himself.

**Rat Kiley:** A nineteen year old medic. Tim admires him because he has a sense of humor, is kind, and is brave. Rat takes care of Tim when he gets shot, and as Tim goes off to the hospital, Rat almost hugs him. Rat is a good medic and he takes care of the other men even when he is frightened for his own life. However, he gradually loses his mind. He believes that bugs are trying to kill him. He sees everyone, including himself, as a collection of organs. He finally shoots himself in the foot because he can't take being in Vietnam anymore. The men, who all like him, understand that he is not a coward, and they wish him well.

**Tim:** The narrator. The writer of *The Things They Carried* is also, of course, named Tim O'Brien, and there are other similarities between the author and the narrator. The line between the two of them is blurred. The narrator is a thoughtful, guilt-ridden man. He knew that Vietnam was an unethical war, but he fought anyway, because he couldn't tell his family he wasn't going. Twenty years later, he is still writing about this mistake, and all the horrible things he saw and did. He believes that stories help him work through these things: they give meaning to who he is now, by linking him to the past. They also bring the dead back to life, allowing him to talk to people he loves even though they are gone.



## Minor Characters

**Martha:** The girl that Jimmy Cross loves. She is quiet and somber, and though she has boyfriends, he is almost sure she is a virgin. An English major in college, she tells him about the authors she loves. She is kind to him, but she does not love him, and she never gets married. Even years later when he tells her he still loves her, she has nothing to say.

**Henry Dobbins:** A kind and gentle man, but not very bright. He is superstitious, wearing his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck, believing they will protect him. He tries to be moral, and he has simplistic ideas about what should or should not be done: he prevents Azar from making fun of a grieving Vietnamese girl, and he is friendly with Vietnamese monks.

**Ted Lavender:** The first man to die in their company. He was afraid, and took drugs to calm his nerves, until he was so high that he hardly even knew he was at war. He was killed suddenly and without warning: one moment he was walking toward the group, and the next he was on the ground.

**Dave Jensen:** A young, naïve and paranoid soldier. He desperately tries to keep clean in the field, even stealing soap from hotel rooms when he gets vacation time. After he breaks Strunk's nose, he breaks his own, so that Strunk will know that they are even. He seems to have a skewed idea of justice---even Strunk knows he deserved to have his nose broken, so there was no reason for Jensen to hurt himself too.

**Mitchell Sanders:** A literate and funny man who has strong convictions about stories. He often gets angry when other soldiers tell stories too slowly, or with too much detail. He looks for morals in real life, even when the other men think he is being naïve. He enjoys elaborate and clever jokes, like mailing his lice to his draft board.

**Lee Strunk:** Steals Jensen's jackknife, then is surprised when Jensen tries to apologize for beating him up over it. He knows he was wrong to steal, so he doesn't understand why Jensen would feel guilty. He thinks he is brave at the beginning of the war, but when he gets injured, he is terrified of death.

**Azar:** A very young man who does not understand compassion or kindness. He ridicules a young girl whose family has been killed. He blows up a puppy. He takes great joy in torturing Jorgenson, the medic. He seems to love pranks more than anything else, and he has no sense of the gravity of death and murder.

**Curt Lemon:** Rat Kiley's best friend. He steps on a mine one day when they are playing catch together. Tim understands Rat's grief, but he never liked Curt: he was too caught up in trying to be brave, and most of the time he was just a silly daredevil.

**Kathleen :** Tim's young daughter. She asks him questions about the war, and he takes her to the place where Kiowa died, but she does not seem to understand much of what



she is asking about. She does not realize how complicated his answers are, and he tells her almost nothing, though he would like for her to understand.

**Elroy Berdahl:** Owner of the Tip Top Lodge in northern Minnesota. He understands Tim's dilemma, and tries to help him: he gives him money, asks no questions, and takes him out on the lake far enough that he could easily swim to Canada. He even ignores Tim's tears when Tim realizes he can't bring himself to run away. He is silent, kind and serious, and Tim appreciates it.

**Green Berets:** A group of soldiers who set themselves apart from the others. Silent and sinister, they are almost like animals, who live to hunt. The other soldiers are afraid of them, because they seem to live by a different code: they are soldiers for life.

**Mark Fossie:** A young naïve boy who brings his girlfriend to Vietnam. They had always planned to marry young and have three beautiful children, so when she grows apart from him, more and more interested in life in Vietnam, he is very disturbed. But soon she disappears for good, and there is nothing he can do. She has become part of the jungle, and is lost to him.

**Mary Anne Bell:** She arrives a seventeen-year-old girl from middle America, but she quickly becomes part of Vietnam. She learns how to hunt from the Green Berets, but soon she moves beyond even them, and disappears into the jungle. She loves the way Vietnam makes her feel: as if she is all there, and can never lose herself. When her boyfriend last sees her, she is wearing a necklace of human tongues.

**Dead man:** The man Tim killed--or didn't kill--with a grenade one early morning. Tim imagines, based on his appearance, that the young man would have been a scholar, not a fighter. He would have been afraid of war and hopeful that the war would end soon.

**Bobby Jorgenson :** The medic who replaces Rat Kiley. When Tim gets shot, Bobby hesitates before running over to care of him, because he is afraid of getting shot himself. Tim almost dies. This infuriates him, even though Bobby apologizes repeatedly and the other soldiers later tell Tim that Bobby has matured and become a better soldier. Tim is only satisfied after he has pretended to be the enemy and frightened Bobby half to death. He then feels they are even--though he also hates himself for being so cruel.

**Linda:** The first girl Tim ever loved. They go on a date when they are only nine. Their love is unspoken, simple, awkward and pure. Linda is dignified, graceful, happy and understanding. She has a brain tumor, and she dies a few months after their date. Tim writes stories about her to try to bring her back, and he feels that he partially succeeds. However, she is also the reason he is so terrified of death.



## Objects/Places

**The things they carry:** Everything they carry is precious in some way--it has to be, or they wouldn't carry it, because many of them already carry at least twenty pounds worth of gear. What they carry is decided by their fear (some of them carry more ammunition than others) and by their homesickness or desperate need for distraction from the war (Rat Kiley carries comic books, and Jimmy Cross carries pictures of Martha). Some of them carry good luck charms. They all seem to know the weight of each thing they carry, because each thing is a necessary part of them, for one reason or another.

**Pebble :** Jimmy Cross carries the pebble, which he received from Martha, under his tongue. Its presence distracts him from his soldierly duties. Martha wrote that the pebble symbolized her feelings toward him, since she found it on the shore, right where things come together and also separate. He loves her, even though he doesn't really understand what she means.

**Tip Top Lodge:** Tim goes to the lodge when he is trying to decide whether or not to flee to Canada. The owner of the lodge, Elroy Berdahl, gives Tim every chance he can to cross the border secretly, but Tim can't make himself do it. It is a turning point for him: he realizes that he would rather die than stand up for what he believes in, if what he believes in is not accepted by his family and friends.

**Song Tra Bong:** A river in Vietnam that seems to symbolize the power and savagery of the country. Mary Anne Bell disappears along the river, when her hunger for life in the jungle consumes her. Kiowa gets swallowed up by the muck on the river bank. The river seems to symbolize the war itself: violent, unforgiving, sometimes beautiful, and deadly.

**Silver Star:** Norman Bowker, in Tim's story, almost won the Silver Star--a medal for bravery--but was not quite brave enough. He left his friend Kiowa in the mud of the river bank, because the smell of the river was too disgusting for him to bear. When he returns home to America, he thinks about the Silver Star, and what it represents, and what bravery really means. He finds he cannot explain it to anyone, and getting or losing medals seems pointless when he thinks about Kiowa dying in that field.



