In the Lake of the Woods
by Tim O'Brien

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About this Book

On its surface, In the Lake of the Woods suggests the classic locked-room mystery turned on its head. Sometime between the night and late morning of September 19, 1986, a woman vanishes near Lake of the Woods in northern Minnesota, "where the water was everything, vast and very cold, and where there were secret channels and portages and bays and tangled forests and islands without names." While the traditional locked-room mystery presents investigators - and readers - with the seemingly impossible, the disappearance of Kathy Wade poses too many possibilities, a wilderness of hypotheses. There are too many places she could have gone, too many things that could have happened to her.

As Tim O'Brien gradually reveals in this haunting, morally vertiginous novel, there were too many reasons for Kathy to vanish. All of them are connected to her husband, John, an attractive if morally confused 40-year-old politician whose career has lately ended in a defeat so humiliating that it has driven the Wades to an isolated cabin in the Minnesota woods.

A long-buried secret has resurfaced to bury John alive; perhaps it has buried Kathy along with him. John's disgrace originated in "a place with secret trapdoors and tunnels and underground chambers populated by various spooks and goblins, a place where magic was everyone's hobby...a place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else."
Its geographic epicenter is the village of Thuan Yen in Vietnam. It was there, eighteen years before, that John Wade was transformed from a boy with a gift for performing magic tricks (his platoon-mates knew him as "Sorcerer") into an entranced killer.

What happened at Thuan Yen was not fiction. The events that took place there were widely reported and documented in official U.S. Army hearings and are known today as the My Lai massacre. At the heart of *In the Lake of the Woods* is its brutal re-creation of this wound in John Wade's history and his country's. Because Wade was one of many killers, Tim O'Brien intersperses his narrative with the testimony of real figures like Lieutenant Rusty Calley and U.S. Army Investigator William V. Wilson—not to mention Presidents Richard Nixon and Woodrow Wilson. Just as John's and Kathy's associates—his mother and campaign manager, her sister and co-worker—try to decipher the events at *Lake of the Woods*, those historical witnesses posit partial explanations for America's mysteriously aligned obsessions with politics and violence.

Clausewitz observed that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Tim O'Brien suggests that politics, at least in its American variety, is a continuation of needs more basic and more terrible even than the need for power. The craving for love, he reminds us, can drive the human soul toward acts of desperation, deceit, and even violence.

For O'Brien, as for the unnamed investigator who is his narrator, all explanations are hypotheses rather than proofs. Beyond the mystery of Kathy's disappearance and John's role in it, and even beyond the mystery of My Lai, are other riddles: What predisposed John to become a murderer? What sort of magic enabled him to make his past vanish for twenty years, and what disappeared along with it? How could he love Kathy with such self-annihilating ferocity while keeping an essential part of himself hidden from her? Was Kathy a victim of John's deceptions or a participant in them? Is John an autonomous moral agent or another victim—of a bad childhood or a bad war or the murderous pastel sunlight of Vietnam? With *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien has reinvented the novel as a magician's trick box equipped with an infinite number of false bottoms. Kathy's disappearance remains a "magnificent giving over to pure and absolute Mystery." John believes that "to know is to be disappointed. To understand is to be betrayed." This brave and troubling novel neither betrays nor disappoints, but brings the reader into a direct confrontation with the insoluble enigmas of history, character, and evil.
Discussion Questions

1. Almost from this novel's first page we know that Kathy Wade will vanish, and it is not long before we discover that her disappearance will remain unsolved. What, then, gives In the Lake of the Woods its undeniable suspense? What does it offer in place of the revelations of traditional mysteries?

2. Instead of a linear narrative, in which action unfolds chronologically, Tim O'Brien has constructed a narrative that simultaneously moves forward and backward in time: forward from John and Kathy's arrival at the cabin; backward into John's childhood, and beyond that to Little Big Horn and the War of Independence. It also moves laterally, into the "virtual" time that is represented by different hypotheses about Kathy's fate. What does the author accomplish with this narrative scheme? In what ways are his different narrative strands connected?

3. What does O'Brien accomplish in the sections titled "Evidence"? What information do these passages impart that is absent from the straightforward narrative? How do they alter our understanding of John as a magician, a politician, a husband, and a soldier who committed atrocities in wartime? What connections do they forge between his private tragedy and the pathologies of our public life and history? Does the testimony of (or about) such "real" people as Richard Nixon, William Calley, or George Custer lend greater verisimilitude to John's story or remind us that it--and John himself--are artifices?

4. Who is the narrator who addresses us in the "Evidence" sections? Are we meant to see him as a surrogate for the author, who also served in Vietnam and revisited Thuan Yen many years after the massacre? (See Tim O'Brien, "The Vietnam in Me," in The New York Times Magazine, October 3, 1994, pp. 48-57.) In what ways does O'Brien's use of this narrator further explode the conventions of the traditional novel?

5. One of the few things that we know for certain about John is that he loves Kathy. But what does John mean by love? How do John's feelings for his wife resemble his hopeless yearning for his father, who had a similar habit of vanishing? In what circumstances does John say "I love you"? What vision of love is suggested by his metaphor of two snakes devouring each other? Why might Kathy have fallen in love with John?
6. Although it is easy to see Kathy as the victim of John's deceptions, the author at times suggests that she may be more conscious (and therefore more complex) than she first appears. We learn, for example, that Kathy has always known about John's spying and even referred to him as "Inspector Clouseau," an ironic counterpoint to John's vision of himself as "Sorcerer." At a critical moment she rebuffs her husband's attempt at a confession. And in the final section of "Evidence," we get hints that Kathy may have planned her own disappearance. Are we meant to see Kathy as John's victim or as his accomplice, like a beautiful assistant vanishing inside a magician's cabinet?

7. Why might John have entered politics? Is he merely a cynical operator with no interest in anything but winning? Or, as Tony Carbo suggests, might John be trying to atone for his actions in Vietnam? Why might the author have chosen to leave John's political convictions a blank?

8. John's response to the horrors of Thuan Yen is to deny them: "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not." Where else in the novel does he perform this trick? How does John's way of coping with the massacre compare to the psychic strategies adopted by William Calley or Paul Meadlo? Do any of O'Brien's characters seem capable of acknowledging terrible truths directly? How does In the Lake of the Woods treat the matter of individual responsibility for evil?

9. Each of this novel's hypotheses about events at the cabin begins with speculation but gradually comes to resemble certainty. The narrator suggests that John and Kathy Wade are ultimately unknowable, as well; that any attempt to "penetrate...those leaden walls that encase the human spirit" can never be anything but provisional. Seen in this light, In the Lake of the Woods comes to resemble a magician's trick, in which every assertion turns out to be only another speculation. Given the information we receive, does any hypothesis about what happened at Lake of the Woods seem more plausible than the others? With what certainties, if any, does this novel leave us? Which hypothesis is the most plausible?

Critical Praise

A risky, ambitious, perceptive, engaging, and troubling novel...a major attempt to come to grips with the causes and
Section 1.  
An introduction to *In the Lake of the Woods*

The American psyche was damaged irreversibly by its involvement in the Vietnam War. The fallout from the war is still felt as veterans struggle with the cancerous psychological effects of Agent Orange (dioxin), as soldiers struggle to obliterate the past or come to terms with it. There is the drain on the penal system through those who have not coped with their personal trauma, the dislocation of families and communities through suicide and mental breakdowns, the lack of public and political recognition given to veterans until recently, the rejection of Vietnam’s call for - and need of - reparations, the collective guilt and hand-wringing over the depravities committed in the name of the Free World, the lies and distortions and cover-ups of the military and politicians at the time and beyond and the compensation sought by combatants through the justice system for their personal losses and tragedies.

As recently as 1991, George Bush, then US President, described his country’s intervention in Kuwait in the face of Saddam as "not another Vietnam". The Vietnam war still resonates in contemporary US foreign policy. With the loss of face and the massive loss of life in Vietnam, there is clearly an attempt on the part of the military-industrial complex to atone for the humiliation of Vietnam.

The involvement of USA in the Vietnam war officially finished in April 1975 when Communist forces took Saigon. A war which it was thought would be over in no time dragged on for over a decade. The USA withdrew without honour, the resilience and resolve of the Vietnamese Communists and ordinary people proving more powerful than the military might and "scorched earth" policies of a succession of US Presidents.

As background to the study of *In the Lake of the Woods* it would be worth asking why the USA committed so many troops in South East Asia. What was at stake? What was the magnitude of US intervention in South East Asia? Who were the US protecting or who did they think they were protecting? What ideologies were opposed to each other? What sort of war was the Vietnam War and how did it differ from other wars? Was the war purely a civil war? Did the very nature of this war justify the contravention of the "etiquette" of war enshrined in the Geneva Convention? Why was conscription introduced in Australia? What was Australia’s involvement in the war? What ramifications did the conflict have at home? What were the immediate and long-term consequences of US intervention?

*In the Lake of the Woods* is not a text which sermonises on these consequences, although the reader is palpably reminded of them in the process of reading the novel. It is not a novel on a crusade to assuage the collective guilt over the human costs of the Vietnam War. No amount of apology can assuage that corrosive guilt. It does explore the loss of humanity and morality in otherwise ordinary people - young troops. O’Brien is puzzled by the ways in which war strips people of this spirit and humanity in young men.

*In the Lake of the Woods* reminds the reader of the impact of the war on the lives of the men, women and children of Vietnam; those who lived through the horrors of the war. While John
Wade's psyche is explored and the causal links between his political and personal demise and his presence at the Thuan Yen massacre, the Vietnamese communities who faced the numbing violence and brutality are not forgotten. While the novel cannot speak on their behalf, the novel registers the collective opprobrium, shame and outrage on behalf of those American troops who committed the atrocities; those troops who would never apologise for the horrors they perpetrated on the Vietnamese, those troops whose amorality in war is graphically described, troops who did not know why they were in Vietnam or why they were acting in such inhumane, grotesque ways, troops who perceived the "gooks" as faceless, nameless and sub-human.

It is these atrocities which perplex Tim O'Brien. One of the main ideas explored is the mystery of evil; the mystery of how and why such atrocities can ever occur is never resolved. Nor can it be. The evil has been revisited in Bosnia, the Gulf, the Middle East.

The novel also defines notions of illusion and reality and the fine line that exists between them. John Wade's attempts to create the illusion of normality in his life are futile. His tricks and intellectual contortions do not work. His secrets catch up with him.

The novel's melange of fiction and reporting of the deliberations of the Peers Commission and the proceedings of the Court Martial of Lieutenant William Calley, reinforces this blurred line. In an author's note we read, "although this book contains material from the world in which we live, including references to actual place, people and events, it must be read as a work of fiction. All dialogue is invented. Certain notorious and very real incidents have been altered or reimagined."

There is a constant search for a way out of the angles of deception and mirrors of obfuscation which John Wade has placed around himself. John Wade searches for love, yearns for atonement and resurrection, but is ultimately surrounded by death. In Vietnam his moral compass goes haywire. His immersion in popular politics cloaks his self-delusion and denial, his moral void, his unsatisfying relationship with Kathy and his personal loneliness. The trauma of war lives with John Wade to the end.
Tim O'Brien

Born in 1946 in Minnesota. As a youth, he did study techniques of magic. His father was an insurance salesman and his mother was a teacher. His father was also an alcoholic. He graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul in 1968 with a BA in political science and was then drafted. He had been senior class president and was mildly involved in Macalester's mild version of an antiwar movement. He says he did consider Canada and jail, but was a coward. He served as a foot soldier in Vietnam from Feb. 1969 to March 1970. He reached the level of sergeant and received the Purple Heart. He worked his final months as a clerk. Following military service, he went to grad school at Harvard to study government. He was Harvard from 1970-1976 taking classes, making ends meet as a teaching assst. and as a reporter. He got an internship in 1971 with the Washington Post as a national affairs reporter. He left Harvard in 1976 without a degree to write fiction full-time.

He is the author of Going After Cacciato, the winner of the 1979 National Book Award for fiction. The Things They Carried. Other books include If I die in a Combat Zone, Box me up and Send me Home Northern Lights, and The Nuclear Age. Work has appeared in many magazines. Has written many short stories. Received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Art, and the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation.

In the Lake of the Woods took 6 years to write. It was written during the breakup of his marriage and a subsequent love relationship. The book was selected as one of the best books of 1994 by the New York Times Book Review and Time magazine called it the Best Fiction of 1994.

He now lives in Maryland.
ABOUT TIM O'BRIEN

Born in 1946

Minnesota native Tim O'Brien graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul in 1968. He served as a foot soldier in Vietnam from February 1969 to March 1970. Following his military service, he went to graduate school in Government at Harvard University, then later worked as a national affairs reporter for The Washington Post.

Drafted, considered Canada, then jail. Now lives in Maryland.

O'Brien is the author of the novel Going After Cacciato, winner of the 1979 National Book Award for fiction, and of The Things They Carried, winner of the 1990 Chicago Tribune Heartland Award in fiction. Its title story, first published in Esquire, received the 1987 National Magazine Award in fiction.

His other books are If I Die in a Combat Zone, Northern Lights, and The Nuclear Age.

His work has appeared in numerous magazines, including Esquire, The Atlantic Monthly, Playboy, McCall's, Granta, Harper's, Redbook, The New Republic, Ploughshares, Gentleman's Quarterly, and Saturday Review. His short stories have been anthologized in The O. Henry Prize Stories (1976, 1978, 1982), Great Esquire Fiction, Best American Short Stories (1978, 1987), The Pushcart Prize (Vols. II and X), and in many textbooks and collections. He has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation.

In the Lake of the Woods was selected by the editors of The New York Times Book Review as one of the best books of 1994. Time mag. called it Best Fiction of 1994.
Paul Meadlo

Paul Meadlo was a young farm boy whose life was drastically changed because he failed to question orders. Meadlo admitted to shooting his rifle into groups of people, including the group of people in a ditch, when ordered to do so by William Calley. While he did so he was crying hysterically and pleading with others who were not firing to join in. When asked why he followed an order to kill women and children, Meadlo stated that he believed he could be shot if he disobeyed an order, and that in the past Calley had kicked him when he failed to follow orders.

Two days after the incident at My Lai, the Charlie Company broke camp early and began moving south. A sergeant had ordered the group to stop on the side of a hill, but Calley ordered the men to continue up the hill (although strategically there was nothing to be gained). Calley and Meadlo, the mine sweeper, continued on up the hill. No one else followed. When Calley turned back and noticed the other men had remained in place, he went back down to the men and told Meadlo to follow, but to “not bother” sweeping for mines as it would take too much time. This was some of the worst advise Meadlo ever followed. During his retreat, Meadlo stepped slightly off the trail and a land mine exploded, blowing off his foot. Calley’s face was cut by a piece of flying shrapnel. It took twenty minutes for a helicopter to be flown in, and Meadlo had to be given shots of morphine for the pain in the mean time. As he was flown off, he cursed Calley shouting, “You’ll get yours! God will punish you Calley!” While recovering in the hospital, Meadlo firmly believed that God was punishing him for his conduct. He received the Purple Heart for his injury (as did Calley for his cut incurred in the same explosion).

When Meadlo returned home after the war to his wife and year old son, he was a “nervous stuttering wreck.” He took a factory job to support his family, despite the searing pains in his leg. His mother claimed that she “had sent the Army a nice boy before he went to Vietnam, and they had turned him into a murderer,” and that, “he wasn’t raised up like that.” Meadlo had kept the My Lai incident a secret from his family, although his conscience bothered him a great deal. When he was approached by the Wilson investigation, he was eager to tell his story. The eagerness was due in part to his anger at having his disability pension reduced from $197 to $136 a month once his stump of a foot healed and he was fitted with an artificial limb. When told that what he said could be used against him in court, he replied, “I don’t care,” and proceeded to tell what had happened that morning in 1968 in My Lai.

As the Calley trial was in progress, Meadlo agreed to do an interview on CBS with Mike Wallace. Meadlo’s story forced American’s to recognize that something terrible had taken place in Vietnam. Although Meadlo received no compensation for his CBS interview (except travel expenses), afterwards he refused to do other interviews without being paid.

Even though he had admitted his role at My Lai on national television, Meadlo initially refused to testify at Calley’s trial on the advice of his lawyer. He changed his mind when he was given a grant of
immunity. When Meadlo arrived at the court room “his whole manner [was] emotionless, almost dead, and his voice, for the most part, equally lifeless.” As he testified, two federal marshalls sat close by ready to take him to jail if he refused to answer any questions. Meadlo testified that he never considered whether an order was legal or illegal, he just followed them. Since he was a wounded veteran, Latimer was rather gentle in his cross examination, although Meadlo had given testimony as damaging as that of any other witness. Meadlo also testified that Medina had been at the ditch, which other witnesses had denied. After his testimony, Meadlo limped out of the court room looking like a “sad, pathetic figure.”
PLAUSIBILITY OF DENIAL:

Tim O'Brien, My Lai, and America

by H. Bruce Franklin

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Besides the well-deserved guilt and shame and anguish evoked by the Vietnam War, Americans can also take rightful pride in two great national achievements. Foremost is the antwar movement of tens of millions of ordinary citizens, a movement in which Vietnam veterans and active-duty soldiers eventually played a decisive role. The other major achievement is the literature produced by the war, a literature of which Vietnam veterans have become the formative creators. Among the scores of important Vietnam-veteran writers are such fine poets as Bruce Weigl, John Balaban, W. D. Ehrhart, Marilyn McElroyon, and Yusef Komunyakaa (winner of the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for poetry); playwrights like David Rabe and Oliver Stone; and fiction writers as diverse as Larry Heinemann (winner of the 1987 National Book Award for Peace's Story), Tobias Wolff, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Gustav Hasford (author of the novel on which the film Full Metal Jacket was based), Stephen Wright, David Huddle, Wayne Karlin, Philip Caputo, James Crumley, Winston Groom (author of Forrest Gump), Robert Olen Butler (whose A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for fiction), and Joe Haldeman (author of the most popular of all Vietnam novels, The Forever War, a science-fiction extrapolation that has sold well over a million copies).

Tim O'Brien has been involved in both of these national achievements. His contribution to the antwwar movement--writing antwwar editorials for his college newspaper and later ringing doorbells for Eugene McCarthy in 1968--had no immediate effect, even on himself, for he then marched off to fight in the very war he considered "evil." But his contribution to the literature of the war has been exceptional, partly because he organized his own home newspaper and later wrote editorials for that American guilt and shame and anguish.

When the men in the White House and the Pentagon decided to send Americans to fight in Vietnam, they probably never gave a thought to the literature that veterans might write. But they certainly did anticipate the likelihood of antwwar protest, which is why they conspired to try at first to wage war covertly, later to conceal how the war was being conducted, and finally to expunge the memory of the entire affair or bury it under layers of false images. Indeed, the key phrase in their 1963 covert plan for the war (National Security Advisory Memorandum 273) was "plausibility of denial." And "denial" has been, in every sense, the essential term necessary to plumb the resulting depths of secrecy, deception, and delusion.

From his first book, the autobiographical If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973), right on through his autobiographical cover story for the October 2nd New York Times Magazine, this denial--both personal and national--has been Tim O'Brien's main theme. The most revealing chapter in If I Die in a Combat Zone, entitled "Escape," exposes the core of his own denial. Recognizing that if he kills people in a war he knows to be immoral he will be jeopardizing his very "soul," he decides his only moral choice is to desert. But he discovers that he lacks the courage. He lets himself be sent off to Vietnam, he confesses, because "I was a coward."

This confession--that mere cowardice prevented the moral choice of running away rather than killing--appears again and again in O'Brien's writings, sometimes elaborately sublimated, sometimes candidly blunt. It is central to his 1978 novel Going After Cacciato, winner of the 1979 National Book Award and frequently hailed as the great American Vietnam War novel, a book all about soldiers trying to run away from the war in body and mind. In the climax of the protagonist's fantasy, he announces to the world:

"I am afraid of running away.... I fear what might be thought of me by those I love.... I fear the loss of my own reputation.... I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself."

In The Things They Carried, O'Brien's award-winning 1990 collection of mostly autobiographical Vietnam stories (labeled "A Work of Fiction" "Tim O'Brien" tells the "one story I've never told before," of his life's crucial event on Minnesota's Rainy River. "For more than twenty years I've had to live with... the shame" of the moment when, just yards from Canada, he didn't flee the draft because "I did not want people to think bad of me". "My conscience told me to run," but "I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing." The final words of "On the Rainy River" are: "I was a coward. I went to the war." In the October New York Times Magazine piece, he repeats: "I was a coward. I went to Vietnam." Therefore each thing he did in Vietnam "was an act of the purest self-hatred and self-betrayal."

This awareness generates for O'Brien a tortured dialectic of concealment and exposure, which in turn spins the dazzlingly intricate webs of imagination and memory that constitute his fiction. In these webs, imagined acts of escape are often the desired alternative to the remembered acts of slaughter. One Needs to know all this to understand the deepest meanings of O'Brien's latest novel, In the Lake of the Woods.

The main action takes place in late September, 1986, near the mouth of the Rainy River, on the Minnesota edge of the Lake of the Wooded, whose labyrinthine shoreline of 25,000 miles extends deep into the Canadian wilderness. Vietnam veteran would-be U.S. Senator John Wade has just suffered a humiliating defeat in the primary because it was revealed that he had taken part in the My Lai massacre and then altered his service record to conceal his participation. He and his wife Kathy, from whom he had also hidden his dreadful secret, have fled to a remote cabin where they are futilely attempting to resurrect their relation and their lives, built, as they now both know, on layers of concealment, illusion, and

http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~hfb/obrien.html
lies. On the seventh night, Kathy vanishes along with the only boat at the cabin. More than a month later, John borrows another small boat, ostensibly to search for her, heads into the remote recesses of the lake, and also disappears.

On one level, the book is a mystery story. What happened to Kathy Wade? Did she wander off and die accidentally? Did she deliberately flee, either alone or with a lover? Is she still lost in the wilderness? Did she and John conspire to disappear together and begin a new life? Or did John murder her? All of these are presented as possibilities, but the novel is not as indeterminate or unresolved as it may seem. As in Going After Cacciatore, some events did happen while others take place only in the imagination. True, the purported writer of the book, who speaks to us in footnotes and authorial comments—and who hints that his own life has important resemblances to that of both John Wade and Tim O'Brien—ends by suggesting that we can choose to believe whichever scenario we wish. However, all the possible scenarios, with one exception, are presented only in the eight chapters entitled "Hypothesis," where they are liberally sprinkled with "maybe" and "perhaps." Each of these hypothetical scenarios is merely an act of imagination. Each involves some form of escape from the hideous event that did happen, outlined in the chapters "What He Remembered," "How the Night Passed," and "What He Did Next," titles indicating the actuality that can be recalled.

Although John cannot remember whether or not he murdered his wife, enough details surface from the depths of his memory—not his imagination—to allow readers to reconstruct the gruesome scene. Unless, O'Brien suggests, readers would rather indulge in elaborate fantasies of denial.

On the night of Kathy's disappearance, John got out of bed in a murderous rage, poured a kettle full of boiling water on each houseplant in the cabin, and then poured another kettle full of boiling water on Kathy's face. Fragments of her screaming death agony, buried deep under layers of denial, later keep erupting from Wade's memory. He next concealed the crime by carefully weighting both her body and the boat and burying each at the bottom of the lake. He thus reenacts once again the murder he committed at My Lai and his attempts to expunge all records—and memory—of this act that was too awful to be possible.

My Lai, in Wade's mind, has become just a nightmare of "impossible events": "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not." The most grisly detail of Kathy's death, repeated several times in the novel, evokes the same response:

Puffs of steam rose from the sockets of her eyes.

Impossible, of course.

But My Lai did happen, as we know. Or do we? That is the most troubling question posed by the novel, which includes page after page of the actual testimony and other evidence of the massacre that was not an aberration but a sample of how the United States conducted its genocidal war against the people of Vietnam. At My Lai, American soldiers did not just slaughter some five hundred unarmed people. They sodomized young girls, raped women in front of their children, bayoneted children in front of their mothers, and used babies for target practice. Does John Wade's frenzied murder of the houseplants seem "impossible"? Then, suggests O'Brien, so must Lieutenant Calley's actions: "He reloaded and shot the grass and a palm tree and then the earth again. 'Greas the place,' he said. 'Kill it.'" This was, after all, the U.S. strategy for much of Vietnam, especially My Lai's province of Quang Ngai, as O'Brien reminds us in his The New York Times Magazine essay.

In Vietnam, John Wade was so adept at making things disappear that he acquired the nickname Sorcerer. He had perfected his magic expertise a young boy, who needed it to build means of denial about his own identity as the son of an alcoholic father who killed himself. Performing his magic tricks before a mirror, John had learned to construct mirrors inside his own mind to deflect reality and to hide behind. Wade is a magician, a master of illusion. And so is O'Brien, who is such a wizard of narrative that he can make the most implausible fantasies seem believable. But this does not mean that In the Lake of the Woods (any more than Going After Cacciatore) should be read as magic realism, in which the products of imagination have the same ontological status as actual material events. Magic, O'Brien recognizes, is an art of illusion.

Of course imaginary events are also real. The event that did happen, Wade's murder of his wife, just like the fantasies of escape offered as alternatives to it, is a fiction that takes place only in a novel. But each scenario, whether remembered or merely imagined, has a significant reality, the reality of fiction.

Not everything, however, is fiction. There is another kind of reality—represented by My Lai in 1968 and O'Brien's own experience around My L the following year. And in this experience, as O'Brien tells us over and over again, he, like his fictive John Wade and like the American nation itself, committed acts so horrible that they continually evoke denial.

