

Reading Guide Questions for 'The Things They Carried':

1. The narrator of **The Things They Carried** goes by the same name as the author, but the title page notes that this is a "work of fiction." How did this launch your reading of the book?
2. In the title story, soldiers carry things both tangible and intangible (physical and emotional). Which were heavier? Which items spoke most powerfully to you? What do you carry around with you every day, materially and emotionally? What do soldiers carry in war today and what would you most want to carry in war?
3. Who is Elroy Bendahl, and why is he "the hero of [the narrator's] life" (page 48)?
4. Discuss the two very short stories "Enemies" and "Friends." What is the relationship between Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen? How are they both enemies and friends? In what other ways are the soldiers in this platoon sometimes fighting one another instead of the "real" enemy?
5. In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien writes: "A true war story is never moral." What does this mean? Is there even such a thing as a true war story? Can one person's truth be another person's falsehood? Is truth a simple matter of black and white, or can it come in shades of gray? In what other places in the book do we see characters struggling with morality? Are there morals to be learned from these war stories? How does its discussion of morality fit into the larger discussion of wars and our world today?
6. Consider the many paradoxes of war and how O'Brien brings them to light: "I was a coward. I went to war" (page 61); "The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty" (page 80). What are some other paradoxes of war? How do they affect your understanding of war?
7. At the end of "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien claims the story he's just related "wasn't a war story. It was a love story" (page 85). How does O'Brien distinguish between a war story and a love story?
8. "'Daddy, tell the truth,' Kathleen can say, 'did you ever kill anybody?' And I can say, honestly, 'Of course not.' Or I can say, honestly, 'Yes' " (page 180). How can both of these contradictory responses be true? What is truth --- to both Tim O'Brien the narrator and Tim O'Brien the author? Consider the distinction between "story truth" and "happening truth," which O'Brien develops in the story "Good Form."
9. The soldiers often tell jokes to relieve tension. Did you find their jokes funny? How is language important to the soldiers? What words do they use to make their experience easier to handle? What other tricks do the soldiers use to keep themselves sane?
10. Many of the stories are told second- or even third-hand ("Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"; what happened to Rat Kiley in "Night Life"). How does this help with our understanding of the stories? Why does O'Brien create this distance?
11. Three stories in succession, "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," and "In the Field," deal with one event: Kiowa's death. O'Brien similarly shows us incidents from different perspectives throughout the book. How do these different perspectives change your understanding of an incident? Why do you think the author chose to do this?

12. Repetition is a tool O'Brien uses in his stories. What do you remember about the man killed by the narrator? How does the repetition enhance the event or affect your understanding of it?

13. In "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien writes, "Stories can save us" (page 225). How do stories save the narrator? What else can stories do, according to **The Things They Carried** and from what you've experienced in your own life?

14. There are many different types of loss addressed throughout the book: the loss of life, of course, but also the loss of the past --- for example, after Tim O'Brien gets shot for the second time, he feels the loss of being a "real" soldier very strongly and misses the excitement and fraternity (camaraderie) of combat. What else do O'Brien and the other characters in the book lose? What does resurrecting these losses through story accomplish? What losses do you feel most strongly in your own life, and how do you deal with them? Do you tell about them?