## Quotes

Quote 1: "Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should have done." Chapter 1, pg. 5

Quote 2: "Oh shit, the guy's dead." Chapter 1, pg. 13

Quote 3: "there it is." Chapter 1, pg. 14

Quote 4: "By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost." Chapter 1, pg. 15

Quote 5: "On occasions the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance." Chapter 3, pg. 32

Quote 6: "Mellow, man. We got ourselves a nice mellow war today." Chapter 3, pg. 33

Quote 7: "All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*." Chapter 3, pg. 35

Quote 8: "My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame." Chapter 4, pg. 52

Quote 9: "Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do." Chapter 4, pg. 57

Quote 10: "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war." Chapter 4, pg. 61

Quote 11: "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." Chapter 6, pg. 68

Quote 12: "[A]nd the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say." Chapter 7, pg. 75

Quote 13: "Well, that's Nam. Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's fresh and original." Chapter 7, pg. 80

Quote 14: "It's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true." Chapter 7, pg. 82

Quote 15: "It wasn't a question of deceit. Just the opposite; he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt." Chapter 9, pg. 89



Quote 16: "Tone? I didn't know it was all that complicated. The girl joined the zoo. One more animal--end of story." Chapter 9, pg. 107

Quote 17: , "When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark--I'm on fire almost--I'm burning away to nothing--but it doesn't matter because I know exactly where I am." Chapter 9, pg. 111

Quote 18: "No sweat. The magic doesn't go away." Chapter 10, pg. 118

Quote 19: "Oh man, you fuckin' trashed the fucker. You scrambled his sorry self, look at that, you *did*, you laid him out like fuckin' Shredded Wheat." Chapter 12, pg. 125

Quote 20: "All right then, dance right." Chapter 14, pg. 136

Quote 21: "[The town] had no memory, therefore no guilt....It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know." Chapter 15, pg. 143

Quote 22: "That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him" Chapter 16, pg. 156

Quote 23: "He'd lost Kiowa and his weapon and his flashlight and his girlfriend's picture. He remembered this. He remembered wondering if he could lose himself." Chapter 17, pg. 171

Quote 24: "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." Chapter 18, pg. 179

Quote 25: "You're a shadow. You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in." Chapter 20, pg. 211

Quote 26: "It had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure such things. I just loved her." Chapter 22, pg. 228

Quote 27: "I should've stepped in; fourth grade is no excuse. Besides, it doesn't get easier with time, and twelve years later, when Vietnam presented much harder choices, some practice at being brave might've helped." Chapter 22, pg. 234

Quote 28: "It lasted only a moment, but I had the feeling that a whole conversation was happening between us. *Well?* She was saying, and I was saying, *Sure, okay.*" Chapter 22, pg. 235

Quote 29: "And as a writer now, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body--her life." Chapter 22, pg. 236



Quote 30: "Once you're alive, you can't ever be dead." Chapter 22, pg. 244

Quote 31: "I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story." Chapter 22, pg. 246



# Topic Tracking: Bravery

## Chapter 1

Bravery 1: In this book bravery is often mingled with cowardice. The men want to appear brave, but only because they are afraid of looking silly in front of their friends. The suggestion is that they are not really brave, or at least that they are confused about what bravery is.

## Chapter 4

Bravery 2: Even at age twenty-one, Tim knows the difference between a moral action and a socially acceptable action. He knows that being willing to die so that he will not be embarrassed does not make him brave. He wishes he could be truly brave and stand up for what he believes in--he truly does believe that Vietnam is wrong--but something holds him back. He knows it is fear and shame. He does not want to be called a coward, so he goes to war. Even years later, he sees this as pathetic.

## Chapter 6

Bravery 3: Strunk and Jensen think that life would not be worth living if they were to get seriously injured: they never want to be in wheelchairs. But when Strunk loses part of his leg, he is terrified, and realizes that above all he wants to live. What he thought was a brave wish has now become ridiculous. Coming close to death has made him realize that his life is much more precious than he thought. He was "brave" when he had nothing to worry about: now that he has faced death, he is very frightened.

## Chapter 8

Bravery 4: Curt Lemon is so obsessed with being brave--and making sure his friends know he is brave--that he has a tooth pulled out just to prove he isn't afraid of the dentist. No one else cares about it, but for Curt it is such a big deal that he goes through unnecessary pain to live up to his own distorted idea of bravery.

## Chapter 12

Bravery 5: Tim does not feel brave when he kills the young man. In fact, he never makes it clear whether he was the killer or not. He wants to avoid thinking of war as individual acts of bravery: rather, it is made up of general acts of brutality or cowardice. He seems to suggest that although his entire platoon killed that young man together, he will feel guilty for the rest of his life because he was part of it.

## Chapter 13

Bravery 6: Tim's only experience with killing an enemy has nothing to do with bravery or valor. Tim saw a Vietnamese soldier who didn't see him, and he threw a grenade. It was an automatic act, and he was most likely in no danger. He suspects that if he had just



let the man walk by, nothing would have happened. In this war story, there is no moral, and no goodness behind the murder to make up for it. Tim killed a single man, who posed no threat, because he was afraid and because that is what he had been trained to do.

### **Chapter 15**

Bravery 7: Norman Bowker can't forgive himself for Kiowa's death, even though he knows he was brave many times during the war. He thinks constantly about the shades of courage: why, when he was brave before, couldn't he be brave in that field? Why was the smell worse than any danger? The questions are painful, but he can't stop asking himself for answers.

### **Chapter 20**

Bravery 8: Tim admires Rat Kiley for his courage and tenderness. Rat is good-humored and is a good medic: he takes care of the wounded soldiers even as he is fighting for his life. Tim admires this fearlessness and commitment to duty. He contrasts Rat with Bobby Jorgenson, who was too afraid to help Tim when he was shot. Tim is furious because he depended on Bobby, and Bobby was too cowardly to help him.

### **Chapter 21**

Bravery 9: No one thinks to judge whether Rat Kiley was being courageous or cowardly when he shot himself in the foot. They all understand what he is going through and feel sorry for him. They realize that, sometimes, in a war like Vietnam, judgments like that are irrelevant.

### **Chapter 22**

Bravery 10: Tim doesn't believe he was being brave when he refused to shake the dead Vietnamese man's hand. For him, the peer pressure wasn't as strong as the fear of death--a fear he still can't shake, though he has been dealing with it since he was nine. He seems to suggest that all his stories may be ways to get around the terrifying idea of death.



# Topic Tracking: Effects of War

## Chapter 1

Effects of War 1: When Jimmy Cross understands that Ted Lavender is really dead, and that he might have prevented it, his whole outlook changes. Before, he couldn't get Martha out of his head. He was a daydreamer and a lover more than he was a soldier, and he thought often about that. But afterward, he understands that when someone dies, that can't be changed. It makes him realize his duty, and he is suddenly able to distance himself from everything that used to be important in his life. He understands that he is now living in another world, and that he is a soldier whether he wants to be or not.

## Chapter 3

Effects of War 2: The lack of a purpose sometimes drives the men crazy. They feel that there is no definite morality to what they are doing. They become desperate for anything, even a game of checkers, that has a definite winner and loser. Their own wartime life seems endless, repetitive, boring and terrifyingly pointless.

Effects of War 3: Tim is unable to forget even the tiniest details from Vietnam. They play out in his memory and in his writing over and over, and he is helpless to contain them. Writing about the war is his link between the past and the future, he says. And the terrible and beautiful things he saw in Vietnam will be with him forever.

## Chapter 5

Effects of War 4: Dave Jensen becomes unable to tell what is right and what is wrong. He has been fighting Vietnamese for so long that when he begins to fight with someone from his own side, he goes a little crazy. He thinks he has to make up for the way he hurt Lee Strunk, when even Strunk believes he had every right to hurt him.

