

# **THE THINGS THEY CARRIED**

## **Study Guide Questions**

### **“The Things They Carried”**

1. In what sense does Jimmy love Martha? Why does he construct this elaborate (mostly fictional) relationship with her? What does he get out of it?
2. When is he most likely to think about her? Why is he thinking about her while one of his platoon members is in the tunnel?
3. In what sense is Ted Lavender's death Cross' fault?
4. Here is his excuse for allowing his men to be lax: “He was just a kid at war, in love.” Why does Jimmy use this excuse? In what sense does it excuse him? In what sense, doesn't it?
5. Why do soldiers tell jokes about the war and about killing?
6. How is the idea of weight used and developed in this story (“jungle boots; 2.1 pounds”)? How do you as a reader feel reading those lists of weight? What effect does it have on you?
7. If this is a story about sacrifice, what does Jimmy sacrifice, and why?
8. How has Jimmy changed by the end of the story? How will he be a different person from this point on? What has he learned about himself? Or, to put it another way, what has he lost and what has he gained?
9. Do you think the war will affect him in a different way now that he refuses to think about Martha? How will it be different? What did “Martha” save him from?

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### **“Love”**

10. After the war, the soldiers returned home to personal dreams that had been left on hold. Discuss Jimmy Cross' dreams and what became of them.

11. What function did the word “love” serve for Lt. Cross in Vietnam? Did it change when he return to the States? How?

12. Did this conversation happen in real life? Is Tim O'Brien the author the same as the “Tim O'Brien” in the story? How can you tell?

### **“Spin”**

13. How does the fragmented style of the writing affect how you read this story? Is there a connection that can be made between these short anecdotes?

14. Give some examples of how war can have both horrific scenes, and scenes of random acts of kindness.

15. According to the narrator, why does he still write war stories?

16. What role do stories play in our lives? In the space below, and on the back of this sheet, tell a story – any story.

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### **“On the Rainy River”**

17. How do the opening sentences prepare you for the story: “This is one story I’ve never told before. Not to anyone”? What effect do they have on you, as a reader?
  
18. Why does O’Brien relate his experience as a pig declotter? How does this information contribute to the story? Why go into such specific detail?
  
19. What is Elroy Berdahl’s role in this story? Would this be a better or worse story if young Tim O’Brien simply headed off to Canada by himself, without meeting another person?
  
20. At the story’s close, O’Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but doesn’t. What has O’Brien learned about himself, and how does he return home as a changed person?
  
21. Why, ultimately, does he go to war? Are there other reasons for going he doesn’t list?

### **“Enemies” & “Friends”**

22. How does the notion of “friendship” get distorted in these two stories?
  
23. What “code” do the men seem to follow, or find more important, than that of friendship?
  
24. What is the pact that Strunk and Jensen make? Is that pact kept?
  
25. Why is Jensen relieved to hear of Strunk’s death? What was, in Jensen’s mind, ultimately, the “right” thing and the “wrong” thing in this situation?

### **“How to Tell a True War Story”**

26. Why and to whom does Rat write a letter? Why is he upset? Should he be upset?
  
27. What does a war story do? What does a war story not do?
  
28. Describe what happened to Curt Lemon. Compare how it was described in the book with the way it might have actually been.
  
29. After Rat tells his story, on pg. 85, the narrator says, “It wasn’t a war story. It was a love story”. Explain what he means by this.
  
30. What, do you think, is the truth in these stories? Why does O’Brien keep reminding us that these stories are fictional – but also true? What is he trying to get at?
  
31. Often, in the course of his stories, O’Brien tells us beforehand whether or not the story will have a happy or tragic ending. Why might he do so? How does it affect your attitude towards the narrator?