

Overview of lecture

PART ONE NARRATIVISING THE VIETNAM WAR

Tim O'Brien and *The Things They Carried*

A Different War?

- Perceptions of Vietnam veterans
- Homecoming experiences
- 'The Spitting Image'
- Vietnam as Trauma
- Vietnam and Memory
- Vietnam and Memory Industry

Vietnam War Stories

- Narrativizing the Vietnam War
- Vietnam in literature
- John Wayne Syndrome

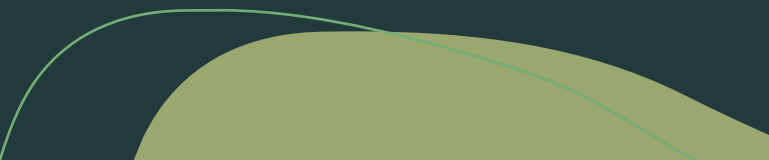
- Frontier myth
- Hearts of Darkness and odysseys

PART TWO INTERPRETING TIM O'BRIEN

Vietnam War and Postmodernism

- Vietnam War in language
- Michael Herr, Fredric Jameson
- Questioning of form and structure
- Questioning of knowledge and truth
- Flattening of time and space
- O'Brien as postmodernist
- O'Brien as modernist

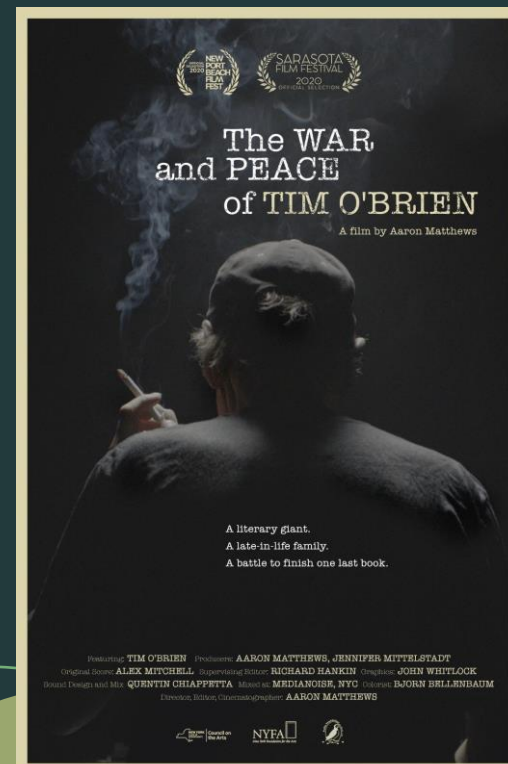
How to Tell a True War Story?



PART ONE: NARRATIVISING THE VIETNAM WAR

Tim O'Brien

- b. 1941; grew up in Worthington, Minnesota
- Served in Vietnam 1969–70
- *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)
- *Northern Lights* (1975)
- *Going After Cacciato* (1978)
- *The Nuclear Age* (1985)
- *The Things They Carried* (1990)
- *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)
- *Tomcat in Love* (1998)
- *July, July* (2002)
- *Dad's Maybe Book* (2019)

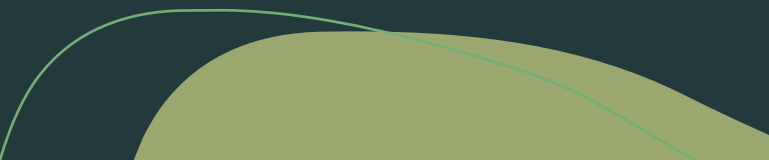




What did you make of the assigned readings and the documentary?

Are there any themes you particularly want to discuss in relation to them?

Did you have any favourite chapters/stories in *The Things They Carried*?



Themes

- War (*duh!?*)
- Memory
- Truth
- Boundaries between fact and fiction
- Relationship between authors' experiences and their writing

"The art of the novel draws its power from the *absence of a perfect consensus* between writer and reader on the understanding of fiction. *Readers and authors acknowledge and agree on the fact that novels are neither completely imaginary nor completely factual.* But as we read a novel, word after word, sentence after sentence, this awareness is transformed into questioning, into a strong and focused curiosity. *Clearly the writer must have experienced something of that sort, the reader thinks, but perhaps he has exaggerated or imagined part of it.* Or on the contrary, the reader, presuming that writers are capable of writing only what they have experienced, may begin to imagine the 'truth' about the writer."



- Orhan Pamuk,
translated by Nazım
Dikbaş, *The Naïve
and Sentimental
Novelist:
Understanding What
Happens When We
Write and Read
Novels* (London:
Faber and Faber,
2010), p. 35.

Epitextual front matter in *The Things They Carried*

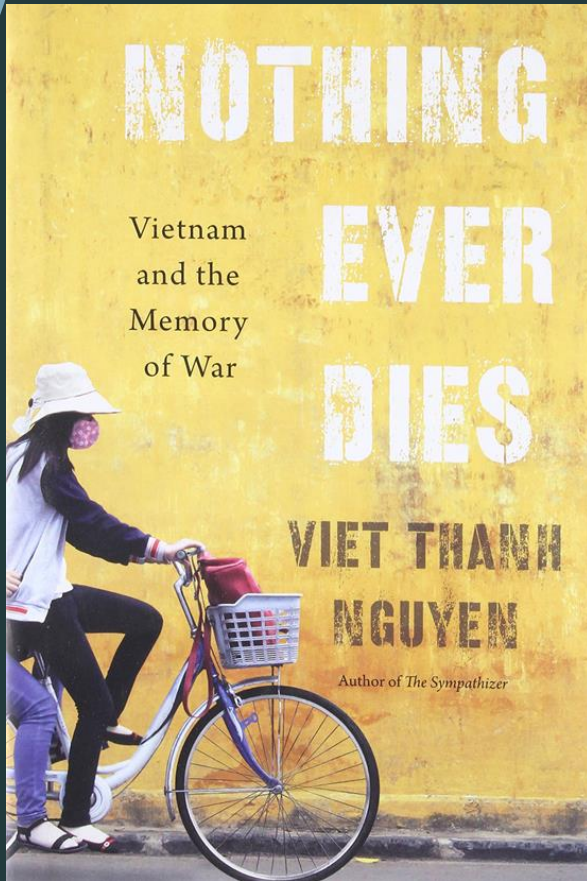
This is a work of fiction, except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names and characters are imaginary.

This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa

Narrativizing the Vietnam War

Each war has a distinct identity, a face with carefully drawn features, familiar at a glance to the nation's people. The tendency is to remember any given war, to the extent it is remembered at all, for a detail or two. ...

- Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 5.



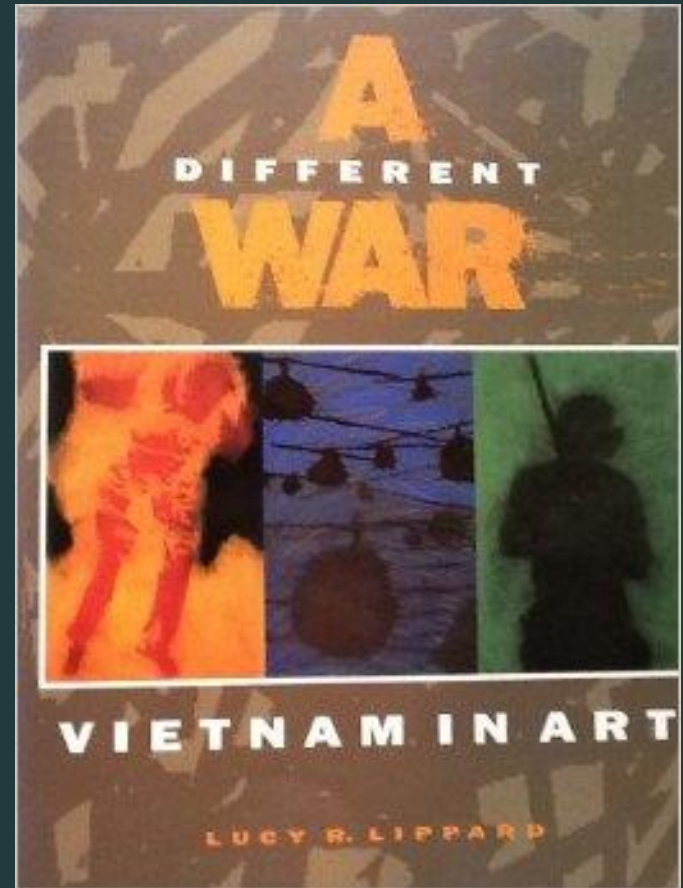
"VIETNAM WAR"

**What words, images and ideas do you most associate
with the Vietnam War?**

**What representations of the Vietnam War are you
familiar with, and what are there notable features?**

- **Why might the Vietnam War is considered 'a different war'?**

Lucy R Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (Seattle: Whatcom Museum of History and Art/Real Comet Press, 1990)



Vietnam War and US Politics/Society



- Total no. US military personnel deployed in Vietnam = 2.7 million; peak 536,000 in 1968.
- US casualties totalled 58,220 dead, 303,644 wounded
- Widespread opposition to involvement in Vietnam in US; intersections with Civil Rights movement, second-wave feminism, Black Power, student protests, Sixties counterculture

Vietnam as a “Different War”

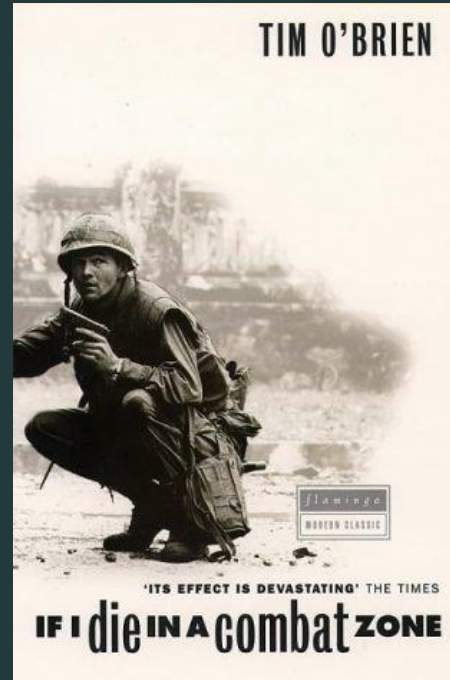
Contrast with WWII



Vietnam War vs WWII

"I grew out of one war and into another. My father came from the leaden ships of the sea, from the Pacific theatre; my mother wore the uniform of the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service]. I was the offspring of that great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s, one explosion in the Baby Boom, one of the millions of new human beings to replace those who had just died. I **was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a rejuvenated, splendidly triumphant nation given to bridle its own good fortunes and success. I was fed by the spoils of 1945 victory.**"

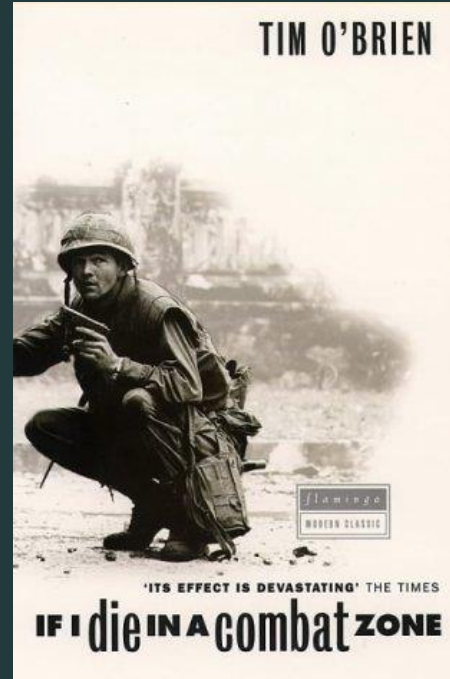
- O'Brien, 'Pro Patria,' in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, pp. 21-23



Vietnam War vs WWII

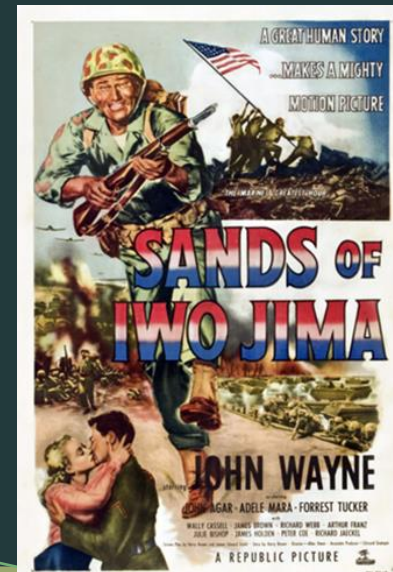
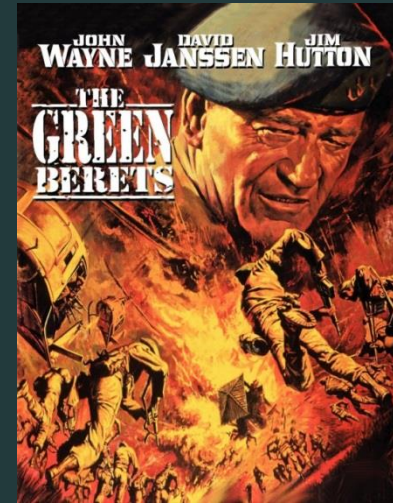
"... Friends introduced me to the army surplus store. We bought dented relics of our fathers' history, rusted canteens and olive-scented, scarred helmet liners. Then we were our fathers, taking on the Japs and the Krauts on the flat fairways of the golf course."

