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THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

By Tim O'Brien

Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 273 pp.

"You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever," Tim O'Brien writes in this haunting new book. Like America itself, O'Brien has tried for two decades to retell, reshape, make sense of and reach peace with the Vietnam War. After a disappointing last novel, *The Nuclear Age*, this former sergeant who earned a Purple Heart near My Lai returns to Vietnam with the mastery that made his 1978 *Going After Cacciato* a unanimous National Book Award winner.

Unlike *Cacciato*, whose fantasy and realism slalom along an unbroken plot line, *The Things They Carried* is less a novel than a jigsaw of interrelated Vietnam and pre- and post-Vietnam stories salted with reflections by the 43 year-old writer who wonders if all the pieces will ever fit into any clear picture. Not quite a novel, it remains a strongly unified book, a series of glimpses through different facets of the same mysterious, deadly stone.

Tim O'Brien the narrator—carefully distanced from Tim O'Brien the writer—sounds less like he wants to tell his story than like he must, an ancient mariner compelled to stop listeners and exorcise demons that will never go away. "Telling stories," he says, is "a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me . . . all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done. . . . You objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself."

The longer, more sustained Vietnam narratives are brilliant, beginning with the relentless title story. This 1987 National Magazine Fiction Award-winner is one of the most compelling stories of the past decade. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and his platoon carry weapons, fear, good-luck charms and the land itself. But Cross carries also his love for a girl back home and the responsibility for his men. When one of his men dies, Cross must let something go, and it cannot be his sense of responsibility.

"The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong" casts a surreal spell in conveying the story of Mary Anne Bell, the high school girl from Cleveland Heights who flies to join her boyfriend at an isolated jungle outpost. Mary Anne becomes transfixed by the spell of Vietnam which "had the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something." In the jungle, Mary Anne moves steadily deeper into the heart of her own darkness and never comes out.

Stories set before and after the war provide overall perspective. "On the Rainy River," a kind of inverted "Big Two-Hearted River," recounts what O'Brien did to heal *before* the war, upon receiving his draft notice. Terrified, caught between conscience and disgrace, he seeks calm in six days on the Rainy River bordering Canada, offering its

sanctuary, and senses the eyes of his community forcing upon him the decision he feels shamed into making.

In Southeast Asia, O'Brien finds himself in a ghoulishly ironic world where men think they've betrayed a wounded buddy by *not* killing him, infantrymen discuss becoming ministers while Buddhist monks clean their M-60 machine guns, a Vietnamese girl responds to the destruction of her home and family by ceaseless dancing, soldiers complimented for guts explain it wasn't guts but fear and are told "same difference." Men cope as they can, with drugs and girlfriends' pantyhose and Bibles and grotesque senses of humor. They mail their body lice home to their draft boards. They shake hands with VC corpses. They try to defuse death by calling it anything else, so that a napalmed VC nurse is a "crispy critter." When Curt Lemon steps on a booby-trapped 105 and gets blown in pieces into a tree, a buddy climbs up and tosses down the fragments of flesh and bone, all the while singing "Lemon Tree."

The most affirmative irony is how constant proximity to death makes men feel more alive: "After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. . . . You're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable."

O'Brien blends diverse incidents, voices and genres, indelibly rendering the nightmarish impact of the Vietnam experience. In "The Man I Killed," without his own character saying a word, he adumbrates the luridness of having killed for the first time. As in *Cacciato*, he mixes the realistic with the hallucinatory, what happened with what seemed to happen, both equally true in this jungle war where nothing is but what is not.

"If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted . . . you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie," says O'Brien. "You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil." But what is true about this unreal war may vary from what was factual. "Memory believes before knowing remembers," wrote Faulkner, and O'Brien presents himself as often unable to distinguish what occurred from what appeared to occur: "What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. . . . When a guy dies . . . you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled. . . . In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. . . . In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling."

O'Brien has been described as wanting us to question what it means to be sane in an insane world, but the phrase is a contradiction. The more insane the world we inhabit, the more sanity we must relinquish in exchange for the ability to fit there and survive. Having physically survived Vietnam, O'Brien stands at the intersection of memory and imagination, still exploring the meanings of courage and shame, honor and guilt, truth and fact.

With authority, O'Brien keeps writing true war stories as if to relieve the pressure of sadness and confusion. "That's another thing Nam does to you, . . ." he says about the sadness, "You learn, finally, that you'll die, and so you try to hang on to your own life, that gentle naïve kid you used to be, but . . . you know for a fact that you can't ever bring that happy kid back again." The confusion surfaces when he tries to explain to his fictional ten year-old daughter why he was there:

"This whole war,' she said. 'why was everybody so mad at everybody else?'

I shook my head. 'They weren't mad exactly. Some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing.'

'What did *you* want?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'To stay alive.'

'That's all?'

'Yes.'"

Back in the world, the narrator of *The Things They Carried* wants other things: clarity, peace, homage for lost friends, that happy kid back again, things he senses he will never find but which he pursues with consummate artistry.