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to meet Christmas without coming to a certain conclusion as to what actually happened, and what the two Tim O'Briens had to do with any of it. The two stories that nailed me, (2) Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong The second of these stories was a mind-blowing story called Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong. Tim O'Brien character plays no part in it, except to introduce it. Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane. This one keeps returning to me. The actual story is told by one of the platoon characters, Rat, it's about an assignment that Rat previously had on a remote mountain top near a village ("village"). It was sort of a Mash-type assignment, where wounded would be brought in by local choppers for emergency and trauma care, then shipped out by chopper to rear areas. Mostly they played volleyball and sat around, probably smoking weed. No officers, no discipline. One day they're shooting the shit, and someone says hey you know we could fly a broad in here. A few weeks later, a "tall, big-boned blond" steps out of the supply chopper one morning, and is introduced by their young medic as Mary Anne, his seventeen year old girlfriend from Cleveland Heights Senior High, by way of LA, Bangkok, and Saigon.Well, skipping a whole lot of the story, the girl takes to 'Nam like a bee to a flower. She starts dressing like the guys, learns how to fire a rifle, goes down into the vllle to check out the locals, and finally starts going out on patrols with six Greenies (Berets) that have their own little station in an enclosed area near the medic place (thus sort of leaving her boy friend). Again I'm not going to go into the details, but the story takes a very strange twist, and we find this seventeen year old morphing into a female Apocalypse Now style Brando character, wearing a necklace made out of human tongues and hanging out with the Greenies in their hooch. Across the room a dozen candles were burning on the floor near the open window. The place seemed to echo with a weird deep-wilderness sound - tribal music - bamboo flutes and drums and chimes. But what hit you first was ... two kinds of smells. There was a topmost scent of joss sticks and incense, like the fumes of some exotic smokehouse, but beneath the smoke lay a deeper more powerful stench ...Thick and numbing, like an animal's den, a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh - the stink of the kill ... On a post at the rear of the hooch was the decayed head of a large black leopard ... Off in the gloom a few dim figures lounged in hammocks ... The music came from a tape deck, but the high voice was Mary Anne's ... she stepped out of the shadows ... barefoot. She wore her pink sweater and a white blouse and a cotton skirt.And that necklace.Well Rat draws the story out nicely, then finally ends it with And then one morning, all alone, Mary Anne walked off into the mountains and did not come back. ... But the story did not end there. If you believed the Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes. Late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, the whole rain forest seemed to stare in at them - a watched feeling - and a couple times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill. Worth the price of admission, that one.(1) On the Rainy RiverBut the first of the stories that nailed me, maybe not as flamboyant, not as good a movie script, was On the Rainy River. I don't need to really tell the story. Actually I do. But only one spoiler two spoilers. The introduction is simply "This is one story I've never told before." It's about "Tim's" and/or Tim's summer of '68, after graduating from Macalester; after receiving within a couple weeks a draft notice; after working in a pig slaughterhouse in Worthington for several weeks; anguishing over what he should do about this war that he spoen't believe in, that's he's being called to; finally leaving a note to his parents, taking off, driving north up through Duluth, International Falls, then to the west along the Rainy River. Just across from Canada. Where he stops at a run-down fishing resort called the Tip Top Lodge, and stays for a few days, the only customer of the eighty-one year old owner, Elroy Berdahl.Elroy Berdahl: "The hero of my life ... the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed, without questions, without any words at all. He took me in. He was there at the critical time - a silent, watchful presence."Tim lays it all on the table, all the things that were urging him to flee to Canada, all the things that were holding him back. (He tells us the readers, that is, not Elroy. He and Elroy only make small talk, but as Tim realizes later, Elroy knows what's going on, yet never says anything.)The last day at the Lodge, Elroy takes him out fishing on a sunny, cold afternoon. He turns the boat north, goes the motor, and steers all the way across the river, cutting the motor to drift twenty feet off the Canadian shore. Baitis his book, says nothing, starts fishing. Tim sits in the low, looking at the forest, looking at an invisible boundary that, if crossed, will change his life forever.I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself ... You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest.What would you do?Would you jump?Would you feel pity for yourself?Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind?Would it hurt?Would it feel like dying?Would you cry, as I did?He can't jump. "I did try. It just wasn't possible." I couldn't risk the embarrassment.He drives home. The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war.This story affected me deeply. Of course I cried. You have to know that it's early in the book, before I realized that "Tim" maybe wasn't Tim, and that the story was probably not actually true. And although I now think its truth is not the truth of happening, it still is true, but its truth is the truth of story.For it could have been my story. I was less than two years older than Tim. Both my future wife and I had graduated from college in '66. (She had graduated from Macalester for godsakes.) And I had received my draft notice just a few weeks after graduating, had even driven to Ft. Holabird in Baltimore for my pre-induction physical that summer. I wasn't working in a slaughterhouse, but at the Dept. of Health Education and Welfare (HEW) that summer, programming some primitive desk top computer with paper tape. And then out of the blue, I can't even remember how it happened, I wound up going to a job interview at the Naval Research Laboratory, and was hired, and given a deferment. That was the first really momentous occurrence in my life that taught me that I had no real control over my fate. Things just happen.A couple years ago my wife and I went to our fiftieth HS reunion in the small town in Minnesota where we grew up. I met a classmate who I hadn't known very well in school. He was from the country, didn't go to my church, so we just didn't know each other real well, despite being in a class of only about a hundred. He said that it was the first reunion he had come to. The reason was, he had skipped to Canada when he was drafted. But ever since, he had been too embarrassed to return to see his old classmates. I told him that I was really glad he had come. I'm also pretty sure I said something to him like "Joe, you were one of the brave ones". At least I hope I did. I think Tim would have said that. But wait ... an Epilogue Here's where I've decided to override the end of my prior narrative. It's 13 August 2016. Today my wife and I drove to International Falls MN, just a side trip on the way to visit family three hours farther west. Our motel turned out to be right on the south bank of the Rainy River. I talked about Tim's story with her. I took a camera, and we walked behind the motel and down a steep path to the river. Across the river, Canada. The river flowed from right to left, from Rainy Lake up to the northwest, 85 miles into Lake of the Woods - its waters flowing from there, into the Winnipeg River, through Lake Winnipeg, out the Nelson River, finally into Hudson Bay. To the west the sun was glaring off the rippling water. Somewhere up that 85 miles was the fabled Tip Top Lodge, haunted by the ghosts of Elroy Berdahl and maybe Tim ("Tim?") O'Brien. I took a picture, thinking that so much glare would ruin it. But no ... not at all. It fact that bright sun, in the blue summer sky, seemed to lay down a white pathway on the river, somehow strangely getting wider as it moved into the distance ... perhaps widening more and more as it moved farther and farther, mile upon mile, winding through the Lake of the Woods, on and on into Hudson Bay ... and somehow lighting all the possible twists and turns that a life could have taken from that moment when a young man sat in a boat twenty feet from Canada and cried.Well, that's what I've decided to say about this picture of the Rainy River. Glad I took it. And guess what. Rereading the comments below, I discovered (#35) that Fionnuala had already written this Epilogue, lacking only the photo to illustrate it. Here I thought I'd written something clever.americana fiction-of-wartimes have July 30, 2022It was 1962. I was living in Vacaville, CA working at the A&W as a carhop when a young soldier from Travis Air Force Base got out of his car and began walking. He was carrying a bundle of letters which he placed in the garbage can behind the building. I found them when I took out the garbage that night and picked them up. I carried them into the building and hid them in my purse and then took them home. They were Dear John letters, but all I remember were these words: "I am going to join a convent." I thought about them, wondering who they were. They weren't just names on letters; they were people who were suffering. I still think about them from time to time. Did he die in Vietnam or is he happily married? How about her? Did she become a nun or was that just a line? I