"... I learned about the Second World War, hearing it from men who had fought it. The talk was tough. Nothing to do with causes or reason; the war was right, they muttered, it had to be fought. The talk was of bellies full of German lead the long hike from Normandy to Berlin, close calls and of scars just visible on hairy arms."



Vietnam War vs WWII

- *The Green Berets* (1968, directed by and starring John Wayne) tried to ape WWII combat movies (e.g. *Sands of Iwo Jima*, 1949)
- Allusions to John Wayne recur in veterans' accounts of the war
- Wayne's image and persona as an impact upon psychology of troops in Vietnam: psychoanalyst Robert Jay Lifton recalled holding a rap group on the theme 'How Much of John Wayne is Still in Us?' and described veterans' resistance to 'the John Wayne thing' (see Lifton, *Home From the War*, pp. 94, 238-239, 251-256)



Vietnam War vs WWII

Fighting the John Wayne Syndrome

By ELSA BRENNER

IT has variously been called battle fatigue, shell shock and the Vietnam syndrome. But more recently psychologists are using the term post-traumatic stress to describe the disorder.

Whatever the term, the symptoms are often the same: flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive memories of a painful event, inability to concentrate, irritability and problems with relationships.

Its victims, suffering from what some have termed the John Wayne syndrome, often keep their feelings to themselves and attempt to deal with their problems alone, experts in the field say. Among the most likely to suffer from the disorder are armed forces personnel, emergency medical technicians, police officers and firefighters.

"We're talking about the people who very regularly face life-threatening situations, who experience things out of the range of normal human experience," said W. James Cosse, a Hartsdale psychologist.

A New Group Is Trained

County firefighters, realizing the need to deal with the stresses of their jobs and the importance of heading off serious emotional problems among their ranks, recently formed the Westchester County Paid Firefighters' Critical Incident Debriefing Team.

Twenty-three men — representing firefighters from Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, White Plains and Yonkers — have been trained by Dr. Cosse to recognize the symptoms of stress dis-

order and to help fellow firefighters who have been traumatized in the line of duty.

"We attempt to get behind the big tough-guy facades that often mask the real feelings inside," said Dr. Cosse, who also does critical-incident counseling with the Scarsdale Police Department.

During four training sessions, each lasting three hours, Dr. Cosse taught

Firefighters form a team to intercede in times of crisis.

peer-counseling skills to members of the debriefing team so they could help colleagues deal with the difficult range of emotions that often follows intense rescue efforts.

'We're the Heroes'

"Historically, we're the heroes who aren't supposed to hurt or feel pain or be affected by the things we see, when in reality many of us are being torn apart inside," said Lieut. Roy Miserindino, coordinator of the debriefing unit and a member of the Mount Vernon Fire Department.

Lieutenant Miserindino recalled an incident 10 years ago in Yonkers when firefighters knew there were

children trapped inside a building but were uncertain about how to reach them.

"They had to decide which room to go to, and they ended up going to the wrong room," Lieutenant Miserindino said. "The bottom line was that the children were in a room that no one could get to. But that's not what the guys remembered afterward. They only could think that somehow they made a mistake, that somehow they failed."

The symptoms of post-traumatic stress often follow the death of a co-worker in the line of duty, the death of a civilian — especially a child — or the death of a victim despite heroic lifesaving efforts. But firefighters, instead of talking out their feelings, traditionally keep their emotions to themselves, said Lieutenant Miserindino, who holds a master's degree in psychology and is a licensed alcohol counselor.

Drinking Instead of Talking

He said firefighters often think it is a sign of weakness to talk about their disappointments or share feelings of sadness.

"Instead, a common thing after a rough night is to go out and have a few drinks," Lieutenant Miserindino said. "We're talking about an inherently high-stress job and lots of high blood pressure, heart attacks and not always the most constructive ways of working out feelings."

Lieut. Peter Mitchell, a member of the Yonkers Fire Department who began efforts to form the countywide debriefing team, said firefighters were "finally realizing that it's time for the John Wayne syndrome to go out the back door."

Elsa Brenner,
'Fighting the John
Wayne Syndrome,'
New York Times, 17
November 1991,
section WC, p. 12

Vietnam as a “Different War”

Different names:

- Popularly referred to as 'Vietnam War' or even simply 'Vietnam' ('Nam')
- 'The Second Indochina War'
- Known as 'The Resistance War Against America' (*Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*) 'The Resistance War against the American Empire to Save the Nation' (*Kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước*) or 'The American War' (*Cuộc chiến tranh Mỹ*) in Vietnam
- Referred to as the 'Vietnam Conflict' in US Governmental documents

Vietnam as a “Different War”

Different chronologies:

Start date?

- 1950? (date of arrival of first US ‘military advisors’ into Vietnam)
- 1955? (date of first US serviceman to lose their life in Vietnam)
- 1964? (Congressional approval for escalation of US military involvement in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident)
- 1946? (beginning of Viet Minh war of resistance against French rule)
- 1858? (start of French colonial presence in Southeast Asia)

End date?

- 1973? (cease-fire between US and north Vietnam regime)
- 1975? (fall of Saigon, reunification of north and south Vietnam)
- 1995? (normalisation of US–Vietnamese diplomatic relations)
- Ongoing? (figuratively)

Perceptions of Veterans

First Blood (novel 1972, film 1982)



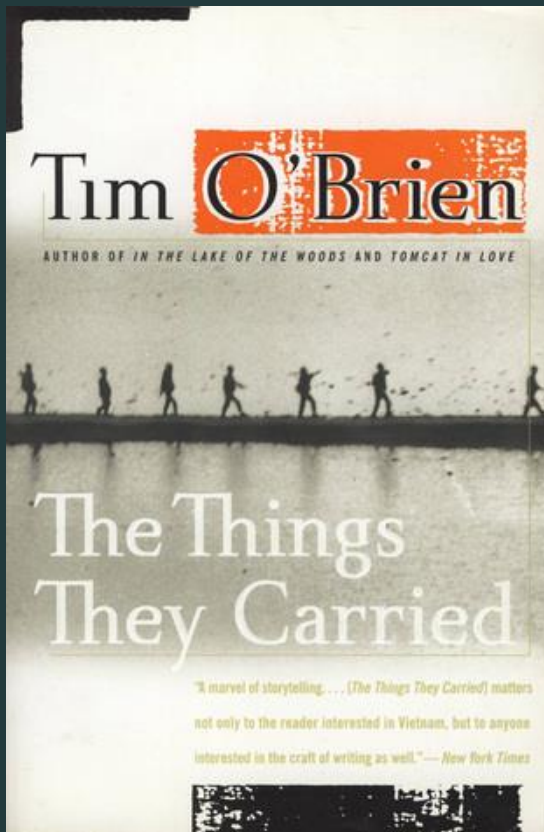
Trautman: This mission is over, Rambo. It's over Johnny. It's over!
Rambo: Nothing is over! You just don't turn it off! It wasn't my war! You asked me, I didn't ask you! And I did what I had to do to win! But somebody wouldn't let us win! And I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap! Who are they to protest me? Who are they? Unless they've been me and been there and know what the hell they're yelling about!

Perceptions of Veterans



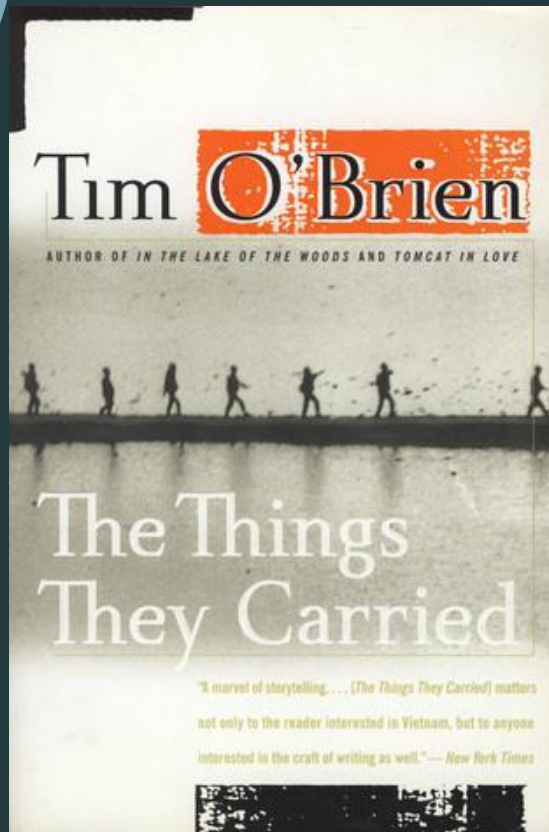
- Feelings of alienation: veterans' homecoming not accompanied by triumphalism that characterised WWII
- Retrospective narratives by and about veterans referred to confrontations with hostile anti-war protestors on arriving back at American airports or naval ports.
- Recurrent trope of veterans being spat upon by civilians or anti-war protestors

No parades?



- How is this issue reflected upon in O'Brien's novel – particularly the story 'Notes'?

No parades?



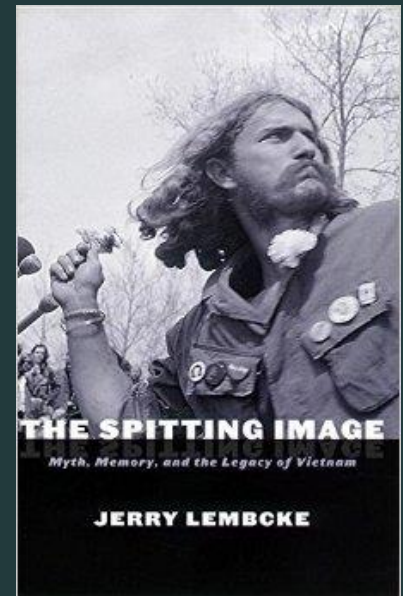
“God, this is starting to sound like some jerkoff vet crying in his beer. Sorry about that. I'm no basket case—not even any bad dreams. And I don't feel like anybody mistreats me or anything, except sometimes people act too nice, too polite, like they're afraid they might ask the wrong question . . . But I shouldn't bitch. One thing I hate – really hate – is all those whiner-vets. Guys sniveling about how they didn't get any parades. Such absolute crap. I mean, who in his right mind wants a parade? Or getting his back clapped by a bunch of patriotic idiots who don't know jack about what it feels like to kill people or get shot at or sleep in the rain or watch your buddy go down underneath the mud? Who needs it?”

