

Dear Lauren: So here is the novel guide questions—it should be easy to adapt, depending upon what sort of test you want....

Consider:

1. **Questions to Consider Before Reading:** : Adapt them for AFTER—have their feelings changed?
2. Choose a few of the questions from each story to form into MC questions
3. The format of the novel: If you want, you can give them an essay question regarding WHY the novel is formatted in this way, why it isn't told in chronological order
4. You could ask them to write an essay about Tim O'Brien as a dynamic character (let's face it, the dude in "The Ghost Soldiers" is a far cry from the innocent young man in "On the Rainy River")
5. Or you could ask them to write an essay about STORYTELLING, since the whole novel circles around this topic, someone is always telling a story....

Good Luck! Feel better!! 😊

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Novel Guide: The Things They Carried, Tim O'Brien

Questions to Consider Before Reading:

1. The characters in the novel are put in very difficult situations, situations where they were expected to act without having had the time to consider the consequences of their actions. How might this affect their decisions?
2. What does courage mean to you? What are the situations in everyday life that require courage?
4. How would testing your courage at war be different from everyday life situations? Do you think a person who is courageous in everyday life will be courageous fighting in a war? Explain.
5. Do the citizens of the United States have a moral obligation to fight in a war?
6. In a war, should women fight in the same capacity as men? Why—or why not?
7. One of the themes of the novel illustrates the unexpected results of a decision. It is often impossible to predict all the effects a certain action will have. Think about a time when you did something that caused unexpected results. Were the results positive, negative, or both?

Metafiction, also known as Romantic irony in the context of Romantic works of literature, is a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction; metafiction uses techniques to draw attention to itself as a work of art, while exposing the "truth" of a story. It is the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.

1. "The Things They Carried" (read together)

1. In what sense does Jimmy love Martha? Why does he construct this elaborate (mostly fictional) relationship with her? What does he get out of it?
2. When is he most likely to think about her? Why is he thinking about her while one of his platoon members is in the tunnel?
3. In what sense is Ted Lavender's death his fault?
4. Here is his excuse for allowing his men to be lax: "He was just a kid at war, in love." Why does Jimmy use this excuse? In what sense does it excuse him? In what sense, doesn't it?
5. Why do the soldiers tell jokes about the war, about killing?
6. How is the idea of weight used and developed in this story ("Jungle boots, 2.1 pounds")? How do you, as a reader, feel reading those lists of weight? What effect does it have on you?
7. In the list of all the things the soldiers carried, what item was most surprising? Which item did you find most evocative of the war? Which items stay with you?
8. If this is a story about sacrifice, what does Jimmy sacrifice, and why?
9. How has Jimmy changed by the end of the story? How will he be a different person from this point on? What has he learned about himself? Or to put it another way, what has he lost and what has he gained?
10. Do you think the war will affect him in a different way now that he refuses to think about Martha? How will it be different? What did "Martha" save him from?
11. What is "the great American war chest"?
12. Some literary critics view Jimmy Cross as a Christ figure—how might this view be accurate? Do you agree?

2. "Love" (Group One)

Write your questions / comments below

3. "Spin" (Group One)

Write your questions / comments below

4. "On the Rainy River"

1. How do the opening sentences prepare you for the story: "This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone"? What effect do they have on you, as a reader?
2. Why does O'Brien relate his experience as a pig declotter? How does this information contribute to the story? Why go into such specific detail?
3. What is Elroy Berdahl's role in this story? Would this be a better or worse story if young Tim O'Brien simply headed off to Canada by himself, without meeting another person?
4. At the story's close, O'Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but doesn't: "I did try. It just wasn't possible" (61). What has O'Brien learned about himself, and how does he return home as a changed person?
5. Why, ultimately, does he go to war? Are there other reasons for going he doesn't list?
6. How does Elroy Berdahl help Tim to decide what to do about being drafted? Be specific.
7. In "On The Rainy River," we learn the 21-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage: "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. It was a comforting theory." What might the 43-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage be? Were you surprised when he described his entry into the Vietnam War as an act of cowardice? Do you agree that a person could enter a war as an act of cowardice?

