

Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried* has many themes within it, each of which can be its own paper. One of these themes is that which is the truth of what O'Brien made up and wrote down versus the truth of what actually happened and he wrote down. O'Brien really was a soldier in the Vietnam War, and has written this book partly to express his emotions on the subject for himself, but to make us actually believe these emotions and his experiences he had to tell "story truth" (or as he described it in an interview, a "noble lie") for parts of the book.

One of the clearer ways to begin to question what parts of the book may be this "story truth" is when the chapter you're reading is directly before a chapter entitled "\_\_ Notes" or another such title. O'Brien uses this chapter heading to explain anything that he feels needs explaining about the chapter before it. These notes generally are written well after the actual chapter, and put it into context. But they are also used to clear up notions of how true to the real happenings they are. An example of this is with the *Speaking of Courage* chapter. At the tail end of its associated notes chapter O'Brien states: "That part of the story is my own." It's statements like that which tell you for certain if a segment of the story was "happening truth" or simply "story truth".

Most of the time, however, the distinction isn't just handed to you on a silver platter. You need to dig for what segments are what truth type. You can do that in many ways, but here's one way I've chosen to do it. I look at the context of the segment as well as my own experiences that may relate. Usually if I can't add the pieces up then that segment is "story truth". Sometimes this is harder than others. For example, the chapter *On the Rainy River* starts out by O'Brien saying he's never told this story before. You may stop and say: "Well, it's happening truth". But even still you can't be sure simply because it's stated in the "story text" (versus "note text"). In digging deeper I examined the details of the story and laid out the assumed timeline of events (this isn't

always the order in which it's written). Is it plausible? I also looked at the literary context and used that to help assess the plausibility of the story. Lastly, I took a look at the meaning O'Brien meant the chapter to have. In this case one of its overarching themes was cowardice and bravery. Would this story, in reality, truly exhibit that theme? In the end I trusted the first sentence of this chapter and now treat it as "happening truth", but that was only after a deeper set of digging and questioning.

O'Brien has one chapter in the book which is titled *How to Tell a True War Story*. This chapter digs right into this theme. In it O'Brien sets out some simple guidelines that tell us what stories are "happening truth" and what are just "story truth". He mentions how a true war story never has any moral meaning. It is not instructive, but rather a depressing series of events. This is just like war. War has no rectitude, no virtue, and is evil. These are the same traits that true war stories ("happening truth") have. O'Brien states that true war stories cannot be believed. Belief in these stories should make you skeptical of them. An example of this would be the Rainy River story, as that is clearly "story truth" since O'Brien wouldn't have actually considered running in real life. The most important note here is that the crazy stuff in the stories is the "happening truth", where the normal stuff is actually the "story truth". True war stories never seem to end and there is usually no point to them.

One thing to keep in mind when assessing truth types is the basic structure of the book. In some chapters the entire chapter will be either "story truth" or "happening truth". But in other chapters you have to really pay attention to the breaks. Whole sections may be one or the other kind of truth. Yet more puzzling, in some chapters it is sentence by sentence, in these cases you generally need to assume the entire section to be "story truth" because the entire section wouldn't make sense without the parts that truly are "story truth".

You'll need to decide as a whole what this book is: "happening truth" or "story truth". This is really similar to determining what type of truth a chapter is. What you do is just decide what chapters were most important and see where the majority rests in terms of truth type. This is a little bit different from deciding how true the message of the book is. I have no doubts in saying that this book is a work of fiction based on true experiences, but the message that O'Brien is attempting to get across is very true and nowhere near a noble lie.

Why has O'Brien used so much "story truth" when wanting to express the emotions of the "happening truth" he lived through in Vietnam? He gets at some of why this is when describing how to tell a true war story. The "happening truths" are quite unbelievable to civilians. We need the "story truth" to even begin to comprehend and believe the "happening truth" if indeed we wanted to try to comprehend it. But to infect the "happening truth" with "story truth" is to lose some of the emotional load O'Brien set out to put on paper. You will make the whole story believable, and compelling, to civilians, but in doing so will sway from the original intent. The question that remains is: Would doing this be bad as an author? I can imagine that O'Brien's answer would have been no, simply because any emotional off-loading is better than none.

The notion of "story truth" and "happening truth" is one of the biggest themes in Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried*. Many other themes in the book are shallower, but this theme stretches across the other themes in its depth. This theme also determines how truthful (and therefore trustworthy) the book is as a source of historical information on the Vietnam War. Where most themes in the book are closely connected to the book's content, this theme is one that can be explored in any book where the author used his or her own experiences as one source for the content.