- Norman Bowker letter to Tim O'Brien, 'Notes,' *The Things They Carried*



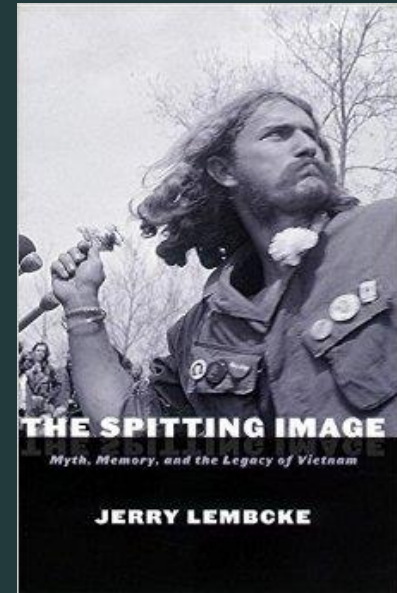
‘The Spitting Image’

- Homecoming parades less common than in WWII; but some held
- Jerry Lembcke argues US military deliberately briefed veterans to expect hassle by anti-war protestors (as shown in *Coming Home*)
- Lembcke finds no documentary evidence of veterans having being spat on by protestors

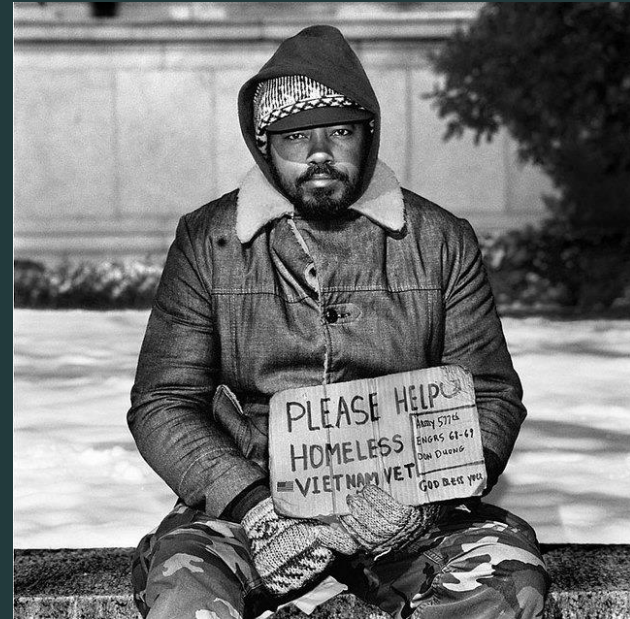
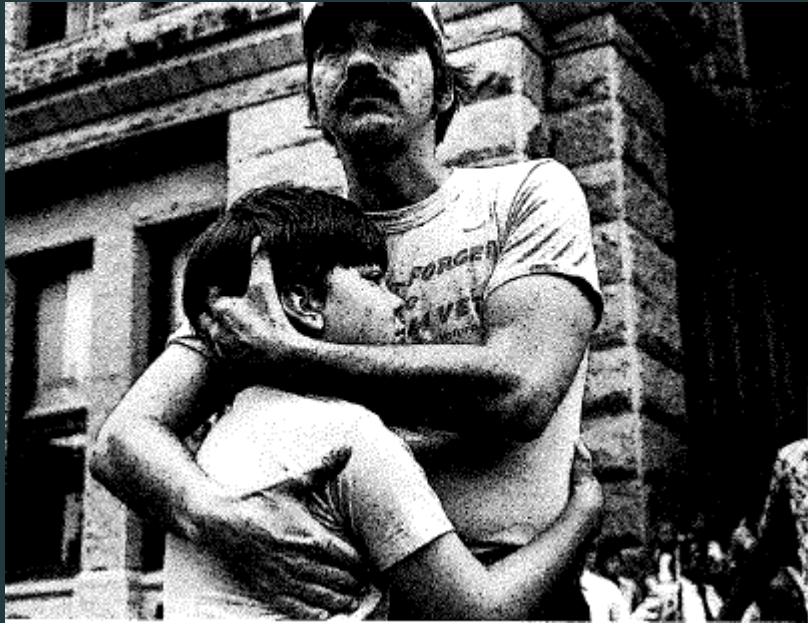


‘The Spitting Image’

- Ongoing currency of ‘the spitting image’ despite its lack of evidence
- Analytical problem: how to prove something *did not* happen merely by using archival sources
- Malleability of memory:
 - susceptible to influence by outside culture
 - does not necessarily obey criteria conventionally employed by historians



Vietnam War as Trauma



- Physical and psychological trauma experienced by veterans (and exacerbated by homecoming experiences)
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) first clinically defined in treatment of US Vietnam veterans
- Veterans a very visual, physical reminder of the war & impact in US society
- Trope of 'healing' scars, wounds, and traumas inflicted upon veterans and nation alike

Vietnam War and Memory

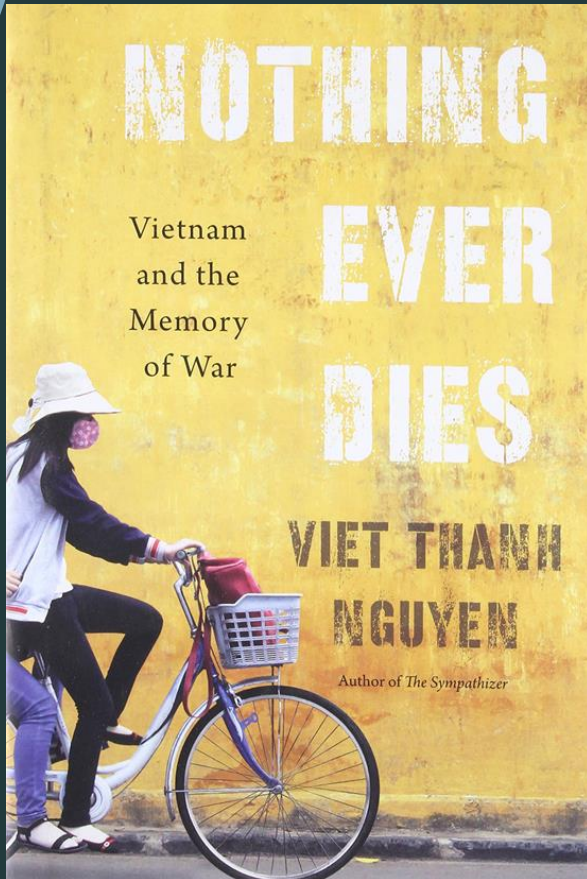
"When *Platoon* was first released [in 1987], a number of people asked me 'Was the war really like that? I never found an answer, in part because, no matter how realistic and graphic, a movie is after all a movie, and war is only like itself. But I also failed to find an answer because what 'really' happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. This is odd, even painful, in some ways. But it is also **testimony to the way our memories work**. The Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves."

- Vietnam veteran William Adams in 1989, cited by Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1997), p. 86.

Vietnam War and Memory Industry

"An entire memory industry exists, ready to capitalize on history by selling memory to consumers ... [This] is merely a symptom of ... the industrialization of memory. Industrializing memory proceeds in parallel with how warfare is industrialized as part and parcel of capitalist society, where the actual firepower exercised in a war is matched by the firepower of memory that defines and refines that war's identity. Thus, the Pentagon's war of attrition in Vietnam was matched by Hollywood's *Apocalypse Now* and its entire celluloid campaign to refight the Vietnam War on global movie screen."

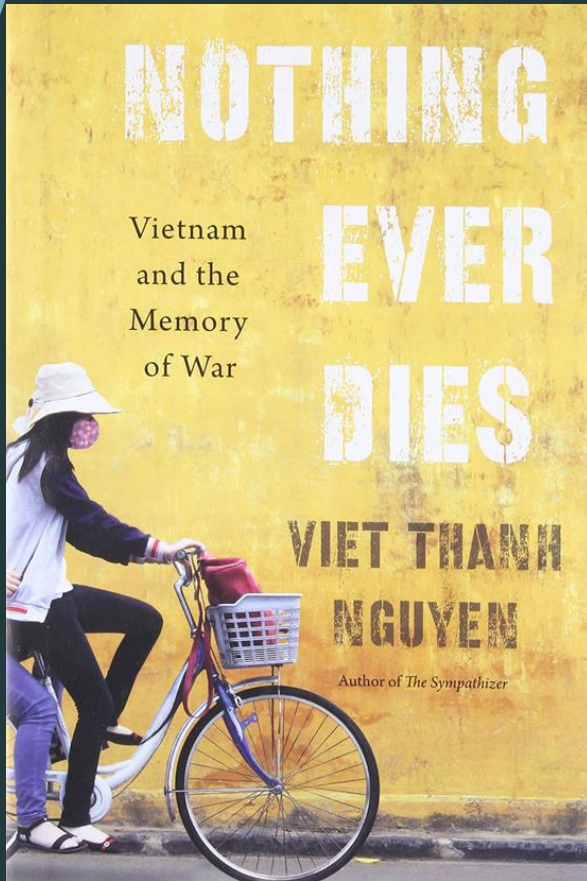
- Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, pp. 13–14.



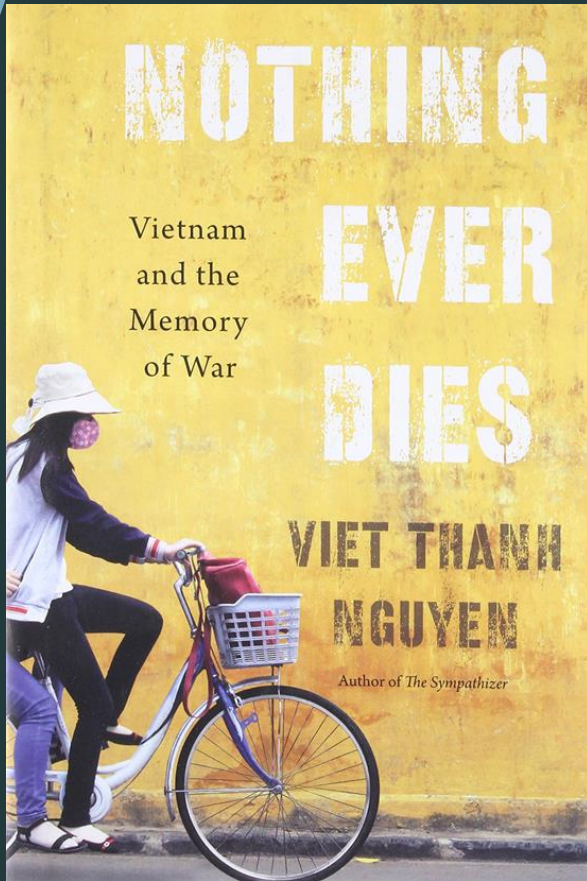
Vietnam War and Memory Industry

" ... Even identifying the sites of industrial memory is not enough to show how the strong industries of strong countries will find more receptive audiences and consumers than the weak industries of weak countries will."

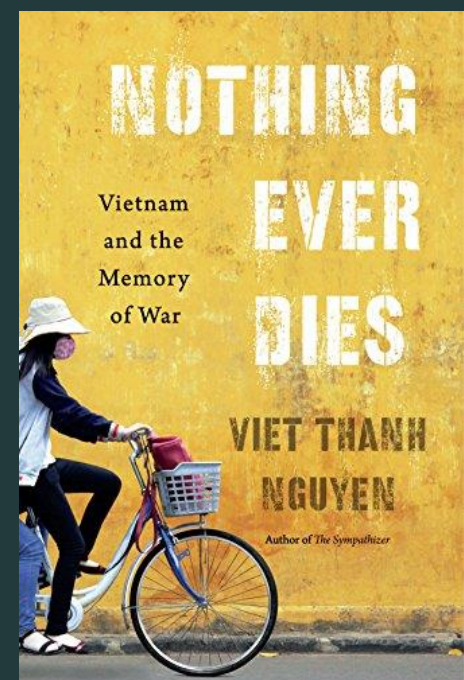
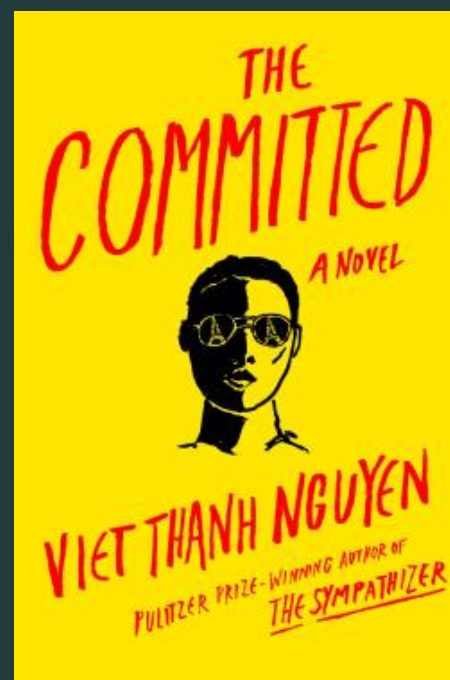
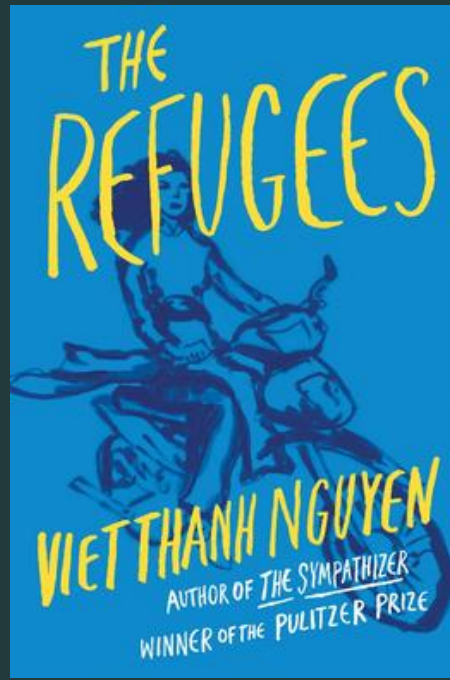
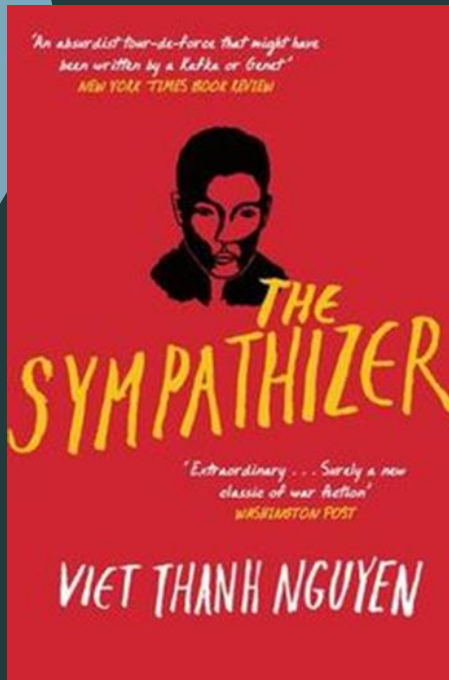
- Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, p. 15.