kept the letters for many years, wishing I could write to them to see how they were, to tell them that I had the letters, but then I thought it not proper. And then one day I carried them to my garbage can and threw them away. For many more years I saved the Lipton tea bag label that she had placed in one of her letters. Inscribed on it were the words: "To forgive is to forget." It was '69, and I was hanging out in Berkeley, studying and going out dancing. Mac was in Vietnam carrying a rifle and maybe letters or photographs, I never asked. I saw them on the streets of Berkeley, holding out their hands for spare change, talking in strange tongues, sleeping on the sidewalks in doorways, and in People's Park. The sign on the door of the Vedanta Society across the street from People's Park, "Do not sleep on the steps," and I thought, "How charitable." Years later at a Vietnamese Buddhist monastery an Australian monk gave my husband a book to read about a monk who had been in Vietnam. I read it instead of my husband, and then I wrote this poem in memory of what the monk in the book had seen in Vietnam.LIVING IN BERKELEY BACK IN NAMI saw you standingin front of the market on Telegraph Avenueasking for spare change.With fearseeping throughthe shadowsyour hallowed eyes,you let me know that you were back in Nam,where you watched your buddhoidalive a Vietnamese babyn his protecting arms,blow upbefore those very eyeswhat I am startingingo now.In one breathyou told me that itwasn't real that itnever really happened...in the next breathyou asked me "Why?"And I had no answerother than to offer you few coins. And you walked into that storeto buy yourself anotherbottle of wine.I turned around, and was back in Berkeley. The street vendorswere selling their wares-punks shell necklaces,quill earrings,stone pottery,and the die dished shirts withpeace emblems— reminding methat Nam wasnever far away.I walked around the corner.A flyer dangled from atelephone pole.Maharishi's liquid eyes stared back at mineand promised peace,if only we would forget the world andlet goof all theoughtsbut that kept pouringinto our minds,during a time when we only wanted to stophat damn war in Vietnam.I was apolitical during those troubled timesand had my own wargoing on deep inside. So I spent my dayswith friendsin the Renaissance Cafefrinking cappuccinos and eating chocolate croissants,while talking about going to Aito's dance to Greek musicion Friday nights. —Jessica slade magorjian July 11, 2005I met Mac in '88. Fun loving and as one friend of ours said to me, "He is the kindest man I have ever met." Mac's buddy walked up to him one night when he was in the trenches. "Mac, can I change places with you tonight?" I feel like it is my time. I am going to die tonight." Mac changed places with his buddy, just to ease his mind. The next morning Mac was asked to pick up his buddy's body parts and put them into a bag and carry them away. He has carried this with him all of these years, but he doesn't talk about it to anyone. I heard it twice and just tried to remember the details.Mac now carries an oxygen Pac with him wherever he goes and all because he had carried that orange dust around with him in Vietnam for way too long. Sometimes, he proudly wears his Marine basic cap, and when men see it they say, "Thanks for your service."July 14, 2023I had a friend who went to war. Part of him did not come home. His shoulder and much of his upper body was metal plate, but that is not the part I am talking about. The part that was left there was a piece of his soul, an innocence and lightness that could never be recaptured. He talked about the war when he was in his cups, which he was too often. His best buddy in the war was killed in front of his eyes, and Sam was convinced (he is true or not) that the bullet he took was meant for Sam. He felt his friend had saved his life and that he was not worthy of that sacrifice. Knowing him made reading this book a harder experience for me. It made the stories more real, it reminded me how many Sams there were out there in the jungles of Vietnam.This is, of course, a book about war, and as such, not surprisingly, a book about loss. It is also a book about death, even the deaths of those who live, for people die in stages sometimes, they die in bits and pieces that they bury and exhume and rebury. I cannot imagine anyone reads this book without taking it personally. Certainly the men who fought this war must find something I can never touch inside its pages. What I found myself seeing were Sam's eyes, the way they sparkled when he was free of war for a moment and the way they clouded and glazed when he tried to tell anyone about what he was feeling. I would sometimes catch him in a quiet moment at his desk, and I knew without a word that he was there. From the first page, I was walking with Sam, not with Tim, but then I realized Sam and Tim and Kiowa and Curt Lemon, are all the same person for one short moment in time. I know why I have had this on my TBR for so long and