

Tim O'Brien in the Classroom

“This too is true: Stories can save us”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



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As a foot soldier in Vietnam, Tim O’Brien encountered firsthand the victories and losses of war. This chapter provides background about the writer’s life and demonstrates how students can use the connections between life and art to explore their own memories and experiences.

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By exploring the nebulous border between fiction and truth, Tim O’Brien challenges us to question the nature of fiction and literature. This chapter suggests ways in which O’Brien’s work can be used to jump-start discussions about reading and reacting to literature in the classroom.

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This chapter includes ideas and examples for having students write their own stories and poems modeled on Tim O’Brien’s work.

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Tim O’Brien uses simple syntax and diction to create complex narrative structures. This chapter explores the author’s use of language and includes lessons that use basic tools of writing to help student writers weave themes and meaning.

2 A True Story That Never Happened

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Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. (The Things They Carried 83)

Ask your students what *The Things They Carried* is about, and chances are the words *Vietnam*, *soldier*, and *war* will make it into their first few sentences. How would they react if you were to respond to their answers by telling them that none of the stories are about the Vietnam War, that all of the stories in the book are about the fine balance between truth and fact and why we tell stories? In the end, Tim O'Brien isn't examining the politics of the Vietnam War, the purpose of any war, or the nature of life and death. What O'Brien is trying to divine in this novel is why we tell stories and what purpose those stories—completely biased, subjective reports of events—serve in our lives. Central to this question is the idea that truth and fact might not be the same thing.

Lying gets a bad rap, we tell our students. We lie when we rationalize selfish behavior or pretend to be surprised when being told of a secret we've clandestinely known for months. What's more, we ask to be lied to on a regular basis. Every time we turn on the TV to watch a drama or comedy or go to the movies to see the latest blockbuster, or each time we open up a novel, we know

a series of quick vignettes, varying between the comic, the grotesque, and the mundane, some only single phrases, until O'Brien ends the chapter:

Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, where there is nothing to remember except the story. (38)

Compare this to the last paragraph of the last story, "The Lives of the Dead," as the writer dreams of Linda, a little girl he's been remembering:

And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. . . . 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. (245–46)

So the framework of the entire book is one in which a writer tells his readers stories—made-up stories—and then tells us why he's telling us those stories: to reveal emotional truth.

O'Brien pauses in the telling of his stories several other times either to wonder if he is telling the stories correctly or to explain that he is fabricating stories. In some sections, he tells a story and

“No wonder you are such a mother-figure—very controlling.” The stoic woman now looks up from her yellow pad. “You feel like you have to protect everything and everyone.”