Vietnam War and Memory Industry



"Because of the reach of American military and mnemonic power ... I always run into American memories. No matter where I go outside of Vietnam, if I want to discuss the war, even with intellectuals and academics, I often have to encounter their encounters with American memories. The Ivy League professor of contemporary literature who inquired about Tim O'Brien at my lecture on Vietnamese civilian war memories (because, she asked, what about actual war stories?); the Indian professor of Indian cinema who brought up *Apocalypse Now* when I mentioned Vietnamese cinema about the war ..."



Vietnamese-American Diasporic Literature

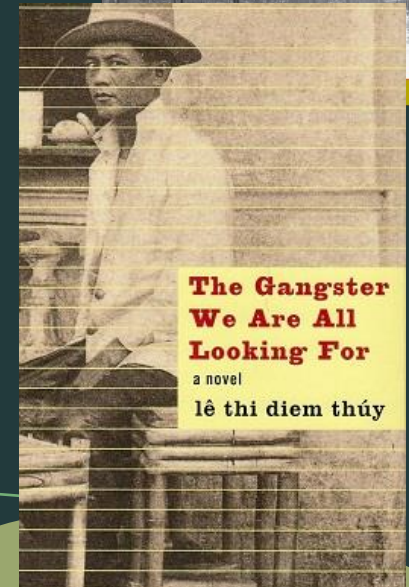
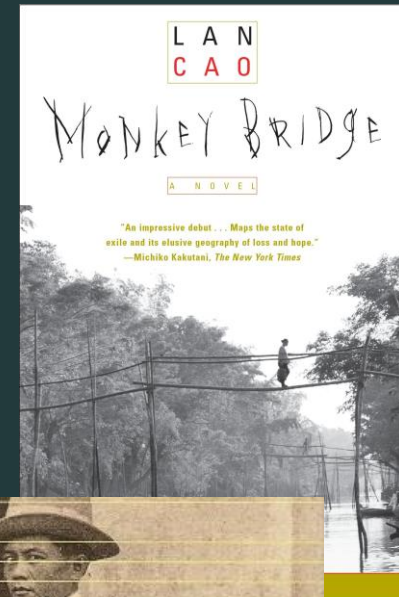
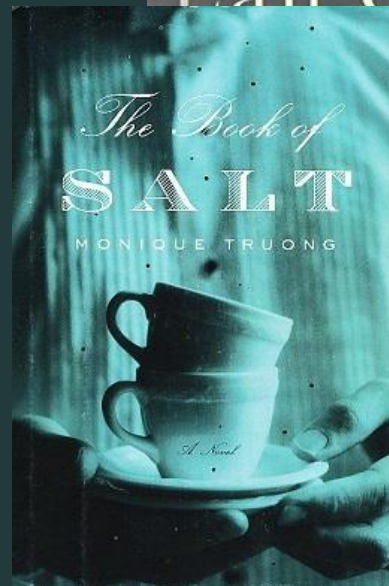
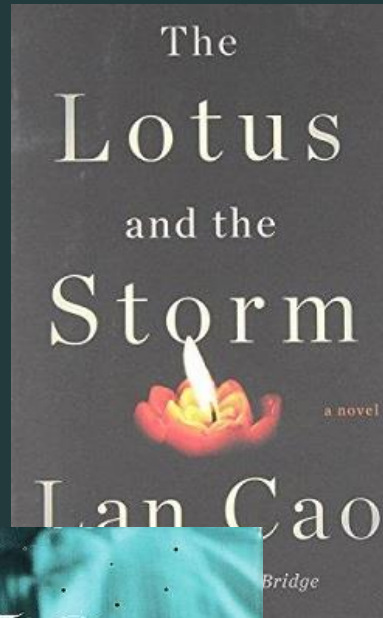
Vietnamese-American Diasporic Literature

"One of the most important books of Vietnamese American and Vietnam War literature. . . . Moving, powerful"
—Viet Thanh Nguyen, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Sympathizer*

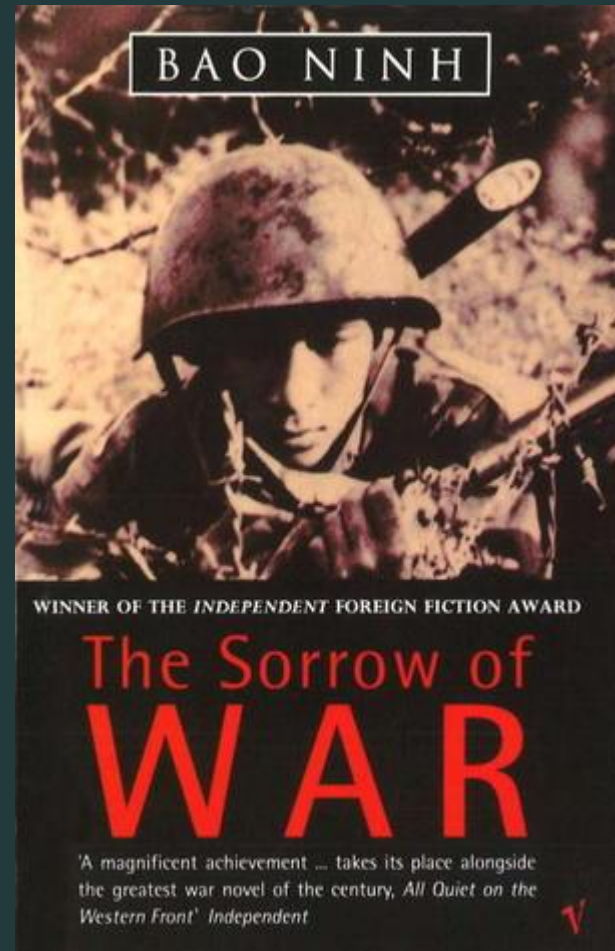
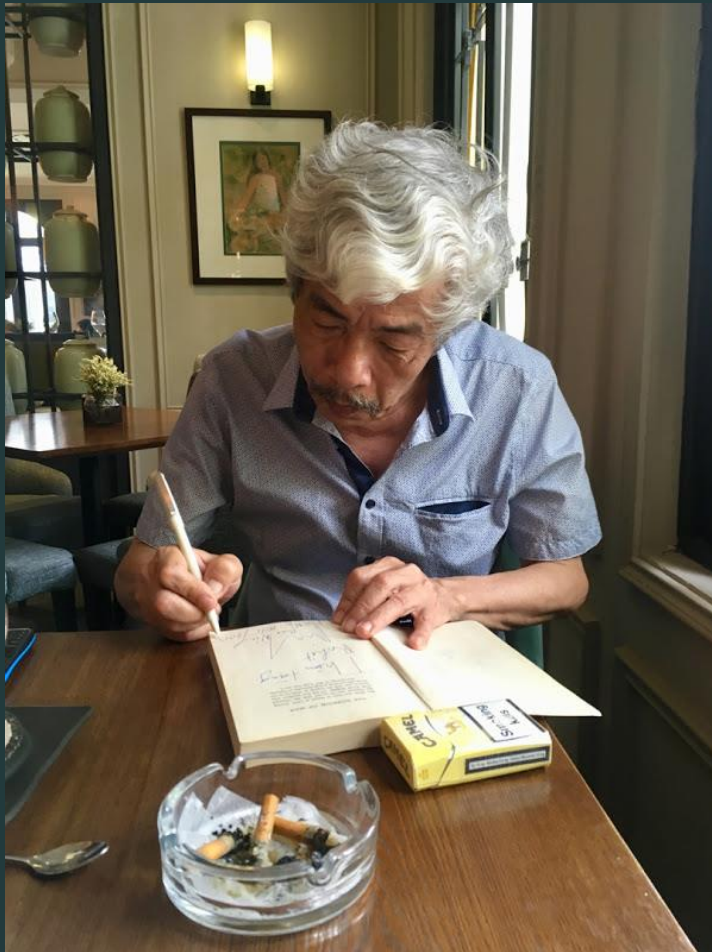
When Heaven and Earth Changed Places

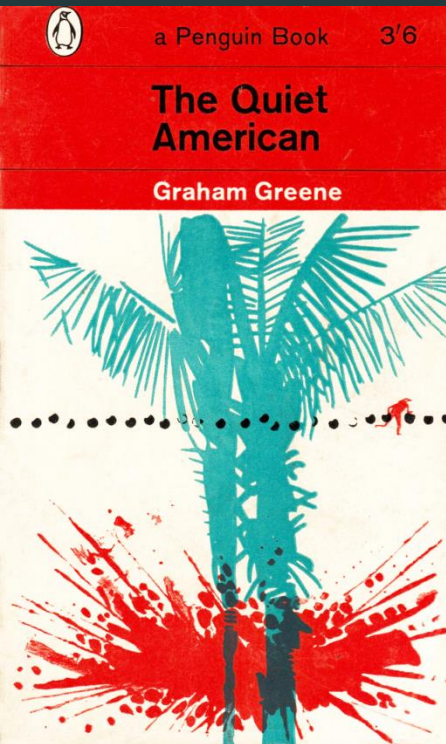
A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace

With a New Afterword

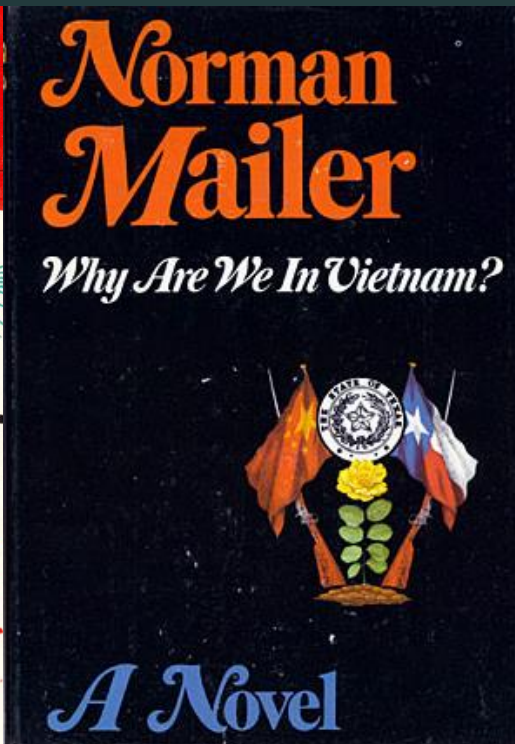


American War in Vietnamese Literature

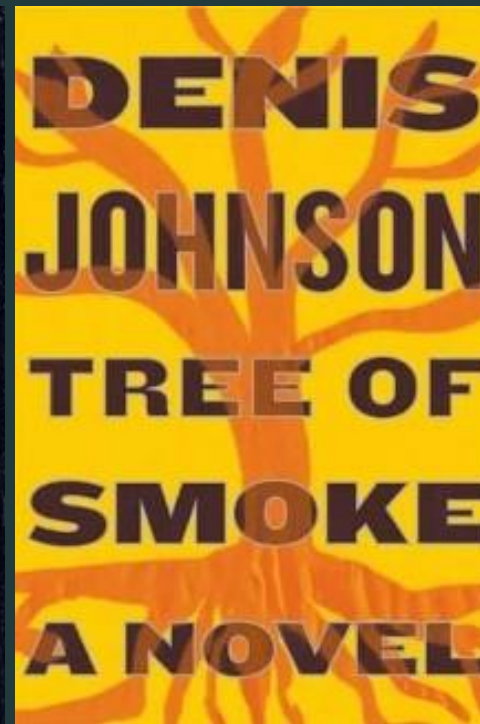




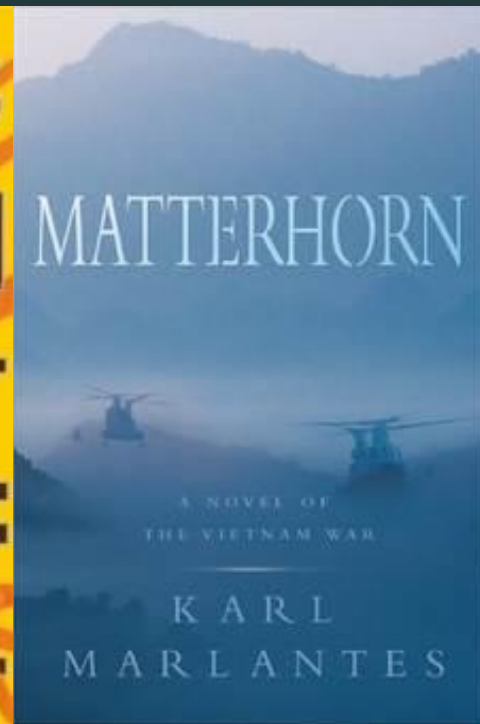
1955



1967

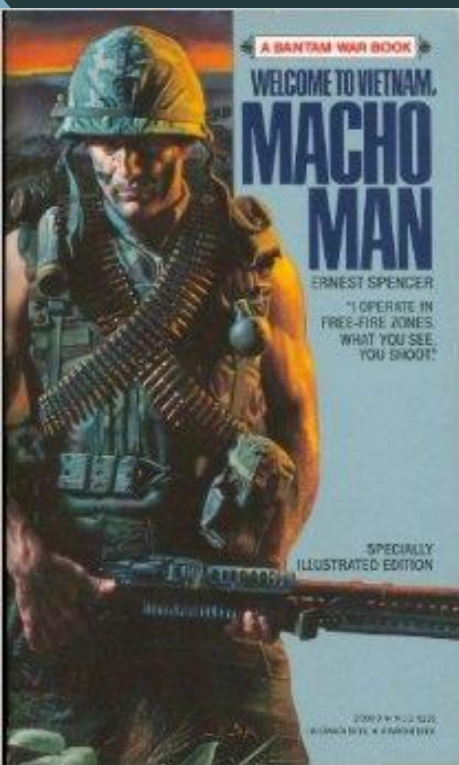


2007
Winner of the US National
Book Award; Pulitzer Prize
finalist

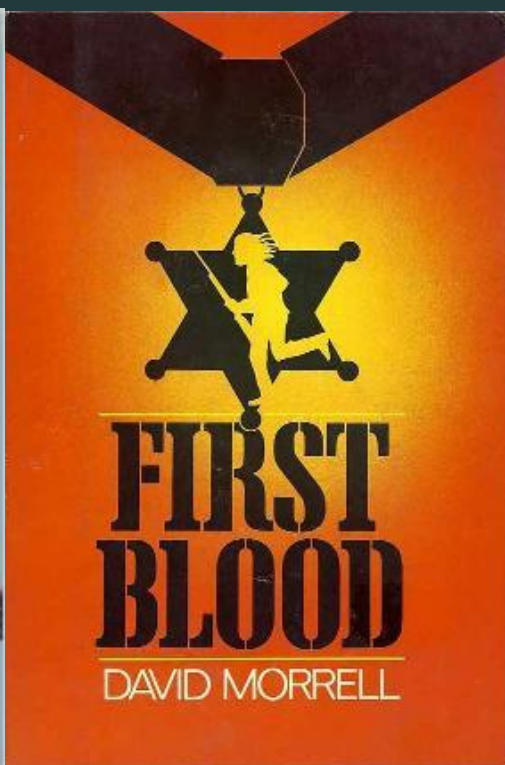


2009/2010

Vietnam War in American Novels

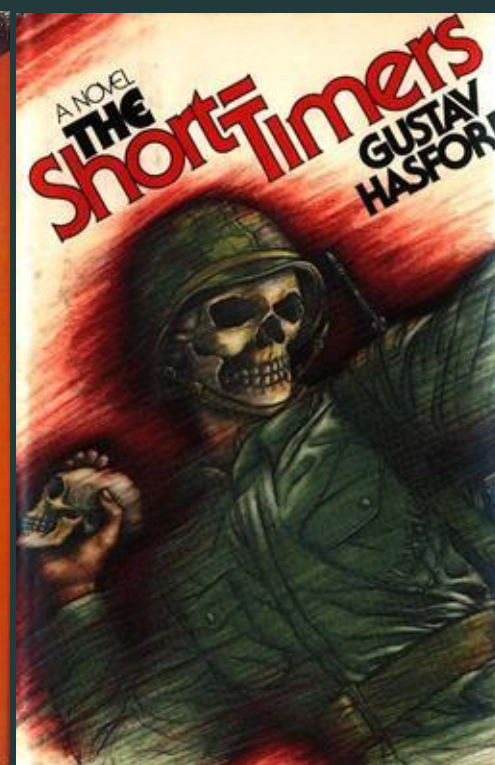


1987



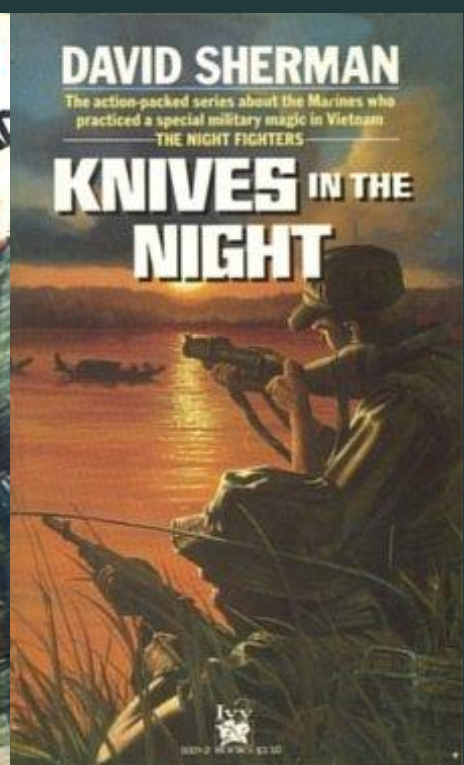
1972

Inspiration for *First Blood*
(1982)



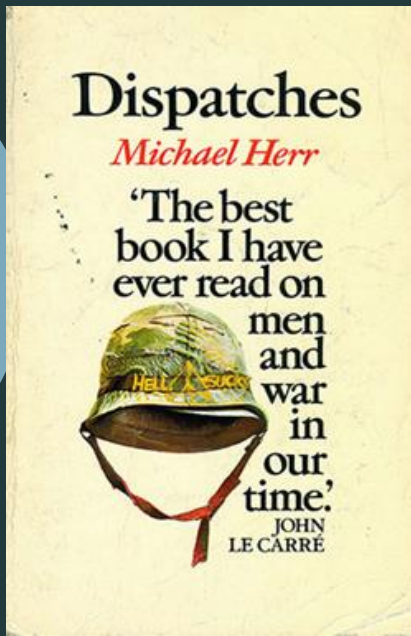
1979

Inspiration for *Full Metal Jacket*
(1987)



1987

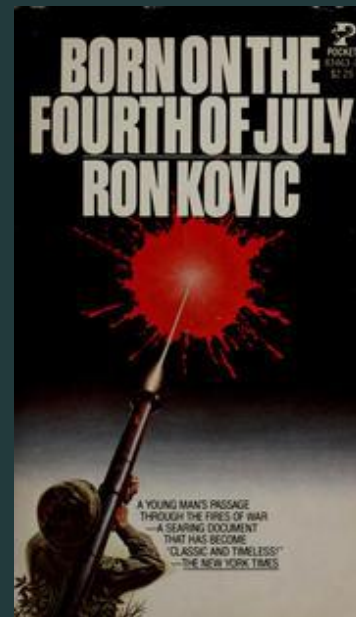
Vietnam War in American Novels 'Carnography'



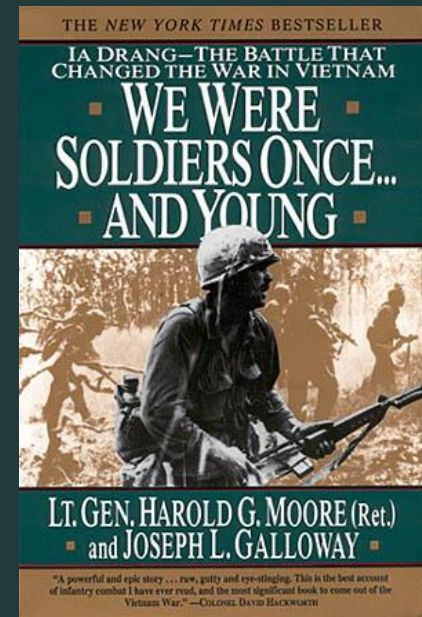
1977
Herr worked as a consultant on *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*



1977

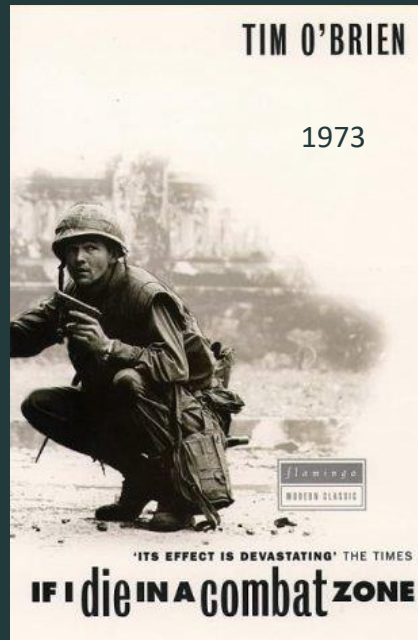


1976
Inspiration for *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989)

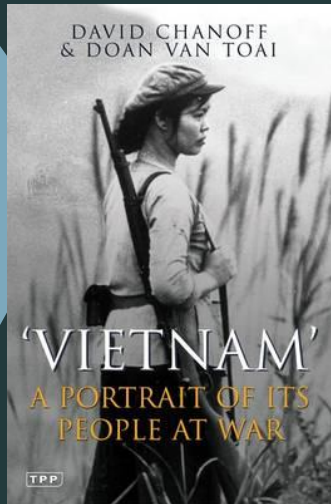


1992
Inspiration for *We Were Soldiers* (2002)

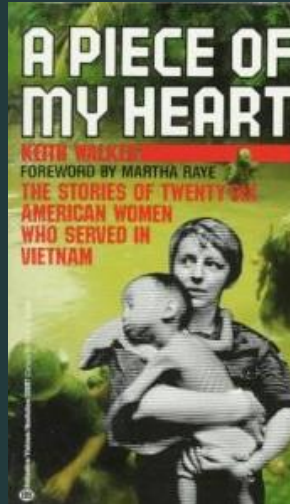
Vietnam War Memoirs



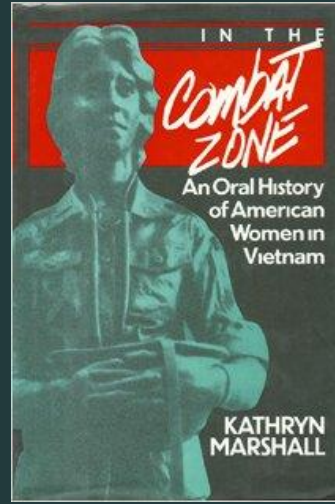
1973



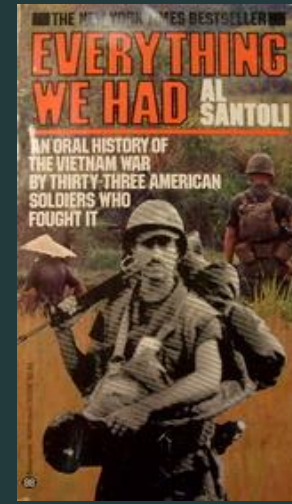
1987



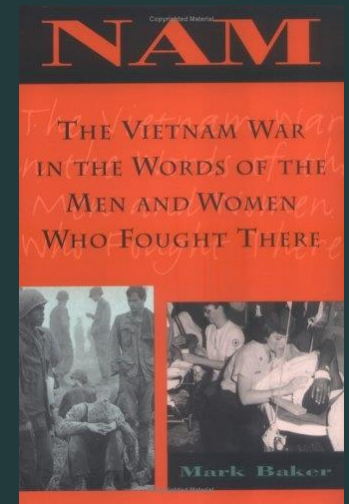
1986



1987

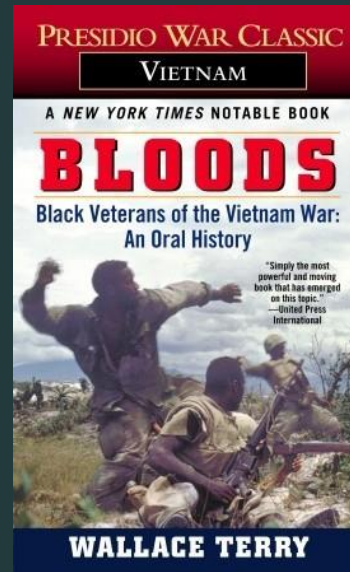


1981



1982

Vietnam War Oral Histories



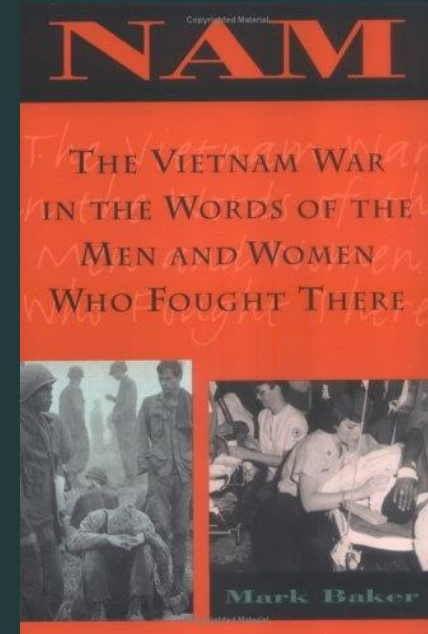
1984

Vietnam War and Storytelling

"To the men and women who aren't here to tell their stories."