## Chapter 7

Effects of War 5: Rat Kiley cannot deal with the fact that his best friend is dead, so suddenly and without any reason behind it. He tries to explain how he feels to his friend's sister, and when she doesn't respond, he directs all his fury and hopelessness at her. He is nineteen, but war has made him vulgar, and a killer.

## Chapter 9

Effects of War 6: Mary Anne Bell, who was only in Vietnam a few months, lost herself in the country. She became, as Rat Kiley described it, an animal. No one knows what happened to her, but she seemed to become part of the land itself. Rat cautions the others not to be surprised that this could happen to a woman: it could happen to anyone, he says.



### **Chapter 15**

Effects of War 7: The war separates Norman from everything he wants to be close to. He knows no one in the town will understand his experiences, so he hardly talks to anyone. His thoughts are endless and repetitive, but he cannot get away from them. He spends a lot of time alone because he simply cannot seem to relate to anyone anymore.

### **Chapter 20**

Effects of War 8: Though Tim is trying to spook Jorgenson, he gets spooked himself. Vietnam is a terrifying, savage, mysterious place, and he does not want to become it. He feels he is doing just that by scaring Jorgenson. When he sees Jorgenson terrified, he feels a connection to him. They both know what it's like to think you're about to die. But Tim is also terrified of the power he has over Jorgenson.

### **Chapter 21**

Effects of War 9: Rat Kiley is literally driven crazy by the war. The entire country seems full of ghosts--every sound the men hear is haunted--and when they are travelling solely by night, they can hardly tell if their own bodies still exist. Rat cannot handle this. He sees visions of himself as dead. He views the other men as just so many anatomical parts. He loses his sense of reality.

### **Chapter 22**

Effects of War 10: All the people Tim lost in the war have given him a new understanding of death. Since he has spent twenty years writing about them, he has slowly realized that they are not really dead: they are alive in his memory and imagination. He understands the pain of losing his friends, and the guilt of killing his enemy. But he also knows that his stories keep all of them alive.



# Topic Tracking: Truth

## Chapter 2

Truth 1: In the second chapter Tim, the narrator, is introduced. Though the book is a work of fiction, Tim O'Brien the author and Tim O'Brien the narrator intermingle. The reader is not sure how much he or she knows about the story of Jimmy Cross: when Tim says he won't mention certain parts of it in his story, it's unclear whether he kept his promise or not. Did Jimmy want Tim to keep quiet, for example, about Ted Lavender's death? Or are there other secrets the reader is not told?

## Chapter 3

Truth 2: Tim knows that certain stories, like the one about the soldier who goes AWOL, are true even if they are not factual. They are true because they *feel* true, and they convey something true about the situation they describe. Tim is a story-teller, and he wants to erase the difference between reality and story-truth.

## Chapter 4

Truth 3: When Tim sees his past and future calling to him from the boat, the reader knows that this isn't exactly a true--or even realistic--story. Tim hears and sees people who the reader will meet later in the book. This gives the characters a sense of having always existed (they don't just appear and disappear as the storyteller needs them) but at the same time, this eternal quality makes them unreal.

## Chapter 7

Truth 4: Tim says that a true war story cannot have any moral or meaning behind it. If it makes you feel good at the end, it isn't true. Only stories that reveal something obscene or evil about the people involved are true war stories, because there is no goodness in war.

Truth 5: Tim explains that what seems to be true is often the realest truth there is. Mitchell Sanders makes up details of his story to make Tim feel as if he were there: that is a kind of truth-telling. When Curt Lemon dies, Tim sees it all happen in a big confused jumble, and that is the truth of what happened. There are no details to sort through: it is the confusion that is true.

## Chapter 9

Truth 6: Mitchell Sanders believes that a story has some kind of integrity--there's a right and a wrong way to tell it. Never add your own comments, he says. It ruins the flow of the story. But Rat Kiley wants the story to be believed, so he cannot just stick to the facts of what happened. In order to make the story believable, he has to add to it, either in imaginary details or in sideline commentary.



## Chapter 16

Truth 7: Though the narrator of the story seems to be very clear-minded about the facts of Norman Bowker's story, the reader is never more confused about those facts than in this chapter. Who is the narrator? Is he the author, Tim O'Brien? He says he has been using Norman Bowker's real name, but is Norman Bowker a real person? The book is labeled a "work of fiction." How does one distinguish between truth and falsehood in made-up characters?

## Chapter 17

Truth 8: Jimmy Cross at first believes with all his heart that Kiowa's death is his fault. Then he decides it was just an accident, and that is the absolute truth. He turns it over and over in his mind, but there seems to be no way to tell whether or not he should blame himself for not anticipating the flood.

## Chapter 18

Truth 9: The narrator explains that what is made up is often truer than what actually happened, because it puts a face on faceless events and people. It gives specificity to general events. Tim saw many people die, though he was afraid to ever really look at any of them. Centering all his guilt and grief on one man, the dead Vietnamese man, allows Tim to explain his feelings in a way that would not be possible without these made up (though very true-to-life) details.

## Chapter 22

Truth 10: In his stories, Tim plays with the truth. He has been doing this since he was a young boy, wishing his girlfriend back to life. He realizes that if you try hard enough and are creative enough, you can bring the dead back to life in stories. It doesn't matter whether the stories are exactly true--you can change the name, or location, or even parts of what happens--the feeling of truth will still be there. This is perhaps the essence of what Tim calls "story-truth"--not facts, but real feelings and impressions.



## Chapter 1, The Things They Carried

American soldiers in Vietnam during the war carry many things, most of them from home. First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries letters from a girl named Martha, a college student back in New Jersey. He loves her, and though he knows she doesn't love him, he hopes she will. He often daydreams about romantic vacations with her. He wonders if she is a virgin. His love sometimes distracts him from taking care of his soldiers. The men in his platoon carry objects that revealed their personalities. Henry Dobbins is a big man who liked to eat, so he carries extra food. Ted Lavender was scared, so he carried tranquilizers, which he took until he was shot and killed. Dave Jensen is worried about disease, so he carries soap and a toothbrush. They all carry heavy helmets and boots. Kiowa carries a bible--he is a deeply religious Baptist. Mitchell Sanders carries condoms, and Norma Bowker carries a diary. Rat Kiley, the medic, carries comic books. The nights are cold, the ground is wet, and you can bleed to death very quickly, so they carry ponchos and bandages. Almost everyone carries, or "humps," photographs. Jimmy Cross carries two photographs of Martha, one where she leans against a wall (he wonders who took the picture) and one where she is playing volleyball, her left knee supporting all her weight. He stares at that knee, remembering when they went to see the movie "Bonnie and Clyde" together. He had touched her knee, and she had given him a look that made him take his hand away. Looking at the volleyball picture now, he wishes he had been more aggressive with her. He should have carried her up to her room that night after the movie. "Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should have done." Chapter 1, pg. 5

The men carry some amazingly heavy physical and emotional burdens. Jimmy Cross, the leader of the platoon, carries navigation tools and the responsibility of taking care of his soldiers. Rat Kiley carries medicine, painkillers, surgical tape, and other things that weigh in total about twenty pounds. Ted Lavender is very scared, so he carries a great deal of ammunition, and when he is shot he falls heavily and suddenly, like a sandbag. Jimmy Cross thinks that Lavender is dead because his love for Martha distracted him from his men. They all carry as much as they can, for entertainment and protection, including awe and fear of the things they carry.

Jimmy Cross receives a pebble from Martha the week before Lavender dies. She says she found it on the Jersey shoreline, right where the land separated from the water, and she thought it symbolized her feelings toward him. He doesn't understand this, but he thinks it is romantic. He wonders who she was with that day. He keeps the pebble under his tongue and thinks about walking with Martha, not carrying anything.

