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Tim O'Brien; inventing a new form helps the author talk about war, memory and storytelling. (PW Interviews) Coffey, Michael.

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Tim O'Brien When nominations for the 1979 National Book Awards were announced, most observers believed it was a two-horse race between John Irving, for his critically acclaimed and widely popular *The World According to Garp*, and John Cheever, for *Stories*, a collection that seemed to be his career's crowning achievement. When the winner was announced--32-year-old Tim O'Brien for *Going After Cacciato*, a book that had sold only 12,000 copies in hardcover (compared to 20 times that amount for *Garp*)--the upset not only spelled the end of the NBAs as we'd come to know them (long considered too uncommercial in taste, they were renamed The American Book Awards in 1980, an experiment that itself ended in 1986), but it also thrust a modest, self-effacing writer into the limelight.

"I didn't know how the bullets fired," O'Brien was fond of saying about his 14 months in Vietnam, but clearly he knew how to make sentences. In a laudatory review of *Cacciato*, John Updike sensed that the young author was "reaching for a masterpiece." If O'Brien's publisher, Seymour Lawrence, is to be believed--"This is one of the most original and beautiful books I will ever publish," he says--*The Things They Carried* (Fiction Forecasts, Jan. 26) may be that masterwork.

O'Brien has volunteered to pick up PW at Boston's Logan Airport--"The directions to our house would drive you crazy." He rushes into the baggage area, compact and energetic in a short jacket and baseball cap. Ann, his wife of 17 years, is waiting in the car--they met while she was at Little, Brown and he was a grad student at Harvard (she is now production manager at *Sail* magazine). "I was wondering if you'd ask us where our daughter is," O'Brien quips as we hop into the car, referring no doubt to the nine-year-old who challenges the writer O'Brien in the book. His eyes flash as he surmises whether his listener had indeed taken the autobiographical bait.

Called "A Work of Fiction" on the title page, *The Things They Carried* (due in March from Houghton Mifflin) is neither a collection of stories nor a novel. Rather, it is a unified narrative, with chapters that stand perfectly on their own (many were award-winning stories) but which together render deeper continuities of character and thought. Throughout, there are tautly drawn Vietnam vignettes, with "O'Brien" as sergeant; there is the character of "Timmy," a Minnesota fourth-grader who witnesses a schoolmate's slow death by cancer; there are the doubts of a 43-year-old writer with a daughter named Kathleen who tells him, "You keep writing these war stories so I guess you must've killed somebody"; there is a war buddy named Norman Bowker, who implores a famous writer to tell his story and eventually commits suicide. Yet as O'Brien points out as we weave into the traffic leaving the airport, there's no dying little girl, no Norman Bowker, "and we don't have a daughter--it's all made up.

"My own experience has virtually nothing to do with the content of the book," he continues as we settle in over coffee at the O'Brien house in Boxford, Mass., a thickly wooded town half an hour north of Boston. "Every now and then I would draw on my memories or attitudes about Vietnam, but of the whole time I spent there I remember maybe a week's worth of stuff. By and large, in the composition of the book, my attention was on trying to get a feeling of utter authenticity, which meant paying attention to language. My goal was to write something utterly convincing but without any rules as to what's real and what's made up."

O'Brien sees *Cacciato*, his third book, as "an effort to move from realism to a kind of .. I don't want to say surrealism .. let's say a plane where the experience of imagining, which was so crucial to me as a soldier and as a person today, formed the body of the book. In this new book I forced myself to try to invent a form. I had never invented form before. Even in *Cacciato*, which people found inventive, the form came through my reading of writers like Faulkner and Joyce, whereas this feels to me as if something has been invented."

After graduating from Macalester College in 1968 with a full academic scholarship to Harvard, O'Brien was drafted into the army. Near the end of his tour he wrote his first major piece, which was published in *Playboy*. He claims to have suffered none of the readjustment problems that have haunted American vets. "It was land in Seattle--they process you out of the army in about two hours--say the pledge of allegiance, get in a taxicab, get on a plane, take off your uniform in the toilet and fly to Minnesota. It was over, in a day and a half--from Vietnam, to Seattle, to Minnesota. It was fast and effortless, just like gliding out of a nightmare."

O'Brien finally got to Harvard in 1970, where his dissertation was "Case Studies in American Military Interventions" ("I never finished!"). He continued his writing at night, working on short pieces that eventually became part of his first book, the war memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (Delacorte).

"There came a point when I had to decide where I was going to devote my time, and I decided that I wanted to be a writer and not a scholar. I'm glad I didn't pursue it," he says, clearly still relieved.

All but one of O'Brien's five books were published by Seymour Lawrence. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), *Northern Lights* (1974) and *Cacciato* (1978) were issued under Lawrence's imprint at Delacorte. When Lawrence moved to Dutton in 1982, O'Brien went with him with a new manuscript, *The Nuclear Age*, but a Lawrence book it was not to be.