"This book is not the Truth about Vietnam. Everyone holds a piece of that puzzle. But these war stories, filled with emotion and stripped of ambition and romance, may bring us closer to the truth than we have come so far."

"You want to hear a ge-u-ine war story. I **only understand Vietnam as though it were a story.** It's not like it happened to me."

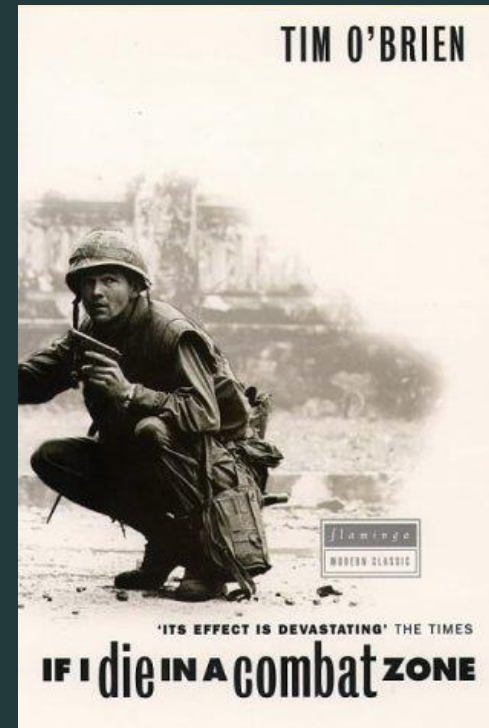


dedication,
introduction, epigraph
to Mark Baker, *Nam:
The Vietnam War in
the Words of the Men
and Women who
Fought There* (Abacus:
London, 1987 [1982]),
pp. v, xiv–xv, xvii

Vietnam War and Storytelling

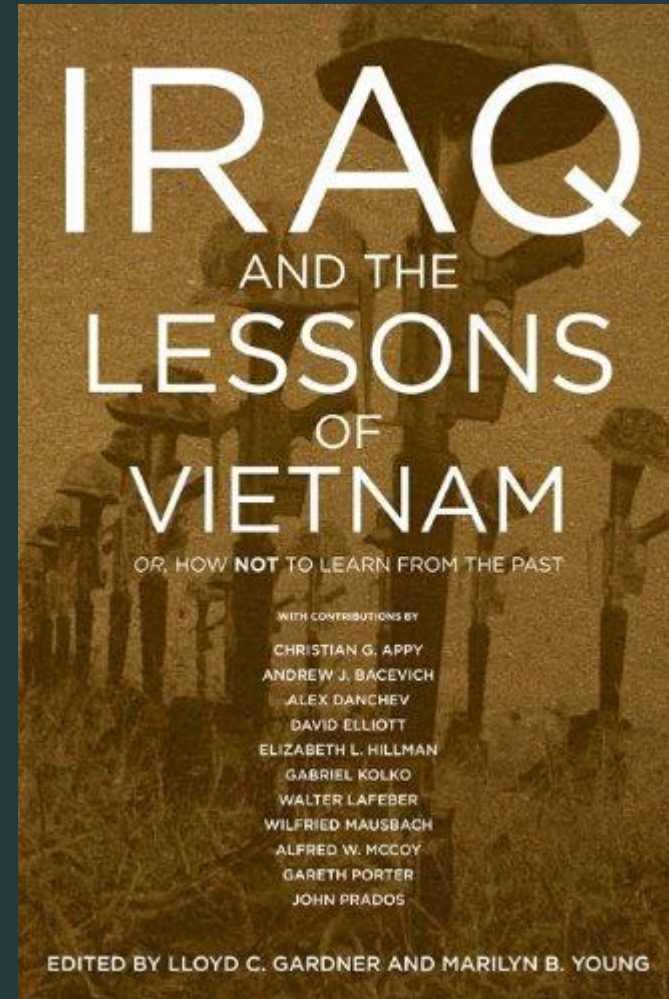
"Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyse them and live our lives and advise others as a result? **Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.**"

- Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (Flamingo: London, 1995 [1973]), pp. 34

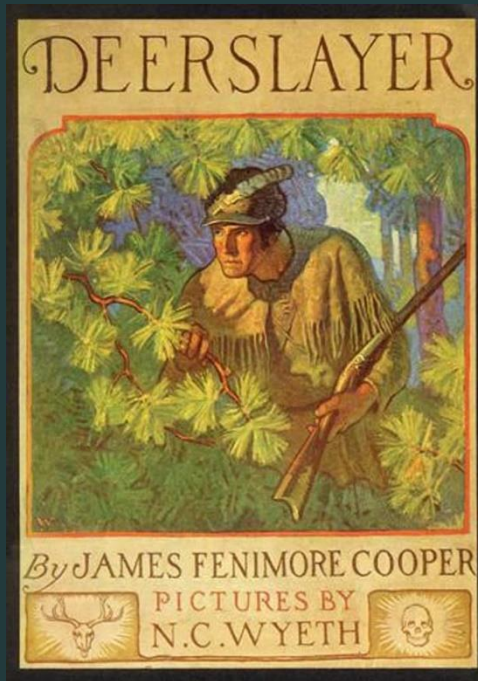


Vietnam War and Storytelling

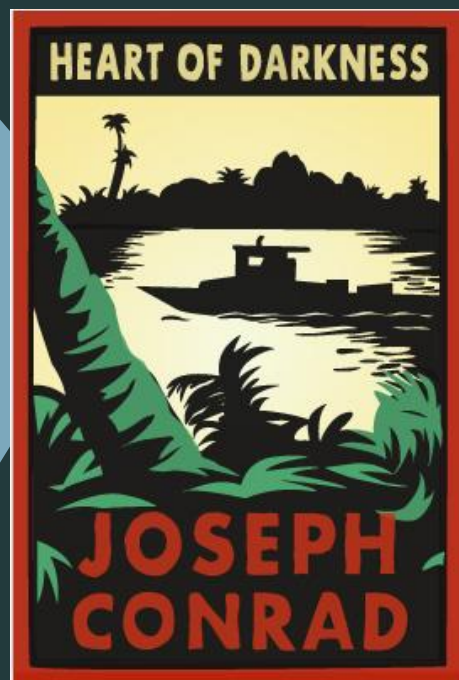
- What – and whose – stories about the war should be remembered, and how?
- What 'lessons' can be taken from the war?
- Can these 'lessons' apply to US foreign policy?
- Can Vietnam War stories be made compatible with existing narrative formulae?



Vietnam War and the Frontier Myth



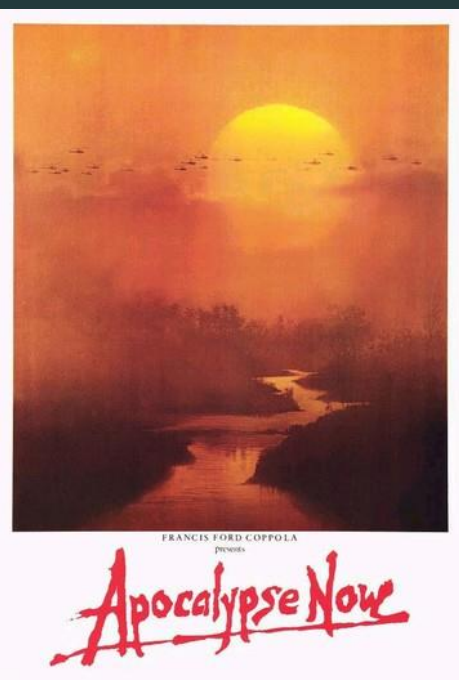
- Framing of Vietnam War as encounter between 'savagery' and 'civilisation' and equation of Vietnam and 'wilderness' of the American West
- Trope of 'going native' to adapt and survive amidst 'alien' landscape
- Allusions to the figure of the 'White Indian' created by James Fenimore Cooper



Vietnam and *Heart of Darkness*



- Vietnam as "some heavy-heart-of-darkness trip," Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977)
- *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as a revision of *Heart of Darkness* (1899)
- *Heart of Darkness* as an investigation of the proximity and contiguousness of savagery and civilisation



Artful Dodge Interviews Tim O'Brien

Daniel Bourne and Debra Shostak/1991

From *Artful Dodge* 22/23 (1992): 74–90. Reprinted with permission of Daniel Bourne.

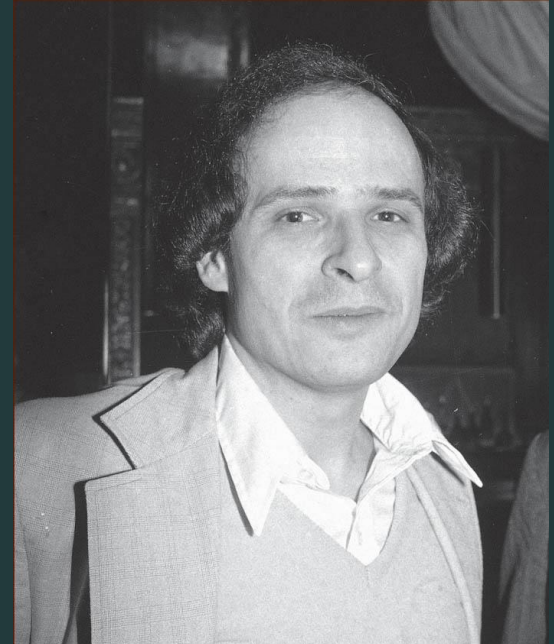
DB: Now that you are looking at the war in that way, how have you found this terrain of Vietnam a convenient metaphor?

O'Brien: That's mostly how I look at it—though I'm not sure I'd call it a convenient metaphor. I'd say an essential metaphor or a life-given metaphor that, for me, is inescapable. And I'm grateful for it in a sense. I've used it in the way Conrad writes about the sea, life on the water, stories set on boats, from *Heart of Darkness* to *Lord Jim*, from *Nostromo* to *Typhoon* to *Youth*. But Conrad is no more writing about the sea than I am writing about war. That is, he's not writing about marine biology and dolphins and porpoises and waves. He's writing about human beings under pressure, under the certain kinds of pressure that the sea exerts, life aboard vessels, the discipline of living aboard a ship at sea, the expectations of behavior that are a part of a ship's life. *Lord Jim* and his act of cowardice and so on. Conrad uses the sea the same way I use Vietnam, as a way to get at the human heart and the pressure exerted on it. He's not writing literally about sailing and sailors. At the same time, this life aboard vessels carries with it a framework for storytelling that he uses beautifully. My content is not bombs and bullets and airplanes and strategy and tactics. It is not the politics of Vietnam. It too is about the human heart and the pressures put on it. In a war story, there are life and death stakes built in immediately, which apply just by the framework of the story. There is a pressure on characters that in other kinds of fiction one would have to meticulously build. So, in a way, using the framework of war is a short cut to get at things without having to engage in some of this mechanical work that I don't particularly like, to get bogged down in plotting. I don't like reading heavily plotted stories. I like a situation to have an instant sort of pressure.

