English III AP Summer Reading Guide: Fall 2017

_The Things They Carried_ by Tim O’Brien

**Content:** They carried malaria tablets, love letters, 28-pound mine detectors, dope, illustrated Bibles, each other. And, if they made it home alive, they carried unrelenting images of a nightmarish war that history is only beginning to absorb. Since it was first published, _The Things They Carried_ has become an unparalleled Vietnam War testament, a classic work of American literature, and a profound study of men at war that illuminates the capacity, and the limits, of the human heart and soul. As this is a war story, be prepared to encounter a few graphic war details and strong battlefield language, and be prepared to ponder deep questions about the nature of truth and story telling.

**Themes and Motifs:** The following are a few of the powerful messages, or arguments, this novel presents to us. Consider these as you read.

**The Nature of Truth:** O’Brien tells the same stories in different ways. How do the details of the story change in the retelling from different perspectives? What is truth? O’Brien often claims that a story is true, but then denies it ever happened. He introduces whole characters only to tell the reader later that these characters are not real people. What is the point of this? What argument is being made with this technique? Also, the story is told both in and out of chronological order. What is the point in structuring the plot events of this novel in this way?

**The Power of Language:** O’Brien uses diction, or word choice, carefully. When are nicknames and diminutives employed? How do characters distance themselves from their experiences with language?

**Games:** As many of these soldiers are conscripted, O’Brien plays with the idea of the characters as pawns of fate. How are the soldiers affected by the decisions of generals and politicians? Pay attention to any games such as word games, rhyming, puns, euphemisms, checkers, and chess. Who plays these games and for what purpose? Why would soldiers use up valuable energy and space to bring game boards and pieces onto the battle field?

**The Human Experience:** What does it mean to be in a civilization? How do we know when we are beyond civilization? Just as in Joseph Conrad’s _Heart of Darkness_, characters become drawn to the primal experiences of being immersed in nature. At they start to lose touch with the rules of civilized society, some are sucked into the darkest parts of the human experience. What does it mean to be human? Why do the soldiers carry mementoes? Are the mementoes positive or negative? What do these objects symbolize?

**Sacrifice and Christianity:** When one of the major characters is named Jimmy Cross, you can bet there is a connection to Christianity. Who and what are being sacrificed? How do the characters feel about their actions in relation to their religious beliefs? What are the spiritual beliefs of the major characters? Do the characters achieve salvation or lose it?

**Literary Devices:** This novel introduces some of the key concepts we’ll study all year such as tone, diction, symbolism, theme, and motif. It also contains important language constructions and syntactical strategies. What is syntax? What is parallelism and how does O’Brien use it to underscore meaning?

**Guiding Questions for Key Chapters:** (Please note, we will take this for an extra credit grade. You will need to either hand-write your answers in complete sentences on a separate piece of paper neatly, or type them in MLA format and they will be due on the day of the summer reading assessment.)

“The Things They Carried”
1. Throughout the chapter, take some notes on what the major characters carry and why they carry these things.
2. What kind of person is Martha? How does Jimmy imagine her? Note the brief allusions to other literature in the description of Martha (she’s an English major)—what’s the significance of these?
3. What brings “lightness” to the soldiers? Why? Consider individual characters and what each is carrying.
4. How does O’Brien change focus on what the soldiers are carrying? How do the last few sentences of this section add to the “weight” of things?
5. What would you say the mood of this story is (try to pick a word or a few words) and why? Go past words like “depressing” or “sad”—try to tie the emotional feeling to something more ingrained in the story’s action. Reread the beginning and the end of the story to locate mood.

“Love”
6. What kind of person is Jimmy Cross? What kind of person is Martha?
7. What do you make of the _Bonnie and Clyde_ allusion here? (It’s the movie they saw on their date—if you don’t know the story, look it up.)
8. What do you make of Jimmy Cross’s relationship with Martha? What does he mean when he says, “It doesn’t matter…I love her”?
9. What does the ending mean? (There is more than one right answer.)
10. What are some of the multiple meanings of the word “spin” as O’Brien uses it, and in other contexts?
11. Note the first-person aside by O’Brien (“I’m forty-three…”). What is the significance of this paragraph? Note that this sentence or variations of it appear later in the story (and throughout the book).
12. This story is really a series of fragments. Note things you don’t completely understand. You may understand them after reading the rest of the book.

“Escape” and “On the Rainy River”
13. Compare the two stories, one fiction and one non-fiction, and make a list of differences and similarities. Why might O’Brien have changed some things?
15. What does he mean when he says, “It was a moral split”? An older edition of this story had this sentence as, “It was a type of schizophrenia, a moral split.”
16. Interpret the last line of “Rainy River”: “I was a coward. I went to the war.” How does the meaning of “coward” change here?

“How to Tell a True War Story”
17. Write down elements of what O’Brien considers a “true” war story.
18. Curt Lemon’s death is described multiple times in this story. Note the differences among the descriptions of his death in each instance.
19. What does O’Brien mean by “true”? What is the difference between literal truth (what actually happened) and what he considers “truth”?
20. What do you make of the last section where O’Brien wants to call the old woman a “cooze”?
21. Do you feel cheated at the end of this story when he implies that it’s all fiction?

“The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong”
22. Make two lists: (1) stereotypical characteristics of a traditional man; (2) stereotypical characteristics of a traditional woman.
23. How does Mary Anne slowly evolve from the beginning of the story to the end? Pick three passages in which you notice a distinct change in character.
24. How does Mark Fossie slowly evolve? Again, pick three passages.
25. Who are the Greenies? What do they represent?
26. How would you describe how Mary Anne turns out in the end of the story?
27. Why doesn’t Mitchell Sanders like the way this story is told? What is ironic about his criticisms given Tim O’Brien’s methods of telling a story?
28. How is “Sweetheart” a “true war story” according to O’Brien?

“The Man I Killed” and “Ambush”
29. How does repetition function in this chapter? O’Brien has already told this story, so how is this telling different? Why is the hole “star-shaped”?
30. In “The Man I Killed,” how does the narrator empathize with the dead VC soldier? What kind of man does the narrator imagine the dead man was? Who does the dead man remind you of?
31. How is the story different in “Ambush”? Why do you think O’Brien retells the story differently?
32. What is the significance of the last line of “Ambush”? What happens here?

“Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” and “In the Field”
33. Look closely at the last section of “Notes.” What interpretations do you make of the last sentences? How do your interpretations play out in “In the Field”? Or, to approach the same question from another angle, why does Tim O’Brien retell the story the way he does in “In the Field”?

“The Lives of the Dead”
35. In the first few lines of the story and throughout the story, what phrases repeat from earlier in the book?
36. What does O’Brien note about the nature of stories in this section?
37. Why does he keep retelling the story of Linda to himself?
38. Why does Rat Kiley keep retelling the story of Curt Lemon on Halloween?
39. What does Linda say about herself not being dead? What does she compare herself to?
40. Why does ice-skating work as an image in this story? Look closely and relate it to other images in this book. What new meaning is given to this image?

Assessment: There will be a summative reading check over this novel the week we return. It will include quote identifications and a variety of reading comprehension questions. We will have an extended discussion of this novel and a close reading of one of the chapters in class. The summer reading provides a framework for extended thematic connections to other readings in this course and an avenue of evidence for argumentative essays; furthermore, it bolsters student knowledge of literary works which may be used for the AP English Literature and Composition open-ended response question.

See you in the fall! We can’t wait to meet you!