Mostly the men just accept everything they have to do during the war as their job. Sometimes they are required to search tunnels, something they all fear because the tunnels are dark and ghostly, and rats--or other, more dangerous things--might be down there. One morning it is Lee Strunk's turn to search a tunnel. He seems nervous but goes down without hesitating. After a few minutes Jimmy Cross starts to think something went wrong, but then he can't help thinking about Martha. He wants to know her completely. He wants to be down in the tunnel with her, crushed by love. He is



twenty-four, and feels too young to be a leader in this war. Then Lee Strunk reappears. He is so happy to be alive that he makes a gleeful screaming sound, and then Ted Lavender is shot in the head. Rat Kiley says, over and over, "Oh shit, the guy's dead," Chapter 1, pg. 13, and it seems like a profound statement.

Norman Bowker carries a thumb cut from a dead Vietnamese teenage soldier. Mitchell Sanders cut it off and gave it to him, saying he could see a moral in all this. When Henry Dobbins asked what the moral was, Sanders just told him, "there it is." Chapter 1, pg. 14

They carry many things--diseases, each other. Often their journey seems pointless. "By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost." Chapter 1, pg. 15 Sometimes they throw supplies away because they know more will come that evening. They are amazed at the supplies they are constantly being provided with: they even get colored eggs for Easter. After Lavender dies and Kiowa, who saw it happen, explains just how suddenly he fell, never to get up again, Cross tries not to cry. He is thinking of Martha, of how she is leading a different life far away, and will never love him, and he hates himself for letting that distract him from his men. Kiowa tries to tell Bowker the story of Lavender's death, but Bowker gets angry about hearing it over and over. Silent, Kiowa tries to feel bad about Lavender's death, but it happened so quickly he can't feel anything but surprised. He would like to be able to feel as sad as Jimmy Cross does. Suddenly Bowker sits up and demands that Kiowa tell him the story again: he hates silence more than chatter.

Usually the men are brave, but sometimes when they are being attacked they become terrified and cry and scream and make promises to God. They are ashamed afterward. They don't want to look cowardly in front of the others. They tell jokes to distance themselves from their grief and fear: whenever someone dies, they don't call it death, they call it being "greased" or "offed" or lit up." It doesn't mean that they care any less, it only means that they know that caring doesn't change anything. They don't want to be thought of as weak or soft. They all dream about simply lying down and not getting up, or shooting off their own toe, so that they can be taken out of the war. They dream about not having to carry anything anymore.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 1

After Lavender dies, Jimmy Cross burns Martha's letters and photos. He knows it is a silly gesture, because he has all of them memorized. But now he knows that she will never love him. He begins to hate her, even as he loves her. He turns into a soldier--a man who does not let his feelings take him out of the reality of his duty. He still thinks about her, but she is no longer really with him. He decides that from now on he has to be stricter with his men, and distance himself, not caring about anyone as much.

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 1



## Chapter 2, Love

Years later Jimmy visits Tim (the narrator) and they talk about the war. They look at photographs, and Jimmy says he never forgave himself for Lavender's death. Tim feels the same way about some things. After they are both drunk, Tim asks about Martha. Jimmy is surprised that Tim remembers her, but he goes to his room and gets a framed picture. It is the volleyball photograph. At a college reunion in 1979, they had run into each other. She was a Lutheran missionary, a nurse. She had never married, and she said she didn't know why, and looked at him mysteriously. When he told her he still loved her, she shrugged him off. Her eyes were dull when she looked at him, and she said she was sorry. Then she gave him a copy of the photograph and laughingly told him not to burn this one. He still loves her, Jimmy tells Tim. They avoid the topic for the rest of Jimmy's visit, but as he is leaving he asks Tim to write a little story about him and Martha. He thinks it might change her mind. Tim agrees, promising to make Jimmy look good, and not to mention certain parts of the story.

Topic Tracking: Truth 1



## Chapter 3, Spin

Sometimes the war can almost seem sweet or fun. Azar gives a young Vietnamese boy a candy bar. Mitchell Sanders picks lice from his body and mails them to his draft board (which sent him to war) in Ohio. "On occasions the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance." Chapter 3, pg. 32 Some of the men play checkers: it gives them a reassuring sense of order. In the game, there is always a winner and a loser.

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 2

Tim is forty-three now, and he is a writer. He cannot forget the deaths of his friends, like Kiowa or Curt Lemon. But the war is not all horrible. Sometimes they would ask Ted Lavender how the war was that day, and if he was high, he would say, "Mellow, man. We got ourselves a nice mellow war today." Chapter 3, pg. 33 Tim remembers the time they hired an old Vietnamese man to guide them through a mine-infested area. There were mines everywhere, but no one got hurt, and everyone grew to love the old man, who also liked them. The war is also boring though, despite all the dangers. Tim feels guilty that he is still writing about it--his daughter Kathleen tells him he should write about ponies--but Tim knows he has to write about his own life. He tells the story of a soldier who goes AWOL (absent without leave). The soldier has a wonderful time with a Red Cross nurse, but after a while he goes back to the war, even more ready to fight than before. His friends ask him what happened, and he says, "All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*." Chapter 3, pg. 35 Tim heard the story from Mitchell Sanders, who was probably making most of it up. But nevertheless, it is true, because Tim knows exactly how the man in the story feels.

Topic Tracking: Truth 2

Tim remembers many fragments of stories from Vietnam: Norman Bowker wishing his father didn't want him to get medals so badly, or Kiowa teaching the others a rain dance, or Azar blowing up Lavender's adopted puppy. Tim also remembers even smaller fragments: the moon above the rice paddies, or Henry Dobbins singing, a hand grenade, a young dead man, and Kiowa telling Tim he had had no other choice. Tim thinks that stories link the past and the future. They help you understand who you are and where you're going.

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 3



## Chapter 4, On the Rainy River

Tim tells a story he has never told anyone. It is a confession. He still feels ashamed, more than twenty years later. As a child, he always wanted to be brave, and believed he would be whenever the need arose. But in 1968 he is drafted to fight in Vietnam, a war he opposes. He has spoken out about it in a mild way, writing editorials for his school paper. He never believed he could be drafted, and treated the entire war with an intellectual distaste. When he receives his draft notice, he is shocked and outraged. He is too liberal and too pacifist for the war. He doesn't deserve this. He spends the summer working in a meat packing plant. He sprays a huge water gun at dead pigs, to dissolve their blood clots. He could never wash the smell of dead pig off of him. He feels trapped, and he still didn't know what to do about his draft notice. He begins to think about escaping to Canada. He knows that his family, and his entire town, would never forgive him if he did it, but he thinks it is, in reality, the moral thing to do. He believes the war is wrong, but he knows that if he ran away he would never be able to come back to his own life. He has described these feelings before, at least partially, but he has never told the next part: he quit his job. Abruptly, he threw down his water gun and left the plant. He packed a suitcase and left a vague note. He drove north, to the border between Canada and Minnesota. He stopped at the Tip Top Lodge, owned by Elroy Berdahl. Tim is forever grateful to Elroy for what he did for him: he understood immediately that Tim was in trouble, and he took him in without questions. They spend six days together--there is no one else staying at the lodge. Tim believes Elroy knows exactly why he is there, but he never asks. Tim is terrified and nauseous, trying to decide whether or not to swim across the river and enter Canada secretly. "My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame." Chapter 4, pg. 52

