

“On the Rainy River”

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. Why, ultimately, does he go to war? Are there other reasons for going he doesn't list?
5. How does Elroy Berdahl help Tim to decide what to do about being drafted? Be specific.
6. 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?