

[The Things They Carried](#) by Tim O'Brien, Reviewed 03/2026

Reviewed by A.H., Class of 2029

Book - Paper or Ebook

★★★★☆

Genre: Fiction

What made you interested in reading/watching/playing this media?

How did you hear about it or come across it?

My English teacher introduced the book to me. I read and analyzed the book with my classmates, and I really loved it. O'Brien has a unique writing style, and it was nice to participate in group discussions about all of the key details in this book. Even though this book was for my class, I am still really glad I had the opportunity to read it, and I would definitely recommend it to others.

Setting:

This book takes place in Vietnam from the years 1968-1969. It focuses on the experiences of stories of American soldiers fighting during the Vietnam War. While most of the book takes place in Vietnam, O'Brien also occasionally depicts the characters' lives in America.

Protagonists:

Most of the protagonists in O'Brien's story are based on real people, who endured the horrors of Vietnam alongside O'Brien. The story follows multiple different soldiers, each with different backgrounds, stories, and traumas. Some of the notable characters include: O'Brien, Jimmy Cross, Kiowa, Azar, Norman Bowker, and Rat Kiley. O'Brien depicts himself as a character in this book and talks about the challenges he faced before, during, and after the war. He talks about his personal experience in deciding to follow the draft and go to Vietnam, and the relationship he built with the soldiers around him while there. While he illustrates his own perspective, he also develops interesting narratives for the other American soldiers in his troop.

Plotline:

This media deals with a strong theme of truth vs. storytelling. O'Brien breaks the book up into multiple different chapters and develops a new story for each chapter. Although the book is based off of his true experiences, he frequently takes a lot of creative liberties, and can be an unreliable narrator at times. However, he makes the argument that sometimes the emotional truth of a moment can be more important than the historical truth of a moment. Therefore, he uses this unique narration to illustrate captivating stories for all of the soldiers around him. He talks about what each character struggled with during the war, and the internal battles that they all faced. For example, he depicts a lot of violent, and random deaths, and illustrates how the soldiers fought grief, and tried to make sense of such meaningless losses of life. Furthermore, he talks about how these soldiers grew angry and resentful towards each other, for things that

they may, or may not have done. He also illustrates the inescapable trauma and guilt that all of the soldiers feel, both while fighting in Vietnam and back in America. Throughout all of these stories, O'Brien employs incredible imagery, symbols, and other literary devices that not only make this story engaging to read, but also interesting to analyze.

Reflection on the novel's strong points and weak points:

I think a really strong part of this book is that O'Brien is able to stitch together a lot of completely different stories together in a way that makes sense and still escalates the plot. Often times, I think that stories that contain many different perspectives can sometimes feel disjointed and can disrupt the flow of the overall plot of the book. In "The Things They Carried", however, O'Brien takes many different viewpoints and stories and stitches them together in a way that still helps build the overall plot. Furthermore, each one of these stories are equally as interesting, so there are never any perspectives that feel "boring" to read about.

A main weak point in this media is the lack of warning before a graphic scene. In order to try and convey the randomness and unexpected nature of the violence in Vietnam, O'Brien, tries to catch the reader off-guard. Multiple times throughout the story, he interrupted calm moments with deaths and graphic illustrations. I think that this lack of warning could be triggering for some readers. Although O'Brien's writing approach helps to build the context of his stories, I think the lack of warning could be tough for some readers. While I really enjoyed O'Brien book, this weak point is part of the reason why I chose to give it an overall rating of four stars.

What are some themes that come across?

Some major themes in the media include guilt, grief, and fear. The most prominent theme, though, is the theme of stories versus reality. It is hard to decipher when O'Brien might be telling the truth and when he might be taking creative liberties, and he leaves it up to the reader to decide what is real.

Do you feel that the cover art is true to what the media is about?

I do believe that the cover is true to what the book is about. Not being able to see the faces or quickly learn about the main characters is a unique and intentional creative approach. Furthermore, seeing each of the soldiers carry large bags on their back quickly ties into the intro of the story, and helps illustrate the idea that these soldiers carry a lot with them during the war, in both a literal and figurative sense.

Did you enjoy it? Would you recommend it?

I did really enjoy reading this media. I thought that all of the stories were incredibly interesting and eye-opening. I also really enjoyed the overall message of this book, and the morals depicted at the end. I would definitely recommend this book to people in my life, however, I would only recommend this book to more mature audiences who are able to digest such heavy themes and topics.

Readalikes/Watchalikes are:

I think anyone who likes survival and war stories would like this book. Furthermore, I think people who enjoy interpreting details within literature would also like this book. One of the best parts of this story is that it causes the reader to think deeply about what the author is saying, beyond all of the graphic stories and illustrations.

Final thoughts?

I really recommend this book!

Submitted MARCH 2026