CONVERSATIONS WITH

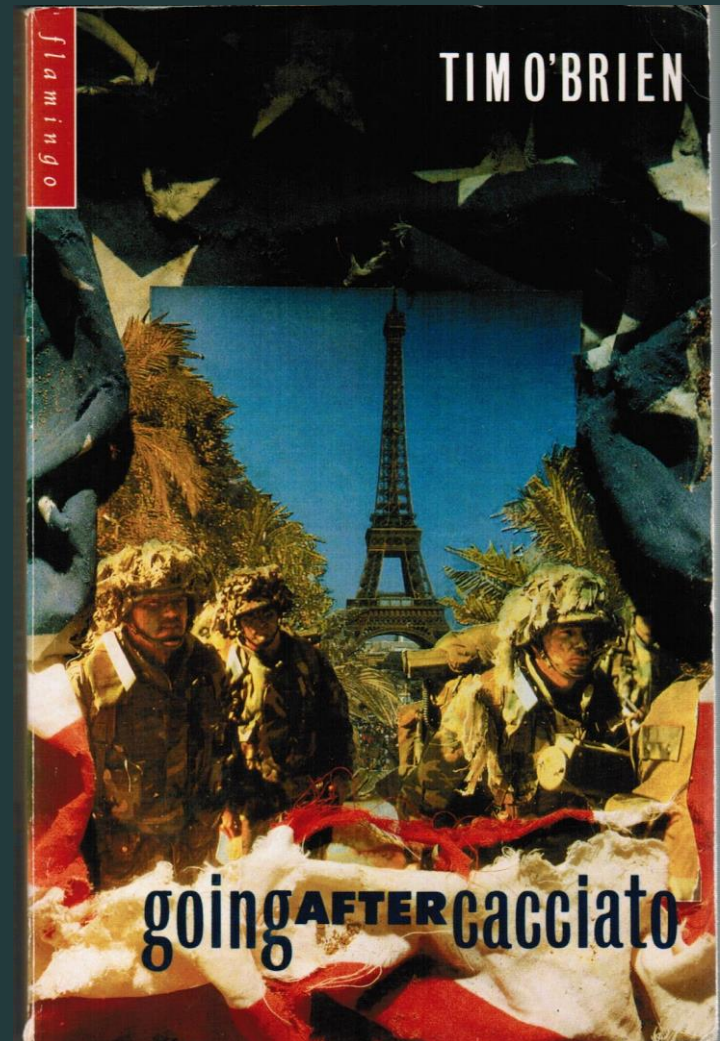
Tim O'Brien

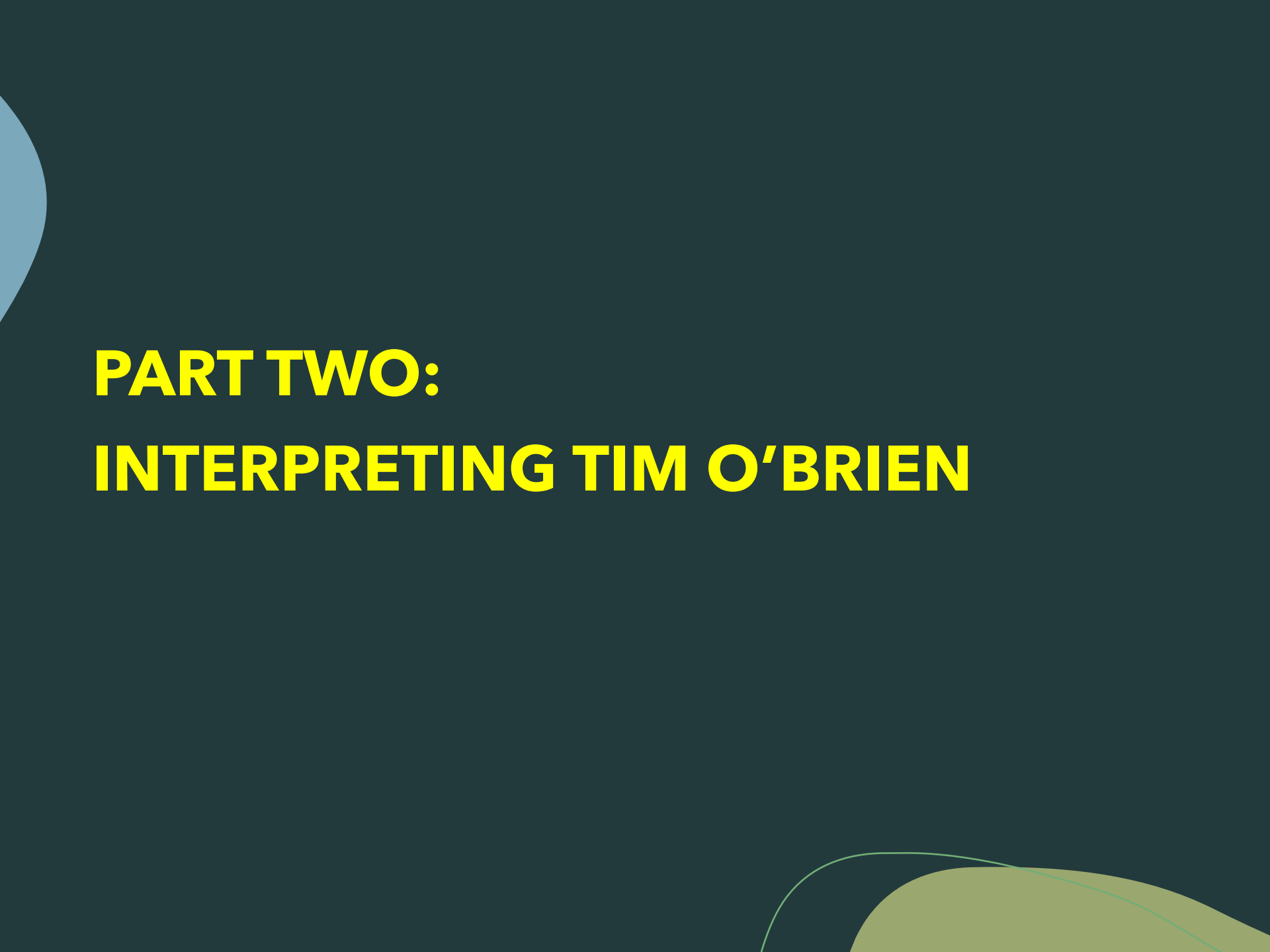
EDITED BY PATRICK A. SMITH



Conrad and O'Brien

- How might *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad feature as influences in *The Things They Carried* and O'Brien's wider oeuvre?





PART TWO: INTERPRETING TIM O'BRIEN

Language in *The Things They Carried*

- Is there anything notable about the way language is used by O'Brien?
- What do you make of his prose style and vocabulary?
- Does the book foreground language as a theme/problem?
- Are there any particular linguistic issues or problems that might be raised by attempts to represent the Vietnam War?

Language in *The Things They Carried*

They were called legs or grunts. To carry something was to hump it, as when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps. In its intransitive form, to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive.

- From 'The Things They Carried' chapter/story

Language in *The Things They Carried*

They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo. They told stories about Ted Lavender's supply of tranquilizers, how the poor guy didn't feel a thing, how incredibly tranquil he was.

- From 'The Things They Carried' chapter/story

Language in *The Things They Carried*

For almost two weeks, Sanders said, they lived the night life. That was the phrase everyone used: the night life. A language trick. It made things seem tolerable. How's the Nam treating you? one guy would ask, and some other guy would say, Hey, one big party, just living the night life.

- From 'Night Life'

Language in *The Things They Carried*

In Vietnam, we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead. Shaking hands, that was one way. By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was. By our language, which was both hard and wistful, we transformed the bodies into piles of waste. Thus, when someone got killed, as Curt Lemon did, his body was not really a body, but rather one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage. I learned that words make a difference. It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead. And so a VC nurse, fried by napalm, was a crispy critter. A Vietnamese baby, which lay nearby, was a roasted peanut. "Just a crunchie munchie," Rat Kiley said as he stepped over the body.

- From 'The Lives of the Dead'

Vietnam War and Language

"Briefings came in a language that sounded cosmetic ... [and] since most of the journalism from the war was framed in that language it would be as impossible to tell what Vietnam looked like from reading most newspaper stories as it would to know how it smelled."

- From Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977)

"Reports had to be written in that clinical, euphemistic language the military prefers to simple English. If a marine had been shot through the guts ... I had to say 'GSW' (gun-shot wound) 'through and through, abdomen.' Shrapnel wounds were 'multiple fragment lacerations,' and the phrase for dismemberment 'traumatic amputation.'"

- From Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977)

Dispatches

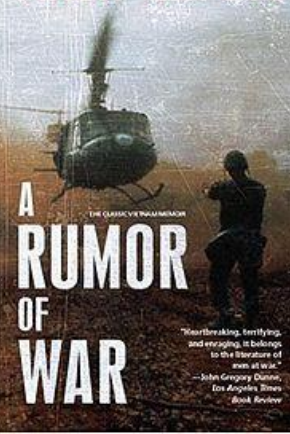
Michael Herr

'The best book I have ever read on men and war in our time.'

JOHN LE CARRE



PHILIP CAPUTO



Vietnam War and Language

"It's funny what you remember. Like a black paratrooper with the 101st glided by and said 'I been scaled man, I'm *smooth* now,' and went on, **leaving me to wonder where he'd been to get his language.**"

- From Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977)

Dispatches

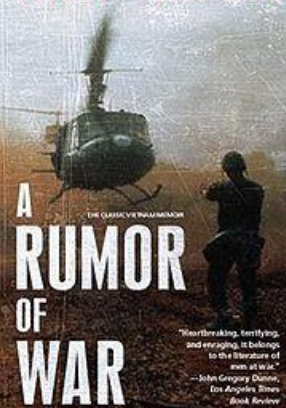
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Vietnam War and Postmodernism

"Michael Herr ... evokes **the space of postmodern warfare** ... in his great book on the experience of Vietnam, *Dispatches*. The **extraordinary linguistic innovations** of this work may still be considered postmodern, in the eclectic way in which its language impersonally fuses a whole range of contemporary collective idiolects, most notably rock language and Black language: **but the fusion is dictated by problems of content.**

"This **first terrible postmodernist war cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie** – indeed that **breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms** is, along with the **breakdown of any shared language** through which a veteran might convey such experience, among the principal subjects of the book and may be said to open up the place of **a whole new reflexivity.**"

- Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1991), pp. 44-45

Dispatches

Michael Herr

"The best
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JOHN
LE CARRÉ



POSTMODERNISM

OR,
THE CULTURAL LOGIC
OF
LATE CAPITALISM



FREDRIC JAMESON

Vietnam War and Postmodernism

Jameson posits four distinctive aspects of postmodern literature:

- Experimentations with style and language
- Experimentations with narrative and representational forms
- Experimentations with structure and content
- Experimentations with modes of perceiving the world

AND (crucially) that postmodern literature constitutes a questioning and problematizing of all the above concepts and phenomena

Dispatches

Michael Herr

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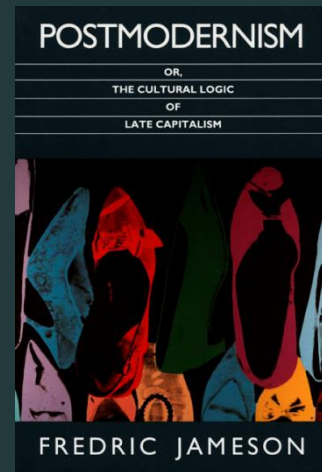
Postmodern literary 'experiments'

- **Style and language**
- **Narrative and representational forms**
- **Structure and content**
- **Modes of perceiving the world**

Vietnam War and Postmodernism

For Jameson postmodernism is more than a literary phenomenon; it involves fundamental reorientation of how space and time are perceived and experienced:

- **A flattening out of distinctions between different geographical locations** ("our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically – let alone theoretically – incapable of distantation," Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 48–49)
- **A flattening out of distinctions between different historical epochs** ("a waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way ... there no longer seem[s] any organic relationship between the American history we learn from schoolbooks and the lived experience of ... of our own daily life;" "the conception of postmodernism outlined here is **historical rather than merely stylistic**," Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 21, 45–46)



Vietnam War and Postmodernism

- **A flattening out of distinctions between different geographical locations?**
- **A flattening out of distinctions between different historical epochs?**

Vietnam War and Postmodernism

- **A flattening out of distinctions between different geographical locations?**

- Simultaneity of war at home and abroad
- Reduced distances for communication and travel
- Reduced significance of nation-state borders

- **A flattening out of distinctions between different historical epochs?**

- Loss of continuity from traditional historic narratives American myths told (tell) about the nation
- Impingement of movies and popular culture on understandings of history
- Perpetual refighting of the war

Vietnam War and Postmodernism

- **Is Tim O'Brien a
'postmodern' author?**

O'Brien as Postmodernist

- **Flattening of distinctions between geographical locations?**
 - Simultaneity of war at home and abroad (e.g. juxtaposition of Iowan lake and Vietnam shit field in 'Speaking of Courage')
 - Reduced distances for communication and travel (e.g. ease by which Mary Anne arrives 'in country' in 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong')
- **Flattening of distinctions between historical epochs?**
 - Shifts backward and forward in time; unstable chronology
 - Sense in which O'Brien's war is still occurring through the "spell of memory and imagination" (*Things*, p. 236)

Tim O'Brien and Modernism

- Judged by aesthetic or stylistic criteria alone, postmodernism cannot be considered a fundamental departure in prior literary tradition
 - **Experimentations with style and language**
 - **Experimentations with narrative and representational forms**
 - **Experimentations with structure and content**
 - **Experimentations with modes of perceiving the world**
- All of the above could apply equally to 'modernist authors' (e.g. William Faulkner or James Joyce)
- WWI crucial influence on literary modernism, which re-evaluated commonly-held Western societal myths

O'Brien as Modernist

"Erik [O'Brien's friend during basis training for the army] became Ezra Pound. Seriously, slowly he recited a portion of 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley'

'These fought in any case,
and some believing,
 pro domo, in any case ...
Some quick to arm,
some quick to adventure,
some for fear of weakness,
some for fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination.
learning later ...
some in fear, learning love of slaughter;

Died some, pro patria,
Non "dulce" non "et decor" ... [all ellipses in original text]."