"When I turned it in," O'Brien says, "the editor-in-chief at Dutton, Joe Kanon, didn't like it that much. The way I understood it was that they would publish it but they wouldn't give it the kind of backing or print run I wanted. It was all quite amiable, and I said I preferred to look around for another house. My agent Lynn Nesbit showed it to Bob Gottlieb at Knopf who loved the book and said he would get behind it, and did.

"It was very difficult leaving Sam Lawrence," he continues, "but at the time I had a feeling that I would end up going back. And Kanon is now [sr. v-p and director, trade and reference] at Houghton and loves the new book, or so I hear. So everything has come full circle."

The Things They Carried was not supposed to be O'Brien's next book. "I've had a novel called *The Lake of the Woods* under contract for a while at Houghton. But in the middle of it I just started amassing this collection." Asked when he conceived of the new book's shape, he says, "All along, I knew I wanted to have a book in which my name, Tim, appeared even though Tim would not be me; that's all I knew. Over the course of, I'd say, 12 years, I was developing courage, which was the whole problem. The conception was pretty clear. But if you can imagine putting your name down doing horrible things you've never done or witnessed, it was something I had to find the guts to do. Even though in the broader sense of the world it's no big act of courage, when you face it in that room"--he points to the large, book-lined study just off the kitchen--"it's a scary feeling."

Although O'Brien admits that, "For the rest of my life I'll probably be writing war stories," he contends that it is not out of any obsession with war but rather the imperatives of writing with passion about things that matter that draw him back to the combat experience as a source for storytelling.

"If there is one fundamental thing," he says, "it's that I want to write stories that are good. To do that requires a sense of passion, and my passion as a human being and as a writer intersect in Vietnam, not in the physical stuff but in the issues of Vietnam--of courage, rectitude, enlightenment, holiness, trying to do the right thing in the world."

He also admits to the purely technical allure of war writing. "In a war story there is a built-in life and death importance, one that a writer would have to construct otherwise. When you start a story saying, 'It was a hot day,' and you know it's a war story, the hot day has all sorts of reverberations that wouldn't be there if it were set on a beach in Miami."

As O'Brien has grown older and his career has continued, his work has necessarily come under a different scrutiny--from himself and his readers. For example, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," a chapter in *The Things They Carried*, "was originally conceived to address the comments I hear from women I know--that they don't like war stories." It concerns a 17-year-old girl from Cincinnati who is flown to Vietnam by her boyfriend only to become enraptured with the most horrific rituals of war. From the innocence of a high school cheerleader she is transformed into a frightening image of war's incalculable madness. When last seen, she is disappearing into the jungle wearing a necklace of human tongues.

"That story is in the center of the collection for a reason," says O'Brien. "It is so far from one's ordinary expectations as to be a fable, unacceptable on the plane of what happens. I will say, though, that of all the stories in the book, this one comes the closest to an actual event, not one I witnessed, but one that I had been told about. I had the character Rat Kiley tell that story so I could get into some of the issues of the book itself: his buddies are shaking their heads, saying, 'That just can't be real,' and Kiley gets so furious, saying, 'You accept all this other crap in Vietnam, why can't you accept that some girl comes over here?'" And Rat is fighting what I am fighting in this book--this whole problem of trying to make credible what to me was incredible.

"My feeling," he continues, "is that what happened to me as a man in Vietnam could happen to a woman as well. And the reasons it didn't were reasons of sociology and demography, not a difference in spirit."

In *The Things They Carried*, drifting above the reminders that none of it is true, the funereal listings of the "things" the characters indeed carried, and the fantastical flights that call into question the common grounds of sanity, is a sense that the subject of storytelling itself, not only as an act but as an issue, is the thread that binds this collection.

"If there is a theme to the whole book it has to do with the fact that stories can save our lives," says O'Brien, lighting another Carlton. "I've just read Shelby Foote's trilogy on the Civil war, and the images of Longstreet or Lee or Grant gazing across the battlefield are rendered by Foote as stories. What remains of them all is purely story. What I discovered in the course of writing this book is the reason I love story: not just for its titillation, its instant gratification of what next, what next, but for the livingness that's there as you read and that lingers afterward. Jake Barnes is alive for me. Though he is a fictional character in the taxicab at the end of *The Sun Also Rises*, he is alive in that cab with Brett. That's what I love about writing them and reading them--that quality of immortality that a story is--doesn't contain--just is."

O'Brien pauses and struggles as he works through these ideas; the book is not really behind him yet (in January, he was looking forward to revising in proofs). He apologizes: "This is a hard thing to talk about. It sounds mystical, and I'm not a mystical person. But one has to say what one believes.

"My hope is that when you finish the last page of this book, or any book, there is a sense of having experienced a whole life or a constellation of lives; that something has been preserved which, if the book hadn't been written, would have been lost, like most lives are."