The one great failure of In the Lake of the Woods is its quite unconvincing presentation of Wade's senate campaign amid the scene of the late 1980s. O'Brien makes almost no attempt to show how the revelations about Wade's acts in Vietnam devastate his candidacy and thus destroy his life. One might even wonder whether such would be the effect. In fact, his cynical campaign manager at one point regrets not having had the opportunity to use Wade's participation in My Lai: "Could've made it work for us. Whole different spiel... A village is a terrible thing to waste."

Certainly there are now men sitting in the U.S. Senate who killed many more Vietnamese civilians than John Wade did, and falsifying one's records is hardly an insurmountable barrier to a senate seat, as suggested by Oliver North's near win in Virginia.
Nevertheless, *In the Lake of the Woods* does connect to the most essential truths about Vietnam's role in the politics and culture of the nation in the 1980s and 1990s. Just over two years after Kathy and John Wade vanish in fiction, the denial that O'Brien is dramatizing was given its most succinct statement by President George Bush in his inaugural address: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory."

Books by H. Bruce Franklin, the John Cotton Dana Professor of English and American Studies at Rutgers University in Newark, include *M.I.A. Or Mythmaking in America*, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, *The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems*, and *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*.

jbfrankins@compuserve.com
Critics have often placed O'Brien within the somewhat limited category of "war writer." Milton J. Bates, assessing O'Brien's ongoing obsession with the myth of courage, places him "in the tradition of our great war novelists -- Crane, Hemingway, Jones, Mailer, and Vonnegut." In Philip D. Beidler's Re-Writing America, Philip Caputo, another Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnam writer whose memoir A Rumor of War reveals strong affinities with O'Brien's, finds his peer standing "solidly within the tradition of midwestern soldier-poets. Indeed, it is Ernest Hemingway that a reader hears most often in much of O'Brien's work -- the spare, rhythmic repetition of key words and phrases; the hard, disciplined control of dialogue and emotion in sentences and paragraphs that are models of the stoic understatement; the darkly ironic gestures; and the classical imperatives of courage and cowardice, transgression and expiation, of Hemingway's best stories and novels.

Such comparisons, if containing more than an ounce of truth, are finally too easy and too constraining for a writer of O'Brien's thematic preoccupations and stylistic innovations. What a reader finds in his work, from the classical, meditative early memoir to the dazzling, metafictional In the Lake of the Woods (1994), is the remarkable education and evolution of a writer whose fundamental themes, "discipline, honesty, integrity, understanding, acceptance, endurance," as Beidler notes, grant his work larger, even universal, significance. O'Brien certainly belongs to the small pantheon of great American war writers that has walked through native mythic terrain, a literary outfit begun by James Fennimore Cooper, but in ambition and achievement he also demands induction into the larger unit of artists who are simply called important American writers. Like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, O'Brien is a natural storyteller who can spin a tale with the best of them. Like Herman Melville's Ishmael, he is also a figure who would cast off from safe harbors and dive deeply into the primal American soul and psyche. If his diving is toward hot landing zones rather than the Leviathan, his frequent visitations to the Vietnam War do not limit his thematic and symbolic reach. About the heart of his fiction the author in 1984 asserted, "My concerns have to do with the abstractions: What's courage and how do you get it? What's justice and how do you achieve it? How do one do right in an evil situation?" O'Brien has resisted the designation "war writer"; while admitting it was his Vietnam experience that demanded he become a writer, he calls the term "meaningless." The author of some of the most striking narratives of warfare, both real and imagined, in the entire corpus of American literature, O'Brien argues finally that "War stories aren't about war -- they are about the human heart at war."

Beyond his war, any war, he recurrently explores a few specific subjects and themes: the continual interplay of fact and imagination in fiction as in life; the compulsive, absurd, noble quest for human truth; the difficulty in defining and obtaining the elusive quality of courage; and the ongoing human need for the fragile, made-up, explanatory device we call story. Indeed, O'Brien's prime theme finally is not that war maims and destroys -- an obvious truism -- but that storytelling explains, connects, and ultimately saves the teller and the listener. As O'Brien asserts in The Things They Carried (1990), "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head."

O'Brien's ability to dream his stories and novels and to make his readers dream them too has made him a major voice in American fiction since the early 1970s and has garnered him substantial recognition. In addition to the National Book Award, O'Brien has won Esquire, O. Henry, and Pushcart prizes for his short fiction; has been the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation; and has seen his works translated into several foreign languages. Much more than a chronicler in fiction of a single, problematic war, O'Brien is now valued by critics and readers as a true American historian of the most valuable kind: the artist of the hidden recesses of the human heart and soul.

O'Brien does not deny the natural placement of his work within the larger corpus of war writing; indeed, considering his own writing in that context, he revealed in 1992 that "when I read the best things by Crane or Tolstoy, I feel a sense of confirmation." He faces, however, the ongoing paradox of the important literary artist, asserting that "a good writer must write beyond his moment, but he does have to be rooted to a lived-in world -- like Conrad, Shakespeare, and Homer." If there does exist an American Joseph Conrad or a Homer of the Vietnam War, an artist who has melded that particular trauma with universal themes, that figure would seem to be Tim O'Brien, a writer who again and again has voyaged out into dangerous historical and imaginative waters only to return home with tales worth telling, unique American encounters with new cultural deceptions, with fresh hearts of darkness.

O'Brien's evolution as a storyteller seems the familiar stuff of the midwestern poet-novelist. Born on 1 October 1946 in Austin, Minnesota, he grew, as he relates in If I Die in a Combat Zone, "out of one war and into another.... My bowing came with the first thratory note of a new army: spawning." He matured in another Minnesota town, Worthington, where his father, William Timothy O'Brien, sold life insurance and his mother, Ava, raised him, his brother, Greg, and his sister, Kathy. His family life included a house full of books; as a boy O'Brien was a voracious reader who also tried his best to play Little League baseball and to grow into the sturdy young man his environment demanded. He attended Worthington Senior High School and Macalester College in Saint Paul, where he graduated summa cum laude in 1968, having earned a degree in political science. Despite having lived in the Boston area since 1970, when he entered the Ph.D. program in government at Harvard, O'Brien continues to see himself as a midwesterner. His decision to remain in the East after his early writing success, however, does reveal something
about his ambivalent connection to the America of his boyhood. His early works, especially If I Die in a Combat Zone and his first novel, *Northern Lights* (1975), contain many passages that evoke the stolid provincialism that has recommended to many a young writer a permanent artistic and emotional exodus. Of his boyhood O'Brien said in 1992, "Writers are connected. I'm connected to my past, but we're connected to be things, too. There were things about the Midwest that I liked. But my dominant recollection ... is one of a kind of seething rage. Even as a kid I felt that way. Small town gossip and the values of those places."

In August 1968 after graduation from Macalester, O'Brien was drafted into the army, an event that produced a major emotional crisis for him. Finding the conflict morally reprehensible and emotionally unacceptable, he considered Canada or jail but finally did not choose flight or incarceration over Vietnam. He admits the prospect of losing friends and family and the censure of his culture overcame his personal objections, and he found himself dragged inexorably toward war. As he records in his memoir, "in the end, it was less reason and more gravity that was the final influence."

His decision to accept induction into the armed forces might be seen as an American literary *felix culpa* (fortunate fault), for the war was the event that made him a writer. His service in Vietnam as an infantryman with the Americal Division presented him with jarring, traumatic material, but it also made writing a need rather than a choice. Seeing the many physical and emotional atrocities, watching friends destroyed or maimed in meaningless search-and-destroy missions and village searches; battling the fear, boredom, and deadliness of America's longest war, one to which he had pronounced moral objections -- all of this and more supplied O'Brien with the two great themes that have powered all of his novels and short fiction: the ongoing quest to acquire or simply to define courage and the desperate need to attain redemption after sin. Careful not to avoid cliché, O'Brien rejects the pat line "It was horrible but it makes a man out of you," finding in such sentiment "a certain B-movie quality."

Before Vietnam, O'Brien's commitment to the life of the writer was desultory at best. He wrote his first story at the age of nine, a piece called "Timmy of the Little League." He credits "Miss Wick, my junior high school English teacher," as a great writing influence but describes his overall commitment to his craft in high school and college as "a flickering rather than a burning desire." As a college student he wrote a novel set in Czechoslovakia, a "love story set within the political changes there" that remained, he is thankful, unpublished. In another familiar pattern of American fiction writers, O'Brien also served a literary novitiate as a journalist. Before Vietnam he worked as a sports reporter for the *Worthington Daily Globe*; between May 1973 and August 1974, while he was in the Ph.D. program at Harvard, he served two summers as a reporter for the *Washington Post*, learning the "discipline of the newspaper story, the importance of correct grammar and active verbs." Again, comparisons to the biographies of Crane and Hemingway are inevitable -- the correspondent as storyteller who honed his spare, athletic prose with the tools of the working newspaperman. Although his lean, understated prose clearly puts him within the long tradition of the American journalist-fabulist, O'Brien has consistently forged his own imaginative and stylistic pathways through the rich terrain of the story and the novel.

O'Brien admits his debt as a writer to the modern pantheon of American writers that includes F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Hemingway, but he also credits the influence of "a lot of nameless books." Critics have made much of O'Brien's intricate interplay of imagination, memory, and experience in his novels, his cutting back and forth through time, and as influences he points not only to Faulkner but also to James Joyce and Homer as masters of "nonlinear time, the experience of one's life as jumps and starts." He feels a strong kinship to such contemporary American writers as Robert Stone, Tom McGuane, and Philip Caputo because of the types of stories they tell and the chances they take: "A lot of fiction doesn't aspire high enough," says O'Brien of the contemporary scene. He admires fiction written without compromise, who calls "all or nothing tales," and in the work of Stone and the others he finds strong analogues to his own artistic values and concerns. The writer O'Brien has mentioned most often, however, is neither American nor contemporary. As a writer who features themes of innocence and experience, transgression and expiation, O'Brien asserted, "I also have a lot in common with Conrad in many ways, especially when I think of *Lord Jim*. Good stories somehow do have to do with the awakening into a new world, something new and true, where someone is jolted out of a kind of complicity and forced to confront a new set of circumstances or a new self" (*Missouri Review*, 1991). O'Brien is particularly attracted to fictions that feature heroes who sin or fail and then must make amends, figures who must live with memories that hurt and shame but that finally compel the bearer to evolve, to find forgiveness. He says, simply, "We write about the mistakes we make in our lives -- we have to write about them."

After his return from Vietnam, O'Brien was at Harvard from 1970 to 1976 taking classes, passing his orals, making ends meet as a teaching assistant and a reporter, thinking about his dissertation, but mostly becoming a distinctive new voice in American letters. During his time at Harvard he published two books, the first of which was his memoir. O'Brien's achievement in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* was twofold. First, he established his literary voice by creating a striking personal meditation whose somber, classical tones and poetic effects immediately prompted critics such as Beidler to place his work "in the central tradition of American spiritual autobiography ... the tradition of Edwards and Woolman, of Franklin and Thoreau and Henry Adams." In a more local historical way, however, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* was one of the key texts of the 1970s that placed Vietnam back within American historical memory just as cultural exhaustion and collective amnesia had become national conditions. Like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, personal historical-artistic statements that would follow O'Brien's lead, in the memoir O'Brien offers a version of himself who is both a participant telling one man's story and a symbolic emissary of his culture who exchanges traditional and pop culture myth for the hard-earned knowledge of personal transgression and historical experience.

O'Brien succeeds in joining the newly historical with the long-standing mythic, the particular with the general, the local with the universal in the memoir. Noting the book's striking, classical voice, Annie Gottlieb invoked the phraseology of *Aristotle* in her 1 July 1973 review in *The New York Times*, assessing O'Brien's first work as "a beautiful, painful book, arousing pity and fear for the daily realities of a modern disaster."

Early in the book O'Brien defines the memoir as both product and process with some key inquiries: "Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes? ... Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely from having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories." O'Brien describes his own memoir not as autobiography but as a work of literary imagination. A poetic-philosophical sensibility controls the account of a young infantryman's passage through a year at war, always seeking the proper cultural touchstones for its experience and education..."
The great cultural irony of If I Die in a Combat Zone is that to find a proper standard of courage within a fragmented, postmodern war, one who prime features are chaos and unreadability, O'Brien must swim back against the current of history to a time well before Hemingway and the modernist sensibility. To be hard-boiled and taciturn in the face of the kind of cultural tragedy Vietnam was for O'Brien was not enough. He returned in the memoir to older, dust-covered definitions of courage and virtue. Vietnam seemed to shatter many classical imperatives, and many World War I literary artists -- Ezra Pound, Wilfrid Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and others -- would nod in agreement with O'Brien when he asserts "Horace's old do-or-die aphorism -- Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori -- was just an epitaph for the insane." But O'Brien, to be able to write about his war not only in his classical memoir but also in the more daring fictions to come, seeks and finds a standard with the help of another ancient thinker. He finds his man not in Shane, the mythic hero of the American West, not in Hemingway's Frederic Henry, but in a Greek philosopher.

Responding to the Socratic dialogue called Laches, O'Brien concludes, "Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise. It is the endurance of the soul in spite of fear -- wisely." Although he finds in Plato a meaningful four-part definition of virtue -- courage, temperance, justice, wisdom -- and an acceptable definition of courage as "wise endurance," he also discovers Vietnam to be nearly void of those necessary qualities. Instead of Socrates, he finds morally myopic chaplains; foolhardy, vicious, or cowardly commanding officers; increasingly brutal and brutalized peers. After one of many losses of personal and collective discipline in the field, he can only write that "it was good to walk from Pinkville to see fire behind Alpha Company, just as pure hate is good" and can only nod in tragic agreement when his best friend in another area of Vietnam tells him in a letter that "what I see is evil."

If I Die in a Combat Zone is a remarkable first work, a moving attempt by one very literary "grunt" to reconcile ancient virtue with contemporay evil, but it was only the first chapter in O'Brien's ongoing quest to explore the ramifications of "wise endurance" in a contemporary landscape seemingly sandblasted of such noble imperatives. That critics see the memoir as a "real" story distinct from his subsequent fiction is to O'Brien's false distinction. Some of the characters in the memoir are real but others are invented; he describes the book as "eighty-five percent a work of the imagination." What he did discover in writing the memoir was the difference between facts and the truth, and it is the latter quality that O'Brien would pursue down innovative fictional pathways. Of that elusive prize in If I Die in a Combat Zone he said in 1984, "Truth doesn't reside in the surface of events. Truth resides in those deeper moments of punctuation, when things explode. So you compress the boredom down hiding at it but always going for drama -- because the essence of the experience was dramatic. You tell lies to get to the truth."

The next dramatic "lie" that O'Brien would tell would come in 1975 with his first novel, a long, darkly poetic, sometimes parodic story of two brothers and their ongoing quest for proper courage and personal virtue. The setting of Northern Lights is Sawmill Landing, a hard, cold Minnesota town where Pehr Lindstrom Peri, minister of Damascus Lutheran Church, tries to raise his two sons, Paul and Harvey Perry, to endur stoically whatever life may throw at them. Harvey, the athletic, physically courageous brother, goes to Vietnam and returns, like Hemingway's Jake Barnes, with a wound from the war. Paul, the softer, more passive sensibility, works ineffectually as a county farm agent and nestles in the sheltering arms of his wife, a maternal-sexual presence with the symbolic name of Grace. Harvey returns from Vietnam as damaged goods both physically and psychically, and the brothers collide, antagonize, and test each other: in response to the father's apocalyptic obsessions (foreshadowing O'Brien's 1985 novel, The Nuclear Age, he is intent on building a bomb shelter); in a not-quite-defined rivalry for the affections of a beautiful, wild young woman named Addie; in opposition or adherence to untested cultural definitions or standards of courage, self-sufficiency, and manhood.

The novel contains some elements that O'Brien does not entirely harmonize. Part of the book is a long parody of Hemingway that some early critics took too seriously. Roger Sale in the 13 November 1975 New York Review of Books concluded that "Northern Lights is too literary much of the time, but fine when it is not." Taking the parody to be serious imitation, asked, "Is it possible to read The Sun Also Rises too often...? O'Brien has read it too often, let it sink into him too deeply." Other reviewers also found the book too long, too self-conscious, and too artificial literary. Of the long parodic sequence O'Brien said, "I tried to make fun of Hemingway. I respect Hemingway's work, and some of it I love. But sometimes I find myself being irritated by a kind of macho simplicity and by the way women are treated almost as little pawns to be moved around from place to place. That's not always true of his women, but often it is true, I think." (Missouri Review, 1991).

The climax of Northern Lights is an arduous ski trip the two brothers undertake together that a killer blizzard turns into a physical and emotional struggle for survival. Paul saves himself and his brother and begins to reconcile his feminine side that his father tried to expunge with traditional male definitions of heroism. In its deep exploration of gender in relation to identity, strength, endurance, and courage, the novel is an interesting one. Critics of O'Brien's work have sometimes complained that he fails to create three-dimensional female characters, but Northern Lights is an early attempt to isolate and explore both the male and the female in every human being, fictional or real. Of men and women, O'Brien said, "We're different, yes, but we're not that different. We all experience anger. We experience lust. We experience terror. We experience curiosity and fascination for that which repels us. All of us." (Missouri Review, 1991).
Although the original reviews of the novel were lukewarm at best, recent opinion has reversed this judgment somewhat. In perhaps the best specific reading of the novel, Bates concludes that "in its juxtaposition of masculine and feminine, woods and pond, apocalypse and salvation, endurance and love, it nevertheless has that 'mythic quality' O'Brien considers essential to a good story." Seeing the book over greater distance and within the context of O'Brien's evolving literary career, Beidler in 1991 assessed the novel sixteen years after its publication, finding in it "stirrings of a stylistic experimentation of uncommon power and originality."

In retrospect, O'Brien calls *Northern Lights* "my training novel, my *Torrents of Spring*" and claims he would like to revise it, to cut it by eighty-nine pages. At the time of its publication, critical reaction certainly gave no indication that within four years O'Brien would be the recipient of the National Book Award. Leaving Harvard with his degree unfinished, he was now committed full-time to his craft. "Instead of writing my dissertation," he says, "I was writing what I needed to write." Had he not become a writer, O'Brien feels he might have become a foreign service officer or an employee of the State Department, perhaps a government functionary of the type Melville or Conrad would have employed for dramatic, ironic effect. Without his Ph.D. and with his literary apprenticeship behind, O'Brien set to work on the novel that would show the true flowering of the "uncommon power and originality" Beidler and many other commentators would soon describe at length and with great enthusiasm.

O'Brien left Harvard but remained in the Boston area. With his academic ties cut, he devoted his full energies to a novel that would take many readers and critics off guard. Part reality, part memory, part fantasy or dream, *Going After Cacciato* (1978) established O'Brien as an important American writer whose subject happened to be the Vietnam War. To this day O'Brien insists it is not a war novel at all, but he also understands why the novel confused readers entering its stylistic terrain with specific if limited expectations. Playing the reader's role, O'Brien in 1984 commented, "if I were to pick up my own book and read it, my feeling would be that I wasn't really reading a war novel; I would perhaps feel that a trick had been played on me... It's quirky. It goes somewhere else; it goes away from the war. It starts there and goes to Paris. A peace novel, in a sense."

What O'Brien offered his readers in 1978 was a novel that seemed a strange blend of the real and the fantastic, the remembered and the imagined, an elaborate literary game that was deadly serious about its subjects, a text in which time and space were arranged at odd angles, in nonlinear arrangements. The book is ostensibly the travel tale of a young foot soldier named Cacciato (Italian for "the hunter"), "dumb as a bullet," who decides one day to walk eighty-six hundred miles to Paris, but the real central character, the controlling narrative voice, is Spec Four Paul Berlin who with his overaged, disaffected lieutenant and the rest of Third Squad, must track down the young deserter and bring him back to the war. The book begins with a somber, sparse evocation of the tragic realities of the Vietnam War; O'Brien offers the reader a litany of the dead that quickly finds its opposite number in the celebration of the power of imagination to deal with the terrible facts of Vietnam. One of the lessons O'Brien offers in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is that "soldiers are dreamers," the same epigraph from Sassoon that precedes the first chapter of *Going After Cacciato*. It is a well-chosen assertion, for what the reader discerns slowly is that this war novel is really an instruction manual on how to survive traumatic history through the power of imagination, through the need to tell a war story that is much more than a war story. Said O'Brien in 1984, "The very themes of the book are imagination and memory. In that sense it's about how one goes about writing fiction, the fictional process."

The novel is actually an elaborate frame tale, one in which the geometry often seems akin to the eye-fooling perspective of an M. C. Escher drawing. Author O'Brien creates the story of "author" Paul Berlin, a soldier afflicted with a major case of "bore holes," who while on guard duty one night by the South China Sea tells a story, an apparently fantastic tale about his and Third Squad's journey to Paris in pursuit of Cacciato. In his observation post, the present time of the novel, Berlin writes a novel of a certain kind, one that is an elaborate interpenetration of memory and imagination, hope and loss. The tripartite structure of the novel is at first puzzling, but a reader soon learns that memory and imagination, the real and the possible, affect the quality and nature of each other as Paul writes in the guard tower. The tragic realities and the unacceptable history of the Vietnam War affect the parameters and features of what Paul Berlin is able to conjure in his imagination, but O'Brien makes it clear how the power of our dreams also creates what we call the real world.

Many early critics concentrated on the seemingly fantastic elements of the story without taking full account of the overall architecture and made comparisons based on that focus. Speaking for many, Richard Freedman in *The New York Times Book Review* (12 February 1978) asserted that "clearly we are dealing here with what the new South American novelists would call "magical realism." There is, however, a large difference between O'Brien's novel and a work such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel in which supernatural and fantastic occurrences coexist in the same textual time and space with realistic happenings. Early in *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin and Third Squad fall magically through a hole into an elaborate underground tunnel complex, a moment that may convince a reader that he or she is following Alice through a Vietnam wonderland. O'Brien carefully juxtaposes that apparently fantastic occurrence with Berlin's terrible memory of the destruction of a village called Hoi An. He remembers his and Third Squad's desire for revenge, the words "Kill it" coming from his lips. I remember finally that "the village was a hole," a dark remnant of the war within his consciousness that Berlin "writes" anew as the tunnel sequence where imagination attempts to mediate and bargain with the unacceptable history of the war.

O'Brien rejects the "magical realism" tag for the novel, asserting that *Going After Cacciato* is truly about "the reality of our dreams, our day dreams in particular, the work of our imagination. There's nothing unreal or surreal about it." He is particularly amused by the suggestion that he was consciously or unconsciously airlifting the fictional technique and style of Garcia Marquez to the jungles and mountains of Vietnam; of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he said in 1984, "I just hated it. My wife read it and loved it, but I got through about three pages....I remember the paragraphs were extraordinarily long, and I didn't like reading my way through long paragraphs." By sending their way through O'Brien's memory-dreamscape in *Going After Cacciato*, however, readers encounter O'Brien's familiar themes reconstituted and restated: the need to find personal courage in the face of overwhelming fear; the imperative to find a moral center within historical circumstances that consistently blunt such pretensions; the necessity of dreams, imagination, and stories as the protective flak jacket for everyone, whether in real combat zones or no...
The true battle in Going After Cacciato is not so much between memory and imagination as it is between the desire for freedom and safety and the terrible constraints of duty. Both write us -- and creatively. At one juncture Cacciato rescues Third Squad from a Tehran prison using a 1964 Chevy Impala as a getaway car, but there are also drags and obstacles on the imagination throughout the narrative, and for a good thematic reason. The climax of the debate between duty and freedom occurs when Third Squad reaches Paris and Paul Berlin, the spokesperson for duty, and Sarkin Aung Wan, a mysterious female refugee who champions freedom, have their own dreamlike version of the Paris Peace Talks. Sarkin counsels Berlin to remain in Paris to make a separate peace, asserting, "For just as happiness is more than the absence of sadness, so is peace infinitely more than the absence of war. Even the refuge must do more than flee. He must arrive." From the beginning of the novel onward, Paul Berlin has been a fine creative writer of his own impulsive toward freedom, asserting of his imaginative escape to Paris that "it could be done." At novel's end, however, his is a different voice, one that has tested through the power of story the limits of that narrative. Facing the attractive, powerful argument of Sarkin, he finally admits, "Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits."

Imagination is not vanquished, however, and O'Brien makes it clear that all of the other members of Third Squad will have to write their own personal "Goings After Cacciato." What both Paul Berlin and Tim O'Brien achieve in the novel is finally anything but fantastic: it is the real negotiation, the ongoing everyday dialectic, between dream and fact, the real and the possible, that constitutes what we call reality. Is Paul Berli as he pursues proper notions of duty and courage, Tim O'Brien himself? O'Brien in 1984 said, "he's more of a dreamer than I was, I think. He spends much more of his time in dream... He's more frightened than I was -- and I was very, very frightened." There are clear similarities, however, among the "Tim O'Brien" he creates in his memoir, Paul Perry from his first novel, and Paul Berlin in Going After Cacciato. All search seriously for a standard of courage that is not just intellectually and emotionally sound but historically applicable and livable. All achieve only partial, contingent, or qualified success in that quest. In Going After Cacciato both "writers" achieve clear victories on a certain level. Of the relationship of Tim O'Brien's storytelling to Paul Berlin's in the observation post by the South China Sea, perhaps Eric James Schroeder says it best: "O'Brien's own 'inner peace' is ultimately achieved in the writing of Cacciato. Paul Berlin's activity in the tower becomes a metaphor for O'Brien's own creative act." It is appropriate that at the end of the novel a new story is just beginning, this time by Third Squad's commanding officer, who, thinking of the impossibility of Cacciato's proposed walk to Paris, suggests, "And who knows? He might make it. He might do all right... Miserable odds, but --!"