5. "Enemies" (Group Two)

Write your questions / comments below

6. "Friends" (Group Two)

Write your questions / comments below

7. "How to Tell a True War Story" (read together)

1. Why does this story begin with the line: "This is true"? How does that prepare you, as a reader, for the story? In what sense is "this" true?
2. In this story O'Brien relates a number of episodes. What makes these episodes seem true? Or, to put it another way, how does O'Brien lull you into the belief that each of these episodes is true?
3. Find a few of O'Brien's elements of a "true war story" (such as, "A true war story is never moral.") Why does O'Brien believe these elements are important to a "true" war story?
4. In what sense is a "true" war story actually true? That is, in O'Brien's terms, what is the relationship between historical truth and fictional truth? Do you agree with his assessment that fictional truth and historical do not need to be the same thing?
5. According to O'Brien, why are stories important? In your opinion, what do we, as people, need from stories--both reading them and telling them?
6. Why is the baby water buffalo scene (85) more disturbing than the death of one of O'Brien's platoon members, Curt Lemon (89, top of page)?
7. Why does Rat Kiley kill the baby water buffalo? Explain the complex emotions he experiences in this scene.
8. On page 90, O'Brien explains that this story was "not a war story. It was a love story." In what sense is this a "love story"? Why?
9. Finally, O'Brien says "none of it happened. None of it. And even if it did happen, it didn't happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy..." If O'Brien is not trying to communicate historical fact, what is he trying to communicate? Why change the details? What kind of truth is he trying to relate, and why is this truth set apart from historical truth? Is it OK that this "true" war story may or may not be entirely true?
10. What advice does O'Brien offer on how to tell a war story?

8. "The Dentist" (Group Two)

Write your questions / comments below

9. "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" (read together)

1. Is this really a war story? Does it use classic war story elements? Why—or why not? Who is the main character, and why?
2. Again, this story plays with truth. In the first paragraph (101), O'Brien tells us, "I heard it from Rat Kiley, who swore up and down to its truth, although in the end, I'll admit, that doesn't amount to much of a warranty." How does O'Brien engage you in a story which, up front, he's already admitted is probably not "true"? How does this relate to his ideas for a "true war story" found in an earlier story?
3. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," what transforms Mary Anne into a predatory killer? Does it matter that Mary Anne is a woman? How so? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?
4. How does O'Brien use physical details to show Mary Anne's change? (Think of her gestures, her clothes, her actions.) How, specifically, has she changed? And why?
5. Why do you think O'Brien keeps stopping the story so that other characters can comment on it? (i.e. page 108) How do these other conversations add to Mary Anne's story?
6. Does it matter what happened, in the end, to Mary Anne? Would this be a better story if we knew, precisely, what happened to her after she left camp? Or does this vague ending add to the story? Either way, why?
7. The story Rat tells in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is highly fantastical. Does its lack of believability make it any less compelling? Do you believe it? Does it fit O'Brien's criteria for a true war story?

10. "Stockings" (Group Three)

Write your questions / comments below

11. "Church" (Group Three)

Write your questions / comments below

12. "The Man I Killed" (Group Four)

Write your questions / comments below

13. "Ambush" (Group Four)

Write your questions / comments below

14. "Style" (Group Five)

Write your questions / comments below

15. "Speaking of Courage"

1. Address the title, "Speaking of Courage." What does the story illustrate about courage? How would Norman Bowker define courage? How is the title ironic?

2. Aside from "The Things They Carried," "Speaking of Courage" is the only other story written in third person. Why are these stories set apart in this manner? What does the author achieve by doing so?
3. Like other male characters in this novel (for example, Tim O'Brien and Lt. Jimmy Cross), Norman Bowker develops an active fantasy life. Why do these men develop these fantasy roles? What do they get from telling these fantasy stories to themselves?
4. Answer the following questions with respect to Norman Bowker: Why does he still feel inadequate with seven medals? Why is Norman's father such a presence in his mental life? Would it really change Norman's life if he had eight medals, the silver star, etc.?
5. Why is Norman unable to relate to anyone at home? More importantly, why doesn't he even try?
6. Kiowa is clearly a prominent character in the company's narrative, a soft-spoken, peaceful man—how does his death change their relationships?

