

# Tim O'Brien in the Classroom

“This too is true: Stories can save us”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



Barry Gilmore and  
Alexander Kaplan

# Contents



*Introduction* . . . . . vii

**1. Where Life and Art Intersect** . . . . . 1

*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.*

**2. A True Story That Never Happened.** . . . . . 12

*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.*

**3. Writing from Models.** . . . . . 26

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

**4. The Simple Need to Talk** . . . . . 41

*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

.....

*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



- ◆ Their first experiences driving
- ◆ A story their families tell about themselves

This assignment starts as a discussion, but we like to ask students first to write down everything they know about the story without anyone else's input. They then ask others involved (such as parents or grandparents) to tell the same story with as much detail as possible. (This works better with some stories than with others.) In instances such as the parents' first meeting, the students ask both of the parents—separately—for their stories. When the students return with the stories and note the inevitable discrepancies, we discuss whether one is more or less "true" than the other. This discussion in turn leads to a discussion of subjectivity and memory. When does the truth stop being the truth in recounting events? If you tell a story that happened to you, but you say it happened when you were twelve and it actually happened when you were ten, are you lying? Is it no longer true?

- Another good place to start the discussion about blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction (after students have read at least one of the stories) is inside the book's covers but before we reach the text. Turn to the title page and you'll see a subtitle: *A Work of Fiction by Tim O'Brien*. The dedication page reads: "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa." These are the names of the characters in the book. Is he dedicating this book to characters that he himself created? Were they real people who he is lying about? And, more to the point, how does this gray area make you as a reader feel about the veracity of the rest of the story? (In fact, the characters are just that—fictional characters. It's possible to find O'Brien's own explanation for this choice of dedication, in which







O'Brien allows one of his own characters, Mitchell Sanders, to criticize this approach, but then uses Rat Kiley to offer his defense:

[A]ll that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can't clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. It destroys the magic. What you have to do, Sanders said, is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself.

But Rat Kiley couldn't help it. He wanted to bracket the full range of meaning. (106)

We use this passage to begin a discussion of metafiction in *The Things They Carried*. To what extent does O'Brien "destroy the magic"? Does he ever get out of the way of his own stories? What does he mean by suggesting that metafiction can "bracket the full range of meaning," and how does this work in the novel as a whole?

One of the first places O'Brien enters the world of metafiction is in the story "Spin," where he wishes that his stories could be labeled "peace stories." Then he gives us these paragraphs:

Here's a quick peace story:

A guy goes AWOL. Shacks up in Danang with a Red Cross nurse. It's a great time—the nurse loves him to death—the guy gets whatever he wants whenever he wants it. The war's over, he thinks. Just nookie and new angles. But then one day he rejoins his unit in the bush. Can't wait to get back into action. Finally one of his buddies asks what happened with the nurse, why so hot for combat, and the guy says, "All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*." (35)

And then we learn that Mitchell Sanders told that story to the narrator and that he made most of it up. What follows in "Spin" is

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







(One might be reminded of Gertrude's famous observation, "The lady protests too much, methinks"). And what does it mean that the author is doing this in the midst of a book that has as its subtitle "A Work of Fiction"?

- Tim O'Brien the character plays a role in some of the chapters but not all of them. Is that to imply that he witnesses some of what goes on in the book but not all of it? Does it make the narrator more or less reliable that he never tells us the answer to this question?

One effect of metafiction is to undo everything the author has attempted to create, because the author is admitting that he is manipulating the reader, rearranging facts, leaving out what did happen and adding in things that didn't. He's lying in order to tell the truth, he would argue, and this idea serves as a pathway to powerful discussions and writing exercises. We often ask students to create a lie that tells us the truth. A few ideas:

- Discuss and practice writing dialogue with students. O'Brien admits freely that his first work, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, which is usually billed as nonfiction, contains fabricated dialogue that is true to his memory but perhaps not to fact—after all, what soldier takes notes on everything his comrades *actually* say? Ask students to remember a real event and reconstruct the dialogue as it might have been. This might even be a good time to introduce the concept of irony; students can try having a character mean something other than he or she says only through dialogue.
- After students compile family histories such as those mentioned earlier in this chapter, have them write the story of, say, how their parents or grandparents met—a fiction based on truth.