After the early critical reception to Northern Lights in 1975, many critics might have suggested there were also miserable odds against O'Brien's winning a National Book Award, at least so soon. But with Going After Cacciato he demonstrated that this, too, could be done, that events of the imagination could produce miracles both inside and outside the text. In his review Freedman suggested that "to call Going After Cacciato a novel about war is like calling Moby-Dick a novel about whales." Freedman soon found a large regiment of critics and readers that would nod to that assertion, but the novel produced for O'Brien another artistic irony. By producing the first novel of the Vietnam War that critics were calling an instant American classic comparable to the best of Crane or Hemingway, O'Brien wedded himself more solidly than ever to the term war writer. Three books into his career, he was being called by more and more critics America's best war writer on America's worst war.

It would be seven years before O'Brien would offer his critics and readers a new novel, this time one set on the American home front of nuclear paranoia, radical politics, and revolutionary terrorism. The Nuclear Age (1985) is in many ways O'Brien's most culturally ambitious work, a sprawling, darkly funny historical saga of what it meant to grow up with the persistent threat of the atomic flash, to reach intellectual and emotional maturity during the life and death of the antiwar movement, to see America's collective nervous breakdown of the 1960s and 1970s give way to the uneasy ennui and exhaustion of the 1980s. Some similarities exist between The Nuclear Age and Going After Cacciato in the way O'Brien handles time and history. Again there is a frightened protagonist, William Cowling, who is digging a hole to protect his poetic flight-attendant wife, Bobbi, his precocious daughter, Melinda, and himself from what he feels is imminent nuclear apocalypse. Like Paul Berlin in the observation post, William looks backward from the present time of the novel, 1995 in Montana, through turbulent American history and through his own comic-tragic evolution. If the immediate threats of history are less imminent to William Cowling than to Paul Berlin, they are also large for the hero of The Nuclear Age trembles not just for himself and his immediate peers but for mankind. Fear for the squad has been replaced by the nightmare of species suicide. In Vietnam, Paul Berlin surveys the damage from the elevated perspective of the tower and his creative imagination; at the end of the millennium in a chaotic American free-fire zone, William Cowling can only burrow deep below ground and wait for the end.

"Am I crazy?" William Cowling asks on the first page of the novel, and the reader must compare at all times contemporary historical hopes and fears to the "quality of obsession" that the hero personifies. O'Brien takes his protagonist from his boyhood fear of Soviet first strikes in 1958 -- the young William attempts to build a bomb shelter from lead pencils in the family basement -- to his final moments of sanity/insanity as he contemplates destroying himself and his family in 1995 in order to save them. Between those two fearful, obsessive moments, O'Brien offers the reader his hero's travels through the 1960s and 1970s, a comic-symbolic trek that features his involvement with a group of campus radicals who move from civil disobedience to violent revolutionary action. If Paul Berlin makes a poor foot soldier in Vietnam, William Cowling is a sorry terrorist, a disaffected figure who cannot into deathly tactics on the home front any more than O'Brien's protagonists can in the jungles and villages of Vietnam.

O'Brien's treatment of the New Left in The Nuclear Age is satiric, and the characters are often deliberate caricatures. With a homemade sign that says "THE BOMBS ARE REAL," Cowling becomes a one-student protest at Peverson State College -- "Pevee State" -- but he soon finds himself a member of "The Committee," a group of self-designated revolutionaries that includes a politicized former cheerleader, an activist linerbacker, and an overweight young woman who combines leftist politics with the compulsive consumption of junk food. As the group drifts more and more toward irrevocable violence, William becomes less certain of his commitment, more fearful and alienated. The Committee eventually is trained for destructive imperatives in Cuba and participates in bombings, thefts of military weapons, and, finally, the absurd procurement of Cowling's worst nightmare, a live nuclear warhead, the ultimate tool for true apocalyptic terrorism. As his peers move toward inevitable meltdown and
What becomes clear in the novel is O'Brien's own ambivalence to the leftist politics, the civil disobedience, and the cultural upheaval of America in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking backward, his protagonist asks, "What happened? Was it entropy? Genetic decay? Even the villains are gone... And who among us would become a martyr, for what?" He describes the period as a time of great energy, but energy of a kind that is more pyrotechnic than useful or constructive -- lots of flash and dazzle, questionable substance. The radicals in the novel are brave, driven, dedicated to their own manic mission, but depicted as more tragic than heroic. Indeed, there is a decidedly entropic feel to the book as O'Brien's own uncertainty toward his characters and their politics plays itself out in increasingly doomed enterprises.

It is tempting perhaps to read William Cowling as an imaginative variant of O'Brien himself, the domestic alternative to the young foot soldier who did go to Vietnam. Would he have been a different type of warrior, one fighting to stop a war rather than serve it? O'Brien uses a line from William Butler Yeats recurrently in the book -- "We had fed the heart of fantasies, the heart's grown brutal from the fire." Part of the enjoyment and the frustration of reading The Nuclear Age comes from the unresolved tensions that permeate the text, for O'Brien treats the social activism of the novel both satirically and respectfully. He both fears and admires the "quality of obsession" he creates, and, to his credit, does walk a fine, dangerous, fragile line between love and death, between affirmation and apocalypse.

At the end of the novel O'Brien offers an important debate. If Sarokin Aung Wan and Paul Berlin in Going After Cacciato enter into important negotiations involving freedom and duty, the final exchange in The Nuclear Age is potentially more crucial, even terminal. At the climax the hol beckons to the hero, "I am, in modesty, Neverness. I am the be-all and end-all. I am you, of course. I am your inside-out -- your Ace in the Hole.

The voice of the end -- the end of fear, the end of uncertainty, the end of anxiety -- the hole offers peace as nothingness. Cowling, however, a twitch of the finger from his loved ones and his own personal apocalypse, chooses death's opposite, with all of the ongoing dangers that that choice entails. Asserts Cowling finally, "I will hold to a steadfast orthodoxy, confident to the end that E will somehow not quite equal mc2, that it's a cunning metaphor, that the terminal equation will somehow not quite balance." This is a mature and sane response to questions raised in all of his works, but the answer is also complex and demanding: to live with fear, one must posit hope; to counter the certainty of death, one must traffic in the absurd, terrible substance called love.

When The Nuclear Age appeared, critical reaction was harsh, as if by leaving the literal combat zone of Vietnam behind, O'Brien had cut himself off from the wellspring of his imaginative power. Many critics were not willing to grant him true creative vision in the wider historical field of fire he chose to inhabit. Reviewers praised certain aspects of the book, but many felt it failed as a whole, primarily because O'Brien was not writing about what he knew best. David Montrose, for instance, praised "the lean clarity of O'Brien's prose" in The Times Literary Supplement on 28 March 1986; he also created a bandwagon of complaint other critics would climb aboard -- "The principal flaw is O'Brien's inability to create believable urban guerrillas: Cowling's anti-war brothers and sisters come across as tepid cartoons."

O'Brien, however, says that many aspects of the novel are deliberately "cartoonlike, wildly exaggerated" and that those anticipating or demanding traditional realism are missing both the essence and the more subtle features of the novel. He wrote the novel as "a funny, comic work," but he also describes it as "a meticulously structured book -- a patterned book in which the lines increase on a mathematical scale." He likens The Nuclear Age to some of the novels of Jim Harrison and Tom McGuane, writers whose tough prose conceals a fragility, "a sense of the collapse around us." Despite the panning by several critics, O'Brien calls The Nuclear Age "my strongest book by far," adding wryly that his reaction is certainly "what Melville would say about Pierre."

O'Brien admits to taking secret pleasure in the hidden structure of his apocalyptic comedy, and he also is interested in seeing how The Nuclear Age will meet the test of time. While enduring the confusion and disappointment the novel produced, O'Brien was already journeying back to the Vietnam killing ground of If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato, the imaginative territory of his greatest literary successes. Throughout his career O'Brien has published many stories or excerpts from his fiction that have become chapters or parts of the larger works; many of the best pieces originally appeared in Esquire. In 1981 that magazine published "The Ghost Soldiers," a striking Vietnam tale of revenge and exploitation that also garnered an O. Henry award. Some of his most demanding, innovative, and critically praised stories appeared in the same magazine after the publication of The Nuclear Age: "The Things They Carried" in 1986, "How to Tell a True War Story" in 1987, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and "The Lives of the Dead" in 1989. Although these individual tales were clearly some of O'Brien's finest short pieces, critics and readers were not fully prepared for what their effect would be in combination with other new stories. O'Brien was about to publish a work that would not only break new personal ground for him as a writer but also would test the ability of his critics to adhere to familiar generic distinctions.

In the chapter of The Things They Carried (1990) titled "Spin," a narrator and central character named Tim O'Brien, "forty-three years old, and a writer now," offers a key assessment of the value of the "real" Tim O'Brien's challenging new work, of all great literary art: "Stories are for joining the past to the future.... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story." Creating a version of himself that is both real and imaginary, offering a group of stories that seem to be simultaneously a novel, a story collection, a literary autobiography, a personal confession of transgression and forgiveness, and a meditation on the art of fiction, The Things They Carried would be perceived as the most innovative and challenging book he had written to date. All of his established subjects and themes are here: the search for workable definition of courage, the need to transmute terrible memory into a livable present, the responsibility of the living to the dead to keep them alive somehow; the wonderful, terrible nature of storytelling itself. Is the work a novel or a collection of stories? The answer would seem to be simple -- and ironic -- yes. Characters appear and reappear in the different chapters, sometimes complementing, sometimes contradicting...
their own words and actions or those of other characters. Some of the stories are realistic and dramatic, some metafictional and philosophical, or all are spare, economical, ironic -- live literary round that are both beautiful and brutal, terrible and true.

The most challenging feature of the book is the controlling narrator, the character named Tim O'Brien who both is and is not the "real" one. Mar of Melville's commentators have noted how in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael at times seems merely the author himself, ruminating over and glossing his own creations and his own pretensions. Likewise in *The Things They Carried*, there is not only a pronounced metafictional feel -- the implicit argument for the utter interchangeability and fluidity of life and art -- but also the perception by the reader that finally any attempt to separate th author from the narrator-hero is a fool's errand. The work is the most serious literary game O'Brien had yet played, and throughout the strangely connected and affiliated chapters, which are also discrete tales, he preserves a weighty contradiction: that it is possible to revel in the glories of sheer imagination -- storytelling in its purest, most shameless form -- while revealing the most terrible truths about human beings.

Many critics were not certain how to appraise the book. In the 11 March 1990 *New York Times Book Review*, Robert R. Harris wrote, "This is a collection of interrelated stories... The publisher calls the book 'a work of fiction,' but in no real sense can it be considered a novel. No matter. The stories cohere... he not only crystallizes the Vietnamese experience for us, he exposes the nature of all war stories." Harris's arguments for coherence and universality do much to capture the unusual effects of *The Things They Carried*, for, in a radically different way from his earlier combat-zone narratives, the work depicts Vietnam as both "this war" and "any war"; O'Brien also achieves an organic unity among the tales that preserves their individual integrity while simultaneously displaying their interrelatedness. O'Brien confesses that the book is "all invented," that despite the presence of a version of himself as the narrative glue, the work is actually in the "form of the memoir as a way of telling a made-up story." The last comment suggests that the book should feel like *If I Die in a Combat Zone* at certain junctures, like *Going After Cacciato* at others. It does, but it also contains an affable quirkiness, a unique feel that belies the often dark events within its pages and makes the work a new point of departure for O'Brien even at the moments it appears to be a return to old fictional landscapes.

In the 2 April 1990 *Newsweek* Peter Prescott said of the book, "Wars seldom produce good short stories, but two or three of these seem as good as any short stories written about war." Some readers would contend that that number should be enlarged. The first chapter bears the book's title it also bears the weight of the entire experience of the soldier in Vietnam, condensed and concentrated as a remarkable physical, emotional, and spiritual inventory. Some of what the men carry is visible, quantifiable, but the most important things are not. Creating one character who recurs in the early chapters, O'Brien writes, "As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, an .45-caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a stenbog and the responsibility for the lives of his men." Because the psychological and spiritual inventories are offered matter-of-factly, without judgment, they gain significance and power. As O'Brien summarizes: "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried."

Many of the characters gain form and feature as they appear and reappear in several stories. The chief carrier of evil in the text, for example, is a soldier named Azar: in "Spin" he straps a mine to another soldier's puppy and blows it to pieces, exclaiming to his disgusted peers, "Who's everybody so upset about?... I mean, Christ, I'm just a boy." In "The Man I Killed" Azar examines the enemy soldier the fictional, traumatized Tim O'Brien has just killed and observes, "On the dead test, this particular individual gets A-plus." In "The Ghost Soldiers" Azar's brutality finally pushes the fictional Tim O'Brien and another soldier to contemplate killing him. As Azar gains definition and significance from story to story, so do evil, frustration, and loss.

Adjacent tales often do much more than enhance character. In "Speaking of Courage" Norman Bowker is the central figure in a painful coming-home story about the loss of a friend and O'Brien's prime theme, the failure to be courageous. In the next tale, "Notes," O'Brien creates a version of himself giving the history of the preceding story that is revealed as "a suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself in the lockeroom of a YMCA in his hometown in central Iowa." The following story, "In the Field," however, complicates whatever conclusions the reader may have drawn, offering Bowker again at the scene of his friend's death, this time remarking of the loss, "Nobody's fault... Everybody's." Such accumulation of possibility is more than perverse gamesmanship on O'Brien's part, and in "How to Tell a True War Story," the key chapter in regard to his philosophy of storytelling, he argues strongly for a clear understanding of the difference between fact and truth. He states early in the chapter that "in any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen"; he also contends that, for even the best of writers, a true war story sometimes "is just beyond telling." The effect of O'Brien's meditative is to bring the veracity of all of his stories into question at the very moment it makes such worries irrelevant. Is this puzzling, enchanting book finally memoir or fable? Again the answer is an emphatic yes. How can a reader know if a story is true? For O'Brien and his characters it comes down to a basic experience: "It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe." As storyteller, O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* discards once and for all concern with strict adherence to fact. As he has revealed in a 1991 interview in the *Missouri Review*, "Ninety percent or more of the material is invented, and I invented ninety percent of a new Tim O'Brien, maybe even more than that." More than ever, he is telling lies to get the truth.

The "new" O'Brien is a wonderful teller of tales. Some of the stories remain in the imagination like strange inscriptions of terrible import. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" O'Brien offers the American "girl next door" as an updated version of Conrad's Kurzt. When a soldier brings his girlfriend to Vietnam, she becomes involved in special duties with the Green Berets but soon becomes too attuned to the call of the wild even for them. At story's end O'Brien describes her as having "crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill." The frequent descent into pure evil, however, is met in *The Things They Carried* by equally powerful salvational gestures. In the final chapter, a story called "The Lives of the Dead," the fictional Tim O'Brien -- or is it the real one? -- asserts simply, "But this too is true: stories can save us." Contemplating lost friends, fictional anc real, living and dead, O'Brien lets the reader know that the person truly saved in the leap of faith called storytelling is most often the teller. *The Things They Carried* is yet another group of war stories by yet another another war writer. But O'Brien transcends those categories to demonstrate once more that story is not an option but a need. As "The Lives of the Dead" and the book itself come to an end, the narrative loops back to its first
word, to the beginning of the writer's own creative consciousness. Like a Vietnam version of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, O'Brien concludes, "I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when 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."

If *The Things They Carried* reveals O'Brien to be a stylistic risk taker and innovator with his own well-established themes, his newest work reveals that he is becoming an even more daring and compelling magician of postmodern fictional strategies. In *The Lake of the Woods* (1994) is remarkable novel for a writer who has already delivered so many surprises in his writing, for in the newest book O'Brien offers a depiction of human mystery, secret sin, and the dark, tragic effects of contemporary American history that again rubs away the artificial line between the literary and historical imagination but does so in new, unexpected ways.

One main character is again a Vietnam veteran, John Wade, who has been a rising Minnesota politician but whose senatorial campaign and personal life have been derailed by disclosures of his participation with Lt. William Calley and his men in the My Lai massacre. A practitioner of magic since boyhood who gives himself the nickname "Sorcerer" in Vietnam, Wade attempts to cover up his participation in the evil of the My Lai episode, but *In the Lake of the Woods*, while exploring a contemporary Comedian scenario in Vietnam, is most truly about men and women: love, marriage, and the terrible, inevitable secrets husbands and wives keep from each other. Within a fictional landscape teeming with real historical personage, event, and voice -- O'Brien's strategies often remind one of John Dos Passos's daring blends and collages of art and history in the *U.S.A.* trilogy -- is a daring postmodern detective novel, a larger, even universal, exploration of what, says O'Brien, "deceit can do to the human heart."

*In the Lake of the Woods* is a striking achievement for many reasons. Another protagonist in the novel is Wade's wife, Kathy, whose sudden, strange disappearance is the story line that bears the weight of O'Brien's significant psychological and spiritual meditations on the nature of love and the difficulty, even the impossibility, of truly knowing another human being. John and Kathy Wade are both American secret sharers, and O'Brien combines in a truly masterful way the specifically historical, the darningly creative, and the richly universal threads of his intricate web of epistemological inquiry and emotional exploration. O'Brien serves as narrator and commentator in a set of intriguing author's notes, a uniquely American version of Conrad's Marlow, as he responds to the male and female hearts of darkness of John and Kathy Wade. A reader hears in the novel odd, compelling echoes of other great writers and texts -- from Nathaniel Hawthorne's obsession with secret sin to Thomas Pynchon's concerns with postmodern cabal, conspiracy, and the problem of reading in a darkened American cultural landscape -- but O'Brien's own originality is never diminished. While participating in the search for the missing Kathy Wade and learning more about the hidden recesses of her tormented husband and her own buried secrets, the reader also rewalks the dead land of national ethical and moral imperatives that extends from My Lai through the 1990s and moves back in time to other violent impulses and dark moments in American history: the massacres of Native Americans at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee; the brutal, vengeful British military action at Lexington and Concord.

*In the Lake of the Woods* is O'Brien's most daring and perhaps best book, for within its charged energy field of fictional and historical elements lies a story that remains compelling to all readers: the portrayal of well-intentioned hearts coming to terms with their own capacities for weakness, for deceit, for failure, and, sometimes, for real evil. In one of the important author's notes that gloss and complicate the motives of his protagonists, O'Brien makes the key revelation, a confession that speaks finally not just of *In the Lake of the Woods* but of his entire corpus of work: "What drives me on, I realize, is a craving to force entry into another heart, to trick the tumblers of natural law, to perform miracles of knowing. It's human nature. We are fascinated, all of us, by the implacable otherness of others." With this most recent work, O'Brien remains challenging and paradoxical, both diving and ascending within the heart and psyche, retracing familiar ground as he forges new and necessary trails through his creative imagination.

It has been a long, storied journey already for O'Brien: from the nine-year-old who wrote "Timmy of the Little League" to the mature, contemplative, innovative Tim O'Brien of *In the Lake of the Woods*. Readers and critics will wait eagerly to see what the war writer will create next, what new "miracles of knowing" he will achieve in his fictions. Living and working today in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he continues to play the role of the transplanted mid-westerner, living a full-time writer's life that he feels to most people would appear "extremely boring." His work habits are disciplined and his outside diversions few and simple. He works from early morning to dinnertime, including weekends and holidays; his hobbies include golf and reading at night. Asked why he keeps his existence so basic and streamlined, he says, sounding like one o his own heroes, "the life of the imagination is enough."

Perhaps Tim O'Brien's career to date may be best summed up in two brief statements, one from himself and one from another notable contemporary writer. In "How To Tell a True War Story," striving to answer why the search for courage is so important and why the recording of that quest in story form is so crucial, O'Brien says it simply: "In the midst of evil you want to be a good man." Having experienced his fair share of contemporary historical evil, he has striven to find its opposite, and in addition to the quest for a fair and just definition of manhood, he has grown to become one of America's finest writers, one whose quirky humor and dazzling stylistic virtuosity cannot conceal the fact that he is a serious queter for truth, a creator of some of our finest and most important moral fiction.

Another contemporary novelist, Chaim Potok, has offered a good definition of what Tim O'Brien and other serious writers of imaginative moral fiction contribute to their culture. "Stories," Potok has said, "are maps that give shape to events which are shapeless." From the early 1970s onward, O'Brien has offered his readers some of the most interesting and necessary fictional charts possible. Like Cacciato leaving behind in the jungle his map for Third Squad to follow, O'Brien has created a corpus of work that has given shape to both American dream and reality -- a remarkable, complex, and wonderful map for his readers to follow. In doing so, he has chronicled his war, his generation, his moment in American history like few other contemporary writers have done.
Few critics would argue with calling O'Brien the most important American fiction writer on the Vietnam conflict. Speaking for that consensus, Bates notes correctly that "his work is one of the happier outcomes of that unhappy war." While wearing with distinction the limiting tag of war writer, O'Brien continues to explore subjects and themes that demand of his critics larger classification and deeper vision. Whether his setting is military combat zone where humans struggle just to survive or a domestic jungle whose casualties are often less obvious, he continues to feature protagonists who create and define themselves by the narratives they write, the dreams they imagine, the tales they pass on to others. Why the central concern with the power of the story to be told and retold well? O'Brien in 1992 said, "Stories, retold, carry the force of legend.... Huck is still going down that river, Ahab is still chasing that whale. Legends have to do with the repetition of things. Though there's a narrative end to Moby-Dick, there's a sense, as in all stories, that everyone is still out there, still doing these things, forever and ever."

What may lie ahead for Tim O'Brien? In a 1994 interview he said, "I don't know if I'll ever do another novel.... With In the Lake of the Woods, I feel like I've completed the things I have to say about myself and the world I've lived in, and I've also completed a kind of search. I can't see anywhere else to go beyond where John Wade is ... I'm just gonna head north. See what happens." Many readers will hope that he will continue the artistic journey he began more than two decades ago: that he will offer his readers future stories and novels, "true or untrue," that will energize memory and imagination, conscience and fancy. O'Brien certainly knows the personal value of the well-told tale -- "Good stories can be true or untrue," he said in 1992. "It doesn't really matter too much, provided that the story does to the spirit what stories should do, which is to entertain, but entertain in the highest way, entertain your brain and your stomach, and your heart, and your erotic zones, and make you laugh." One thing is certain of Tim O'Brien: whatever he writes in the future will be aimed at both head and heart, at both body and soul. And surely readers and critics will hope that a certain paradox will remain strangely valid -- that his truth-filled lies will continue to make the stomach believe.
Into Troubled Waters

Critique: William O'Rourke
Source: Chicago Tribune Books, October 16, 1994, Section 14, pp. 1, 8. Reproduced by permission
Criticism about: (William) Timthy O'Brien (1946-), also known as: Tim O'Brien, William Timothy O'Brien

Nationality: American

[[review date 16 October 1994] In the review below, O'Rourke concludes that In the Lake of the Woods is "a risky, ambitious, perceptive, engaging and troubling novel, full of unresolved and unresolvable energies and powerful prose.”]

Tim O'Brien is one of his generation's most deservedly acclaimed authors. O'Brien's writing career has recorded both hits (Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried) and peculiar misses (Northern Lights, The Nuclear Age)—his novels set in America having alternated with, and fared less well than, books that use Vietnam as their subject.

The challenging and provocative In the Lake of the Woods follows that pattern in part. Coming after the widely praised, Vietnam-based The Things They Carried, the new novel is set in the States, but it combines both worlds—doing so with mixed but ultimately satisfying results.

The protagonist of In the Lake of the Woods, John Wade, is a middle-aged politician who had been a member of Charlie Company when it ran over the number of small Vietnamese villages now collectively known as My Lai, killing most every man, woman, child and animal they found there—though it was mainly, in descending numerical order, women, children and old men. In the Lake of the Woods is Wade's biography; but the problematic premise of the novel is that it is written by a fellow veteran who has set out to discover the mystery of Wade's life, "Biographe historian, storyteller, medium—call me what you want—but even after four years of hard labor I'm left with little more than supposition and possibility. John Wade was a magician; he didn't give his tricks away."

These interpolations, which come at chapters' end, are done by means of footnotes (other secondary source materials are also footnoted with standard bibliographic references). But O'Brien is giving away some fictional tricks with this choice; and it is hard not to question his methods.

The story, without footnotes, is in another tradition of American fiction, bringing to mind Dreiser's An American Tragedy, which also makes potent, criminal use of an isolated body of water. Lakes have played a metaphorical role in literature that is both benign and malevolent, a medium always mysterious and unknowable. And O'Brien fills the novel with that quality: using "lakes " as a theme

It is by the nature of the angle, sun to earth, that the seasons are made, and that the waters of the lake change color by the season, blue going to gray and then to white and then back again to blue. The water receives color; the water returns it. The angle shapes reality. Winter ice becomes the steam of summer as flesh becomes spirit. Partly window, partly mirror, the angle is where memory dissolves.

After losing a primary election for U.S. senator, Wade and his wife, Kathy, rent a cabin in the Minnesota wilderness: "They needed the solitude; they needed the repetition, the dense hypnotic drone of woods and water, but above all they needed to be together." Wade had become lieutenant governor of the state at 30. He seemed to be a shoo-in for senator until his presence at My Lai was uncovered during the campaign. (It was a fact he had hidden from everyone since he had left military service.)

Wade's life unravels still more: His wife "disappears" near the end of their vacation, lost in the Great North. Or was she murdered by Wade? The unnamed biographer can't decide.

O'Brien has set two contradictory narratives forward: one a compelling mystery, the other a investigation into the nature of mystery, of knowing itself. They do conflict. Readers hooked on one are likely to be irritated by the other.