One night Elroy decides that Tim doesn't owe him any money: because of the odd jobs Tim has been doing at the lodge, Elroy actually owes *him* money. Tim tells Elroy about his terrible job cleaning up pig's blood. Elroy decides he owes Tim \$115.00, but gives him two hundred even. Tim will not accept it, and Elroy is insistent, calling it an emergency fund. Tim, years later, is sure that Elroy knew that Tim needed to get away but didn't have any money. On his last day at the lodge, Tim goes out in a boat with Elroy. Elroy takes him close to the other side of the lake--Canada--and then pretends to be busy with his fishing gear. Tim sits there, not knowing what to do. He knows Elroy is suggesting that he swim across the lake and escape the war. He begins to cry. This is what he is ashamed of: he could not make a moral decision, all he could do was cry. "Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do." Chapter 4, pg. 57 Elroy pretends not to notice. Tim sees and hears hundreds of people from his past and his future, cheering him on, and he cannot risk the embarrassment of letting all of them down. He knows he should protest the war, but he cannot bear doing something that will make him look bad to so many people. His crying gets louder, and finally Elroy, still ignoring it, turns the boat toward the lodge. The next morning Elroy seems to know Tim is leaving, and disappears. Tim leaves Elroy's "emergency fund"



money in the kitchen and goes home, and then to Vietnam. "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war." Chapter 4, pg. 61

Topic Tracking: Bravery 2

Topic Tracking: Truth 3

## Chapter 5, Enemies

One morning Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen get into a fight over a jackknife. Jensen punches Strunk in the face until he breaks his nose. Strunk has to be sent to the hospital for a few days. Jensen is terrified that Strunk will take revenge. He can never relax, and he becomes very paranoid. Then he breaks his own nose and goes to see Strunk. He asks him if things are even between them. Strunk agrees that they are, but later he laughs about it. He stole Jensen's jackknife--he deserved to have his nose broken!

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 4

## Chapter 6, Friends

Jensen and Strunk slowly learn to trust each other. They even make up a written pact that says that if one of them gets seriously injured, the other will kill him. Then Strunk steps on a mine, and his leg is blown away at the knee. He looks up at Jensen and frantically begs him not to kill him. Jensen assures him that he won't, and Strunk passes in and out of consciousness, asking Jensen not to kill him over and over. Strunk is taken away and dies soon after. Jensen seems relieved.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 3



## Chapter 7, How to Tell a True War Story

Tim says that this story is true. Rat Kiley's best friend in the world is killed. He writes a letter to the man's sister, telling her what a wonderful, daring, brave man he was. Rat pours his heart out in the letter, telling the sister just how much her brother meant to him. She never writes back. Rat despises the sister. Tim says that this story is true because it has no moral. "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." Chapter 6, pg. 68 There is no goodness in war: there's only obscenity and evil. Rat Kiley swears viciously about the sister, because his best friend is dead and war is too much for him.

Topic Tracking: Truth 4

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 5

Rat Kiley's dead friend was Curt Lemon. They were in the deep jungle, and Rat and Curt were playing catch with smoke grenades. If it detonates in someone's hands, they only get covered with smoke--the grenades are supposed to be harmless. But then Tim hears a noise and turns to look. Curt steps out from under the trees, looking handsome, and then suddenly he disappears. Tim explains that when you watch someone die you look and then you look away and then you look back again, so that what you see becomes confused. But in fact this confusion becomes the truth. Sometimes, in fact, a true war story can't be told at all. It's beyond words. Tim gives an example: he heard this story from Mitchell Sanders. A group of men were sent out into the mountains to listen for the enemy. The mission is simple: they just sit and listen, making no sound, for a week. But it begins to drive them crazy. The mist seems to take away their bodies. They begin to hear strange sounds--rock music, chimes, etc. They can't report the music, and they can't goof around to try to forget it. They just have to sit there and listen. Then they start hearing a party, complete with clinking martini glasses. Mitchell tries to pretend he doesn't care whether or not Tim believes this, but he clearly does care. He continues: the men finally order artillery, saying that they have to destroy a whole army. They burn and blow up the entire mountainside, but they can still hear the music. They go back to their base camp, and a colonel demands to know what happened with the expensive attack. The men are totally silent, staring at him. Mitchell says, "and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say." Chapter 7, pg. 75 Later, Mitchell tells Tim that the moral of the story--which, to Tim, seems to be endless and without a moral--is that no one listens. You have to listen to your enemy, and to the silence, he says.

Topic Tracking: Truth 5

A true war story is something you believe with your stomach. Tim gives an example: After Curt Lemon dies, the company finds a baby water buffalo. They bring it to their camp, and Rat Kiley tries to feed it. It isn't hungry. Rat almost disinterestedly shoots the animal through the knee. He shoots it over and over. He doesn't want to kill it, he wants



to hurt it. The men are amazed. Mitchell says, "Well, that's Nam. Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's fresh and original." Chapter 7, pg. 80

There can be no generalizing in war, because the truths are often at odds with each other. Sometimes war is beautiful, sometimes it's horrible. Being in the midst of so much of evil makes you want to be good. Nothing seems permanent or absolute. There are no certainties. "It's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true." Chapter 7, pg. 82 Often there seems to be no point, or you think of the point and then forget it before you can tell anyone. Tim remembers something that wakes him up at night: as he and Jensen pulled down pieces of Curt Lemon from the tree he flew up into when he stepped on the mine, Jensen sang the song "Lemon Tree."

True war stories are true even if they never happened. But some stories aren't true, whether they really happened or not. For example, there's one everyone knows: one man jumps on an exploding grenade to save his friends from dying as well. It may have happened, but it isn't true. This is because whether it happened or not matters. On the other hand, if the guy jumped on the grenade and everyone died anyway, that is a true story whether it happened or not.

Tim believes that if he could explain just how the sunlight seemed to pick Curt Lemon up into the air and blow him up, he could explain the final truth of Curt Lemon.

Sometimes when Tim tells the story of the water buffalo, people approach him and tell him they liked the story. Usually it is a kindly older woman, who tells him to put the war behind him. And he will think of her what Rat Kiley thought of Curt Lemon's sister: she wasn't listening. The story isn't about war; it's about love. It's about sunlight.



## Chapter 8, The Dentist

Tim didn't really feel sad really feel sad when Curt died, because he didn't like the little he knew of him. He thinks Curt was arrogant, and Tim doesn't want to feel sentimental about Curt just because he's dead, so he tells this story: At a time when little is happening in their platoon, a dentist is sent in to check their teeth. Curt was not afraid of pain or blood, but something about dentists frightened him. At first he said he wouldn't go to the dentist, but when his name was called, he went. He fainted in the chair. He was so embarrassed that he woke the dentist up later that night, saying he had a terrible toothache. The dentist couldn't find anything wrong, but finally he pulled the tooth because Curt wouldn't leave him alone. The next morning, Curt felt much better about himself.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 4



## Chapter 9, Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong

Tim heard another story from Rat Kiley, who was given to exaggeration. "It wasn't a question of deceit. Just the opposite; he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt." Chapter 9, pg. 89 Though when you listen to him you have to calculate just how much of the story to believe, there is one story he is insistent about. Mitchell doesn't believe it, and Rat gets very upset. He swears that one soldier had his girlfriend shipped to Vietnam: he saw it with his own eyes.

When he first came to Vietnam, Rat had a job in a medical station near river Song Tra Bong. He was happy there: the work was predictable, if gory, and he didn't have to travel or carry anything. Nearby was a camp of Green Berets, ("Greenies") who did not socialize with the others. They were almost animals--silent, perfect warriors. One night the medics are talking idly, and they brought up the possibility of getting some women into their camp. They laughed, but one young man, Mark Fossie, took it seriously. Six weeks later his girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, showed up. She was seventeen, pretty, and very friendly. The other men were jealous, and Mark explained that it was difficult and expensive, but it could be done. He and Mary Anne were childhood sweethearts, and had always planned their entire life out together. Mary Anne was curious about everything in Vietnam, and she was a quick learner. She insisted on visiting a nearby village; she didn't care that it was dangerous. Mark tried to explain the very real dangers all around her, and the rest of the men were impressed.

