

Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction

A critical success since its publication in 1990, *The Things They Carried* is considered one of the most valuable contributions to Vietnam War literature. Readers often disagree on the genre of the book. It is sometimes regarded as a group of interconnected short stories instead of a novel. Certainly each story—or chapter—stands alone successfully. Several of the stories were originally published in such magazines as *Esquire*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Playboy*, and *Gentleman's Quarterly*. Yet the book also works as a longer narrative, with each section contributing to a unified whole.

The Things They Carried is told mainly from the first-person point of view of a narrator named Tim O'Brien who shares many of the same experiences as the author. There are two stories in the book that are not told from this perspective. As you read the book and notice a shift in the narrative perspective, ask yourself why the author might have chosen to alter the point of view.

Each story in the book has its own protagonist and conflict. Readers should ask themselves whose story is being told. What does the protagonist desire more than anything else? What stands in his or her way? Make notes about the characters who appear in each story and how their roles change over the course of the book.

Setting also plays an important role in understanding the individual stories and how they fit together. Setting can affect the tone and mood of a work of fiction. Much of the action of *The Things They Carried* takes place in Vietnam. Readers should be aware of changes in setting and how those changes vary even within a single story. Be aware of how the narrator describes the setting and what emotions those descriptions are intended to evoke.

O'Brien uses recurring characters, places, and objects as symbols throughout *The Things They Carried*. Readers should note each place where these symbols appear in the text and consider how they contribute to a story's meaning. If a symbol is used in more than one story, it's important to note how the symbolic value of the object affects the book as a whole.

Once readers have read and appreciated the stories as separate pieces of writing, they can begin to discover how they work together to create a unified whole. Characters, settings, and events recur throughout the book, giving readers additional perspective on the way the Vietnam War affects the soldiers in Alpha Company.