Wade is a compelling character; his wife, Kathy, is much less so. As Wade's life history is revealed, O'Brien recounts step by step the killings at My Lai. These pages are shocking after 25 years, even if one knows the facts. (O'Brien makes liberal use of a 1992 nonfiction book, Four Hours in My Lai, which is equally unsettling to read).

I suspect O'Brien's novel will be the first account of My Lai many younger readers will encounter. O'Brien, it appears, wants to place his fact-based fiction in the service of history (rather than the more usual history in the service of fiction), and he is for the most part successful. Even mainstream Hollywood, not especially reticent these days, has shied away from depicting My Lai.
After the carnage is revisited, *O'Brien invents a most cruel and grotesque death for Kathy*—he does seem compelled to top the violence already described. "Finally it's a matter of taste, or aesthetics," the "biographer" informs us. In chapters labeled "Hypothesis" we get different versions of what may have occurred. It is clear that O'Brien wants to understand violence, not exploit it.

As hideous as the possibilities are, history provides Wade (and O'Brien and the reader) with contemporary counterparts. The convicted Green Beret slayer of his wife and two children, Jeffrey MacDonald, floats unnamed (along with others) in the ether of Wade's darkest impulses.

Yet, O'Brien, in the eleventh hour, seems to have pulled back from the logic of his character's character. *Reviewers were supplied with a rewritten ending for the book long after the bound galleys were distributed, a rare occurrence.* The difference was small: a matter of a few lines but the lines lead the reader to favor a verdict of not guilty for John Wade.

O'Brien himself might still be unsettled about the matter. What is clear, however, is that he has written a risky, ambitious, perceptive, engaging and troubling novel, full of unresolved and unresolvable energies and powerful prose, a major attempt to come to grips with the causes and consequences of the late 20th Century's unquenchable appetite for violence, both domestic and foreign.


*Source Database:* Contemporary Literary Criticism
Doing the Popular Thing

Critic: Jonelsen
Criticism about: (William) Tim(othy) O'Brien (1946-), also known as: Tim O'Brien, William Timothy O'Brien

Nationality: American

Interview w. O'Brien

[review date 9 October 1994] Below, Elsen relates O'Brien's personal reasons for writing fiction about the Vietnam War, specifically In the Lake of the Woods.

Like the protagonist of his new novel, In the Lake of the Woods, Tim O'Brien has been driven to do what he considers terrible things because of his need for love.

Major theme?

For Mr. O'Brien, the commission of sin began in earnest in 1969, when he decided to go to Vietnam instead of to Canada after he was drafted into the Army, he said in a recent telephone interview from his home in Cambridge, Mass. He believed the war was wrong--he had even protested it--but he served anyway. "I went to the war purely to be loved, not to be rejected by my hometown and family and friends, not to be thought of as a coward and a sissy," he explained.

Once in Vietnam, he committed what he considers to be sins to gain the love and respect of his comrades. "If friends are burning houches, you don't want to be thought of as a bad person, so you burn along," he said. "You'll do bad things to be loved by your friends, realizing later you've made a horrible mistake." Go along w. peers in committing bad deeds.

A year after the My Lai massacre, which he recounts in In the Lake of the Woods, Mr. O'Brien was stationed in the village. He understands the fury felt by the soldiers who did the killing, though he says their actions can never be justified. "There's a fine line between rage and homicide that we didn't cross in our unit, thank God," he said. "But there's a line in the book about the boil in your blood that precedes butchery, and I know that feeling."

When he returned home, he said, he compounded his sins by keeping them secret, fearing that otherwise he would lose people he loved. "The deceits I write about in the book are magnified versions of the secrecy and deceit I practice in my own life, and we all do. We're all embarrassed and ashamed of our evil deeds and try to keep them inside, and when they come out, the consequences are devastating." He added that he wanted to "write a book where craving for love can make us do really horrid things that require lifelong acts of atonement. That's why I write about Vietnam. It was given to me, and I'm giving it back."

Now he plans to make some changes. Writing In the Lake of the Woods, which took him six years, was a start. He said he decided to put a mystery at the heart of the story and to break away from a straight narrative (though he feared that critics would object) because that is how the novel worked naturally. "This book is a way of helping myself to start to say, 'No, I'm not going to do things I think are wrong and stupid so people will like me.'"

He also plans to stop writing fiction for the foreseeable future. "The object of writing is to make a good piece of art," he said. "As you're making that art, you're tussling with the wicked self inside. That can get depressing, when you tussle with it for six years."

For now, he aims to stick with writing essays, working out, quitting smoking and improving his golf game. "I feel like I've gone to the bottom of a well with this book," he said.


Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism
Vanishing Act

Critic: Richard Eder

Source: Los Angeles Times Book Review, October 2, 1994, p. 3. Reproduced by permission

Criticism about: (William) Tim(othy) O'Brien (1946-), also known as: Tim O'Brien, William Timothy O'Brien

Nationality: American

(review date 2 October 1994) In the following review, Eder calls In the Lake of the Woods "an artistic botch."

The German writer Theodore Adorno questioned whether art could survive the Holocaust. The new novel by Tim O'Brien, author of Going After Cacciato and The Things They Carried, raises a similar question. It carries the suggestion that no human project can survive the contamination of exposure to the Vietnam War: not the political ambitions and private sanity of the veteran who is the novel's protagonist, and perhaps not even the possibility that O'Brien, who wrote so brilliantly about the war, will be able to write his way out of it.

In the Lake of the Woods tries to tell the story of John Wade, a young Minnesota politician whose promising race for the Senate is stopped dead by the revelation that he covered up his membership in the Army company that butchered the inhabitants of My Lai. As a child, Wade was a dedicated practitioner of magic and disappearing tricks. His candidacy, in what it concealed, was another disappearing trick. And when he and his wife, Kathy, retreat to a lakeside cabin in the north woods to recover, Kathy disappears.

When I say O'Brien "tries" to tell the story, I do not mean that he has necessarily failed in his intention. In a sense, he may have intended to fail. He sets up two related stories: that of a political chameleon who does not so much violate the truth as make it vanish, even for himself; and a darkly gruesome mystery about what happened to Kathy. But the two stories are hostages of the bloody presence of Vietnam, waiting in a back room.

They speak under constraint. The story of Wade's childhood, marriage and career is formulaic and desultory; whereas the mystery of the disappearance, written more powerfully, blurs in the nightmarish matter from behind the door. It is as if O'Brien were telling us that even fictionally, there is no possibility of connecting Vietnam with anything that follows; as if it were a kind of antimatter that annihilates any story that tries to build from it.

O'Brien's back room is a group of chapters that alternate with the story of Wade and Kathy. They consist of pages of quotes. Some are from fictional witnesses to the fictional story. Others consist of press reports and trial testimony about the My Lai affair, and of passages from books about the stress of combat and from memoirs of atrocities committed in other American wars.

Underneath these, as footnotes, comes O'Brien's own passionate voice; not as narrator but as a man who was there. He comments on his story, at least on that part of the story in which the fictional Wade takes part in the historical massacre. And the book's key passage occurs not in the fiction, but in the footnote. Here it is, in part:

I know how it happened. I know why. It was the sunlight. It was the wickedness that soaks into your blood and slowly heats up and begins to boil. Frustration, partly. Rage, partly. The enemy was invisible. They were ghosts. . . . But, it went beyond that. Something more mysterious. The smell of incense, maybe. The unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness. This is not to justify what occurred on March 16, 1968, for in my view, such justifications are both futile and outrageous. Rather, it's to bear witness to the mystery of evil. Twenty-five years ago, as a terrified young PFC, I too could taste the sunlight. I could smell the sin. I could feel the butchery sizzling like grease just under my eyeballs.

Such a voice drastically overshadows the fiction designed to embody its message. Except in his nightmares, Wade is an uninteresting, sketchy cliché; and Kathy exists thinly as someone who sees through him but loves him anyway. He is not, in fact, one of the real villains of My Lai. He shoots one civilian, but it was because he mistook a hoe for a gun. The other man he kills is one of the bloodiest of his fellow soldiers, who approaches him after he collapses into a ditch, sickened by what he has seen.

If Wade is loathsome, in fact, it is insofar as he is designed to represent the slickness and superficiality of a national public morality. Wade as the soldier who re-enlists after the massacre, gets a spot as battalion clerk and expunges his own company records, as a politician who conceals his past: all these are part of the universal spin that depends on obliterating history in order to be able, comfortably, to repeat it.

Wade pays for his cover-up by being found out and losing shamefully his race for the Senate. But the real price is internal. He no longer is capable of remembering, of distinguishing what he has done from what he wants to appear to have done. His punishment comes when Kathy disappears. As the sheriff cautiously and fruitlessly investigates, O'Brien dramatizes a series of hypotheses. They range from the routine--she

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has simply decided to leave him, taking their boat—to the bloodier—she has struck a shoal and drowned—to the monstrous—in a Vietnam-vintage nightmare, Wade has killed her in a manner too horrible to describe here—to the possibility, after Wade himself vanishes, that they have staged two-part flight.

To disappear and to make truth disappear is to enter a wasteland of moral anarchy in which even the most hellish actions are conceivable. O'Brien narrates each version of what Wade has done in equally firm detail. Thematically, this is appropriate, but it makes for an artistic botch. Suspense, like suspension bridges, needs pillars to rest on. With his memory x'd out—and with O'Brien, in order to emphasize his character's spiritual anomie, refusing to supply a memory for him—what Wade has or has not done is of relatively little interest. This is particularly so, since the author has taken so few pains to make him, before and after the killing field, in any way distinctive.


Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism
A Self-Made Man

Critique: Verlyn Klinkenborg
Criticism about: (William) Tim(Othy) O’Brien (1946-), also known as: Tim O’Brien, William Timothy O’Brien

Nationality: American

[(review date 9 October 1994) In the favorable review below, Klinkenborg praises O’Brien’s ambitious efforts in In the Lake of the Woods, especially his characterization of John Wade.]

“What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.” That’s how Tim O’Brien put it in The Things They Carried, which was published in 1990 and which is one of the finest books, fact or fiction, written about the Vietnam War. I don’t remember ever hearing a novelist make a more modest claim for the power of stories, at least not a novelist of Mr. O’Brien’s stature. The statement itself—stories make things present—is unassuming and it is offered to the reader diffidently, as if the writer were about to deny the possibility of saying anything useful at all about stories. Perhaps it suggests the discomfort of a storyteller who has, for the moment, slipped outside his story, except that outside his story is where Tim O’Brien has nearly always been, taking refuge—as he says in his stirring new novel, In the Lake of the Woods—“in the fine line between biology and spirit,” between some literal, if unknowable, truth and the truth whose only evidence is the story that contains it.

These are important matters in Mr. O’Brien’s previous works. In the 1978 novel Going After Cacciato, the reader comes to worry about the difference between a story that is merely impossible—a platoon of soldiers following a man on foot from Vietnam to Paris—and a story that is unbelievable precisely because it is true, a story of the Vietnam War itself, a war that seemed to contain every likelihood of improbability. In The Things They Carried, the storyteller’s indeterminacy has grown. The narrator of those stories distinguishes between “story-truth” and “happening-truth,” and he plays one against the other. For Mr. O’Brien, as for many other Vietnam veterans, the “happening-truth” is a terrible thing: it is too powerful to look at, though you are forced to witness it. And yet, in Mr. O’Brien’s case, it has dwindled over time into what he calls “faceless responsibility and faceless grief,” which story-truth has the power to help him accept and alleviate.

In his new novel, these matters of truth, time and responsibility inward, letting them weigh on an individual character in a manner he has never done before. This is a story about a man named John Wade and his wife, Kathleen, who disappears one day from the cottage they are renting at the Lake of the Woods in northern Minnesota, an enormous reach of water and wilderness that divides the United States and Canada. Wade is a Minnesota politician, and he has just lost a primary election for his party’s nomination to the United States Senate. He lost big because his opponent uncovered the fact that Wade was present at a massacre in the Vietnamese village of Thuan Yen, which is the local name for a place better known to history as My Lai, where on March 16, 1968, between 200 and 500 civilians were butchered by a company of American soldiers commanded by Lieut. William Calley. Wade’s presence there was a secret Wade had kept from his wife, from his campaign manager and, in a sense, from himself.

At Thuan Yen, Wade had been responsible for the deaths of one man and an American soldier. But in this novel, it is never clear whether culpability can be parcelled out like that, whether it belongs to the deed or the doer or merely to what the narrator calls the poisonous sunlight of Vietnam. In the end, Wade also disappears on that northern lake, gone in search of his wife, leaving behind only a sympathetic narrator, an author who tries to reconstruct the tale after it has already come to its mysterious close.

There are three kinds of story in In the Lake of the Woods. The first is a conventional, remote third-person account of plain facts, the events that can be reconstructed without conjecture, more or less. The second kind of story appears in several chapters called “Evidence”: collections of quotations, excerpts from interviews and readings that bear on the Wade case. The third kind of story appears in chapters called “Hypothesis”; it tries to suggest what might have happened to Kathleen Wade in the days after she disappeared. But with these stories, Mr. O’Brien is also building a character, John Wade, whose inner architecture is more problematic than personal. Wade is the son of an alcoholic father who hanged himself in the family garage. As a child, Wade consorted with—isolated himself—with magic. In Vietnam he came to be called “Sorcerer,” and one of his last acts before returning to the U.S. was to make himself vanish from the company rolls. To become a politician was an act of atonement for him, but it was also the practice of magic by other means. Mr. O’Brien quotes Dostoyevsky: “Man is bound to lie about himself.” The lie John Wade constructed, as man and boy, was intended to avert the loss of love.

At the center of Wade’s character is a problem of vision. When he was young, he practiced magic tricks in front of a mirror perfecting illusions. When his father died, Wade discovered that he could escape from his rage by slipping behind a mirror in his head, making himself invisible. And that was precisely what he did on that climactic day in Vietnam, when he found himself lying in a muddy trench while all around him, in some too-explicable exercise of small arms fire, an entire village was put to death. Mr. O’Brien has always insisted on the special quality of things that happened in Vietnam, not to deny their reality, but to suggest that seeing was never quite adequate. You could look and look and look, staring down a trail where a platoon member had just been killed by a mine, and yet seeing would register no reality, at least none that could be accounted for emotionally in that instant.

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Incapacity to register reality has become a principle of character in *In the Lake of the Woods*. "We are fascinated, all of us, by the implacable otherness of others," says the narrator, who appears from time to time in footnotes. "And we wish to penetrate by hypothesis, by daydream, by scientific investigation those leaden walls that encase the human spirit, that define it and guard it and hold it forever inaccessible."

I have been trying to decide where the ambition lies in this grim, telling novel. It does not lie in reconstructing the events at My Lai, although it is deeply unsettling for the reader to find them reconstructed from within, nor does it lie in a particularly vivid grasp of the political impulse M. O'Brien has allowed himself only to suggest the magnitude of the story here, the nature of its psychological and historical depths. The quotations that appear in the chapters called "Evidence"—quotations from the court-martial of William Calley, from biographies of politicians, from magicians' handbooks, from the other characters in the novel—are like tentacles reaching into the unknown, adumbrations of a fuller narrative.

But it may be that *In the Lake of the Woods* is the kind of novel whose ambitions are less important than its concessions. Joan Didion has said that narrative is sentimental, and in his own way Mr. O'Brien concurs. One of the most powerful chapters in *The Things They Carried* is the one called "How to Tell a True War Story," which is, in effect, an essay, with examples, on the limits of narrative. The one question that chapter doesn't ask is: Once you've learned to tell a true war story, how do you tell any other kind? *In the Lake of the Woods* asks that question in a different way. It is a novel about the moral effects of suppressing a true war story, of not even trying to make things present, a novel about the unforgivable uses of history, about what happens when you try to pretend that history no longer exists.


**Source Database:** Contemporary Literary Criticism
War Wounds, and a Midwest Microcosm

Critic: Trudy Bush
Criticism about: (william) Tim(othy) O'Brien (1946-), also known as: Tim O'Brien, (William) Tim(othy) O'Brien, William Timothy O'Brien

Genre(s): Short stories; Psychological novels; Journalism; Historical fiction; Autobiographical fiction

[In the following essay, Bush reviews In the Lake of the Woods.]

Fifty years after the end of World War II and 25 years after U.S. forces left Vietnam, the legacy of those wars haunts the pages of American fiction, including some of the best recent novels. In Tim O'Brien's In the Lake of the Woods, the nameless narrator obsessively attempts to reconstruct the story of John Wade, who was in My Lai in 1968 when a company of American soldiers under the command of Lieutenant William Calley massacred between 200 and 500 women, children and old men. Wade, who has since become a promising politician, has kept his past hidden—even from his wife, Kathy. But during his campaign for a U.S. Senate seat in Minnesota, his opponent reveals Wade's secret. Wade is defeated, and he and Kathy escape to a cabin in the wilderness area of northern Minnesota. A week later Kathy disappears. When a widespread search for her fails, Wade sets off in a boat alone and then he also disappears.

Technically brilliant, the book is made up of three kinds of narrative. Besides a traditional account of Wade's life there are chapters titled "Evidence" which present quotations from the Wade's friends and relatives, excerpts from Calley's court-martial, newspaper clippings, and quotations from relevant biographies, psychological studies and novels, marked by footnotes in which the narrator comments on the material. Interspersed with these sections are chapters titled "Hypothesis" in which the narrator presents various possible scenarios of how and why the Wades disappeared. The reader is thus invited to help solve the mystery—a mystery that is, finally, insoluble. "We are fascinated, all of us, by the implacable otherness of others. And we wish to penetrate by hypothesis, by daydream, by scientific investigation those leaden walls that enshroud the human spirit, that define and guard it and hold it forever inaccessible. Our lovers, our husbands, our wives, our fathers, our gods—they are all beyond us."

Character of John - should we be sympathetic?

Facing at age 14 with the suicide of his alcoholic father, Wade escapes into the world of magic and illusion. He spends his lonely childhood practicing magic tricks and discovers that he can retreat behind the magic mirrors in his mind and deny both his fathers death and his rage at that death. In Vietnam Wade becomes known as "Sorcerer." At My Lai, where in terrified reflex actions he kills an old man and a fellow soldier, he recognizes that the massacre was "not madness... This was sin. He felt it winding through his own arteries, something vile and slippery like heavy black oil in a crankcase." One of his friends suggests that they report what has happened that confessing the atrocity is the only way to go on with their lives. Wade realizes that "an important moment had arrived and he could feel the inconvenient squeeze of moral choice." But he rejects confession and chooses instead to erase his name from the company records and the massacre from his memory.

Later, Wade's marriage is undermined by similar kinds of illusion and deceit. After he loses the election and the illusions on which his life are based are shattered, he can no longer repress his rage and sickness. Again Wade feels "the pinch of depravity." He "was not a religious man, but he now found himself talking to God, explaining how much he hated him."

In the Lake of the Woods contains profoundly religious themes. O'Brien has written about how the "craving for love can make us do really horrid things that require lifelong acts of atonement." Unchecked by any commitment to the transcendent, the longing for love and approval can destroy lives. The novel shows the futility of acts of atonement done in the absence of any system of belief that would allow one to see clearly, acknowledge one's guilt, and live with integrity.


Source Database: Literature Resource Center
Memories of War

Critique: Michael Kerrigan
Source: Times Literary Supplement, No. 4803, April 21, 1995, p. 20. Reproduced by permission
Criticism about: (William) Tim(othy) O'Brien (1946-), also known as: Tim O'Brien, William Timothy O'Brien

Nationality: American

(review date 21 April 1995) In the following review, Kerrigan suggests that In the Lake of the Woods reveals "a people at ease but never at peace," referring to the impact of Vietnam on the American psyche.

For Wilfred Owen, apparently, the poetry was in the pity; for America's Vietnam literature it is in the irony. The tone of swaggering cynicism we recognize from so many novels and films is that of men who feel utterly confused as to where—and ultimately who—they are. "What's the name of this goddamn place?" asks one man in O'Brien's memoir If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973). "I don't know. I never thought of that", replies his comrade: "Nobody thinks of the names for these places." The military institution, non-combatant readers know from Catch-22, is absurd enough without having to function in the context of a war whose fundamental "mistakenness" has now, thanks to Robert McNamara, been given all but official confirmation. If the grand geopolitical point of the war was obscure, the "search and destroy" tactics appointed for U troops on the ground amounted to a sort of systematic purposelessness. As the narrator of Going After Cacciato, O'Brien's novel of 1978, remarks:

They did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it a victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels. No Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration.

Nor was there an identifiable enemy: indistinguishable from the general populace, the Vietcong seemed at once pervasive and maddeningly elusive.

And maddened, notoriously, they were—though as John Wade, the protagonist of In the Lake of the Woods, realizes as he watches, appalled in uncondemning, the massacre at My Lai, "this was not madness.... This was sin." The main action of O'Brien's new novel opens many years after these events and unfolds in back woods Minnesota, yet it is all the more a Vietnam novel for that. Time has only made John Wade more completely a creature of his combat experience, though it has been internalized, suppressed until now through a successful political career and an outwardly successful marriage. War was a nightmare—horrible but unreal. Only when the veteran is back in "the world", does Vietnam begin to assume its grim if unacknowledged reality. As the novel begins, Wade is with his wife Kathy in a woodland retreat, trying a pick up the pieces after a crushing defeat in the polls. It is clear that Kathy is about to leave his husband: what we don't know is exactly how or given that she has stayed with him through what is gradually revealed as having been a purgatorial couple of decades, why. Though "Hypothesis" chapter flash forward to explore the possibility that Kathy may indeed be leaving her husband, and back to consider some of her possible motives for doing so, there remains the inescapable suspicion that something more sinister may have befallen her. Will Kathy be alive at all? The soldier kills innocent civilians: why should he not have killed his wife? The attempt to piece together the answers to this question involves the quasi-legalistic assembly, in "Evidence" interchapters, of snippets of testimony, not only from Wade's friends and relations but from non-fictional sources including the transcripts of the Calley trial and the veteran's self-help literature. But it is an attempt to piece something together. Some novels may revel in postmodern fragmentation and centrifugality: In the Lake of the Woods would dearly love to recover its lost centre. "For me, after a quarter of a century, nothing much remains of that ugly war", O'Brien reports in an authorial footnote towards the end of the novel. "My own war does not belong to me." Vietnam remains in the memory incoherent but ineradicable, a set of "splotchy images" which must be brought into focus if the experience is to be apprehended. Aesthetics here are no more than a means to an end. Combat offers multiple encounters with death but leaves the surviving soldier with a need for closure life cannot meet. So it is that the world becomes Vietnam, and the beautiful woods and lakes of Minnesota come to stand in for the jungles and paddies of South-east Asia.

Yet perhaps the North American wilderness has always contained its Vietnam, at least for as long as the United States has existed. "It had been Indian land", recalls O'Brien of his Minnesota birthplace in If I Die in a Combat Zone. "Ninety miles from Sioux City, sixty miles from Sioux Falls, eighty miles from Cherokee, forty miles from Spirit Lake and the site of a celebrated massacre. . . . The settlers must have seen endless plains and eased their bones and said, 'here as well as anywhere, it's all the same.'" Vietnam, O'Brien implies, is just one more stop along the trail for a nation which has indeed "celebrated" massacre in its western tradition but has never come to know the soil it has so ruthlessly conquered. It is significant that O'Brien includes the testimony of a Native American witness at My Lai, a witness who looks on with somethin like resignation but nothing like involvement. It is significant too that Wade's problems pre-date Vietnam. The humiliated son of an alcoholic and thus largely absent father, he had a boyhood passion for conjuring tricks, and while the tips from conjuring manuals offered in evidence here may suggest the manufacture of consent for an indefensible war by government and media, they provide more immediate insight into the mind of an individual with a mania for control: a boy who will grow up incapable of trust in himself or others and who will find no adequate
confessor for the sins of adulthood. Themselves the products of war, born into the baby boom that followed victory in 1945, the Vietnam generation is in some sense sterile; in some sense arrested in childhood. More disturbing than John and Kathy Wade's marital difficulties is the barren infantilism of their marital happiness; more alarming than their conscious decision to abort their baby to further John's political career is the clear subconscious motive that they themselves should remain the children. Foreigners tend to be impatient of the notion that Vietnam was "an American tragedy", pointing out that the war was a sight more tragic for the Vietnamese. Yet it remains interesting that in this, for all its haunting beauty perhaps O'Brien's bleakest novel yet, the most chilling passages are not those which deal with guns and gore in Vietnam but those set in Minnesota many years later, revealing a people at ease but never at peace. Just what is it that American fathers do to their sons that gives them this need to kill and conquer in nameless places abroad? Whatever it is, it robs them of any sense of belonging at home and makes America itself an indeterminate, disorientating wilderness.


Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism
Tim O'Brien

1946-

Biographical Essay
Further Readings
Works

Books


short fiction

- "Speaking of Courage." *Massachusetts Review* 17, no. 2: 243-253 (Summer 1976). (Significantly revised in *The Things They Carried* and discussed in the chapter titled "Notes.")