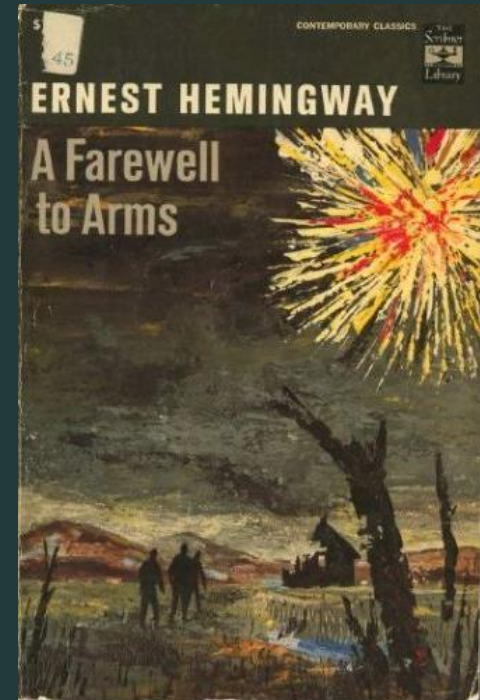
- O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, p. 45; see also reference to "a very old and terrible lie" (a la Wilfred Owen), *Things*, p. 68

O'Brien as Modernist

"I remembered one of Hemingway's stories about a battle in WWI, about the hideous deaths of human beings, swarming into the fight ... I wondered why he did not care to talk about the thoughts these men must have had. Certainly those suffering and scared human beings must have wondered whether their cause was worthy?"

"Grace under pressure, Hemingway would say. That is how you recognise a brave man. But somehow grace under pressure is inefficient. It's too easy to affect, and it's too hard to see through it ... grace under pressure is no courage."

- O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, pp. 98, 146



O'Brien as Modernist?

- What does O'Brien say about courage and bravery in *The Things They Carried* – especially 'Speaking of Courage'?
- What attitudes does O'Brien express with respect to masculinity and gender roles in *The Things They Carried*?

O'Brien as Postmodernist

- Dialogue with Hemingway et al an attempt to question, revise modernism
- Meditation on the utility of language itself: what do we *mean* by words like 'courage' (or 'truth,' 'obscenity,' etc.)

O'Brien as Postmodernist

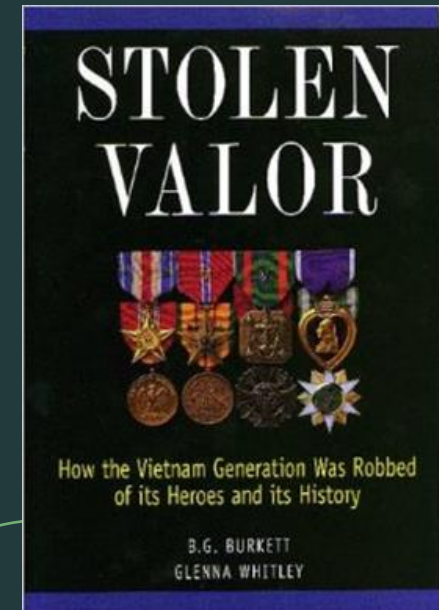
- Experimentations with *form*: 'Good Form' chapter; unorthodox structure (a novel? a memoir? a short story collection?); interventions commenting on the book's contents ('How to Tell a True War Story,' 'Notes,' 'Field Trip')
- Experimentations with *narrative*: disparate narrative voices (O'Brien's position as author/narrator; who is telling a particular story at any one time?); deconstructing narratives ('How to Tell a True War Story,' 'Notes'); deliberate stretching of readers' credulity

‘How to Tell a True War Story’

- What did you make of this chapter?
- How does O’Brien suggest one can ‘tell’ a true war story?
- What distinctions does O’Brien make between ‘story truth’ and ‘happening truth’ (‘Good Form’)?
- Are there any particular aspects of the novel that you believe or disbelieve?
- Are there any issues that make the desire to ‘tell true war stories’ more urgent in relation to the Vietnam War?

'Wannabe' Phenomenon

- Documented instances of 'fakers' who pretend(ed) to have served in Vietnam or of veterans who have fabricate(d) details pertaining to their experiences in the military



‘How to Tell a True War Story’

You can tell a true war story by its **absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil**. Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old— it's too much for him—so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says cooze, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back.

Story-Truth and Happening-Truth

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the **happening-truth**. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the **story-truth**. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

‘How to Tell a True War Story’

A true war story is **never moral**. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the **victim of a very old and terrible lie**. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue.

‘How to Tell a True War Story’

In any war story, but especially a true one, *it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen*. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*.

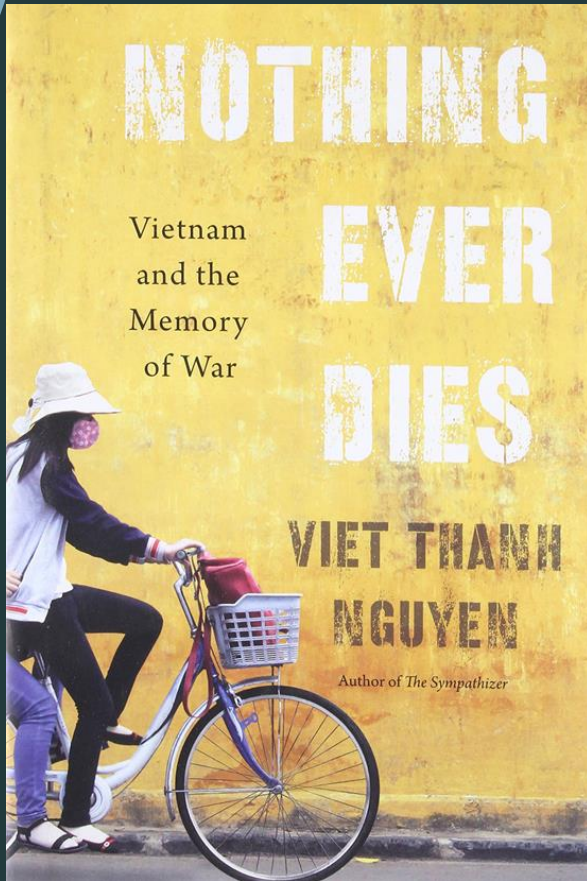
‘How to Tell a True War Story’

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

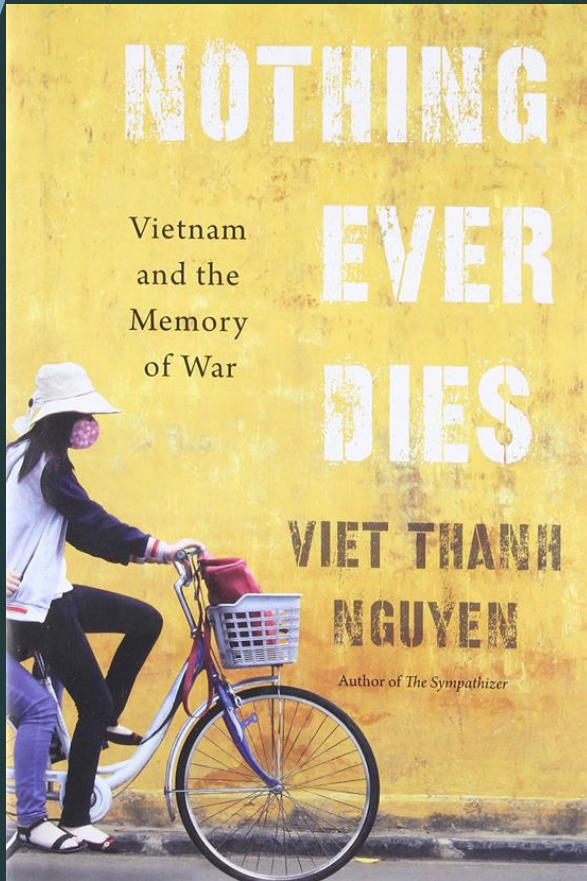
Critiques of O'Brien

Imagining war only through the soldier's point of view paradoxically may not lead to a true war story, despite what Tim O'Brien argues ... O'Brien does not mention that war is profitable, even if it is also costly. This is one of the truest things that a war story can tell, since profit is one of the most important reasons humanity keeps fighting inhuman wars.

- Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, p. 226.



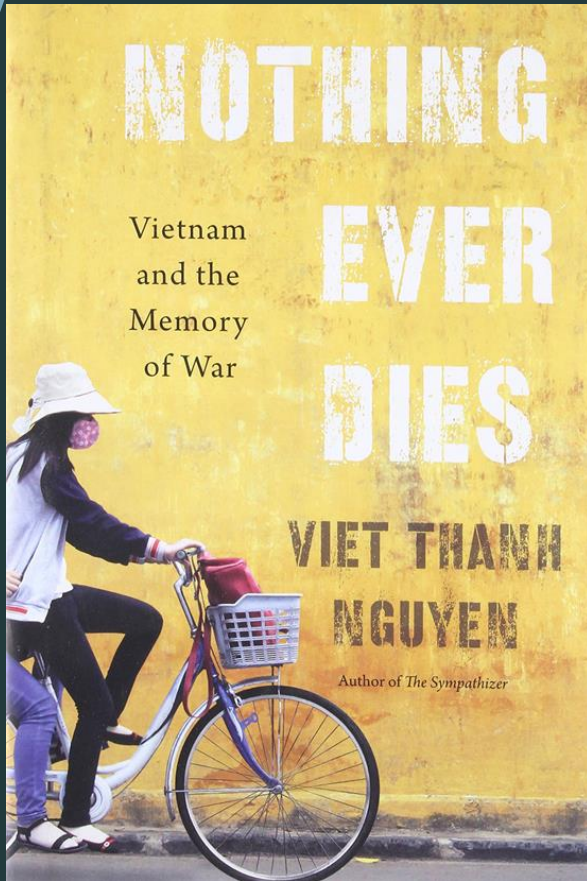
Critiques of O'Brien



While much of what O'Brien describes is also true for some civilian experiences of war, we generally do not associate civilians with war stories. There is not much fun or thrill in being a civilian involuntarily caught in war ... For many spectators and readers, war stories must at least be fun and thrilling, even as they try to communicate the obligatory sentiment that war is hell

- Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, p. 227.

Critiques of O'Brien



What concerns me is how the experience of an artist who works on a true war story, and who aspires to the perfect grade, itself constitutes another kind of true war story. As O'Brien understands very well in *The Things They Carried*, a true war story is not only about the story itself but is also about how the story is told, heard, and passed on. This is why he creates a character in his book called Tim O'Brien, who shares his name and his occupation as the writer of the book's stories, but who is not the same as the Tim O'Brien in the world. The struggles of the character Tim O'Brien express in a perhaps filtered way the struggles of his creator in both war and storytelling. Self-reflexivity is partly what gives this true war story its kick, its recoil.

... Not all soldiers who write make the grade, but soldiers who write can make the grade, as O'Brien does, because the war story belongs to them.

- Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, pp. 247–248.

‘How to Tell a True War Story’

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. ... It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.

"Yes, and I'm a theory man too. **Biographer, historian, medium - call me what you want** - but even ... I'm left with little more than supposition and possibility. There are certain mysteries that weave through life, human motive and human desire. **Even much of what may appear to be fact in this narrative - action, word, thought - must be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events.** I have tried, of course, to be faithful to the evidence. **Yet evidence is not truth. It is only evident.** If you require solutions you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book."



O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*
(London: Flamingo, 1995), footnote, p.