Rat Kiley, telling the story, gets angry whenever one of the details is questioned. He claims that women learn to lose their naïve, romantic ideals as quickly as men do, and that is what happened to Mary Anne. She even seemed to enjoy the urgency of military life: when an injured man came in, he had to be helped immediately: there was no thinking to do. Mark Fossie was amazed at what his girlfriend could now do. She still loved him, but she was less definite about their future together. Within two weeks, she seemed to change dramatically. She came home late, and then one night she didn't come home at all. Mark was in shock, and woke Rat up early that morning, sure that Mary Anne was cheating on him. They checked all the bunks together, but she wasn't with any of the men. She was with the Greenies in ambush. She returned with them early in the morning and gave Mark a quick hug, saying she was tired and didn't want to answer any questions. Hesitating a moment, he chased after her and demanded that they talk about what happened *now*. No one knows just what he said to her, but that evening she came to dinner looking clean and midwestern, like she had before. She was quiet, and avoided questions about the ambush. Mark told Rat that they were officially engaged, and there would be no more late nights. But their relationship seemed strained from then on. Too polite. Everyone knew it had to end, and when Mark began to make arrangements for Mary Anne to go back home, she seemed distant and depressed. Then one night she disappeared with the Green Berets again. She returned three weeks later, a different person. Her eyes had a jungle fierceness to them. Rat pauses to comment on the story so far--something that Mitchell Sanders hates, because



he thinks it ruins the flow of the story. Rat explains that what happened to Mary Anne isn't really that strange: being a woman doesn't make her immune to the way war and the jungle can affect people. Mitchell thinks Rat should just tell the story--he's ruining the tone by commenting on it. Rat says, "Tone? I didn't know it was all that complicated. The girl joined the zoo. One more animal--end of story." Chapter 9, pg. 107

Topic Tracking: Truth 6

Rat continues: Mark waits outside the Green Beret's camp. Rat cautions him against bothering the Green Berets. Then they hear Mary Anne singing in what sounds like a foreign language. Mark can't wait anymore. He runs into the tent, and then everything is silent. Rat and another soldier follow him in. The tent is full of candles and has a strange tribal quality. But the most powerful thing is the smell: a mixture of incense and death. The head of a leopard sits on a post in the corner. There are bones everywhere. Mary Anne appears. Her eyes are dull, and though she wears the shorts and sweater she arrived from America in, she also wears a necklace of human tongues. She tells Mark that he doesn't understand what Vietnam really is. She says, "When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark--I'm on fire almost--I'm burning away to nothing--but it doesn't matter because I know exactly where I am." Chapter 9, pg. 111 She does not even seem to be talking to him. Mark wants to help her, but Rat understands that she is beyond help.

Rat ends the story there: he was transferred a few days later and never saw any of them again. Mitchell is furious--he says you can't tell a story without an ending. Rat smiles and tells Mitchell he knows a few things about Mary Anne that he heard from other people. But first, he says, he loved Mary Anne. So did all the other men--she reminded them of home. Then he says that this information comes from the Greenies: Mary Anne was great at night patrols. She was fearless, and seemed to be interacting with something out there in the darkness, something in nature. Then one day she simply disappeared. Nothing was ever found of her. The Greenies sometimes felt like she was out there watching them, but they could never be sure.

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 6



## Chapter 10, Stockings

Henry Dobbins, though a good man and a good soldier, is not a smart man, and is sometimes driven by superstition. He carries his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck, and sometimes sleeps with them against his face. He thinks they are a good luck charm. And they seem to work: he never gets injured. The other men, who used to make fun of him about it, now believe in the power of those pantyhose. Then his girlfriend dumps him. He thinks about it for a while, then ties the pantyhose around his neck once more and says, "No sweat. The magic doesn't go away." Chapter 10, pg. 118



## Chapter 11, Church

One afternoon the men camp in a nearly abandoned pagoda--two monks live there who speak almost no English. Kiowa thinks it's wrong to camp in a church. But the monks seem to like them, especially Henry Dobbins. One day Henry tells Kiowa he might join the monks after the war. Kiowa is surprised, but Henry says what he wants to do is be nice to people. He isn't smart enough, he says, to explain the ways of God to people, but he would like to wear robes and be kind. Kiowa, a devout Christian, says he wouldn't want to be a minister, but he likes churches--and he still thinks it's wrong to bring the war into any holy house. Henry agrees, and, sending the monks away with candy and fruit, says that all one can do is be nice.



## Chapter 12, The Man I Killed

A dead man lies in the center of a footpath. His face and body are elegant, almost feminine, and his face is blown apart. Tim thinks he might have been a scholar--he doesn't look cut out for war. Tim imagines the man's life story: he would never have questioned his duty to fight, but he would have been afraid, unprepared for combat. Azar tells Tim, "Oh man, you fuckin' trashed the fucker. You scrambled his sorry self, look at that, you *did*, you laid him out like fuckin' Shredded Wheat." Chapter 12, pg. 125 Kiowa pushes Azar away. He tries to comfort Tim, telling him he only did what he had to, and begging him to stop staring at the dead man. Tim continues to imagine what the dead man's life was like: did he get made fun of at school for being weak? He won't speak to Kiowa, who tries to help him but gets more and more disturbed and frustrated. Kiowa leaves and returns, telling Tim he's looking better, but Tim still won't speak. He just sits staring at the man he killed.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 5



## Chapter 13, Ambush

As a nine-year-old, Tim's daughter Kathleen asked Tim if he ever killed anyone. She thought that since he wrote so many stories about war, he must have killed someone. He told her he hadn't, but now he wants to tell the story of what really happened, as if he was talking to her as an adult. He begins:

The man was small and thin, and as he walked down the trail Tim saw him, was afraid, and threw a grenade at him. Tim elaborates: he was on watch in the last hours of the night; everyone else was asleep. He saw the man coming and, automatically, without feeling anything personal or political, he threw the grenade. He saw the man start to run, and then in a puff of smoke he was dead. Tim can't forget it, and even today he sometimes sees the young man come down the trail, smile, and continue on the path, back into the fog.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 6

## Chapter 14, Style

A girl of fourteen dances gracefully after her village has been destroyed. Her family is dead. She ignores the American soldiers, though Azar repeatedly demands to know why she is dancing. After they leave the village, he begins to mock her dancing, and Henry Dobbins gets angry. He holds Azar over a well, asking him if he wants to be dropped in. Azar says no, and Henry says, "All right then, dance right." Chapter 14, pg. 136



## Chapter 15, Speaking of Courage

After the war, Norman Bowker doesn't know what to do with himself. He drives around the small lake in his hometown one evening, thinking. He has driven around this lake many times, with girls, or with friends, having philosophical debates. One of those friends drowned in the lake. His girlfriend from high school is married. He doesn't seem to be able to connect with anyone anymore, including his father, who just watches sports on TV now. He doesn't know what to say to anyone, so he doesn't talk much. He thinks about how he almost won the Silver Star. He would like to tell his father the story, but he doesn't know how. He imagines telling the story: the Song Tra Bong River flooded during the rainy season, and as they camped along it, the men were overwhelmed by the smell. They couldn't sleep because of it. Norman knows that no one in his town wants to hear about this. "[The town] had no memory, therefore no guilt....It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know." Chapter 15, pg. 143