“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.


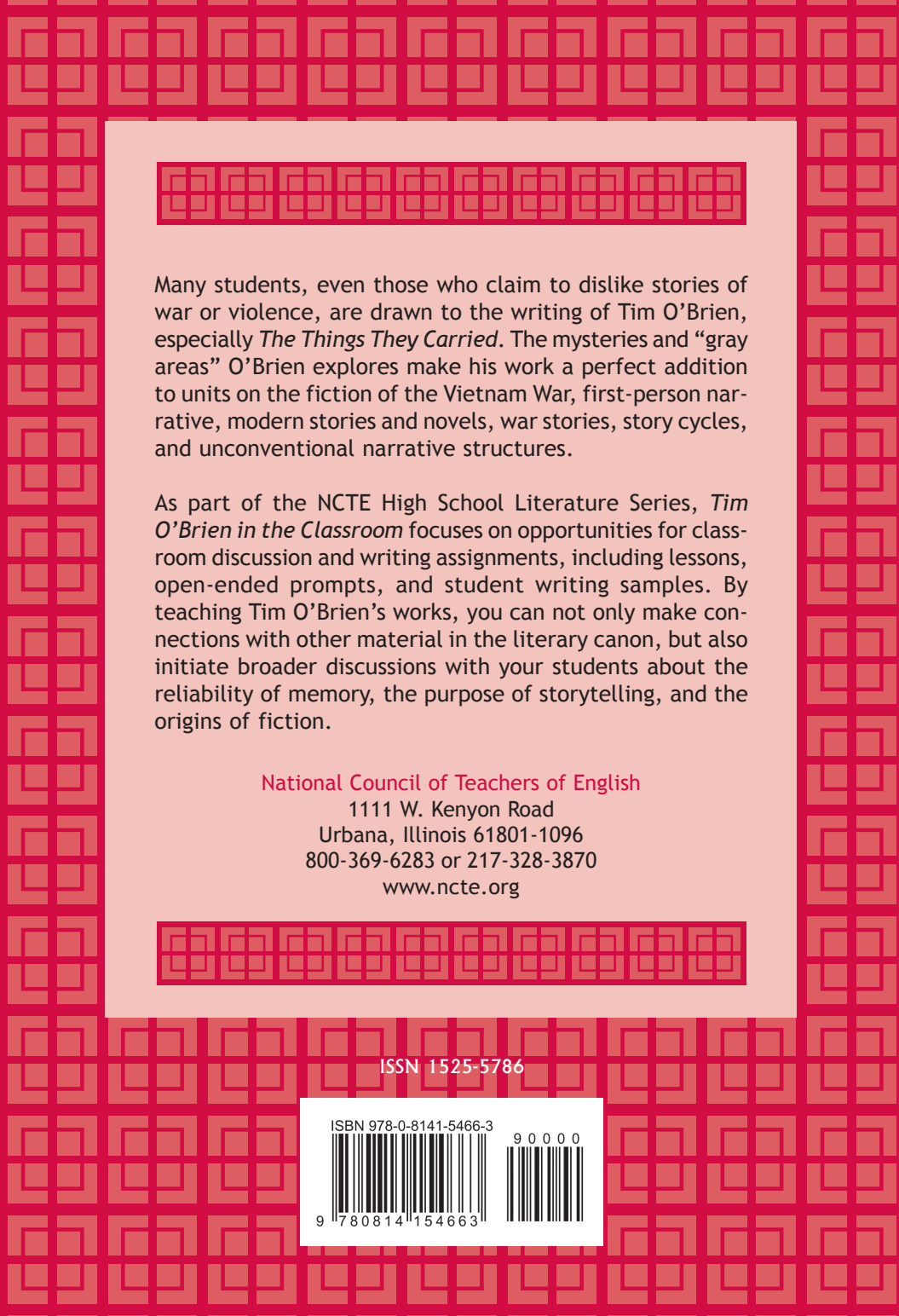
### **Literary and Cultural Examples of Blurring the Line That Can Lead to Discussion**

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.

National Council of Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road  
Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096  
800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870  
[www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)



ISSN 1525-5786

ISBN 978-0-8141-5466-3

9 0 0 0 0



9 780814 154663