

Tim O'Brien

(1946–)

All my work has been somewhat political in that it's been directed at big issues," Tim O'Brien once said. "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 does one do right in an evil situation?" O'Brien turned those questions into powerful artistic tools in his gripping war novel *Going After Cacciato* (1978).

O'Brien was born in Austin, Minnesota, and graduated from Macalester College. In 1968, he was drafted and served with the U.S. Army in Vietnam, where he attained the rank of sergeant. Returning from the war, he went to Harvard for graduate work in English. A summer internship at *The Washington Post* led to a job as national affairs reporter for that newspaper.

O'Brien had been writing stories since childhood, and even in the midst of his academic work, he knew he wanted to write full time. It was his military experience in Vietnam that provided much of the material for his fiction and personal narratives. *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) is a collection of anecdotes and observations of his duty in Vietnam. The book drew widespread praise, particularly from veterans, as an authentic re-creation of the foot soldier's experience in an unpopular war.

O'Brien's first novel, *Northern Lights*, appeared in 1974 and dealt with a veteran returned to civilian life. *Going After Cacciato*, his second novel, followed four years later. This novel returned to the jungle

war and depicted a soldier's fantasy of quitting the battle and walking off across the mountains to find Paris. *Cacciato* was acclaimed as one of the few novels to have captured the essence of the Vietnam experience, and it won the prestigious National Book Award in 1979. O'Brien has said of his novel, "It's not really Vietnam that I was concerned about when I wrote *Cacciato*; rather it was to have readers care about what's right and wrong and about the difficulty of doing right, the difficulty of saying no to a war."

In 1990, O'Brien published *The Things They Carried*, a remarkable fictional memoir about the Vietnam War and its human effects. The book is made up of interconnected stories narrated by a character named Tim O'Brien, who, the author says, is not himself. The title story deals with the physical objects a soldier carries into battle, such as weapons and letters from home, as well as the intangible things, like fears and memories. At publication, O'Brien told an interviewer, "My life is storytelling. I believe in stories, in their incredible power to keep people alive, to keep the living alive, and the dead. . . . In Vietnam, men were constantly telling one another stories about the war."

O'Brien's Vietnam experience also lies at the core of his psychological thriller, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). The book focuses on a politician who tries to conceal his past involvement in the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers at My Lai in 1968.

For Independent Reading

If you'd like to read more O'Brien short stories about Vietnam, try

- "The Things They Carried"
- "Calling Home"