Norman remembers the night they camped in a field that turned out to be the village bathroom. The rain made the stink unbearable. Norman drives around and around the lake. It is a hot night, the fourth of July, and he knows no one in the town could handle hearing this story. Courage, he thinks, is not black and white. Sometimes you can be brave about very dangerous things, but other things are frightening for unexplainable reasons. Norman could not find it in him to be brave in that stinking field. They were attacked one night in the field, and everyone dove under the muck for cover. Norman heard shots, then he heard Kiowa screaming. He crawled in the direction of the screams, and saw Kiowa sinking. He started to try to pull him out, but the stink and muck got to be too much for him, and he let go. Norman knows that it was the smell that destroyed his bravery. He drives away from the lake and orders a burger from a fast food restaurant. He eats, thinking about looking for a job the next day. Then he pushes the intercom button at the drive-thru window. He tells the cashier he's done eating, then starts to tell him the story of Kiowa and the field, but doesn't finish. It is unclear whether he is hallucinating or not. He goes back to the lake, knowing that Kiowa was alive when he let go of him, and knowing that he will never tell the story. He wades into the lake, tasting the water the way he tasted the field in Vietnam. He watches the fireworks, thinking the show is pretty good.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 7

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 7



## Chapter 16, Notes

Norman Bowker suggested that Tim write the previous chapter. He hanged himself three years later. Norman wrote Tim a letter explaining how hard it was to find anything worthwhile to do after the war--jobs and school and even friends all seemed irrelevant. He wrote, "That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him" Chapter 16, pg. 156. Norman asked Tim to write a story about what happened to him the night Kiowa died. Tim is surprised by Norman's letter--he had always felt he himself had adjusted well to life after the war. But Norman's letter makes him realize that his writing has helped him work through a lot of ideas and memories that would have otherwise destroyed him. He is writing a novel, and he fits parts of Norman's story into it. But he has to change many of the details so they make sense with the plot of his novel, and later he realizes his story has failed. Still, he forgets the story's flaws and sends a copy of it to Norman, thinking he will like it. Norman doesn't see it as his story: there's no Kiowa, and no stinking field. Eight months later Norman hung himself. A decade later, Tim has written the story as it appears in the previous chapter of this book. He uses Norman's real name, and tells his real story, except Norman never abandoned Kiowa in the field. That part is Tim's.

Topic Tracking: Truth 7



## Chapter 17, In the Field

The next morning everyone looks for Kiowa. It is one of the worst moments of the war. Everyone feels almost dead from grief, fear, and exhaustion. Jimmy Cross sees a young soldier crying, looking for something in the mud. Jimmy doesn't want to think of the man as just another nameless soldier, though that is what he has been trained to do. He knows he made a mistake setting up camp on the riverbank. He feels very guilty when he thinks about what a good man Kiowa was. Azar will not stop joking about how ironic it is that Kiowa died in a "shit field," though everyone wants him to shut up. The men know they can't leave Kiowa in the field, but they don't want to dwell on his death. They want to find him and send his body home in a helicopter and try to forget him. Mitchell thinks all of this is Jimmy Cross' fault, but Norman doesn't blame anyone. Jimmy Cross thinks about how he had never wanted to fight: he had signed up for the army because everyone else he knew was doing it. And now he has made a mistake and Kiowa is dead. He thinks he will write a letter to Kiowa's father and tell him what a great man his son was, and how his death was Cross' fault.

The crying boy thinks that Kiowa's death was his fault. He was showing Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend, and briefly turned on a flashlight. Moments later, the attack began. He thinks that he is simply and purely to blame: it was the flashlight that alerted the enemy. During the attack he had searched for Kiowa. "He'd lost Kiowa and his weapon and his flashlight and his girlfriend's picture. He remembered this. He remembered wondering if he could lose himself." Chapter 17, pg. 171 Jimmy Cross approaches the boy. He can't remember his name, and he wonders where the boy's helmet and gun are. The boy searches for his girlfriend's picture desperately, ignoring Jimmy when he tries to talk to him. Jimmy sadly walks away. Across the field, Azar, Norman and Mitchell find Kiowa. The rest of the platoon has to help dig him out, because he is upside down and deep under the mud. They hate the job, but no one can bear to leave Kiowa there. Afterward, they try not to think about it. They feel horrible, but also lucky and happy that they are not dead. Azar approaches Norman. He quietly apologizes for joking about death: when he saw Kiowa's body, he felt like it was listening, and like it was his fault Kiowa was dead. Norman brushes him off, saying it is no one's, and everyone's, fault.

Jimmy Cross is reconsidering. He won't take the blame for Kiowa's death after all. It was an accident. He believes this to be true. He thinks that there has to be blame for a death in war--and the blame can be far-reaching; one can blame entire countries. But in the field death has to have an immediate cause. The young soldier approaches Jimmy, wanting to confess that it was his flashlight that killed Kiowa. But Jimmy isn't listening. He is daydreaming about being back on a golf course in New Jersey. He is wondering whether he will ever write to Kiowa's father. Maybe he'll just walk away from it.

Topic Tracking: Truth 8

## Chapter 18, Good Form

The narrator explains that he is a forty-three year old writer, who once fought in Vietnam. But almost everything else in the story is fiction. He didn't throw a grenade at a Vietnamese man, but he was there. No, he says, even that story is made up. "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." Chapter 18, pg. 179 He explains that while there were many real dead people in Vietnam, he was afraid to look at them. When he makes up the story of the dead Vietnamese man, he can attach a face to his guilt and pain. That is what stories are for.

Topic Tracking: Truth 9



## Chapter 19, Field Trip

A few months after writing the chapter "In the Field," Tim took his daughter Kathleen to the field where Kiowa died. It looks smaller and peaceful. Kathleen doesn't understand why they are there--she's only ten--but she generally keeps quiet. She asks him why the war was fought, and why he had to fight in it, and he has no answers. She gets frustrated, and thinks he is weird because he can't forget something that happened so long ago. Though it is never said directly, it seems that Tim is the young soldier who lost his girlfriend's picture in the field. He is the one who let Kiowa die because he couldn't stand the smell. He tells Kathleen almost nothing about why they are there. He quietly takes Kiowa's moccasins out of a bundle and puts them under the mud, trying to find the place where his body was found. He slides into the muck as Kathleen watches in confusion and disgust. He wants to say something profound but can't think of anything. Tim sees an old Vietnamese farmer watching him intently. The man raises his shovel fiercely, then continues to work in the field. Kathleen asks if the man is angry with Tim, but he tells her that that's all over.



## Chapter 20, The Ghost Soldiers

Tim was shot twice. The first time was in the side, and Rat Kiley took care of him, telling him not to worry and checking on him several times, even though they were in the middle of a fight. When Tim is being taken by helicopter to the hospital, Rat nearly hugs him, which surprises Tim. The second time Tim is shot, there is a new medic in their group: Bobby Jorgenson. Tim is shot "in the butt," and Bobby is too afraid to crawl over to him and treat the wound. Tim almost dies of shock, and Bobby treats the wound badly, so that he almost gets gangrene as well. Tim wants to be able to be somewhat proud of getting shot, or at least be able to talk about it, but instead he has to lie on his stomach for a month, and he is made fun of in the hospital. He plots revenge against Bobby.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 8

After he is shot twice, Tim is transferred to a safer location. He no longer has to travel on foot. In some ways he misses it: he saw things very clearly when he was constantly afraid for his life. Still, he would have been okay about leaving combat if he hadn't had the constant pain from the second bullet. He dreams about hurting Bobby Jorgenson.