procrastinated about opening it to read. No one really wants to go back to that war for even a second. I understand as little now about why we were there as I did then, and history usually gives a person more perspective, not less. I think about all the potential we lost, not only in the person of those who died, but in those who came back so changed and could find no way to move forward. Tim O'Brien is one of the lucky ones. He found a voice through his writing and purged some of his ghosts in that way. Some men just carried them to the grave, unpurged, and that must be the worst weight they were asked to carry.2019-city-challenge american asia January 17, 2018When I was a junior in college, our English Dept opened up a new class: Literature of the Vietnam War. I needed an elective credit, and I knew next to nothing about the war, so I signed up for the class, which was held once a week, at night.The class was half-full, and I was one of three females taking the course. I sat regularly next to a man who had actually served in Vietnam, and when he talked about his experiences, I felt puny, as though I didn't belong. I stared frequently at the top of my desk, worked quietly through our first book, some correspondences from a helicopter pilot. And then, we got to Tim O'Brien. We read The Things They Carried and I fell hard. We read Going After Cacciato, and I had actually served in Vietnam, and I lit up with the reading and the writing, and then, one night, the professor asked me to stay after class. I was confused. Why did he want to speak to me? The class emptied out and I approached his desk, and he handed me back one of my papers and stared at me. He had actually written "A+" on the front of my essay, and I alternated between looking uncomfortably at my grade and at his unswerving stare at me. Finally he said something about my paper being excellent, but that he was most interested in the passion I had for the subject. I looked at him again, wondering if he was yet another creepy male professor trying to ask me out for "coffee," but I could see by his eyes that he was not. He was the real deal, another not job like me, who is in it for the stories.It's been years, and I can't remember exactly what he said, but he ended up telling me that he had been reduced to begging the college for years to open this class, and that none of them had been sure of what to expect, but, after reading my paper on Tim O'Brien's books, he knew that it hadn't been a mistake to offer this as a subject. He said something like, "I read your paper, and I could see that you GOT it. You really GOT it, what the Vietnam War was and is for people." And, again, it's been years, so I can't repeat what I answered back then, but I just re-read The Things They Carried this week, and I can say now ... How can you read Tim O'Brien and not GET the Vietnam War?1990s from-the-1990s book-club favorite books April 2, 2025The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien is an unforgettable book, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1991. 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I think of my own son deployed to Iraq on a Blackhawk helicopter crew insisting on a shamrock on his helmet. No worries that he was ordered to remove it, it would be back! They carried all they could bear and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried. "What they carried varied by mission." "The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition." There was a lot of sorrow and truth that comes through in this semi-biographical collection of short stories focusing on the experiences in the Vietnam War. What I found most striking in this narrative was the honesty of Tim O'Brien as he not only tries to offer a better understanding of war and human nature but the struggle to survive. This was a painful and sorrowful but powerful book.1001-books boxall-1001-books classics May 2, 2011I took a short story writing class for kicks a while back. 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I cannot remember precisely what he wrote except that it awed and frustrated me in equal amounts.It was pure frustration yesterday as I reorganized my books. Remember during the Pixar movie, WALL-E, when he is holding the spork and looking left to right. Does it belong with the forks or the spoons? Forks? Spoons? Fiction? Non-fiction? Darn you, O'Brien. 2010 event-music-author festival-savannah-2024 August 19, 2016Technically speaking, The Things They Carried is extremely well-written. O'Brien is a good, tight writer who knows how to weave a story. But even while I admire his style and technique, I am put off by the emptiness and moral vacuum he leaves when his machine guns and grenades finish ripping open your insides. While I wasn't looking for Sunday school platitudes from a book about Vietnam, I was looking for some reason, some sense which he could bring to bear after twenty years of writing and reflecting on his experiences there. 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