(William) Tim(othy) O'Brien

1946-

Entry Updated: 09/12/2002

Birth Place: Austin, Minnesota, United States

Personal Information

Career

Writings

Sidelights

Further Readings About the Author


Awards: O. Henry Memorial Awards, 1976 and 1978, for chapters of Going after Cacciato; National Book Award, 1979, for Going after Cacciato; Vietnam Veterans of America award, 1987; Heartland Prize, Chicago Tribune, 1990, for The Things They Carried; has also received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.
Introduction

A veteran of the Vietnam War, O'Brien is best known for his fiction about the wartime experiences of American soldiers in Vietnam, often combining the realism of war zone journalism with the surrealism of a soldier's daydreams. The novel *Going after Cacciato* (1978), which won him both the National Book Award and the short story collection *The Things They Carried* (1990), which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1991, are valued by many as definitive fictional works about the war. Most of O'Brien's writings deal with Vietnam War and his stories commonly blend memories of his own experiences with fictional treatments of such themes as courage, heroism, brutality, violence, and emotional upheaval in the face of death and destruction by impersonal, global forces. O'Brien's interweaving of fact and fiction has generated much commentary, particularly about the ambiguous nature of his narratives and the metafictional quality of his storytelling techniques. Pico Iyer remarked that "O'Brien's clean, incantatory prose always hovers on the edge of dream, and his specialty is that twilit zor of chimeras and fears and fantasies where nobody knows what's true and what is not."

Biographical Information

Born in 1946 in Austin, Minnesota to William T. O'Brien, an insurance salesman, and Ava Schulz O'Brien, a teacher, O'Brien moved with his family to Worthington, Minnesota, when he was ten years old. As a youth, he studied the techniques of magic and then practiced the art, fascinated by the mystery of illusion. In 1968 O'Brien graduated summa cum laude from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, with a bachelor's degree in political science. Soon after he was drafted into the U.S. Army. He completed basic and advance-infantry training at Fort Lewis, Washington, and arrived in Vietnam in 1969. He served with the 198th Infantry (Alpha Company) in the Quang Ngai region, near the South China Sea, where he earned a Purple Heart for wounds suffered at My Lai a year after the infamous massacre. During this time, O'Brien began writing vignettes about his army experience. Following an honorable discharge as an infantry sergeant in 1970, O'Brien accepted a scholarship to attend Harvard University as a graduate student in government studies. In 1971 he received an internship at the *Washington Post* and continued to work there as a national-affairs reporter until 1974. Meanwhile, O'Brien continued to write stories, publishing some of them in national periodicals. These he collected into his first book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1974); two years later 1 published his first novel, *Northern Lights* (1975). After leaving Harvard in 1976 without a degree, O'Brien devoted himself to writing fiction full-time, regularly contributing to numerous magazines and often submitting selected stories to anthologies. The publication of *Going after Cacciato* in 1978 established O'Brien as a major voice of war literature, although his next novel, *The Nuclear Age* (1985), was generally not well received. The critically acclaimed *The Things They Carried* earned the 1990 Chicago Tribune Heartland Award and a listing in the *New York Times Book Review* as one of the six best works of fiction published in 1990. Since then, O'Brien has published the novel *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994).

Major Works

Classified as both a novel and a memoir, *If I Die* concerns the initiation of an inexperienced and bemused young man into the harsh realities of war. The newspaper and magazine vignettes collected here relate incidents that occurred before and during the war, including an account of the social pressures and traditions that led the youth to fight in Vietnam despite his personal objections. *Northern Lights* centers on the conflicts between two brothers--one a wounded but still physically powerful warrior, the other intellectually and spiritually motivated--who bond while they attempt to survive natural threats during an outing in the wilderness. *Going after Cacciato* reflects the surrealistic atmosphere of war as narrated and dreamed by Paul Berlin, a young soldier on guard duty in Vietnam. Blurring the present tedium and horrors of war with memories of a past pursuit of an AWOL soldier, Berlin imagines his patrol team chasing the soldier on foot from Vietnam to Paris, where peace talks are being held. The blend of realism and fantasy leaves the reader to ponder which events actually occurred. *The Nuclear Age* relates the anguish of a man acutely sensitive to the threat of nuclear annihilation as the narrative shifts from his childhood during the 1950s to a future set in 1995. *The Things They Carried*, a collection of linked stories about a platoon of soldiers who lack any understanding of the reasons for their involvement in the Vietnam War, features a character named Tim O'Brien who comments on the process of writing the stories--twenty years later. The interplay between memory and imagination, again, makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish the truthful elements of the story. *In the Lake of the Woods* tells of the mysterious disappearance of the wife of a politician after the two retreat to a remote lakeside cabin in the Minnesota woods.

Critical Reception

The enormity of critical acclaim bestowed upon *Going after Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*--Robert R. Harris, for instance, has recommended the inclusion of the latter on "the short list of essential fiction about Vietnam"--has extended subsequent commentary beyond pur- literary concerns and into the realm of morality and philosophy, especially where O'Brien explores the nature of courage and the writer's interest in transcending reality to represent the truths of experience. Much discussion of O'Brien's body of fiction examines such topics as the relationship between reality and dream in O'Brien's works; whether a connection between the "magic realism" of Borges and Marquez exists in O'Brien's sty writing; structural analyses of O'Brien's fiction to illuminate the ramifications of war and its effects on the individual; and the significance of O'Brien's overriding concern in his writings with the relationship between fiction and experience. Some scholars have addressed the problems associated with the generic classification of individual works in O'Brien's multi-faceted canon, while others have attempted to determine which elements constitute a "true war story"; still others have challenged O'Brien's belief that "stories can save lives." Suggesting the reason for O'Brien's allure, Iyer remarked, "No one writes better about the fear and homesickness of a boy adrift amid what he cannot understand, be it combat or love."
Journalism and Other Short Works


Tim O'Brien is generally known as a Vietnam War writer, but he is fundamentally a moralist—a moralist who refuses to provide any single, simple morals. He believes in storytelling, but in storytelling as a way to confront the ethical complexities of the real modern world—a complexity that perhaps is best illustrated at war in Southeast Asia but is no less evident at home in the family. For O'Brien, the "true core of fiction" is "the exploration of substantive, important human values." In a 1994 interview O'Brien said, "Fiction in general, and war stories in particular, serve a moral function, but not to give you lessons, not to tell you how to act. Rather, they present you with philosophical problems, then ask you to try to adjudicate them in some way or another." In the same interview, O'Brien said, "All stories have at their heart an essential moral function, which is not only to put yourself in someone else's shoes, but to go beyond that and put yourself into someone else's moral framework."

O'Brien even goes so far as to say that style is secondary, teachable, and (almost) an overrated gimmick. O'Brien's style at moments owes an obvious debt to Ernest Hemingway—to the point of intentional parody in *Northern Lights* (1975)—but O'Brien's devices and moral settings come from William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, and Kurt Vonnegut. His diction is simple, his sentences are rhythmical, and his characters have distinct speaking voices, but they also represent values. According to O'Brien, "Stylistic problems can be solved: by writing better, by recognizing your own faults and getting rid of them. What can't be learned, however, is passion for ideas—substance."

Storytelling is another passion, and one interviewer for the *Boston Globe* described O'Brien (who is childless) as discussing his craft "with the same open-eyed delight that other people use to talk about their kids." O'Brien told a *New York Times* reporter that "Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is." This storytelling never ends. There is always more to be said about any event. When someone speaks, they are often "mostly right. Not entirely." In seeking truth, O'Brien never stops seeking. He revolts ideas and perspectives around and around and around. He revises; he even revised *Going After Cacciato* (1978) after it won the National Book Award. In a 1990 *New York Times* interview O'Brien explained that "As you play with stories you find that whatever is said is not sufficient to the task."

Unlike a character in the short story "Loon Point" (in *Esquire*, January 1993), who is silent because "there was nothing she could say that was entirely true," O'Brien keeps writing fiction in an attempt to reach truth or truths. He is an old-fashioned postmodernist.

O'Brien's writing organizes itself around a familiar set of oppositions: war versus peace, love versus hate, men versus women, reality versus imagination, sanity versus insanity, cowardice versus courage, safety versus danger, and change versus stasis. But in each of these cases, O'Brien is finally more interested in the way oppositions break down. For example, although he was against the war and claims he was a terrible soldier who felt only fear, he writes, "Vietnam was more than terror. For me, at least, Vietnam was partly love." One of his more famous lines is from *The Things They Carried* (1990): "I was a coward. I went to the war."

When exploring issues such as courage, love, and the fear of nuclear war, O'Brien holds up the real and symbolic representatives of these issues in different positions and in different lights. He rotates them, places them in varying relationships with each other, and describes them in the speech of different characters. A Vietnamese man in *Going After Cacciato* says, "things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entire new understandings." O'Brien's commitment to understanding every idea and its multiple alternatives means that his novel villainizes nobody, but they also sanctify nobody. Steven Kaplan wrote that O'Brien "constantly circles around and around given theme or idea, but he never conclusively zeroes in on it to offer a final statement." O'Brien develops all the positions he can and leaves his readers to make their own judgments.

O'Brien returns again and again to the complex relationship among reality, the imagination, and language. He examines most extensively the roles of fiction and memory in building the future as well as narrating and making meaning of the past. Separating himself from the word games of William Gass and Jorge Luis Borges, O'Brien maintains a primary interest in how humans make their moral choices and a compelling curiosity about truth—not "actual literal truth" but the "emotional qualities" of truth. And perhaps surprisingly, O'Brien believes that "exercising the imagination is the main way of finding truth" and meaning.
Certainly experience and language shape our imaginative lives, but O'Brien also contends that our imagination shapes our realities. In his first book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), O'Brien suggests that our decisions are largely guided by the language we use to ask ourselves the questions. In *The Nuclear Age* (1978), O'Brien writes, "Our lives are shaped in some small measure by the scope of our daydreams. If we can imagine happiness, we might find it." In *Tomcat in Love* (1998), his main character (and narrator) is a pathological liar who is always telling at least part of the truth. Tom's imaginative shapings of his experience heavily influence his current and future relationships. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, O'Brien explained, "All of our decision-making—opposing a war, marrying certain people, the jobs we accept or refuse—is at least partly determined by the imaginative faculty." He observed that "Those soldiers who actually did desert were able to imagine a happy ending to it." O'Brien elaborated on this point in a 1994 *Modern Fiction Studies* interview with Eric James Schroeder: "The imagination is a heuristic tool that we can use to help ourselves set goals. We use the outcomes of our imaginings." O'Brien's main interests meet in the matrix of the war: in "The Violent Vet" (*Esquire*, December 1979), he writes, "In memory, in imagination, and in concrete reality, a war goes on and on in its consequences."

Although O'Brien's imagination and his diligence as a writer and reviser are the primary forces behind his success, he says himself that his life experiences, particularly the Vietnam War, influenced—and even brought about—his writing career. Although he takes issue with the limiting designation "war writer," he concedes, "I came to writing because of the war. When I returned from Vietnam, I had something to say." O'Brien expresses his goals in his memoir *If I Die: I would write about the army. Expose the brutality and injustice and stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them."

Extending this goal further, O'Brien celebrates the individual conscience--the side of himself he didn't dare listen to when he succumbed to the draft--while recognizing and not devaluing other, often contrary, responsibilities.

Tobey C. Herzog, whose critical study *Tim O'Brien* (1997) provides the most complete biographical sketch on O'Brien, discussed O'Brien's life in terms of the roles he has fulfilled: as son, soldier, and author. O'Brien has also been a brother, patriot, thinker, reader, friend, teacher, leader, and husband. In his writing, he has explored many of these roles and the way the responsibilities to others and to ourselves have to be negotiated with our individual search for contentedness and meaning. In *Going After Cacciato* O'Brien states, "The real issue is how to find felicity within limits. Within the context of our obligations to other people." In addition to his Vietnam experience, O'Brien's writing has been influenced by his familiarity with the lakes and woods of Minnesota, his childhood love of magic, and his probing of relationships such as that one with his thoughtful, literary-minded, alcoholic father. O'Brien's imagination, though, is the core of his work. His imagination asks questions, wonders what would happen if, probes why things are the way they are. These questions lead to scenarios and stories; they open up compelling mysteries and develop into plots that never completely lose their enigmatic qualities.

Some unenigmatic facts. The son of William Timothy O'Brien and Ava Eleanor Schultz O'Brien, William Timothy O'Brien Jr. was born in Austin, Minnesota, on October 1, 1946. Raised in Minnesota, Tim O'Brien graduated summa cum laude an Phi Beta Kappa from St. Paul's Macalaster College with a Bachelor of Arts in political science and a scholarship to start graduate school at Harvard University. At Macalaster, O'Brien was president of the student body his senior year and was mildly involved in Macalaster's already mild version of the antiwar movement. Immediately after graduating he received his draft notice, and he entered the army in August 1968. He was assigned to the 46th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade, 5th Battalion, Alpha Company, 3rd squad (as is Paul Berlin in *Going After Cacciato*). O'Brien spent seven months in combat and received the Combat Infantry Badge, a Purple Heart, and the Bronze Star. Sergeant O'Brien finished his 365-day (plus one month) tour of duty in Vietnam as a clerk.

During several years as a graduate student studying government at Harvard University (1970-1976), O'Brien took a year to work as a general-assignment reporter on the national desk for the *Washington Post* (1973-1974), wrote and published *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Northern Lights*, and married Ann Wellard (they were divorced in 1995). He revisited Vietnam, including the My Lai area, in 1994. In addition to teaching at places such as Middlebury College's Breadloaf Writer's Conference, O'Brien has won awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Vietnam Veterans of America.

O'Brien's work has won many literary awards: two short stories from *Going After Cacciato* won the prestigious O. Henry Memorial Awards (1976 and 1978), and *Going After Cacciato* won the even more prestigious National Book Award in 1979. The story "The Things They Carried" won the National Magazine Award in Fiction (1989), and the novel of that title received the Chicago Tribune's Heartland Prize (1990), the Melcher Award (1991), and the French Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (1992). *The Things They Carried* was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize (1990) and the National Book Critics Circle Award. The New York Times recommended it as one of the ten best works of fiction in 1990. *Time* magazine labeled *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) the best work of fiction in 1994, and this same best-selling novel received the 1995 James Fenimore Cooper Prize for the best historical novel. *In the Lake of the Woods* has been adapted into a made-for-television movie and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection.

*If I Die in a Combat Zone*
O'Brien's first book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, is his memoir of his experiences leading up to and in Vietnam and his reckonings about those experiences. Only briefly alluding to the way his ideas of war and manhood were spawned by national self-congratulatory and selective hindsight about World War II, O'Brien relates his physical and mental experiences between August 1968 and March 1970: induction, basic training, advanced infantry training, duties with Alpha Company and at battalion headquarters, and the trip home after being stationed in Vietnam for his 365 days. O'Brien wonders how other war writers such as Ernest Hemingway and World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle managed to write much about war without answering two compelling questions: (1) When is war right? and (2) What do soldiers think to themselves? These are O'Brien's big issues: moral decisions and the interior life of the individual.

To once-untouchable arguments about the Vietnam War, O'Brien offers thoughtfulness. One voice says, "No war is worth your life for" and another argues that "no war is worth losing your country for." Even after military service, O'Brien does not claim to be an authority; he does not offer answers. He longingly imagines being able to "integrate it all to persuade my younger brother and perhaps some others to say no to wrong wars." He writes that it would also be "fine to confirm the old beliefs about war: It's horrible, but it's a crucible of men and events and, in the end, it makes more of a man out of you." But he cannot do either; "none of this seems right." Instead he writes, "Now, war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth... some men think war is sometimes necessary and others don't and most don't care."

As he discusses the war, he wonders what the issue is, what the deciding priority should be. He suggests that a decision rests on the words in which we couch the question—for example, is the Vietnam War an issue of U.S. imperialism, communist expansion, loyal patriotism, or personal survival? This theme reappears in later works, including his 1998 novel *Tomcat in Love*. All the words are almost right and also just miss the truth of the situation. Most true statements are "half-truths" that can only be offset with other "half-truths." Thus, he concludes that facts can be accurate but unprofound: the truth of every matter may be that no meaning, no answers, no words, are ever quite final. There is always more to be seen and said.

O'Brien takes his conscience and his thoughts seriously. In this first book, ideas, traditions, and people all pull at him. Unlike one character who "just grinned and gave flippant, smiling, say-nothing answers" such as "it was best not to worry, O'Brien is not flippant. Instead, he is deeply thoughtful. This seriousness about the self—the soul, interiority, and personal responsibility—is not only inspiring but surprisingly pleasant. Our world tends to broadcast flippance and thoughtlessness; sound bites are necessarily only very partial truths, if that. In a world in which people tend to revere the CEO precept, "do something, even if it's wrong," O'Brien's tendency is to do nothing until he knows what's right. Here is a good man, his reviewers have asserted, a man who struggles with the concepts "right" and "wrong" as well as "heroism" and "cowardice. His honest meditations, the attention and respect he gives his own thoughts, represent the human mind in all its stubbornness and vulnerability. Even in a "good war" such as World War II, according to Paul Fussell in *Wartime*, "things are conventionally asserted to be true which smart people know are false." In Vietnam, O'Brien is profoundly confused: trying to trust in the good will and good intentions of his family, neighbors, and even superior officers, his mind and heart are in ceaseless, dogged turmoil.

In resistance to the mindlessness and anonymity of basic training, O'Brien thinks and talks and tries to "see through ideology" with another thinker, Erik Hansen. While nodding respectfully toward friends who found "easy paths" out of military duty, and wishing he had had the courage to go AWOL before being sent overseas, O'Brien describes his quiet verbal protest. He writes, "Our private conversations were the cornerstone of the resistance, perhaps because talking about basic training in careful, honest words was by itself an insult to army education. Simply to think and talk and try to understand was evidence that we were not cattle or machines." He and Erik are accused of "making some love" when they chat, which goes against one of the implicit lessons of basic training: "There is no thing named love in the world." One of the first things he learns at Alpha Company is that language can be made to control and limit the scope of human emotion and evil-doing (men get "wasted" or "fucked up," not murdered or mangled). O'Brien's thoughtful and humanizing language is an antidote to the vivid but finally euphemistic language of the military.

O'Brien's first work was largely praised by the critics, who appreciated the value he places on communication and accepts the work as a "fictionalized memoir" more often than an "autobiography." In his book *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, however, Steve Kaplan refers to the work as a novel, a collection of short stories, a war memoir, a confession, and even an example of New Journalism. O'Brien himself calls it a "non-fiction personal narrative," which would clearly define the book's relation to fiction if "personal" didn't also imply a singular, internal, and imaginative eye, and if "narrative" were not also a term for the purposeful construction of stories.

Several reviewers described the pleasure of reading a book by "someone exceptional," someone "educated, intelligent, reflective, and thoroughly nice." One surprising characteristic of this "nice" author/narrator is that he confesses but does not excuse his own self-betrayal, and he does not conceal his own awful hatreds and evil brutalities. In the *New York Times Magazine* autobiographical article entitled "The Vietnam In Me," O'Brien writes, "After fire fights, after friends died, there was a... great deal of anger—black, fierce, hurting anger... the kind you want to take out on whatever presents itself... I know the boil that precedes butchery." Having "met" such an exceptionally nice author, we hear his antitwar message even more clearly: even reasonable men can feel enough hatred to do these things. O'Brien explores the origins of evil and finds...
it in himself and others, but he blames the system of war, which creates the necessary conditions: loneliness, attachment to buddies, misunderstanding of the enemy, fear, the Vietnam institution of the "body count" as an index of success, and so on. Concerned that "evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology," O'Brien forces his readers to scrutinize evil, to fill in the "ellipses" with which we usually screen it from our attention.

**Northern Lights**

O'Brien's first novel, *Northern Lights*, is the story of Paul Milton Perry--married, thirty, a minor official for the Department of Agriculture--and his brother "Harvey the Bull"--ten years younger and a Vietnam veteran with one glass eye. From the older brother's only slightly more binocular perspective, Harvey is the war hero, the outdoorsman, the favorite of their now deceased but still overbearing father.

The most flawed of O'Brien's novels, *Northern Lights* is gratifyingly repetitive and yet gains a valuable and expressive texture and depth that would be lost without that forceful, dogged rhythm. After reading pages about cross country skiing through wilderness areas that do not correspond to the old, laminated maps the brothers carefully study, one begins to appreciate both the symbolic and physical aspects of their wilderness adventure. While readers can tell what's right and wrong in a conceptual and theoretical sense, perhaps according to precepts that have been passed down to them through the ages, they may not be able to figure out how actual situations correspond to those precepts. Geographically speaking, a map can show someone how to get from the lake to the road, but what does he do if it is not clear how the frozen lake by which he is standing corresponds to any of the lakes on the map? Devoting half a novel to a month of confused skiing tests O'Brien's powers of description, but not beyond endurance. There are surprisingly many kinds of weather and snow, feelings of invigoration and fear and exhaustion and hunger, sounds, thoughts of home, desires and dreams, and phases of coping. Each brother experiences a different parable of emotion and determination, and somewhere in the middle of the wilderness they exchange roles.

In this first novel, as in his memoir, O'Brien continues to explore the meaning of "heroism." Harvey (the war hero) gives u in the blizzard and Perry (the stick-in-the-mud) is stubborn--and thus heroic. (Harvey's definition of "heroic" is that as still alive when they might not have been.) Not only do their roles reverse on this trip, but they are also reversed retroactively. In a rare bit of openness, Harvey describes the past as he remembers it. Instead of being the tough son, the "bull," he sees himself as the child who fearfully did what his father told him to do: when he got a rifle for Christmas he was scared of it but he used it anyway. Instead of seeing Perry as the son who couldn't swim and was too scared to go on wilderness treks, Harvey remembers Perry as the one who could stand up to their dad: "You said you weren't going to listen to him preach anymore. You just told him... He asked if you were sick, and... you said nope, you weren't sick, and you just said you decided not to go listen to him preach anymore. And that was that. I remember. You looked down to eat, calmed as could be."

While each man may be heroic at one time or another, neither is a hero. After the wilderness trek, Perry makes a couple of big decisions, but he does not appear in any way to have become a more permanently impressive man. Harvey seems just as flippant as ever, always making plans to do something difficult and heroic or escapist and pleasure-seeking. He never buckles down to any one task. Things are different, but not very. Perceptions may change everything, but their daily lives change only gradually.

Two of the secondary characters in this novel are women, and for the first time O'Brien represents female characters and relationships across gender. Perry's narration depicts his wife, Grace, and his obsession, Addie (who becomes brother Harvey's girlfriend), in limited ways. Grace is pretty, interested in having a child, supportive, talkative, and too nice. Perry finds her easygoing and comfortable, but he does not quite appreciate her. While O'Brien notifies the reader of Perry's fallibility, he includes a long passage in which Grace talks nonstop--a passage too irregular in the text to be much besides parodic and negative. (They are in bed together; O'Brien says he's better at writing dialogue that takes place outside, so maybe that's the problem.) The irresponsible, flighty, thoughtless Addie is more interesting, which brings up the question of why good women such as Grace are so often characterized as more ridiculous than younger and more obviously exciting women.

On the other hand, one potential locus of sanctification in his work is women--not all women, but women such as Grace in *Northern Lights* or Donna (who Tom always calls "Mrs. Robert Koosh") in *Tomcat in Love*. O'Brien almost reiterates the cultural cliché that associates women with the body or nature and men with the mind or culture. Accepting this commonplace, O'Brien revises it such that these bodily, natural female characters are the ones who truly live because they can accept that life is change. In a very old-fashioned way, these women represent messy, vital life.

While they are compared to the landscape, however, they are not passive and imperialized like that landscape. They are an active form of wilderness, and one that O'Brien's men learn to respect and even emulate. Grace and Donna are heroic, patient, confused about their life paths but ready for movement forward, and enthusiastic about change and experimentation. O'Brien's male characters, such as Perry in *Northern Lights*, have to travel into the wilderness or walk into a gooey life-filled pond to begin to envision and accept their largely unknown futures.
O'Brien's women sometimes represent the unknown that men are attempting to control. *In the Lake of the Woods* depicts John Wade imagining his future and intending to manipulate it into being. His wife, Kathy's, pregnancy is an unwelcome surprise. Although she wants babies more than anything else, she agrees to an abortion. John's spying on Kathy is another way that he tries to feel in control of the relationship (as if knowledge of her possible infidelity might enable him to prevent it). In *The Nuclear Age*, William seems to be able to imagine a future with Bobbi much more vividly than he can with the strong, radical Sarah, in spite of Sarah's constant reference to their future in Brazil with lots of babies. Bobbi, the blonde stewardess and all-purpose man-trap, can be imagined in much more conventional setting; if she can be won, happiness can be gained according to a set order of life events. Brazil is an unknown and perhaps therefore unimaginable, and multiple babies would add even more unknowns to William's future. Finally, Mary Anne, the "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" (in *The Things They Carried*) is a girl like Bobbi (sweetly, reassuringly typical) who turns out not only to relish the unfamiliar but becomes alien herself. Bobbi is likely to leave William by the end of *The Nuclear Age*, which shows that he promise as a type is misplaced, but Mary Anne's reversal is even more abrupt and disturbing to the men who witness it.

O'Brien's female characters become more fully imagined in his late novels. While Grace and Addie are less than enigmatic these later characters have as much personal mystery as his male characters. In *Tomcat in Love*, Mrs. Robert Kooshof is outspoken, desirous, and active, and makes difficult choices with the fullest inkings of the alternative possibilities.

In these ways, O'Brien breaks down the categories of male and female. A soldier and his girlfriend's behaviors are more a difference of geography than gender. He explains that he wrote "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" in response to the many women who had told him they didn't like war stories. In a 1990 interview with Michael Coffey the author states that "what happened to me as a man in Vietnam could happen to a woman as well." In a later interview with Steven Kaplan he expands on this idea: "Under situations of stress and in situations of incredible danger and trauma, women are capable, as men are, of great evil, of great good, and of all shades in between." As George Bernard Shaw said when asked how he wrote his female characters, "I always assumed that a woman was a person exactly like myself, and that is how the trick is done."