16. "Notes" (Group Five)

Write your questions / comments below

17. "In the Field" (Group Six)

Write your questions / comments below

18. "Good Form" (Group Five)

Write your questions / comments below

19. "Field Trip" (Group Seven)

Write your questions / comments below

20. "The Ghost Soldiers"

1. How do you feel about O'Brien's actions in "The Ghost Soldiers"?
2. "The Ghost Soldiers" is one of the only stories of *The Things They Carried* in which we don't know the ending in advance. Why might O'Brien want this story to be particularly suspenseful?
3. After reading this story, reflect as to whether the fear O'Brien feels is more acute than the actual pain of being physically hurt. Is it? Be specific in your description.
4. How does "The Ghost Soldiers" demonstrate the tension between a soldier's need for camaraderie and the difficulty of finding it? When does O'Brien feel alienated—and why?
5. How does the story show O'Brien's progression? For example, in "On the Rainy River," he was an innocent young man. Yet this story reflects upon how he has been changed by the war. Explain this idea fully.

21. "Night Life" (Group Seven)

Write your questions / comments below

22. "The Lives of the Dead"

Write your questions / comments below

1. Reread the first paragraph of "The Lives of the Dead." How does O'Brien set us up to believe this story? What techniques does he use to convince us this story is "true"? In general, how are details used in this collection of stories in such a way their truth is hard to deny?
2. In your opinion, why does O'Brien choose to include this story about a young girl, named Linda, in this collection? What does it accomplish?
3. In many ways, this book is as much about stories, or the necessity of stories, as it is about the Vietnam War. According to O'Brien, what do stories accomplish? Why does he continue to tell stories about the Vietnam War,

about Linda? Does it matter to you, as a reader, whether Linda was a real person in O'Brien's life? Why—or why not?

4. Reread the final two pages of this book. Consider what the young Tim O'Brien learns about storytelling from his experience with Linda. How does this knowledge prepare him not only for the war, but also to become a writer? Within the parameters of this story, how would you characterize Tim O'Brien's understanding of the purpose of fiction? How does fiction relate to life, that is, life in the journalistic or historic sense?

5. Would it change how you read this story, or this novel, if Linda never existed? Why or why not?

6. Assume for a moment, that the writer, Tim O'Brien, created a fictional main character, also called Tim O'Brien, to inhabit this novel. Why would the real Tim O'Brien do that? What would that accomplish in this novel? How would that strengthen a book about "truth"?

7. Finally, if O'Brien is trying to relate some essential details about emotional life--again, as opposed to historic life--is he successful in doing that? Is he justified in tinkering with the facts to get at (what he would term) some larger, story-truth?

Vocabulary

After Reading: Considering the Novel

Keep in mind that the novel has an **active setting** (meaning that the time/place in which the story takes place plays a large role in the theme/conflict of the story) and that the story is **not a chronological narrative** (meaning that the plotline does not follow a traditional timeline, from beginning to end—it jumps in time from the characters' childhoods, to Vietnam, to the U.S., many years later).

Setting (how/why does the setting play a role in the theme/conflict):

Narrative Plotline (why is the novel told in this format—what impact does this style have on the story, the fact that it jumps around in time in many stories?)

Theme:

Conflict:

What is the most important idea presented by this text? Please explain your answer fully, using details from the text.

Significant Quotes:

1. "They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and did, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment."
2. "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain."

Questions To Consider:

1. Why is the first story, "The Things They Carried," written in third person? How does this serve to introduce the rest of the novel? What effect did it have on your experience of the novel when O'Brien switched to first person, and you realized the narrator was one of the soldiers?
2. What is the role of shame in the lives of these soldiers? Does it drive them to acts of heroism, or stupidity? Or both? What is the relationship between shame and courage, according to O'Brien?
3. Often, in the course of his stories, O'Brien tells us beforehand whether or not the story will have a happy or tragic ending. Why might he do so? How does it affect your attitude towards the narrator?
4. On the copyright page of the novel appears the following: "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary." How does this statement affect your reading of the novel?
5. What does the book illustrate about storytelling?
6. The book is about the author's experiences in Vietnam—but aside from the story "The Man I Killed," Vietnamese characters are largely absent from the text. Why?
7. Discuss the structure of the book. The stories, for example, do not progress in a standard, linear manner. Why? Does the fragmented style fit the story itself? How—or why not?
8. How does the book comment upon male/female relationships? Be sure to explain your answer completely, using specific examples from the text.
9. Does your opinion of O'Brien change throughout the course of the novel? How so?