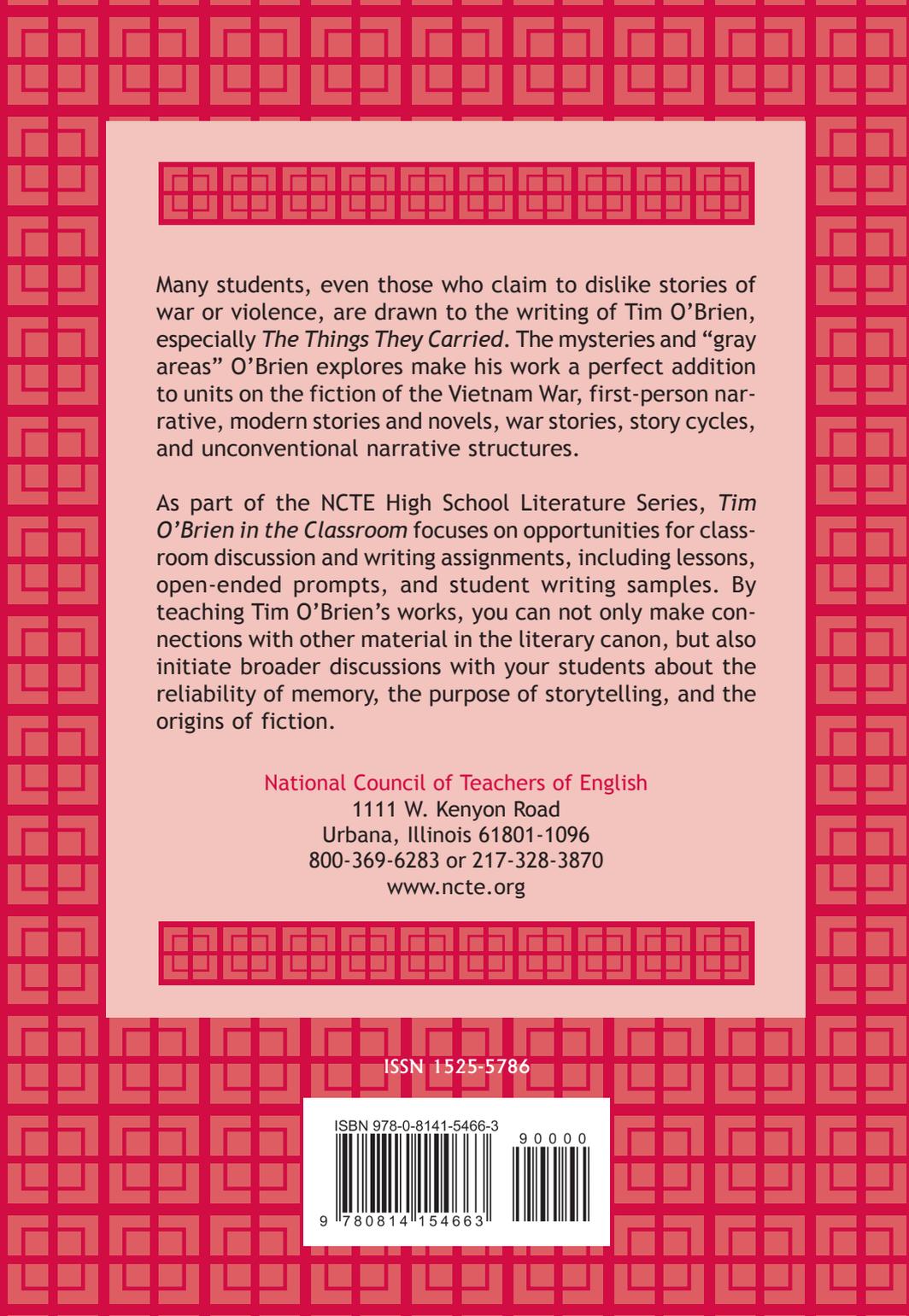
—*Mary Beth Epps*

What struck us about this story was that by framing the subject as a fiction, Mary Beth not only managed to explore a painful topic in her writing, but she also managed to reflect on her own character and reactions. Fabricated dialogue allowed her to see the true consequences of the events she writes about.

Literary and Cultural Examples of Blurring the Line That Can Lead to Discussion

There never seems to be a shortage of people in our culture who play with their own stories. Look at Eminem. He's born Marshall Mathers, renames himself Eminem, raps stories from the perspective of his alter ego Slim Shady about things he has done or imagines doing in his own life, then makes the semiautobiographical movie *8 Mile*. He often talks about violence in terms of how he feels rather than what he has done. Stephen King has published under a pseudonym, Andy Kaufman played characters without ever revealing to the audience that they were characters, Paul Auster writes stories in which there are characters named Paul Auster—examples like these can be great starting points for further discussion of *The Things They Carried*.

As part of that discussion, we often bring up cultural examples of “liars” in order to discuss how we should deal with them. It might start with a little homework. Give each student one or two names to look up; here are just a few we have read about in the last year: James Frey, JT LeRoy, Nasdijj, Helen Darville, Kaavya Viswanathan, Leon Carmen, Augusten Burroughs, Jayson Blair,



Many students, even those who claim to dislike stories of war or violence, are drawn to the writing of Tim O'Brien, especially *The Things They Carried*. The mysteries and “gray areas” O'Brien explores make his work a perfect addition to units on the fiction of the Vietnam War, first-person narrative, modern stories and novels, war stories, story cycles, and unconventional narrative structures.

As part of the NCTE High School Literature Series, *Tim O'Brien in the Classroom* focuses on opportunities for classroom discussion and writing assignments, including lessons, open-ended prompts, and student writing samples. By teaching Tim O'Brien's works, you can not only make connections with other material in the literary canon, but also initiate broader discussions with your students about the reliability of memory, the purpose of storytelling, and the origins of fiction.

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