**Going After Cacciato**

While *Northern Lights* reminded reviewers such as Richard Freedman, Roger Sale, and Alasdair Maclean of Hemingway, *Going After Cacciato* may remind readers of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. O'Brien Paul Berlin lives in the details of future possibilities as much as Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim lives in the morbid details of his past experiences. While Billy Pilgrim goes to the past, or to an extraterrestrial world, when he becomes "unstuck in time," Paul Berlin's imagination takes him on the 8,600-mile march between Vietnam and Paris when on night watch his "eye came unstuck from the starlight scope." Heller (via Yossarian) repeats the refrain of Snowden's death and only gradually and late in the book reveals the circumstances of this death; O'Brien's Paul Berlin repeatedly remembers that "Billy Boy Watkins had died of fright," and he marks time with the deaths of other squad members such as Pederson, Buff, Frenchy Tucker, and Bernie Lynn. Because of the narrator's position inside the head of a highly imaginative character, and one who is not particularly group-oriented, only gradually can the reader map the chronology of events in both books. A similarity among all three novels is their resolutely truthful depiction of war amid their wild "flights of imagination." Yossarian's ten mate, the dumb but clever Orr, escapes to Sweden; *Catch-22* ends with Yossarian's own attempt to follow Orr. *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin imagines that his squad follows Cacciato when he walks away from the war: "Each step was an event of imagination."

Berlin's internal life--how his experience limits his imagination and how his imagination determines the future--is the most important theme in *Going After Cacciato*. O'Brien asserts that this internal life is as real a part of the soldier's experience a marching and eating: "In war, the rational faculty begins to diminish ... and what takes over is surrealism, the life of the imagination. The mind of the soldier becomes part of the experience--the brain seems to flow out of your head, joining the elements around you on the battlefield." He observes, "The life of the imagination is half of war, half of any kind of experience."

Yet O'Brien explicitly rejects magical realism as practiced by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez. His surrealism remains true to his experience. When Paul Berlin is imagining an unlikely but potentially appealing alternative journey for himself, he is building it out of past experiences and shaping it via his psychic necessity to create order and make meaning from his overwhelming and awful war experiences--things he has seen as well as things he has done. One critical point of contention about this novel regards the efficacy of the imaginative process. Does anything come of Berlin's imaginative construct? Or, is he left as powerless and confused as the day he stepped off the transport plane and saw--but could make no meaning from--Billy Boy Watkins' death from fright? Interpretation depends largely on how much of the novel one considers real and how much one understands as Berlin's interior construct. In both this and O'Brien's next novel, *The Nuclear Age*, the main characters envision their survival instead of indulging their fears. In a 1994 interview with Eric James Schroeder, O'Brien explains, "The central theme of the novel *Going After Cacciato* has to do with how we use our imaginations to deal with situations around us, not just cope with them psychologically but, more importantly, to deal with them philosophically and morally."
O'Brien also continues to explore other themes that he addressed in his earlier work: the nature of courage, the similarities and differences between World War II and the Vietnam War, personal responsibility and volition, language, and the interpretation of the world's details. "True courage" is defined as "how to behave" or "how to act wisely in spite of fear." Paul Berlin deduces a reassuring corollary: the greater a man's fear, the greater his potential courage. Finding courage in oneself, then, requires "the power of will to defeat fear," but willpower is another inner resource that is difficult to find. He hopes that his body has a "chemical," or a "bone chromosome," or a "piece of tissue that might be touched and sparked," which would produce a blaze of valor. Instead, he finds himself to be a mass that responds to the mechanisms of momentum: he marches "with no exercise of will, no desire and no determination, no pride, just legs and lungs, climbing without thought and without will and without purpose." If Berlin is counting on his chromosomes to kick in, then he hasn't much active will left. But Lieutenant Sidney Martin, the commanding officer who does things by Standard Operating Procedures, sees Paul Berlin's march and responds to it with joy: "the boy represented so much good—fortitude, discipline, loyalty, self-control, courage, toughness. The greatest gift of God, thought the lieutenant in admiration of Private First Clu Paul Berlin's climb, is freedom of will." Even the difference between free will and movement without volition depends on who's looking, where they are standing, and their frameworks of judgment. 

O'Brien compares and contrasts the Vietnam War with other wars, particularly the Second World War. He believes that World War II was a necessary war on a political and humanitarian level but that Vietnam was not. From the perspective of the individual soldier, however, all wars are about the same. Doc, one of the more perceptive members of Paul Berlin's errant squad, claims that war "has an identity separate from perception" and that every war, "any war," feels the same from the perspective of the single necessarily "confused and middleheaded" soldier. He lectures,

the common grunt doesn't give a damn about purposes and justice. He doesn't even think about that shit. Not when he's out humping, getting his tail shot off. Purposes—bullshit! He's thinking about how to keep breathing. Or he wonders what it'll feel like when he hits that booby trap. Will he go nuts? Will he puke all over himself, or will he cry, or pass out, or scream? What'll it look like—all bone and meat and pus? That's the stuff he thinks about, not purposes.

In other ways, however, the wars are very different. O'Brien writes that the men in Vietnam "did not know even the simple things" that most World War II soldiers did. Soldiers in Vietnam did not know what it was like to win, or to have a specified target, or to capture an area and keep it, or what the rules of engagement were, or what to do with or say to prisoners, or even what to think and feel about their own actions and experiences.

In his memoir, If I Die, O'Brien voices some frustration with the irrelevant advice of World War II veterans. In Going After Cacciato, Paul Berlin's father's solemn advice consists of, "I'll be all right. You'll see some terrible stuff, sure, but try to look for the good things. Try to learn." And Paul Berlin has as much difficulty gleaming lessons from his war experience as O'Brien does. These lessons tend to be conventional wisdom ("Don't seek trouble, it'll find you soon enough.").

War stories trivialize pain, death, fear, the individual, and history—and probably much else—in a way that O'Brien's writing avoids. When Paul Berlin arrives in Vietnam, his first lecture on survival consists of one hour of silence. Not only do these young soldiers need to learn how to overcome the particular nothingness of this war—its "vacuum"—they also seem to need thoughtful silence to maintain their humanness. The words that these men have at their disposal—the incomplete names and nicknames of their fellow soldiers, their understated "weird"s and "sad"s, their acronyms and expletives—combined with their complete ignorance of Vietnamese culture and their inability to understand the facial expressions of the Vietnamese to verbally communicate with them—makes their war stories inadequate, simplistic, commonplace, unprofound, and disturbingly humorous.

O'Brien's passion for tale telling and his careful shaping of sentences allow him to avoid these pitfalls while telling his war stories. He is interested in the truth, but not the facts as they happened. Describing the incessant terror and numbers of dead in Pinkville may be factual, but it doesn't help readers reach the "emotional truth" that O'Brien can achieve by depicting Cacciato calmly washing Buff's face out of his helmet. Doc says, "Facts are one thing" and "interpretation is something else." O'Brien invents details that get readers closer to interpreting the war's meanings than the plain facts could.

The Nuclear Age

Going After Cacciato's Paul Berlin digs the deepest foxholes in Vietnam, and the Vietcong tunnels in that novel are both friend and enemy, a trap and a safe house—and this distinction does not depend on which side of the war you are on. In The Nuclear Age the land is also one's closest friend and a potential enemy. Unlike Paul Perry's father in Northern Lights, who had insisted on his building a shelter, William Cowling is gently mocked by his father when he builds a bomb shelter under the Ping-Pong table in the basement. (In "Darkness on the Edge of Town" [in Feature, January 1979] Tim O'Brien reports that he did the same in his own basement as a child.) As The Nuclear Age begins, William Cowling looks back on the life that has led him toward digging and dynamiting a 12 x 12 x 19-foot bomb shelter in his backyard.
William was a draft dodger and the sad but otherwise convictionless member of a militant antiwar group. After a childhood of nuclear terror and several years of radicalism, he becomes a multimillionaire by selling a mountain of uranium to Texaco. His bomb shelter is meant to save his life and his family's, but he has the urge to use it to kill them all and thus see their love and lives in a literally rock solid state of permanence. Through these paradoxes, O'Brien symbolically represents the clash between the human desire for permanence, perfect fidelity, "wholeness," and complete knowledge of "now and forever," and the fact that life necessarily involves change, risk, fear, and unknowns. O'Brien seems to conclude that in order to live our lives fully and happily, we must purposely place our faith in things--people and ideas--that are undoubtedly feckless and even false.

The Nuclear Age is written about and was written during the Cold War. William focuses his attention on the facts: "The world is in danger" and "Bad things can happen." His mind pictures the realities of "the wall shadows at Hiroshima," "the ping-ping-ping of submarine sonar," and "the rattlesnakes and butterflies on that dusty plateau at Los Alamos." His first political action is to stand outside a college cafeteria with a sign that reads, "THE BOMBS ARE REAL." When writing the sign, he says, "The language came easily," but it is language that he contends with throughout the book, and language--not a hole in the ground--is where he finds his final, living refuge.

O'Brien suggests--and even laments--that humans maintain their humanity, their zest for life, their hope, by way of metaphors. Scientific realities are too much to confront, but if we read realities as metaphors, we can interpret them without feeling overwhelmed by them. If we can trick ourselves into using our complicated mental mechanisms, then our basic survival instincts--our understandable fear of dying--can be pushed far enough aside to allow us to live. William's wife Bobbi is a poet, and she frustrates him with her willingness to use nuclear terminology to describe their relationship. He asks, "Why this preference for metaphor over the real thing?" William destroys a copy of a poem (he eats it) with the intent to erase the poem's implications, while Bobbi treats physical objects as if they signify meaning in a poetic way (she gives him some blades of grass and says they express "her deepest feelings" for him). Bobbi treats poems as if they are artifacts; she says they don't mean, they are. Bobbi uses radioactive materials as metaphors, but William says to himself, "Uranium, no figure of speech." Real things have meaning in that they bring about real consequences. But by the end of the book, William recognizes his need for metaphor. He will believe "what cannot be believed" and hold to the idea that "E will somehow not quite equal mc², that it's a cunning metaphor, that the terminal equation will somehow not quite balance."

O'Brien does more than address the semireflexive issues of poetry and metaphor--the way language changes our reality such that we can live in it without prematurely self-destructing. He is also a thoughtful political writer, and his parsing of the antiwar movement reveals the complexities, paradoxes, and contradictions inherent within this--and perhaps any--political action. In Cuba, William and four friends find themselves enlisted in an army as arbitrary and full of chickenshit: the one they dodged stateside. William's lover Sarah--although she's the most dedicated and thoughtful revolutionary of the group--wants a world of love; she dreams of being a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader who upstages the football game. Her desire for love is so great that she says, "If necessary, I'll wipe out the world." The infighting among coalitions of the antiwar movement, and even among these five friends in Key West, Florida, highlights the difficulty of resistance. Peacemakers need to make a big bang to get anyone's attention; real bombs require real resistance, and vice versa. They steal weapons for peace but can barely resist using them. They walk a tightrope, contending with a fragile "balance of power" between fighting war and waging war.

They lose. Although William manages to dump crates of rifles and ammo in the ocean, avoiding the direct use of force, the friends lose by becoming participants in the creation of weaponry. They find uranium and sell it for a fortune. They feel guilty because they "hadn't done much to change the world" but "the world had changed them." They "prospered in a prosperous world." They claim the heroes and the villains all seem to have disappeared, but maybe they have only lost the vision for the moral spectrum. O'Brien suggests that materialism has overtaken the will of people who once were sure of what was right and would act on it--a familiar complaint about the differences between 1969 and 1979 in America. In his short article "We've Adjusted Too Well," O'Brien laments this change. He writes, "We used to care about these things. We paid attention, we debated, passion was high." For his characters in The Nuclear Age, the world has not become more complicated--they used to spend all night on "convoluted arguments" about "complexities and ambiguities." Ad ditties and investments have simply become more interesting than passion: "The world has been sanitized. Passion is a metaphor." Here O'Brien explores a compelling question of the sixties counterculture: How did a whole passionate generation lose its political edge? How did William become "Mr. Normal"?

William survives his friends. They are somewhat tainted martyrs to their dreams, but William has always been able to envision death much better than he could envision a perfect world. Obsessed with his own mortality since childhood, William avoided the draft primarily out of fear and passivity. He is scared and sad and less politically committed than his friends are. On the other hand, his fear makes him stay in closer touch with the ideal of peace than his friends, who want to use bombs to fight bombs. He can imagine death more vividly than other people, who believe they are "immortal until the very instant of mortality."

O'Brien thus returns to the issues of reality and the imagination in The Nuclear Age. William's morbid imagination shapes his life. When young, he imagines the "world-as-it-should-be" but when he's older he commits himself--almost resigns
himself—to the job of just imagining his own happiness. In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin escapes the war by imagining another version of his war story. But Berlin's narrative is not just escape. He is also making sense of his experiences, and this mental achievement gives him the sense of control that he needs. In *The Nuclear Age* William learns to use his imagination to envision survival instead of death; he tells himself (and forces himself to believe) the stories "sane" people live by. But in *The Nuclear Age*, the two worlds are complicated and confused. No clear division exists between reality and the imagination; the blurring can be disconcerting, but it also makes the imagination more efficacious.

When reality and fantasy are so intertwined we are so sanity and insanity. O'Brien sums up the paradox of many post-World War II novels, most obviously *Catch-22*. "If you're sane, you see madness. If you see madness, you freak. If you freak, you're mad." And he asks, "What does one do?" William's friends accept paradoxes and die rich but rebelliously. William's nuclear freeze turns into a meltdown and finally a conviction that in this nuclear age we can survive only via inspired, purposeful self-deception. O'Brien writes, "Among the sane ... there is no full knowing. If you're sane, you ride without risk, for the risks are not real. And when it comes to pass, some sane asshole will shrug and say, 'Oh well.'" O'Brien's protagonist is insane with self-defeating fears, but what if he is right?

**The Things They Carried**

*The Things They Carried* is O'Brien's most impressively honest work, one in which he reiterates the falseness of war story and even of truly held memories. This work is a deceptive confession, one couched in such a mixture of fictionalization an factuality that the reader cannot know exactly what O'Brien has seen or done—neither can he, and that is one of his points. In this book O'Brien progresses further in his expression of the radical, mutual dependence of truth and fiction. If in *Going After Cacciato* Paul Berlin gains a sense of control over his real situation via his imagination, and if in *The Nuclear Age,* William Cowling comes to recognize the real power that the human imagination exercises over our collective and individual futures, in *The Things They Carried* O'Brien makes the relationship between truth and fiction even more intimate. Kaplan wrote that O'Brien "destroys the line dividing fact from fiction, and tries to show even more so than in *Cacciato* that fiction (or the imagined world) can often be truer than fact." O'Brien spent five years with the characters in this novel, longer than he did with any of his real war buddies; he dedicated the book to these fictional characters.

Whether we come to understand and control events, we know how we feel about them. *The Things They Carried* seems to reveal how O'Brien has felt: he reaches for the "emotional truth." People really die in Vietnam, but whose fault is that really? If a man physically lets go of the leg of his friend who is really drowning in mud and shit, is he more to blame than the man who watches this happen, or the people who turn their eyes away so they don't have to watch? Or does the blame fall on the lieutenant who followed other people's orders and set up camp in that muddy village toilet? Or on the man who broke the rules and turned on his flashlight for a second to look at his old girlfriend's picture? Or on the order-givers themselves? Or on the terrain? Or on the weather? And does it matter if any of this really happened or not? O'Brien tells us about Kiowa's dreadful, messy drowning as if it's Norman Bowker's story, and he claims that "Norman Bowker" is Norma Bowker's real name. But then O'Brien writes, "That part of the story is my own," leaving it up to his readers to decide if letting go of Kiowa is O'Brien's story--his experience--or just O'Brien's story--the one he makes up. According to Kaplan, O'Brien's novel is full of stories that happened, did not happen, and might have happened. The future is a contingency, but so is the past.

O'Brien writes that a "true war story" is one to which the reader responds by asking, "Is it true?" He concludes, "If the answer matters, you've got your answer." If "you'd feel cheated if it never happened" then it's probably "pure Hollywood" and "untrue." In Kiowa's case the answer doesn't matter. The truth of this war, and all wars, is found in the ambiguities, not the Silver Star heroics. (This is one reason that the 1996 film *The Thin Red Line* reveals more about real war than *Saving Private Ryan* of the same year.) O'Brien observes, "It's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen," but when someone dies the others cannot rid themselves of the blame. When fictional character Tim O'Brien's fictional daughter asks, "Daddy, tell the truth, did you ever kill anybody?", he writes, "I can say, honestly, 'Of course not,'" but in the next paragraph he adds, "Or I can say, honestly, 'Yes.!'" The reader's uncertainty mimics the confusion of the characters themselves.

As in his other books, O'Brien's discussions of one issue usually lead to a discussion of seemingly opposite issues. In *The Nuclear Age*, the discussion of peace involves a discussion of war. Must the resistance be resistant? In that same novel, O'Brien explicates the ways safety involves danger and how always keeping things the same can be attained only by irrevocably destroying them. In *Going After Cacciato* the experience of the war is largely expressed through the fantasies of Paul Berlin: Can a person best understand a feeling of entrapment via flights of fancy? In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's war stories seem necessarily to be mixed up with love stories, and his confrontation with death leads to his coming to terms with life. Is the story of the man who offers a baby water buffalo C rations and then mercilessly kills it a war story or a love story? O'Brien says it's a love story; perhaps anyone who has offered a gift to someone and had it refused can partially understand the way love can turn to spite. Maybe only an armed soldier can understand how spite turns to murderous violence.

Regarding the complex relationship between life and death, O'Brien seems to be repeating the wartime banality "you're
never more alive than when you're almost dead." But he tempers this Hemingwaysque tough-guy credo. First, the likelihood of imminent death does not make men into Men as much as it means "jokes are funnier" and "green is greener." Second, war does not affect men only. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," a fantastical story about a young man flying his American girlfriend into the jungles to keep him company, a woman is the one who reaches the depths of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. And third, O'Brien shows that war is not the only place to learn about life and death: "You don't have to be in Nam to be in Nam." His final epiphany about life and death is spoken (in his dreams) by a nine-year-old schoolgirl. Linda says, "Once you're alive, you can't ever be dead," and that death is "like being inside a book that nobody's reading."

By likening death to the closing of a book, O'Brien solidifies the relationship between war and stories. In his memoir *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, Eugene Sledge, a U.S. Marine in World War II, writes that the replacements who got "hit before we even knew their names" were "like unread books on a shelf." O'Brien's stories bring his dead friends back to life. In Vietnam, he writes, "We kept the dead alive with stories," and he continues to do that in his written stories. He concludes that "in the spell of memory and imagination" he can "still see" his friends. Nor are they the only ones he is keeping alive: he is "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story."

Except for *Northern Lights*, all of O'Brien's novels include separately published short stories, but this structure is most obvious in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien complicates this popular American genre (think of Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Maxine Hong Kingston, and countless creative writing Master of Fine Arts grads) by making his stories a complex mixture of fact and fiction. O'Brien's "integrated novel," then, not only integrates parts that have their own "internal integrity" but integrates external facts and mental imaginings. *On The Rainy River* appears to be a first-person confession; it begins, "This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone," and the narrator refers to himself as "Tim O'Brien." Other stories begin with statements such as "This is true" but are told in a self-referential and include statements such as "That's a true story that never happened." The author explains, "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth." True war stories have no moral, no clear ending or beginning, and they admit the difficulty of distinguishing between "what happened" and "what seemed to happen." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* reviewer Dan Carpenter writes,

O'Brien is inventing a form here. His book evokes the hyperintense personal journalism of Michael Herr and the journalism-as-novel of Norman Mailer, but it is a different animal. It is fiction, even though its main character has the same name as the author ... If I had to label it, I'd call it an epic prose poem of our time, deconstructed and demystified and yet singing the beauty and mystery of human life over its screams and explosions, curses and lies.

If O'Brien is inventing a form, it has precedents far earlier than postmodernism and New Journalism. Perhaps in O'Brien's work, George Orwell meets Sir Philip Sidney. O'Brien takes Orwell's interest in "the politics of the English language" as crucial to the struggle between totalitarianism and freedom, and acts on Sidney's assertion in "The Defence of Poesy" that poetry (or fiction) can express the truth better than fact. Sidney writes that nature's "world is brazen, the poet only deliver golden." O'Brien puts it differently: most moments are boring, and imagination can distill all the boredom into something meaningful. "You tell lies," he says, "to get at the truth."

**In the Lake of the Woods**

In his 1994 novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien treats the same themes in a different genre: the mystery—a natural genre for a writer so interested in the problems of discovering truth. John Wade has just lost a primary election for the United States Senate. As he attempts to recuperate in the wilderness with his wife, she disappears, and soon the ex-candidate for senator is a murder suspect. While the local police, the neighbors, John Wade himself, and even the book's narrator seem unsure of what has happened, almost all of them make sinister extrapolations from the revelation that cost him the election—his elaborate cover-up of his involvement in the My Lai (or Thuan Yen) massacre, the most notorious U.S. atrocity in Vietnam. O'Brien's chapters alternate between "Hypothesis" (detailed but unconfirmable guesses about what might have been going on in other people's minds) and "Evidence" (short quotations from involved fictional characters and excerpts from a wide variety of existing books and court transcripts). Other chapters stop several places on the spectrum between hypothesis and evidence, but no certainty is offered. And in all these chapters there are footnotes, written by a philosophizing, clue-full but conclusionless investigator (with a tone akin to Nabokov's scholar in *Parn Fire*) who calls himself "a theory man" and is also a "biographer, historian, medium." Kaplan compares this narrator "detective" to "Marlowe in Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the reporter figure in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane."

In one footnote, this narrator writes "evidence is not truth. It is only evident." While the nonfictional elements of *In the Lake of the Woods* help us imagine what John Wade might have been capable of, the narrator offers hypothetical reconstructions of what might have happened and challenges readers to notice their own imaginative preferences. As part of the "evidence," John Dominic Crossan, the author of *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* is cited as saying, "If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in."

Sigmund Freud is represented by his statement that "Whoever undertakes to write a biography binds himself to lying, to
concealment, to flummery...Truth is not accessible."

Here as in other works, O'Brien investigates the indivisibility of truth and fiction from several different angles. First, he highlights the struggle between our desire for conclusive knowledge and our fascination with the enigmatic. O'Brien's narrator writes that "solutions only demeane the grandeur of human ignorance," "absolute knowledge is absolute closure," and "death itself dissolves into uncertainty, and that out of such uncertainty arise great temples and tales of salvation." Forensic anxiety disperses into epistemological anxiety, plot into philosophy. The conclusion that John Wade--the one man who should know the truth of this story—is able to reach about the mystery of life is that "The only explicable thing... was how thoroughly inexplicable it all was." The characters in this novel are "looking for answers to things that cannot be answered, for answers to the unknowable."

O'Brien's novel also discusses the difference between the truth and what we want or need to believe. Our minds seem unable to comprehend the real truths of the world, such as the factuality of sin and evil, so our "quality of abstraction makes reality unreal." As O'Brien writes in The Nuclear Age, "Nothing real had ever happened" at Los Alamos. We have to believe things that we are able to live with; we have a "forgetting trick" that erases or "smudge[s]" certain experiences in the mind's eye, changing our potential memories. Kathy and John Wade need to believe certain things about one another, but John doesn't know that Kathy knows he spied on her, John doesn't know the many sides of Kathy's self, and Kathy doesn't know that John mainly lives "in the mirror," where he can purposefully manipulate other people's impressions of him. The narrator asks, "Our own children, our fathers, our wives and husbands. Do we truly know them? How much is camouflage? How much is guessed at?" But in order to have an interpersonal relationship, we need to have some faith in the objects of our affection, so we--like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby--agree to understand people "just so far" as they want to be understood, believe in them as they would like to believe in themselves, and accept "precisely the impression" people that they, at their best, would hope to convey.

We not only believe what we need to, but we perform in such a way as to confirm the beliefs and expectations of others. Kathy has never enjoyed being the wife of a politician, but she looks the part and smiles cheerfully when it's expected of her. While she is loyal and a good actress, she also has a multiplicity of identities. She is flexible and adaptive, and as John Wade's cynical campaign manager says, she has "you're galore." The narrator hypothesizes that when (if) her adoring husband killed her, she opened her eyes and saw "twenty years of love dissolving into the certainty that nothing at all was certain." The two characters have lived out John Wade's dream that 1 + 1 = 0 in one way or another. Their union has killed them, or they have disappeared together and are finding happiness in Verona (an ominous address for a happy ending, since it is the setting for Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet). In either case, they were in a fog of performances and appearances, a box of mirrors, surrounded by people trying to discern the truth as much as the Wades were trying to discover it themselves. The wilderness they pass through (or die in) was a "region that bore resemblance to the contours of [John Wade's] own little repository of a soul, the tangle, the overall disarray, qualities icy and wild." If he's a monster, even he doesn't know it.

O'Brien also continues his explication of the ways that safety and danger, change and stasis, and love and war are intrinsically tangled in the human heart. John was obsessed with magic tricks when he was a child, and he continues to be manipulator in his adulthood, both in his public and his private life. His machinations to keep his wife, however, may directly or indirectly cause her to disappear. The son of an alcoholic father who committed suicide, John goes to war because he wants to be loved, and he even imagines it might help him love himself. Love, or his desire to be loved, also leads him to lie to himself and others, to keep secrets, to spy on his wife, and possibly even to kill her; "Amazing, he thought, what love could do."

Perhaps the most disturbing of O'Brien's novels, In the Lake of the Woods seems to have been written during a difficult tin in the author's life. The breakup of his marriage and a subsequent love relationship led O'Brien to write some of his most personally revealing journalism. In the article "The Vietnam in Me" O'Brien describes his self-probing: "I had come to acknowledge, more or less, the dominant principle of love in my life, how far I would go to get it, how terrified I was of losing it... I would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love." That self-analysis and self-accusation permeate this haunting book.