At one point, his platoon comes to his location. They greet each other warmly, and the men tell Tim stories. Tim feels separated from them, because he no longer faces the danger and filth of war with them. Everyone in the group is superstitious, and the men tell him about a man who used up all his luck. He went for a swim one day in a very dangerous area. Soon after, he got very sick and died. The men feel he wasted his luck on a stupid thing like swimming. Tim thinks about this, but he is more interested in where Bobby Jorgenson might be. Mitchell Sanders tells him to forget about it: Bobby made a mistake, but he's a much better medic now. He's part of the group. Tim realizes that he himself isn't. He feels betrayed. Soon after, he runs into Bobby, who is so uncomfortable around him that Tim almost feels sorry for him. Bobby tries to make peace with Tim, admitting that he made a mistake.

Tim doesn't want to let go of his anger, and he hates Bobby for making that happen. Vietnam has turned Tim into this, he says: he began as a thoughtful, moral person, and became a vengeful, hard, cruel one. He tries to get Mitchell Sanders to help him get revenge, but Mitchell calls him sick. Azar, however, is glad to help. Tim doesn't like him--nobody does. But Tim needs help to carry out his plan. They don't want to hurt Jorgenson--just scare him. This is easy to do in Vietnam, where everything seems ghostly--especially the enemy. Tim is still angry and wants to punish Jorgenson, but Mitchell won't speak to him, which makes him feel bad and not want to go through with it. The two feelings cancel each other out, so Tim follows the plan, but without enthusiasm. Azar, on the other hand, seems way too excited. Their plan is simple: Jorgenson is on night watch. They rig some ropes to cans filled with rifle cartridges. When they pull the ropes, the cans rattle, and Jorgenson thinks the enemy is nearby. Tim feels cruel--he knows how frightening this must be for Bobby. He feels like he is becoming Vietnam. Afterward, he and Azar listen to sentimental music. Tim knows he



will never be a young innocent kid again. Azar doesn't get it. They go back to Jorgensen's post later, and set off quiet, bright flares. Bobby jumps and cries out. Tim knows that now Bobby knows how he felt when he got shot: his fear was so strong that he no longer felt human. "You're a shadow. You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in." Chapter 20, pg. 211

Tim knows he has made his point, and tells Azar it's over. Azar seems to pity him in a condescending and cruel way, and tells him they have to finish the job. Tim knows Azar won't listen, but he begs him to stop anyway. Tim remembers how he felt when he was shot: it was like he didn't exist. He felt like he could speak, but the words wouldn't come out. He was sure he was going to die. Everything was in slow-motion and he kept focusing on very small details: a pebble, Jorgenson's shoes. He almost feels like that again as Azar continues with their plan. Azar throws a tear gas grenade. He lifts a white sandbag into the air with a pulley. Jorgenson, thinking it's the enemy, shoots at it. Then he realizes what is happening. He calls Tim's name. Azar is disappointed that the game is over, and thinks Tim is pathetic for chickening out. Jorgenson is not angry at Tim, and says they're even now. Tim is shaken by what he has done, but tries not to show it. He wants to kill Azar.

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 8



## Chapter 21, Night Life

Tim hears about how Rat Kiley got hurt. The men had been traveling only at night, because they had heard rumors about increasing dangers from the enemy. They tried to sleep during the day, and they walked at night, which in Vietnam is unbelievably dark. Everyone in the platoon was affected by this, but Rat Kiley could not deal with it. He believed that giant bugs are hunting him. He clawed at his skin. Everyone was sad to see this, but it almost seemed normal in their situation. One day Rat told Mitchell Sanders that he was frightening himself. He couldn't stop wondering what people's internal organs looked like. He knew it was bizarre, but he couldn't help himself. He even saw his own body, blown to bits. He knew it had to end. The next morning, he shot himself in the foot. No one blamed him, and they gave him warm and sad good byes.

Topic Tracking: Bravery 9

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 9



## Chapter 22, The Lives of the Dead

Tim believes that stories can save living people, and bring dead people back to life. He's still dreaming about all the now-dead people he's known throughout his life. He remembers the body of a Vietnamese man, the only body they can find after they destroy an entire village. This happened when Tim had only been in the war for four days, and he was not ready for what happened: the other men in his platoon all shook the man's hand, talking to him as if he was alive. They let their sense of humor protect them from what had happened. Tim couldn't do it, even though Dave Jensen kept pushing him to. Later, Kiowa came to him and told him that he was right not to shake the man's hand. Tim argued that it wasn't brave to stand up to the other men: it was cowardice in the face of death. He avoided the dead man because he was afraid of him. He was reminded of his first date.

Tim and Linda were both nine years old. They were in love. "It had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure such things. I just loved her." Chapter 22, pg. 228 They somehow arranged to go on a date. His parents took them to a movie. She was wearing a strange cap, like one of Santa's elves might wear, and when he commented on it, trying to be nice, his mother gave him a severe look that surprised him.

Telling a story about someone brings them back to life. The men did this with Ted Lavender. After he died they talked to him and answered for him. It almost makes him seem alive--something that happened with Linda, too, after she died.

That night, they went to see *The Man Who Never Was*. It is a movie about British soldiers who find a dead body, put fake documents in his pockets, and throw his body into the ocean. His body washes up on a German beach, Nazis find the documents and, thinking they are real, use them to decide their strategies. The British are able to anticipate what the Germans will do next, thus winning the war. Tim was enthralled and horrified by the dead body. After the movie, they went to Dairy Queen, then his parents drove her home and he walked her to the door. He doesn't remember anything they said, but he knows they were in love. At school, Linda wore the strange cap every day. One boy kept threatening to pull it off her. Tim wished he could do something, but he wasn't brave enough. "I should've stepped in; fourth grade is no excuse. Besides, it doesn't get easier with time, and twelve years later, when Vietnam presented much harder choices, some practice at being brave might've helped." Chapter 22, pg. 234 In any case, he wished he could have stopped what happened next. The boy continued to bother Linda, and one day in class, he pulled the cap off. Linda was bald except for a few tufts of hair. She had stitches and a Band-Aid on her head. Everyone was silent, still, and shocked. Linda looked at Tim. "It lasted only a moment, but I had the feeling that a whole conversation was happening between us. *Well?* She was saying, and I was saying, *Sure, okay.*" Chapter 22, pg. 235 Later, Linda cried, and Tim and the other boy walked her home.



Today, Tim is forty-three, but he knows he is the same person he was when he was nine. He looks at photographs of himself and he recognizes his own eyes. "And as a writer now, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body--her life." Chapter 22, pg. 236 Linda had a brain tumor, and she died a few months after their first date. Tim didn't believe she would really die, even though his mother told him she would. Then he heard from the other boy that Linda was dead. Tim went home by himself, lay on his bed, and tried to will her back to life. He saw her in a dream, and began to cry. She told him not be sad that she is dead--it doesn't matter. Tim knows that all of this applies to Vietnam as well. The men taught themselves not to think of the people they saw as really dead. They told stories about them that were so vivid that the men almost came back to life. When Tim heard Linda was dead, he asked his father to take him to the funeral home. His father hesitated, but agreed. Tim was afraid, and when he saw Linda he couldn't believe it was really her. She was bloated, and she didn't look asleep. She looked dead. Tim remembers all the bodies he saw in Vietnam. Many of them were horrifying and disgusting. When he was a boy, he made up dreams about Linda. She said amazing things, like, "Once you're alive, you can't ever be dead." Chapter 22, pg. 244 He went to bed earlier and earlier, wanting to see her again. He wrote stories about Linda, in which she explained what it was like to be dead--it isn't bad, or frightening, or really even worth talking about. He still does this, as a forty-three year old adult. He makes up stories about all the men who were his friends who are now dead, and he still writes about Linda too. His memory has faded, but that doesn't matter. His stories, no matter how they change her, keep her alive. "I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story." Chapter 22, pg. 246

Topic Tracking: Truth 10

Topic Tracking: Bravery 10

Topic Tracking: Effects of War 10