

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The lesson plan on the following pages for teaching **Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*** was prepared for the 2002 Chicago Humanities Festival: *Brains & Beauty*.

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Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien's riveting narratives of war in Vietnam have made him a favorite author for millions of readers. His writings include: *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), a semi-autobiographical, anecdotal account of his experiences as an infantryman in Vietnam; *Northern Lights* (1975); *Going after Cacciato* (1978), a National Book Award winner; *The Things They Carried* (1990); *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994); *Twinkle, Twinkle* (1994); and *Tomcat in Love* (1998).

O'Brien continues his examination of Vietnam and its aftermath in his latest novel *July, July* (2002). It is the story of members of a college class of 1969, reunited in 2000, for whom Vietnam is at the center of both past and present.

Use the lesson plan on the following pages to read O'Brien's classic, *The Things They Carried*, with your students.

Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

The Things They Carried: A Lesson Plan By Amy McElroy

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is one of the most widely taught portrayals of the Vietnam War. The short story of the same name, with which the book begins, is one of the most widely anthologized. The things the soldiers carried ranged from the ordinary (pocket knives, mosquito repellent, ammunition) to the sentimental (photographs, a girlfriend's pantyhose) to the psychological ("grief, terror, love, longing").

At once a novel and a collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried* is uniquely suitable for the classroom, as it can be read in its entirety or in pieces. It is a work of fiction and nevertheless a true account of the Vietnam War. In the lesson plan that follows, Amy McElroy sketches how she approaches this book with her students.



Amy McElroy has taught high school English for fourteen years and is currently on staff at Maine South High School where she teaches American literature and freshman English. She earned her B.A. at the University of Iowa and her M.A. at DePaul University. She has been the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress. She is the co-author of a lesson on the Great Depression for the Library of Congress American Memory website. She is an active member of the Council for American Studies Education (CASE) and a frequent participant in CHF teacher institutes.

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Themes

Themes are tied to form in this novel. The multiple-story, multiple-perspective format emphasizes how similar and yet how different the Vietnam War was for the different men. Two themes in particular are woven throughout and are tied to perspective:

- The war story: What is a true war story? How is it told? How does this novel function as a war story?
- Mission: What does this mean? What kinds of physical and psychological missions do the men and women undergo?

Activities

- Keep track of characters by using a chart and plot what each major character carries, discriminating between the tangible and intangible items.
- Design your own rucksack (using a real back pack, or one on paper), and include the physical and intangible things you carry. Represent the intangibles with words or symbols. What do these things say about you? You could also design one based hypothetically on one that you would carry in the Vietnam or some other war.
- Select a quote from the novel, such as one that is open to interpretation or one that elicits an emotional response, and write it on a large sheet of paper. With a partner, have a silent discussion by taking turns writing on the paper a response to the quotation and to each other. No talking is allowed.
- Write a narrative essay incorporating a few stylistic elements O'Brien uses in the novel. These might include playing with time, one-sentence paragraphs, repetition, and realistic language. Topics to consider include:
 - telling about an event or conflict that forced you to make a decision that helped shape who you are today, or
 - telling about a time when you did or did not do something because of fear of embarrassment.
- Teachers could write statistics about the Vietnam War on the board each day during the study of the novel. These could be body count numbers presented chronologically to mirror what viewers were seeing on the television news each night. ("Harper's Index" is often a good source for provocative statistics. Each month's index is available online at <http://www.harpers.org/harpers-index/>.)

Discussion Questions

- What do you think is the heaviest thing that the men carry? Why?
- Why do you think O'Brien gives the specific weights for the objects the men carry?
- Why does O'Brien include Mary Anne Bell in this novel about the Vietnam War?
- According to the novel, what is a true war story? What is a false war story?
- What definitions of the word "courage" does the novel suggest?
- Comment on the role of women in the novel. In what ways are they similar to each other? In what ways are they different?
- What different meanings of the word "home" are suggested at different times in the novel?
- What are different "missions" the characters initiate or follow in the novel?

Supplemental Activities

These activities could be done before, during, or after study of *The Things They Carried* and could be adapted to reinforce particular themes or approaches to the novel.

- Read poems about the Vietnam War experience, particularly those written by those who were there. These short and powerful pieces reflect themes in the novel and reinforce the variety of perspectives on the war. "Body Bags" by R.S. Gwynn and "When I Was a Medic" by D.F. Brown work particularly well.
- Listen to protest songs performed during the war. What basic criticisms of war do they present? How do you respond to them emotionally? Intellectually? Which ones do you think were most effective? If listened to chronologically, how does the tone of the songs shift over time?
- Visit the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum at 1801 S. Indiana Avenue in Chicago. How does the art reflect themes in the novel? What characters in the novel might have created particular pieces? What characters or events are illustrated in the art?
- Interview a Vietnam War veteran and write an oral history of his or her experience. Teacher guidance is very important here in preparing students for what can be a difficult, but rewarding experience. Another approach is to read out loud published oral histories about the war experience, in particular selections that illustrate a variety of perspectives.

- View *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* or *84 Charlie Mopic*. These powerful films work well in the classroom in terms of subject matter, length, and relatively minimal language and violence.

Resources

Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1988.

Edelman, Bernard. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. New York: Norton, 2002.

Ehrhart, W.D. *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1989.

Dear America: Letter Home from Vietnam. Directed by Bill Couturié. 83 min. HBO Films, 1987. Videocassette.

84 Charlie Mopic (also known as *84C MoPic*). Directed by Patrick Duncan. 95 min. New Century/Vista Film Co., 1989. Videocassette.

ILLINOIS LEARNING GOALS

1.B.5a Relate reading to prior knowledge and experience and make connections to related information.

1.B.5b Analyze the defining characteristics and structures of a variety of complex literary genres and describe how genre affects the meaning and function of the texts.

1.C.5a Use questions and predictions to guide reading across complex materials.

1.C.5b Analyze and defend an interpretation of text.

1.C.5c Critically evaluate information from multiple sources.

1.C.5d Summarize and make generalizations from content and relate them to the purpose of the material.

1.C.5e Evaluate how authors and illustrators use text and art across materials to express their ideas (e.g., complex dialogue, persuasive techniques).

2.A.5b Evaluate relationships between and among character, plot, setting, theme, conflict and resolution and their influence on the effectiveness of a literary piece.

2.B.5a Analyze and express an interpretation of a literary work.

2.B.5b Apply knowledge gained from literature as a means of understanding contemporary and historical economic, social and political issues and perspectives.