Tomcat in Love

After In the Lake of the Woods, O'Brien seemed to have signed off as a writer of novels, but in 1998 he published Tomcat in Love. Here the main character and narrator's attention to female taxonomy and his defensive confessions are reminiscent of Nabokov's notorious narrator in Lolita, Humbert Humbert. Thomas H. Chippering's three main interests are women, words, and himself. Ostensibly the story of his attempt to avenge himself on his ex-wife, Lorna Sue, and her family, Tom reveals his own blind search for love, Lorna Sue's martyr complex, and the absolute and consistent misreading that occurs when men and women attempt to communicate with each other.

students milk him for his writing skills and then self-righteously reject his advances. His insatiable desire for loving attention and his willingness to accept what only looks like adoration allow these young women to strut rings around him, and it probably explains why a man who has written seventeen senior theses in his twenty-four-year teaching career doesn't have higher tallies in that ledger. His self-absorption and needy narcissism lead him to overestimate women's estimations of him. These interpersonal misreadings leave him confused and, at one point, undressed and tied up on a barroom floor.

Like another of Nabokov's characters, John Shade in Pale Fire, Thomas Chippering is a linguistics professor, "the Rolvaang Chair in Modern American Lexicology at the University of Minnesota." For Tom, words become laden with all the memories of the situations in which they were used, and his narrative flows according to these verbal associations. He fought in Vietnam, and so "goof," "spider," "wildfire," and "death chant" are heavily loaded words, the nicknames of the Green Berets who claim to have given his life meaning by stalking and threatening him with vengeance. Eventually obliged to resign his tenure, Tom's stint as a day care provider results in three- and four-year-olds quoting Shakespeare and a deep discussion of the "wondrously polytypic word spot."

In Tomcat in Love, O'Brien suggests that those who barely fit into the military organization running the Vietnam War are the ones who have been most influenced by it. Mainly assigned to a desk job, Tom was sent on one mission in Vietnam as the companion of six silent and disagreeable Green Berets. After being abandoned by them and then later catching up with them at a beautiful and serene-looking villa in the jungle, Tom feels betrayed by them for several reasons and in turn betrays them. Hunted down, he responds with uncharacteristic courage to their threats and is told to watch his back "forever." He writes, "Over all these decades ... I have had to live with the consequences of a single, senseless act of valor. His former companions think of the pursuit as more of a game; they have joined "mainstream America. ... Death Chant rant this nifty boutique. ... War's over." Spider says, "For the rest of us, Tommy, the war's history--gonzo--but in this really niff way you've kept it going. That life-and-death edge, man, it gives meaning to everything. Keeps you in contact with your own sinnin' self."

Thus, O'Brien "even pokes fun at the Vietnam War," and reviewers tended to like the way O'Brien "lightened up" in "his first comic novel." But the shift to comedy is not as drastic as it might appear. O'Brien's narrative voice has often been limited to the unreliable delusions of a character who gradually comes to be more defined for readers. This time the narrator is less appealing than usual, and in fact "almost too unsufferable to bear," but he's also less imaginative and more like the ordinary reader. O'Brien works hard to build the uneasy sense of identification between the reader and this unpleasantly self-absorbed and selfish main character. Not only does O'Brien create life stories for his novel's characters, but also he has imagined a past for his reader, and he keeps reminding her of it. She too has a "tangled history," her "husband flew off to Fiji in the company of a redhead barely half his age," and she wants revenge, too. O'Brien even writes, "I spotted your ex-husband at one point. Or was he P? In which case, then, who would you be?"

O'Brien's narrator asks parenthetically "If a love dies, how can such love be love? By what linguistic contrivance?" and he thus heralds the entry of O'Brien's big questions about language, love, and war. These things are important to identify but can easily be confused with their opposites. If love is love, then it shouldn't end. If peace is peace, then it cannot lead to war. But it does. Cacciato and his pursuers, for example, witness many hateful atrocities when they leave the war for the supposedly peaceful walk to Paris. Tomcat in Love reviewer Jonathan Fauman asserts that O'Brien's narrator expounds "on how words carry extra-definitional penumbras of meaning that vary from person to person." In this novel, "Fiji" reminds readers of their potential identity with a selfish, lovelorn man who loses what he wants and gets something else. For Tim O'Brien, "Vietnam" may remind him of the power of words to control others and maintain individuality, the buddy love an evil vengeance that American soldiers felt there, and the nightmarish catalyst for his creative gift.

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An Introduction to the My Lai Courts-Martial

By Doug Linder

Two tragedies took place in 1968 in Viet Nam. One was the massacre by United States soldiers of as many as 500 unarmed civilians—old men, women, children—in My Lai on the morning of March 16. The other was the cover-up of that massacre.

U. S. military officials suspected Quang Ngai Province, more than any other province in South Viet Nam, as being a Viet Cong stronghold. The U. S. targeted the province for the first major U. S. combat operation of the war. Military officials declared the province a "free-fire zone" and subjected it to frequent bombing missions and artillery attacks. By the end of 1967, most of the dwellings in the province had been destroyed and nearly 140,000 civilians left homeless. Not surprisingly, the native population of Quang Ngai Province distrusted Americans. Children hissed at soldiers. Adults kept quiet.

Two hours of instruction on the rights of prisoners and a wallet-sized card "The Enemy is in Your Hands" seemed to have little impact on American soldiers fighting in Quang Ngai. Military leaders encouraged and rewarded kills in an effort to produce impressive body counts that could be reported to Saigon as an indication of progress. Gls joked that "anything that's dead and isn't white is a VC" for body count purposes. Angered by a local population that said nothing about the VC's whereabouts, soldiers took to calling natives "gooks."

Charlie Company came to Viet Nam in December, 1967. It located in Quang Ngai Province in January, 1968, as one of the three companies in Task Force Barker, an ad hoc unit headed by Lt. Col. Frank Barker, Jr. Its mission was to pressure the VC in an area of the province known as "Pinkville." Charlie Company's commanding officer was Ernest Medina, a thirty-three-year-old Mexican-American from New Mexico who was popular with his soldiers. One of his platoon leaders was twenty-four-year-old William Calley. Charlie Company soldiers expressed amazement that Calley was thought by anyone to be officer material. One described Calley as "a kid trying to play war." [LINK TO CHAIN OF COMMAND DIAGRAM] Calley's utter lack of respect for the indigenous population was apparent to all in the company. According to one soldier, "if they wanted to do something wrong, it was alright with Calley." The soldiers of Charlie Company, like most combat soldiers in Viet Nam, scored low on military exams. Few combat soldiers had education beyond high school.

Seymour Hersh wrote that by March of 1968 "many in the company had given in to an easy pattern of violence." Soldiers systematically beat unarmed civilians. Some civilians were murdered. Whole villages were burned. Wells were poisoned. Rapes were common.

On March 14, a small squad from "C" Company ran into a booby trap, killing a popular sergeant, blinding one GI and wounding several others. The following evening, when a funeral service was held for the killed sergeant, soldiers had revenge on their mind. After the service, Captain Medina rose to give the soldiers a pep talk and discuss the next morning's mission. Medina told them that the VC's crack 48th Battalion was in the vicinity of a hamlet known as My Lai 4, which would be the target of a large-scale assault by the company. The soldiers' mission would be to engage the 48th Battalion and to destroy the village of My Lai. By 7 a.m., Medina said, the women and children would be out of the hamlet and all they could expect to encounter would be the enemy. The soldiers were to
explode brick homes, set fire to thatch homes, shoot livestock, poison wells, and destroy the enemy. The seventy-five or so American soldiers would be supported in their assault by gunship pilots.

Medina later said that his objective that night was to "fire them up and get them ready to go in there; I did not give any instructions as to what to do with women and children in the village." Although some soldiers agreed with that recollection of Medina's, others clearly thought that he had ordered them to kill every person in My Lai 4. Perhaps his orders were intentionally vague. What seems likely is that Medina intentionally gave the impression that everyone in My Lai would be their enemy.

At 7:22 a.m. on March 16, nine helicopters lifted off for the flight to My Lai 4. By the time the helicopters carrying members of Charlie Company landed in a rice paddy about 140 yards south of My Lai, the area had been peppered with small arms fire from assault helicopters. Whatever VC might have been in the vicinity of My Lai had most likely left by the time the first soldiers climbed out of their helicopters. The assault plan called for Lt. Calley's first platoon and Lt. Stephen Brooks' second platoon to sweep into the village, while a third platoon, Medina, and the headquarters unit would be held in reserve and follow the first two platoons in after the area was more-or-less secured. Above the ground, the action would be monitored at the 1,000-foot level by Lt. Col. Barker and at the 2,500-foot level by Oran Henderson, commander of the 11th Brigade, both flying counterclockwise around the battle scene in helicopters.

My Lai village had about 700 residents. They lived in either red-brick homes or thatch-covered huts. A deep drainage ditch marked the eastern boundary of the village. Directly south of the residential area was an open plaza area used for holding village meetings. To the north and west of the village was dense foliage [MAP].

By 8 a.m., Calley's platoon had crossed the plaza on the town's southern edge and entered the village. They encountered families cooking rice in front of their homes. The men began their usual search-and-destroy task of pulling people from homes, interrogating them, and searching for VC. Soon the killing began. The first victim was a man stabbed in the back with a bayonet. Then a middle-aged man was picked up, thrown down a well, and a grenade lobbed in after him. A group of fifteen to twenty mostly older women were gathered around a temple, kneeling and praying. They were all executed with shots to the back of their heads. Eighty or so villagers were taken from their homes and herded to the plaza area. As many cried "No VC! No VC!", Calley told soldier Paul Meadlo, "You know what I want you to do with them". When Calley returned ten minutes later and found the Vietnamese still gathered in the plaza he reportedly said to Meadlo, "Haven't you got rid of them yet? I want them dead. Waste them." Meadlo and Calley began firing into the group from a distance of ten to fifteen feet. The few that survived did so because they were covered by the bodies of those less fortunate.

What Captain Medina knew of these war crimes is not certain. It was a chaotic operation. Gary Garfolo said, "I could hear shooting all the time. Medina was running back and forth everywhere. This wasn't no organized deal." Medina would later testify that he didn't enter the village until 10 a.m., after most of the shooting had stopped, and did not personally witness a single civilian being killed. Others put Medina in the village closer to 9 a.m., and close to the scene of many of the murders as they were happening.

As the third platoon moved into My Lai, it was followed by army photographer Ronald
Haeberle, there to document what was supposed to be a significant encounter with a crack enemy battalion. Haeberle took many pictures [HAEBERLE PHOTOS]. He said he saw about thirty different GIs kill about 100 civilians. Once Haeberle focused his camera on a young child about five feet away, but before he could get his picture the kid was blown away. He angered some GIs as he tried to photograph them as they fondled the breasts of a fifteen-year-old Vietnamese girl.

An army helicopter piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson arrived in the My Lai vicinity about 9 a.m. Thompson noticed dead and dying civilians all over the village. Thompson repeatedly saw young boys and girls being shot at point-blank range. Thompson, furious at what he saw, reported the wanton killings to brigade headquarters [THOMPSON'S STORY].

Meanwhile, the rampage below continued. Calley was at the drainage ditch on the eastern edge of the village, where about seventy to eighty old men, women, and children not killed on the spot had been brought. Calley ordered the dozen or so platoon members there to push the people into the ditch, and three or four GIs did. Calley ordered his men to shoot into the ditch. Some refused, others obeyed. One who followed Calley's order was Paul Meadlo, who estimated that he killed about twenty-five civilians. (Later Meadlo was seen, head in hands, crying.) Calley joined in the massacre. At one point, a two-year-old child who somehow survived the gunfire began running towards the hamlet. Calley grabbed the child, threw him back in the ditch, then shot him.

Hugh Thompson, by now almost frantic, saw bodies in the ditch, including a few people who were still alive. He landed his helicopter and told Calley to hold his men there while he evacuated the civilians. Thompson told his helicopter crew chief to "open up on the Americans" if they fired at the civilians. He put himself between Calley's men and the Vietnamese. When a rescue helicopter landed, Thompson had the nine civilians, including five children, flown to the nearest army hospital. Later, Thompson was to land again and rescue a baby still clinging to her dead mother.

By 11 a.m., when Medina called for a lunch break, the killing was nearly over. By noon, "My Lai was no more": its buildings were destroyed and its people dead or dying. Soldiers later said they didn't remember seeing "one military-age male in the entire place". By night, the VC had returned to bury the dead. What few villagers survived and weren't already communists, became communists. Twenty months later army investigators would discover three mass graves containing the bodies of about 500 villagers.

II.

The cover-up of the My Lai massacre began almost as soon as the killing ended. Official army reports of the operation proclaimed a great victory: 128 enemy dead, only one American casualty (one soldier intentionally shot himself in the foot). The army knew better. Hugh Thompson had filed a complaint, alleging numerous war crimes involving murders of civilians. According to one of Thompson's crew members, "Thompson was so pissed he wanted to turn in his wings". An order issued by Major Calhoun to Captain Medina to return to My Lai to do a body count was countermanded by Major General Samuel Koster, who asked Medina how many civilians has been killed. "Twenty to twenty-eight," was his answer. The next day Colonel Henderson informed Medina that an informal investigation of the My Lai incident was underway-- and most likely gave the Captain "a good ass-chewing" as well. Henderson interviewed a number of GIs, then pronounced
himself "satisfied" by their answers. No attempt was made to interview surviving Vietnamese. In late April, Henderson submitted a written report indicating that about twenty civilians had been inadvertently killed in My Lai. Meanwhile, Michael Bernhart, a Charlie Company GI severely troubled by what he witnessed at My Lai discussed with other GIs his plan to write a letter about the incident to his congressman. Medina, after learning of Bernhart's intentions, confronted him and told him how unwise such an action, in his opinion, would be.

If not for the determined efforts of a twenty-two-year-old ex-GI from Phoenix, Ronald Ridenhour, what happened on March 16, 1968 at My Lai 4 may never have come to the attention of the American people. Ridenhour served in a reconnaissance unit in Duc Pho, where he heard five eyewitness accounts of the My Lai massacre. He began his own investigation, traveling to Americal headquarters to confirm that Charlie Company had in fact been in My Lai on the date reported by his witnesses. Ridenhour was shocked by what he learned [RIDENHOUR'S STORY]. When he was discharged in December, 1968, Ridenhour said "I wanted to get those people. I wanted to reveal what they did. My God, when I first came home, I would tell my friends about this and cry-literally cry." In March, 1969, Ridenhour composed a letter detailing what he had heard about the My Lai massacre[LINK TO LETTER] and sent it to President Nixon, the Pentagon, the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and numerous members of Congress. Most recipients simply ignored the letter, but a few, most notably Representative Morris Udall, aggressively pushed for a full investigation of Ridenhour's allegations.

By late April, General Westmoreland, Army Chief of Staff, had turned the case over to the Inspector General for investigation. Over the next few months, dozens of witnesses were interviewed. It became apparent to all connected with the investigation that war crimes had been committed. In June, 1969, William Calley was flown back from Viet Nam to appear in a line-up for identification by Hugh Thompson. By August, the matter was in the hands of the army's Criminal Investigation Division for a determination as to whether criminal charges should be filed against Calley and other massacre participants. On September 5, formal charges, included six specifications of premeditated murder, were filed against Calley.

Calley hired as his attorney George Latimer, a Salt Lake City lawyer with considerable military experience, having served on the Military Court of Appeals. Latimer pronounced himself impressed with Calley. "You couldn't find a nicer boy," he said, adding that if Calley was guilty of anything it was only following orders "a bit too diligently."

Meanwhile, the issue of the My Lai massacre had gotten the attention of President Nixon. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird briefed Nixon at his San Clemente retreat. The White House proceeded with caution, sensing the potential of the incident to embarrass the military and undermine the war effort. The President characterized what happened at My Lai as an unfortunate aberration, as "an isolated incident."

In November, 1969, the American public began to learn the details of what happened at My Lai 4. The massacre was the cover story in both Time and Newsweek. CBS ran a Mike Wallace interview with Paul Meadlo. Seymour Hersh published in depth accounts based on his own extensive interviews. Life magazine published Haeberle's graphic photographs.

Reaction to the reports of the massacre varied. Some politicians, such as House Armed Services Subcommittee Chair L. Mendel Rivers maintained that there was no massacre and
that reports to the contrary were merely attempts to build opposition to the Viet Nam war. Others called for an open, independent inquiry. The Administration took a middle course, deciding on a closed-door investigation by the Pentagon, headed by William Peers, a blunt three-star general.

For four months the Peers Panel interviewed 398 witnesses, ranging from General Koster to the GIs of Charlie Company. Over 20,000 pages of testimony were taken. The Peers Report criticized the actions of both officers and enlisted men. The report recommended action against dozens of men for rape, murder, or participation in the cover-up.

III.

The Army's Criminal Investigation Division continued its separate investigation. Most of the enlisted men who committed war crimes were no longer members of the military, and thus immune from prosecution by court-martial. A 1955 Supreme Court decision, Toth vs Quarles, held that military courts cannot try former members of the armed services "no matter how intimate the connection between the offense and the concerns of military discipline." Decisions were made to prosecute a total of twenty-five officers and enlisted men, including General Koster, Colonel Oran Henderson, Captain Medina. In the end, however, only few would be tried and only one, William Calley, would be found guilty. The top officer charged, General Samuel Koster, who failed to report known civilian casualties and conducted a clearly inadequate investigation was, according to General Peers, the beneficiary of a whitewash, having charges against him dropped and receiving only a letter of censure and reduction in rank. Colonel Henderson was found not guilty on all charges after a trial by court martial. Peers again expressed his disapproval, writing "I cannot agree with the verdict. If his actions are judged as acceptable standards for an officer in his position, the Army is indeed in deep trouble."

Captain Ernest Medina faced charges of murdering 102 Vienamese civilians. The charges were based on the prosecution's theory of command responsibility: Medina, as the officer in charge of Charlie Company should be accountable for the actions of his men. If Medina knew that a massacre was taking place and did nothing to stop it, he should be found guilty of murder. (Medina was originally charged also with dereliction of duty for participating in the coverup, but the offense was dropped because the statute of limitations had run.) Medina was subjected to a lie-detector test which tended to show he responded truthfully when he said that he did not intentionally suggest to his men that they kill unarmed civilians. The same test, however, tended to to show that his contention that he first heard of the killing of unarmed civilians about 10 to 10:30 A.M. was not truthful, and that he in fact knew non-combatants were being killed sometime between 8 A.M. and 9 A.M., when there would still have been time to prevent many civilian deaths. The prosecution, led by Major William Eckhardt, was unable, however, to get the damaging lie-detector evidence admitted. Medina's lawyer, flamboyant defense attorney F. Lee Bailey, conducted a highly successful defense, forcing the prosecution to drop key witnesses and keeping damaging evidence, such as Ronald Haeberle's photographs, from the jury. After fifty-seven minutes of deliberation, the jury acquitted Medina on all charges. (Months later, when a perjury prosecution was no longer possible, Medina admitted that he had suppressed evidence and lied to the brigade commander about the number of civilians killed.)

The strongest government case was that against Lt. William Calley. On November 12, 1970, in a small courthouse in Fort Benning, Georgia, young Prosecutor Aubrey Daniel
stood to deliver his opening statement: "I want you to know My Lai 4. I will try to put you there." Captain Daniel told the jury of six military officers the shocking story of Calley's role in My Lai's tragedy: his machine-gunning of people in the plaza area south of the hamlet; his orders to men to execute men, women, and children in the eastern drainage ditch; his butt-stroking with his rifle of an old man; his grabbing of a small child and his throwing of the child into the ditch, then shooting him at point-blank range. Daniel told the jury that at the close of evidence he would ask them to "in the name of justice" convict the accused of all charges.

Daniel built the prosecution's case methodically. For days, the grisly evidence accumulated without a single witness directly placing Calley at the scene of a shooting. One of the early witnesses was Ronald Haeberle, the army photographer whose pictures brought home the horror of My Lai [TESTIMONY OF HAEBERLE]. Another was Hugh Thompson, My Lai's hero. Defense attorney Latimer's handling on cross of Haeberle, Thompson, and other witnesses led many courtroom observers to conclude that his glowing reputation was undeserved. His questioning of Haeberle, whose credibility was largely irrelevant, was pointless. His attempt to question Thompson's heroism "failed utterly," according to Richard Hammer, author of The Court-Martial of Lt. Calley.

In the second week of the trial Daniel began to call his more incriminating witnesses. Robert Maples, a machine gunner in the first platoon, testified that he saw Calley near the eastern drainage ditch, firing at the people below. Maples said that Calley asked him to use his machine gun on the Vietnamese in the ditch, but that he refused [TESTIMONY OF MAPLES]. Dennis Conti provided equally damning evidence. Conti testified that he was ordered to round up people, mostly women and children, and bring them back to Calley on the trail south of the hamlet. Calley, Conti said, told us to make them "squat down and bunch up so they couldn't get up and run." Minutes later Calley and Paul Meadlo "fired directly into the people. There were burst and shots for two minutes. The people screamed and yelled and fell." Conti said that Meadlo "broke down" and began crying [TESTIMONY OF CONTI].

The prosecution's final witness was its most anticipated witness. Paul Meadlo had been promised immunity from military prosecution in return for his testimony in the Calley case, but when he was called earlier in the trial, Meadlo had refused to answer questions about March 16, 1968, claiming his fifth amendment right not to incriminate himself. Daniel called Meadlo to the stand for a second time, and the ex-GI, who had lost a foot to a mine shortly after the massacre, limped to the stand in his green short-sleeve shirt and green pants. Judge Kennedy warned Meadlo that if he refused to answer questions, two U. S. marshals would take him into custody.

Meadlo said he would testify. He told the jury that Calley had left him with a large group of mostly women and children south of the hamlet saying, "You know what to do with them, Meadlo." Meadlo thought Calley meant he should guard the people, which he did. Meadlo told the jury what happened when Calley returned a few minutes later:

He said, "How come they're not dead?" I said, I didn't know we were supposed to kill them." He said, I want them dead." He backed off twenty or thirty feet and started shooting into the people -- the Viet Cong -- shooting automatic. He was beside me. He burned four or five magazines. I burned off a few, about three. I helped shoot 'em.

Q: What were the people doing after you shot them?
A: They were lying down.
Q: Why were they lying down?
A: They were mortally wounded.
Q: How were you feeling at that time?
A: I was mortally upset, scared, because of the briefing we had the day before.
Q: Were you crying?
A: I imagine I was...

Daniel then asked Meadlo about the massacre at the eastern drainage ditch, and in the same almost emotionless voice, Meadlo recounted the story, telling the jury that Calley fired from 250 to 300 bullets into the ditch. One exchange was remarkable:

Q: What were the children in the ditch doing?
A: I don't know.
Q: Were the babies in their mother's arms?
A: I guess so.
Q: And the babies moved to attack?
A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance.
Q: Had they made any move to attack?
A: No.

At the end of Meadlo's testimony, Aubrey Daniel rested the for the prosecution.[MEADLO'S TESTIMONY]

The defense strategy had two main thrusts. One was to suggest that the stress of combat, the fear of being in an area thought to be thick with the enemy, sufficiently impaired Calley's thinking that he should not be found guilty of premeditated murder for his killing of civilians. Latimer relied on New York psychiatrist Albert LaVerne to advance this defense argument [LAVERNE TESTIMONY]. The second argument of the defense was that Calley was merely following orders: that Captain Ernest Medina had ordered that civilians found in My Lai 4 be killed and was the real villain in the tragedy.

On February 23, 1971, William Calley took the stand. He told the jury he couldn't remember a single army class on the Geneva Convention, but that he did know he could be court-martialed for refusing to obey an order. He testified that Medina had said the night before that there would be no civilians in My Lai, only the enemy. He said that while he was in the village, Medina called and asked why he hadn't "wasted" the civilians yet. He admitted to firing into a ditch full of Vietnamese, but claimed that others were already firing into the ditch when he arrived. Calley said, "I felt then--and I still do--that I acted as directed, I carried out my orders, and I did not feel wrong in doing so" [CALLEY TESTIMONY].

Ernest Medina was called as a witness of the court. Medina directly contradicted Calley's testimony. Medina said he was asked at the briefing on March 15 whether "we kill women and children," and-- looking straight at Calley behind the defense table--he said to the GIs "No, you do not kill women and children...Use common sense." At the close of his testimony, Medina saluted Judge Kennedy, then marched past Calley's table without glancing at him [MEDINA TESTIMONY].

It was time for summations. George Latimer for the defense argued that Medina was lying about not giving the order to kill civilians, that Medina knew perfectly well what was going
on in the village, and now he and the army were trying to make Calley a scapegoat [LATIMER SUMMATION]. Aubrey Daniel for the prosecution asked the jury who will speak for the children of My Lai. He pointed out that Calley as a U. S. officer took an oath not to kill innocent women and children, and told the jury it is "the conscience of the United States Army" [DANIEL SUMMATION].

After thirteen days of deliberations, the longest in U. S. court-martial history, the jury returned its verdict: guilty of premeditated murder on all specifications. After hearing pleas on the issue of punishment, jury head Colonel Clifford Ford pronounced Calley's sentence: "To be confined at hard labor for the length of your natural life; to be dismissed from the service; to forfeit all pay and allowances."

IV.

