

## How to Tell a True War Story

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP18EQzJ2Bg>

**Read over the following summaries and analysis of "How to Tell a True War Story." Then discuss with your group the key questions posted in red. As a group find passages in the story that show the distinction between "happening truth" and "story truth". Post a group comment reflecting the key points of your discussion and passages you may want to refer to later in your paper. Why are ambiguity and paradox so important to the telling of these stories about the Vietnam War?**

### Memory and Reminiscence

Because "How to Tell a True War Story" is written by a Vietnam War veteran, and because Tim O'Brien has chosen to create a narrator with the same name as his own, most readers want to believe that the stories O'Brien tells are true and actually happened to him. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, O'Brien's so-called memoir, *If I Die In a Combat Zone*, contains many stories that find their way into his later novels and short fiction. Thus, it is difficult for the reader to sort through what is memory and what is fiction. There are those, however, who would suggest that this is one of O'Brien's points in writing his stories. Although most readers would believe that their own memories are "true," this particular story sets out to demonstrate the way that memories are at once true and made up.

Further, as O'Brien tells the reader in "How to Tell a True War Story," "You'd feel cheated if it never happened." This is certainly one response to O'Brien's story. Readers want the stories to be true in the sense that they grow out of O'Brien's memory. O'Brien, however, will not let the reader take this easy way out. Instead, he questions the entire notion of memoir, reminiscence, and the ability of memory to convey the truth.

### Truth and Falsehood

Certainly, the most insistent theme in this story is that of truth and falsehood. O'Brien, however, would be unlikely to set up such a dichotomy. That is, according to "How to Tell a True War Story," truth is not something that can find its opposition in untruth. Rather, according to O'Brien, because war is so ambiguous, truth takes on many guises. Even seemingly contradictory events can both be considered true. O'Brien uses the event of Curt Lemon's death to make this point. O'Brien knows, for example, that Curt is killed by a

rigged 105mm round. However, as the scene replays in his mind, O'Brien sees the event very differently. It seems to him that Curt is killed by the sunlight, and that it is the sunlight that lifts him high into the tree where O'Brien will later have to retrieve Curt's body parts. Thus O'Brien distinguishes between the truth that happens and the truth that seems to happen.

Moreover, O'Brien likes to play with words and to undermine the logical connection between words. In Western philosophy, it is considered impossible for a word to mean itself and its opposite at the same time. O'Brien demonstrates it may indeed be possible. For example, when he writes, "it is safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true," he is creating a paradox. If nothing is ever absolutely true, then even that statement cannot be absolutely true. The paradox suggests that while it might be possible to approximate truth, it must be told, as Emily Dickinson once wrote, "aslant."

Perhaps the most disconcerting moment in this tale occurs when O'Brien tells the story of the woman who approaches him after he tells this tale. Most readers assume that O'Brien the author is speaking, and that perhaps he is telling a story of what happened to him after a reading of his fiction. When the woman says she likes the story about the water buffalo, O'Brien is annoyed. Although he does not tell her, he tells the reader that the entire episode did not happen, that it was all made up, and that even the characters are not real. Readers may be shocked. How could O'Brien have fabricated all of this? Then the reader may realize that O'Brien is playing with the truth again, for if everything in the story is fabricated, then so is the woman who approached him. This play with truth and falsehood provides both delight and despair for the reader who will never be able to determine either truth or falsehood in O'Brien's stories in the traditional sense. As Stephen Kaplan suggests in *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, "[O'Brien] completely destroys the fine line dividing fact from fiction and tries to show . . . that fiction (or the imagined world) can often be truer, especially in the case of Vietnam, than fact."

### How to Tell a True War Story: Style

#### Point of View and Narration

One of the most interesting, and perhaps troubling, aspects of the construction of "How to Tell a True War Story" is O'Brien's choice to create a fictional, first-person narrator who also carries the name "Tim O'Brien." Although the narrator remains unnamed in this particular story, other stories in the collection clearly identify the narrator by the name Tim. Further, the other stories in the collection also identify the narrator as a forty-three-year-old writer who writes about the Vietnam War, ever more closely identifying the narrator with the author.

On the one hand, this connection is very compelling. Readers are drawn into the story believing that they are reading something that has some basis in the truth of the writer Tim O'Brien. Further, the authorial voice that links the story fragments together sounds like it ought to belong to the writer.

On the other hand, however, the device allows O'Brien to play with notions of truth and ambiguity. Does the narrator represent the author? Or do the narrator's words tell the reader not to trust either the story or the teller? What can be said unequivocally about the Vietnam War?

O'Brien's use of the fictional narrator suggests that there is nothing unequivocal about the war. Rather, it seems that O'Brien, through his narrator Tim, wants the reader to understand that during war, seeming-truth can be as true as happening-truth.

Ought the reader consider the narrator to be unreliable? After all, after pledging the truth of the story from the very first line, he undercuts that claim by telling the reader at the last possible moment that none of the events in the story happened. While this might seem to point to an unreliable narrator, a narrator who cannot find it in himself to tell the

truth, it is more likely that O'Brien is making the point that the entire story is true, it just never happened. This distinction, while frustrating for some readers, is an important one not only for the understanding of "How to Tell a True War Story" but also for the reading of *The Things They Carried*.

#### Structure

"How to Tell a True War Story" is not structured in a traditional manner, with a sequential narrative that moves chronologically from start to finish. Rather, O'Brien has chosen to use a number of very short stories within the body of the full story to illustrate or provide examples of commentary provided by the narrator.

That is, the narrator will make some comment about the nature of a "true" war story, then will recount a brief story that illustrates the point. These stories within the larger story are not arranged chronologically.

Consequently, the reader learns gradually, and out of sequence, the events that led to the death of Curt Lemon as well as the events that take place after his death.

This structure serves two purposes. In the first place, the structure allows the story to move back and forth between concrete image and abstract reality. The narrator writes that "True war stories do not generalize.

They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis." Thus, for the narrator to provide "true" war stories, he must provide the concrete illustration. While the stories within the larger story, then, may qualify as "true" war stories, the larger story cannot, as it does indulge in abstraction and analysis.

The second purpose served by this back-and-forth structure is that it mirrors and reflects the structure of the book *The Things They Carried*. Just as the story has concrete, image-filled stories within it, so too does the larger book contain chapters that are both concrete and image-filled. Likewise, there are chapters within the book that serve as commentary on the rest of the stories. As a result, "How to Tell a True War Story" provides for the reader a model of how the larger work functions.

The story that results from this metafictional (metafiction is fiction that deals with the writing of fiction or its conventions) structure may seem fragmentary because of the many snippets of the story that find their way into the narrative. However, the metafictional commentary provided by the narrator binds the stories together

just as the chapters of the book are bound together by the many linkages O'Brien provides.