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The Things They Carried
Tim O'Brien



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ISBN 978-1-60389-661-0

Item No. 201156

Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

The Things They Carried

Pre-Reading

1. A large part of *The Things They Carried* takes place in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Free-write for five minutes on what you know of the war—what the fighting was about, how different Americans felt about it, who was drafted, the impact it has had on Vietnam veterans, and anything else your mind happens to land on.
2. Imagine that you're a soldier in the jungles of Vietnam. Like all soldiers, you carry at least twenty pounds of equipment with you as you trudge across the country; this does not include any personal items, such as photographs or chewing gum. Every personal thing you bring adds to the heavy weight on your shoulders.

Given that knowledge, describe five personal items you would carry with you to remind you of home, ease your nerves, and simply make your situation more bearable. Explain the significance each item holds for you.

The Things They Carried

3. Martha signs her letters to Lieutenant Cross "Love, Martha," but Cross understands that "Love" is only "a way of signing" and does not mean that Martha loves him romantically. Why do you think we automatically sign letters or e-mails "Love" when we don't necessarily mean that we deeply love the people to whom we are writing? Is it simply a meaningless convention? How do you sign *your* notes to friends? Address these questions in a detailed paragraph.

Love

13. Cross and the narrator are eventually able to laugh and reminisce about their time in Vietnam, although the terrible things remain with them. In a paragraph, describe a situation or time in your life that was almost unbearable that you are able to talk casually—or even with amusement—about now.

14. Martha is firm but vague when she talks with Cross at their college reunion. Neither Cross nor we really learn what is driving her. Given what she says to him in their brief conversations, invent a “back story” for Martha. What has happened to her? What did Cross mean to her when she was younger?

Write Martha’s “story” in at least one page.

15. The narrator promises Cross that he won’t mention Ted Lavender (or perhaps Martha) when he writes about Cross in the future. Obviously, he breaks his promise. Is this wrong of him, given that we still ultimately feel sympathy for Cross?

Write an e-mail to the narrator in which you express agreement or disagreement with his decision to include Martha and Ted in Cross’s story. Be sure to explain *why* you agree or disagree.

On the Rainy River

20. *The Things They Carried* is intentionally classified as a work of fiction. Most “chapters” or stories are told in the first-person, by a narrator named Tim O’Brien who once fought in Vietnam and is now a writer. The author of *The Things They Carried* is named Tim O’Brien; he once fought in Vietnam and is now a writer.

Why do you think O’Brien decided to bill this book as “fiction” instead of autobiography—and to create a character named O’Brien who seems to resemble the author in every way? Do you find it confusing? Does it seem like a meaningless distinction, or does it have a definite effect on the way you feel as you read the book?

Write a letter to Tim O’Brien—the author, not the character—in which you explain your answers to the above questions to him, and ask him a few of your own questions.

21. As a college student, O’Brien was against the Vietnam War and engaged in a few mild forms of protest: writing editorials, ringing doorbells. If a war that you are profoundly opposed to occurs during your lifetime, how willing do you think you will be to protest it? Will you keep your mouth shut, write a few letters, take place in or organize a protest march, or go even further? Explain your answer in a thoughtful paragraph, including whether you think it is a person’s responsibility to stand up and be counted if she or he thinks a war is being fought for the wrong reasons.
22. O’Brien is ashamed to admit that, on first being drafted, his immediate reaction is that he is “too good for [the] war.” He considers himself “too smart, too compassionate, too everything”—after all, he was student body president at his college and he has a full scholarship to Harvard for grad school.

What if Vietnam was now and you were drafted? Would you think—even for just a second—that you were “too good” to be shipped off to this war? Is there such a thing as being “too good” for a war? Elaborate on your answers in a paragraph.

How to Tell a True War Story

31. O'Brien writes, "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed...[o]ften the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't."

In a page or so, tell the craziest, most unbelievable true story from your own life.

32. Mitchell Sanders tells a story about a platoon camped out on a listening mission in the mountains. They begin to hear eerie music, but must remain silent themselves. As Sanders puts it, "[W]hat makes it extra bad...is that the poor dudes can't horse around like normal. Can't joke it away."

Sometimes making a joke, even when it seems the least appropriate thing to do, is the only thing that can get us through a frightening or depressing situation. We just "joke it away," if only for one moment of relief. In a paragraph, describe a time when you or someone you were with used humor to get through a difficult time.

33. After Lemon's death, Rat Kiley brutally kills a baby water buffalo, inflicting as much pain on the animal as possible. Imagine that the incident has come to the attention of some higher-ups in the military. There is talk of discharging Kiley immediately and without honor.

Write a letter to the military officials in which you either argue for or against discharging Kiley, grounded in how you felt after "seeing" Kiley kill the buffalo.

34. Do you feel cheated at the end of the story, when O'Brien suggests that none of it is true? Explain your answer and describe how the ending affected you in a short note to the author.