

#1 Book Summary: The Things They Carried, by Tim O'Brien

by Allen Cheng

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cOvKzERBL0>

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1-Page Summary of The Things They Carried

Overview

The Things They Carried is a collection of stories about the Alpha Company and its soldiers. All of them focus on Tim O'Brien (same name as the author), who narrates most of the stories.

As the Vietnam War heats up, Alpha Company is sent to help fight. Soldiers carry goods necessary for their survival and also things that remind them of home. One soldier carries pictures from a previous love interest named Martha; however, he's so distracted thinking about her that he can't effectively lead his troops. Upset over this fact and blaming himself for one death in particular, he burns her photos and promises to be more attentive as a leader.

In "Love", Jimmy Cross goes to visit Tim O'Brien, a soldier he knew in Vietnam. This meeting takes place after the war is over and they are both living in Massachusetts. Cross told O'Brien that he ran into Martha, who was married to another man now. He also tells him that she still loves him but isn't going to leave her husband for him because she doesn't love him anymore.

Cross wants O'Brien to portray himself as a great leader if the writer ever writes about their experiences together during the war. He feels guilty about Lavender's death and wishes that he had died instead of her so they could have been together.

Spin is a collection of short stories about the war. The author compares it to Ping-Pong, saying that you can make the ball go in any direction. He says he has been writing only war stories for years now because his daughter thinks he should write something happier, but every time he tries to do so, all he sees are gruesome images from the war.

In "On The Rainy River," O'Brien describes his decision to either run away or go to war. He was split between the instinct to run and the instinct to do what everyone expected: go to war. He took a car up to the Canadian border, and a friendly hotel owner rowed him along a river right up to Canada. In the end he couldn't bring himself jump out of boat; he cried in it, paid Elroy for room, and drove home. It is hard story for O'Brien tell because it shows that he was coward and made wrong choice

In the story, "Enemies", two soldiers get into a fight over a missing knife. The soldier who wins the fight breaks his opponent's nose. Later in the day, he uses his own gun to break his own nose and asks if they're square. In another story called "Friends", one of these soldiers makes an agreement that if either are seriously injured or crippled, the other will kill him. One day during training, one of them steps on a mortar and loses his leg as a result of it. He is terrified because he thinks that this friend will kill him for breaking their pact. However later on in life we find out that Strunk has died which seems to relieve Jensen from feeling guilty about killing someone else again

In the story "How to Tell a True War Story," Curt Lemon is killed by stepping on a mortar. The author has to go up in a tree to pick out his remains, and one of the other soldiers makes a bad joke about lemon trees because of this. After Curt's death, Rat Kiley writes his sister an extremely long letter that she never responds to. He dismisses her as being dumb and stupid for not responding. Another true story in this book is when they torture a water buffalo after Lemon died from stepping on the mortar. It seems impossible so it must be true according to O'Brien.

Curt Lemon was killed in Vietnam. O'Brien describes the incident in "The Dentist". Lemon was a macho guy, but one day a dentist came to check up on the men's teeth. He became so afraid that he passed out during his appointment with the dentist and woke up ashamed of himself for asking for unnecessary treatment.

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