Opinion polls showed that the public overwhelmingly disapproved of the verdict in the Calley case [OPINION POLLS]. President Nixon ordered Calley removed from the stockade and placed under house arrest. He announced that he would review the whole decision. Nixon's action prompted Aubrey Daniel to write a long and angry letter in which he told the President that "the greatest tragedy of all will be if political expediency dictates the compromise of such a fundamental moral principle as the inherent unlawfulness of the murder of innocent persons" [AUBREY LETTER]. On November 9, 1974, the Secretary of the Army announced that William Calley would be paroled. In 1976, Calley married. He now works in the jewelry store of his father-in-law in Columbus, Georgia.

My Lai mattered. Two weeks after the Calley verdict was announced, the Harris Poll reported for the first time that a majority of Americans opposed the war in Viet Nam. The My Lai episode caused the military to re-evaluate its training with respect to the handling of noncombatants. Commanders sent troops in the Desert Storm operation into battle with the words, "No My Lai-- you hear?"

My Lai Courts-martial Homepage
Government and Domestic Dissent in the 1970s

Source Database: DISCovering U.S. History

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Source Citation

The Antiwar Movement

Vietnamization succeeded in neutralizing much of American antiwar opinion. As the troops came home, antiwar protests dissipated. By early spring, 1970, the Vietnam Moratorium Committee, which organized the widespread, middle-class protests of 1969, announced that they were closing their Washington, DC, office. Nixon, however, was highly antagonistic towards the antiwar movement. He believed it undermined the American will to win; it challenged his ability to conduct foreign policy; it threatened the same political defeats that destroyed Johnson. Nixon was therefore determined to change public opinion and crush the antiwar movement.

The Weathermen

Some elements of the antiwar movement fueled Nixon's antagonism. By 1970, small groups of extremists turned from protests to street riots and terrorist violence. In 1969, a radical splinter group known as the Weathermen, calling for revolution in America, organized street riots in Chicago and attacked federal buildings around the country. Believing they could wage a guerrilla war against the government, about one hundred of the Weathermen went underground. The Weathermen perpetrated several spectacular bombings, in particular destroying the Army's math lab center in Madison, Wisconsin, killing one person, and blowing up a part of the U.S. Capitol building. Nonetheless, they had virtually no public support and were ineffective guerrillas -- their most spectacular act was a 6 March 1970 explosion at their own bomb-manufacturing center in New York City, in which three Weathermen were killed.

"Positive Polarization"

Many Americans were frightened by the violence--and the violent rhetoric--of the Weathermen and other radical groups. The Nixon administration exploited this fear and sought to portray the entire antiwar movement as dominated by the Weathermen and the radicals. In dozens of speeches, Vice President Spiro Agnew characterized the antiwar movement as pro-communist and anti-American. He denounced academic opponents of the war and members of the press as "dupes" of the antiwar radicals. Aware that such rhetoric made the division between hawks and doves worse, Agnew replied that his speeches produced a "positive polarization"--one that separated those who loved America from those "who want to destroy it."
The Hard Hats

Despite his inaugural promise to "lower our voices" and "bring us together," President Nixon also contributed to positive polarization. Echoing Agnew, Nixon argued that the majority of Americans -- the great silent majority"--supported administration policy in Vietnam. Despite such rhetoric, public opinion polls showed that a slim majority of Americans remained opposed to the war. Nixon and Agnew's speeches, however, did succeed in uncovering class resentments created by Vietnam. The antiwar movement was led by middle-class Americans and privileged students often protected from the draft. Working-class Americans were not immune from the draft, and served in disproportionate numbers in Vietnam. The televised spectacle of wealthy college students flouting conventional morality, defying authority, and denouncing the United States angered many blue-collar Americans. Nixon and Agnew's speeches increased their anger. In May of 1970, New York construction workers attacked antiwar protesters during a demonstration, and a new political symbol was born. The "hard hat" (a protective helmet worn by construction workers) came to symbolize working-class resentment of the antiwar movement. Nominally democratic voters, the hard hats formed a new base of political support for Nixon, and steeled his resolve to end the Vietnam war on his terms.

Kent State

Nixon believed his political support among the hard hats and the Vietnam hawks, as well as his gradual withdrawal of American troops, would limit criticism of his invasion of Cambodia. He was wrong. Following his 30 April 1970 announcement of the invasion, American campuses exploded with protests. Over 400 universities and colleges shut down as a result of the protests; many schools canceled their commencement exercises. The press was highly critical. The usually supportive Wall Street Journal wrote that the Cambodian invasion would lead to "deeper entrapment" in Indochina. Congress was outraged, and almost immediately passed legislation requiring the United States to withdraw from Cambodia. Even Nixon's own administration opposed the invasion: four members of Kissinger's staff resigned, and 200 State Department employees signed a petition against the invasion. Most tragically protests at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State University in Mississippi led to violent confrontations between authorities and protesters. Two women were killed at Jackson State; four students, some of them uninvolved in the protests, were killed by national guardsmen at Kent State.

Reaction

The killings at Kent State cast a pall over the anti-war movement. The combination of the deaths and the strident rhetoric of the Nixon administration seemed to raise the stakes involved in antiwar protesting. Many protesters feared that they might be killed in future protests; some Americans thought that Kent State represented the beginning of a new civil war. These fears led to quieter campuses in the fall, and elements on both sides of the Vietnam issue sought to resolve the political differences dividing the country. Nixon did not. Instead, the reaction to the Cambodian invasion convinced him he needed more surveillance and control over the antiwar movement.

The Huston Plan

The federal government had monitored the antiwar movement during the Johnson administration. A variety of agencies, from Naval Intelligence to the Central Intelligence Agency, monitored, penetrated and subverted the activities of antiwar protest groups, often in violation of their governmental charter. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counter-
Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) was the most effective of these groups, often employing illegal wiretaps and break-ins to gather information. After Kent State, however, Nixon was dissatisfied with these police activities. Seeking to systematize the various agencies, Nixon appointed former army intelligence specialist Tom Huston to coordinate their efforts and improve surveillance of Nixon's domestic critics. Huston proposed monitoring antiwar groups through opened mail, wiretaps, and break-ins; he suggested using the Internal Revenue Service to harass Nixon's opponents. Despite Huston's warning that these activities were "clearly illegal," Nixon approved the plan. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, however, concerned over congressional investigations of illegal governmental activities, prevented the plan from being implemented, and Nixon, upon more sober reflection, agreed to drop the idea.

**Illegal Activities**

The Huston plan symbolized a type of siege mentality descending upon the White House. Members of the Nixon administration saw subversives and opponents everywhere. While Nixon dropped the specific program developed by Tom Huston for domestic surveillance, he continued to use unethical and illegal means to monitor and harass his critics. Nixon used the Federal Communications Commission, responsible for licensing television stations, to try to force the networks and the press to report the news in a pro-Nixon fashion. He compiled an "enemies list" of prominent Americans (among whom were celebrities, such as football player Joe Namath, actress Carol Channing, and actor Steve McQueen), whom he targeted for harassment by the Internal Revenue Service. The Nixon administration also hired private detectives to follow political opponents and discover details of their personal lives. Such activities increased the bitterness of those who, since the 1950s, perceived Nixon as an unprincipled, immoral politician. To them, Richard Nixon more than earned the nickname of "Tricky Dick."

**The Calley Trial and Winter Soldier Investigations**

Even with the gradual troop withdrawal, by early 1971 Vietnam was still the most important political issue in America. Increasingly, the Congress and the public questioned the conduct of the war. The trial of Lt. William Calley provoked a national debate on the morality of American involvement in Vietnam. Calley faced a court-martial in 1970 for his participation in the 1968 massacre of Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai. In March 1971 he was found guilty of their murder, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Some sections of the public believed that the massacres were part of the normal conduct of warfare; others believed Calley was a scapegoat for widespread American brutality. After the verdict was announced, President Nixon allowed Calley to be released from the stockade, pending appeal. He also announced he would review the case. The most interesting response to the Calley trial, however, came from an antiwar group of American soldiers known as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Meeting in Detroit, in a public forum they called the "Winter Soldier Investigations" (taking the term from the American revolution's definition of a true patriot), members of the VVAW publicly testified that murder, rape and brutality against civilians were part of the everyday conduct of the war. In April, they took their case to Capitol Hill, and engaged in highly publicized demonstrations against the war, demonstrations highlighted by their returning of the medals they had won in Vietnam.

**The Pentagon Papers**

No one person was more influenced by the debates over the morality of the war in Vietnam than former Defense Department expert Daniel Ellsberg. A Vietnam hawk and ex-Marine who had been a member of Kissinger's advisory staff, Ellsberg was convinced by 1970 that the war was immoral and unconscionable. In order to expose what he believed were lies
about the war, in June 1971, Ellsberg passed copies of a secret 1968 Defense Department history of Vietnam to The New York Times. The history, known as the Pentagon Papers, caused an uproar. Many were scandalized by the extent to which the government had deceived the public about the reality of war in Vietnam. Others argued that Ellsberg had betrayed the government. Even though the Pentagon Papers said nothing about the Nixon administration, the president and his staff, concerned about breaches in governmental security and concerned that the Papers would undermine public confidence in their Vietnam policy, won a court injunction to prevent the Times from publishing them. On June 30, 1971, however, the Supreme Court overturned the injunction, and upheld the right of the Times to publish the documents.

The Plumbers Unit

President Nixon, infuriated at the Supreme Court decision in the Pentagon Papers case, responded by attacking Ellsberg. In June the Justice Department indicted Ellsberg under the Espionage act. That same month, the White House formed what it termed a "nonlegal team" to investigate Ellsberg and amass evidence to discredit him. The team, termed the "plumbers unit" because they plugged governmental leaks, used illegal wiretaps to amass information on Ellsberg. On Labor Day weekend they also burglarized the offices of Ellsberg's psychiatrist but found no compromising material. The White House, however, was so pleased with the activities of the plumbers unit that they became a permanent part of the President's staff. It was this group that would conduct the Watergate break-in in 1972. Details of the Ellsberg burglary became known after the Watergate arrests; because evidence against Ellsberg was illegally obtained, the espionage case against him was thrown out of court on 11 May 1974.


Document Number: CD2104240491
William Calley

1943-

Search for any documents that may be available on this person, (The search will include all names by which he or she is known.)

**Born:** 1943
**Occupation:** Army officer

**Source Database:** DISCovering U.S. History

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**BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY**

**My Lai and the Vietnam War**

The trial of Lt. William Calley for the murder of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in My Lai raised many difficult issues for the American people over the conduct of the Vietnam War. The massacre was cited by many as a war crime and genocide, demonstrating the immorality of the American war effort. Others defended Calley, saying that he was a soldier doing his duty in a brutal war. They said that it was unfair to punish Calley without also punishing the whole army as well as the society that had placed him in Vietnam and taught him to kill.

**The My Lai Massacre**

On 16 March 1968 Lieutenant Calley led his platoon into My Lai, South Vietnam, along with two other platoons of Charlie Company. They had expected to meet heavy Vietcong resistance, but they reached the village without a challenge. Finding only women, children, and old men in the village, they nonetheless went in shooting. They rounded up other villagers, herded them into a ditch, and shot them with automatic weapons. Calley's platoon was responsible for over one hundred deaths. Many young women and girls were raped and assaulted. Calley participated directly in the massacre, shooting some villagers himself and ordering his soldiers to shoot others. There was no evidence that the villagers put up any armed resistance.

**The Emerging Scandal and Cover-Up**

No reports of the massacre at My Lai became public until the following year when returning Vietnam veterans and news reporters began to piece together reports from Vietnamese refugees and American soldiers who had seen or heard of the killings. As the story came out, both the horror of the massacre and the broad scale of the Army cover-up shocked the American people. The army formally charged Calley with the murder of civilians in September 1969. Calley's immediate superior, Capt. Ernest Medina, was also charged, as were six enlisted men in Calley's platoon. In addition, fourteen army officers, including two generals, were charged with violating army

regulations in covering up the My Lai incident.

The Court Martial

Calley's court martial trial started in November 1970. The trial revealed the horror of American soldiers killing defenseless Vietnamese civilians. While he disagreed with some details, Calley did not deny that he shot civilians and ordered his soldiers to do so. He explained, "I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job on that day. That was the mission I was given. I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women, and children. They were all classified the same, and that was the classification we dealt with, just as enemy soldiers." The court martial jury, made up of six army combat veterans, convicted Calley of the premeditated murder of at least twenty-two civilians. The jury sentenced Calley to life imprisonment at hard labor, choosing against imposing the death penalty. Calley was the only officer or enlisted man convicted at court martial for the massacre at My Lai. Six enlisted men were tried, but none were convicted, largely because they were responding to Lieutenant Calley’s orders at My Lai. Charges were dropped against Calley’s superior, Captain Medina, for his role. Several officers, including the two generals, were demoted and reprimanded for their roles in covering up the massacre.

Support for Calley

There was an immediate uproar in support of Calley. The White House reported receiving more than one-hundred-thousand letters and telegrams, the great majority in support of Calley. American Legion officials objected to Calley being punished for doing his duty. A spokesman for the Vietnam Veterans Against the War said, "We are all of us in this country guilty for having allowed the war to go on. We only want this country to realize that it cannot try a Calley for something which generals and presidents and our way of life encourage him to do. And if you try him, then at the same time you must try all those generals and presidents and soldiers who have part of this responsibility."

Aftermath

President Nixon ordered Calley released from the military stockade and placed under house arrest while his conviction was being appealed. He served three years under house arrest before a federal court overturned his conviction in 1974. The Supreme Court refused to review the case when it came to them in 1976, effectively ending Calley’s prosecution.

FURTHER READINGS


Document Number: CD2104100063
Calley Court-Martialed for My Lai Massacre,
November 17, 1970-March 29, 1971

Source Database: DISCovering U.S. History

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Further Readings | Source Citation

William Calley was convicted of murdering twenty-two Vietnamese and was the only person convicted of any crime in the aftermath of the My Lai massacre

Principal personages

William L. Calley (1943- ), a second lieutenant in command of a platoon of Company C at My Lai

Frank A. Barker (1928-1968), the commander of the unit that conducted the operation on My Lai

Steven K. Brooks (1942-1968), a second lieutenant in command of a platoon of Company C at My Lai

Ernest Medina (1936- ), a captain in command of Company C of Task Force Barker; immediate superior of lieutenants Calley and Brooks

William R. Peers (1914- ), conducted the official Army inquiry of the My Lai incident

Hugh Thompsom (1947- ), a combat helicopter pilot involved in the assault on My Lai

Samuel W. Koster (1919- ), the commander of the Americal Division

Summary of Event

The My Lai massacre occurred during the first hours of a March 16, 1968, operation carried out by a battalion-sized unit, code-named Task Force Barker, of the Americal Division of the U.S. Army. This unit, comprising three infantry companies (A, B, and C) supported by artillery, helicopters, and coastal patrol craft, was intended to sweep between two hundred and four hundred Viet Cong from a group of hamlets in the Son My subdistrict of Quang Ngai Province in South Vietnam.

Following the surprise Tet offensive launched by the Viet Cong on January 31, American commanders sought to reestablish control and to destroy known Viet Cong units. The
Americal Division, including Task Force Barker, had been searching around Quang Ngai in February and March but encountered few Viet Cong.

On March 15, Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Barker announced a three-day sweep against the Viet Cong 48th Local Forces battalion operating in and around a large, coastal fishing village, My Lai (1). This was the third such operation against this village since February. Barker planned to move his three infantry companies into place by helicopter about 8:00 A.M., following a short artillery barrage. Helicopters were to engage fleeing or fighting Viet Cong. Offshore, small Navy patrol craft blocked any escape through the eastern seaward end of the noose.

Company C landed at 7:30 A.M., just west of another hamlet, My Lai (4). Lieutenant William L. Calley's platoon of twenty-five men moved first through the hamlet's south section; Lieutenant Stephen Brooks's platoon went through the north. Lieutenant Larry LaCroix's platoon remained in reserve near the landing zone.

The men of Company C expected to encounter two armed Viet Cong companies. Captain Ernest Medina, commander of Company C, had instructed his officers to burn the houses and destroy the livestock, crops, and foodstuffs in My Lai (4). Several men from Company C later testified that Captain Medina, who stayed at the landing zone, had specifically instructed them to kill civilians found in the hamlets. Medina denied such statements.

Calley's platoon slaughtered two large groups of villagers sometime between 7:50 A.M. and 9:15 A.M. In one instance, more than twenty people were gunned down on a pathway; in another, around 150 were systematically slaughtered with machine gun and small arms fire in a ditch about one hundred meters east of the hamlet. Soldiers later testified that Calley ordered them to kill their civilian captives. Men from all three platoons of Company C committed murder, rape, and other atrocities that morning.

About 8:30 A.M. Brooks's platoon turned northward on Medina's command to recover the bodies of two Viet Cong killed by a helicopter gunship. Brooks's platoon then entered Binh Tay, a hamlet a few hundred meters away, where they raped and murdered villagers before rejoining Company C around 10:00 A.M.

While this killing was going on, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompsom, an experienced combat helicopter pilot, was flying close overhead in an armed observation craft. At various times from 8:00 A.M. to 10:00 A.M., Thompsom attempted to aid wounded South Vietnamese civilians he saw in the fields around My Lai (4), saw Medina kill a wounded Vietnamese woman in a field, and landed his craft near the ditch where so many defenseless people were shot. He urged members of Company C to stop the killing, but killings resumed after he left. Around 10:00 A.M. he landed again to protect a group of women and children who were being herded toward a bunker by men of Company C. Thompsom called in one of his gunships to evacuate some of the wounded civilians and then landed his own small helicopter to save one slightly wounded child from the heaps of bodies. In addition to his combat radio transmissions, Thompsom made reports upon his return to base to his commander about the slaughter.

The truth of these events was covered up within the Americal Division for a year, until a letter from a Vietnam veteran, Ronald Ridenhour, to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in late March, 1969, claimed "something very black indeed" had occurred at My Lai. Laird ordered an investigation. In September, 1969, William Calley was charged with murdering more than one hundred civilians at My Lai. The full dimensions of the massacre became public knowledge in mid-November, 1969, when newspapers carried Seymour Hersh's interviews with men from Company C, the CBS Evening News broadcast other interviews, and photographs of the massacred victims were printed in Lifemagazine.
Lieutenant General William R. Peers was assigned responsibility for conducting the official investigation of the incident. He learned that Hugh Thompsom's angry, but accurate, accusations of a civilian massacre, as well as reports by South Vietnamese officials of more than five hundred civilian deaths, were never properly investigated. Peers's report of March, 1970, contained detailed findings about what happened at My Lai and a recommendation that thirty individuals be held for possible charges.

The Army preferred charges against a total of twenty-five men: twelve for war crimes and thirteen for other military offenses. Four of the five men eventually tried on war crime charges were members of Company C. The fifth was Captain Eugene Kotouc, the staff intelligence officer of Task Force Barker. He was acquitted of torturing a prisoner. There was no evidence of any misdeeds by men from Company A, but Company B had been involved in killings of civilians at the hamlet of My Khe (4). Captain Earl Michles, in command of Company B, was killed in the same helicopter crash that killed Lieutenant Colonel Barker in June, 1968, so both of those men were beyond the reach of the law. Charges against Lieutenant Willingham of Company B were dismissed in 1970, in spite of evidence of between thirty-eight and ninety civilian deaths caused by his men in My Khe (4) on the morning of March 16.

Charges were brought in 1970 against thirteen officers in the Americal Division for various military offenses that were less than war crimes and did not involve murder or attempted murder. Charges were dismissed against several of the officers, and several had their cases resolved in other manners. Only four men were tried for the war crimes of murdering civilians, all members of Company C: Captain Medina, the company commander; Lieutenant Calley, in command of one of the company's platoons; Staff Sergeant David Mitchell, a squad leader in Calley's platoon; and Staff Sergeant Charles E. Hutto, a squad leader from Brooks's platoon. Lieutenant Brooks was killed in combat after the incident and so was not charged.

Initially, seven enlisted men from Company C had been charged by the Army with crimes including murder, rape, and assault. Charges against five were dropped and two men were tried. The first court-martial resulting from My Lai was that of David Mitchell, a career soldier; it began in October, 1970, at Fort Hood, Texas. Mitchell was acquitted of all charges. While Calley's trial was still in session, Charles Hutto was tried at Fort McPherson, Georgia, and found innocent. Medina's trial took place at Fort McPherson in August and September, 1971, after Calley's March, 1971, conviction. Medina was found not guilty of murder and assault.

Calley's trial was the most prominent of all the courts-martial. He had been identified from the start as ordering the shooting of women and children and was tried under article 118 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice for premeditated murder of more than one hundred Vietnamese. The trial at Fort Benning, Georgia, lasted about four months. On March 29, 1971, Calley was found guilty of three counts of murder by a panel of six officers. He was sentenced "to be confined at hard labor for the rest of [his] natural life; to be dismissed from the service; to forfeit all pay and allowances." Two days later, President Richard M. Nixon ordered Calley released from the stockade and returned to his quarters to serve his sentence. In August, 1971, the Army reduced Calley's sentence to twenty years, and in April, 1974, further reduced it to ten years. In the Army, prisoners become eligible for parole after one-third of their sentence is served. With Calley's punishment reduced to ten years, he became eligible in the fall of 1974 and parole was granted in November.

**Impact of Event**

The reactions both to the My Lai massacre and to Lieutenant Calley's conviction cover a
tremendous range. Most Americans and many people around the world expressed horror and distress at the massacre itself; yet a great many considered Lieutenant Calley to be a scapegoat. To some, it was not Lieutenant Calley or the others who were tried in courts-martial, but the United States that was on trial for its Vietnam war.

The outcome of the courts-martial reveals that no one—not the Army, the president, Congress, or the American public—relished punishing American fighting men for their conduct in Vietnam. The Army backed away from a joint trial of the accused and did not carry through the stern spirit of justice that pervades the official Peers Report.

American official and popular statements from the time typically express outrage toward the massacre itself but suggest that it would be best to reserve judgment about Calley’s or others’ guilt. Some veterans and Army members believed that Calley was being punished for one of the inevitable tragedies of war. Still others believed Calley had done only what the Army had trained him to do: kill Communists. Many believed, in contrast, that since the United States was fighting to protect Vietnam from Communism, the Army should be saving, or at least protecting, Vietnamese civilians.

Immediately following Calley’s conviction for murder, the White House and Congress received a strong wave of popular sympathy for him. It was believed that Calley’s conviction condemned, by implication, all Americans who had fought in Vietnam. Others believed that what occurred at My Lai (4) were war crimes and that Calley, and others, should have been punished by death in the same way that German and Japanese war criminals were following World War II.

Beneath these opposing emotional calls for Calley’s release or execution, the My Lai massacre and the subsequent courts-martial had a profound impact on the United States and the Army. Knowledge of the massacre came twenty-one months after the Tet Offensive, but it was additional confirmation that hopes for an American victory in Vietnam were unfounded. If U.S. troops were slaughtering the South Vietnamese, how could the people ever be won over to the side of the United States?

People also wondered if My Lai was only the first of many such massacres that would come to light. In fact, evidence of thousands of unnecessary and unwarranted deaths of South Vietnamese civilians caused by U.S. and other allied units have been documented, but nothing quite so horrible as that at My Lai (4).

Simply because of the questions raised about possible American atrocities in Vietnam, the whole discussion of the war itself took on a new color. The massacre gave proof to those antiwar protestors who called the war immoral and unjust. The atrocity marked an end, or at least a profound shock, to trust in American goodness and nobility of purpose.

In the 1970’s, evidence of various hidden schemes and deadly plans by the U.S. government came to light, many of them completely unconnected with My Lai. The My Lai massacre remains a key incident that loosed the tide of self-doubt and questioning about the United States’ purpose and moral stature that marked much of national life in the 1970’s and 1980’s. One of the most profound and lasting impacts of the My Lai massacre and the Calley court-martial was the coldness and distaste Vietnam veterans encountered after 1969 upon return to the United States. Many Americans treated all veterans as if they had joined with Company C to abuse and murder Vietnamese women and children. For those remaining in the military service, the vision of a unit running amok killing civilians in Vietnam’s guerrilla war was one of several powerful forces that led to major reforms in Army military doctrine and the abandonment of the draft in favor of an all-volunteer armed services.
In the end, the accounts and photographs of the My Lai massacre make one think again of both the horror of war for those somehow caught in its grasp and the fragility of the rules by which civilized warfare is supposed to be conducted.


  After interviewing Calley at length in 1969 and 1970, the author says he took Calley's words and feelings apart and put them back together as a continuous story. Revealing


  This book tries to explain why the men of Company C acted as they did on March 16, 1968. Portrays them as innocent infantrymen doing their job


  Although highly unfavorable to Lieutenant Calley, this is a useful summary of the trial itself, containing large amounts of verbatim testimony from Calley and men of his unit


  Hersh won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting about the My Lai incident. Here he brings together the early evidence of a massacre in a compelling way. The book is somewhat dated by the later courts-martial and the release of the Peers Report


  A riveting account by a writer who attended Medina's trial as a correspondent for The New Yorker. McCarthy makes sense of this important TRIALtrial, which attracted less attention than Calley's


  Peers wrote this reflective, detailed book years after the official inquiry. A fascinating, readable summary of the massacre and its aftermath. Full of balanced, careful judgments. Indispensable


  Sim and Bilton, two British documentary filmmakers, reconstruct events leading up to the massacre, document the events, and report on the subsequent cover-ups and trials. Much of the material comes from interviews conducted in the 1980's and 1990's


In 1974, the Army released most of its official inquiry, commonly known as the Peers Report. This volume is the most convenient place to find the text of the Peers Report. Supplements deal with general war crime issues and some war crime matters relating to the Vietnam era. Be sure to distinguish between this official report and General Peers's own account.


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