



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for the ARTS

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NEA BIG READ

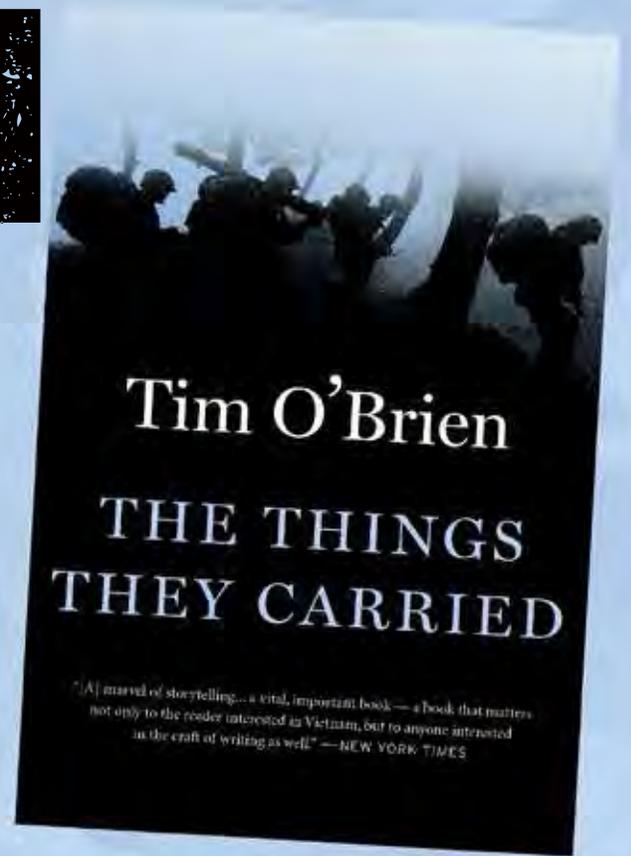
Managed by Arts Midwest

NEA Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest.

NEA

Big Read

Together We Read



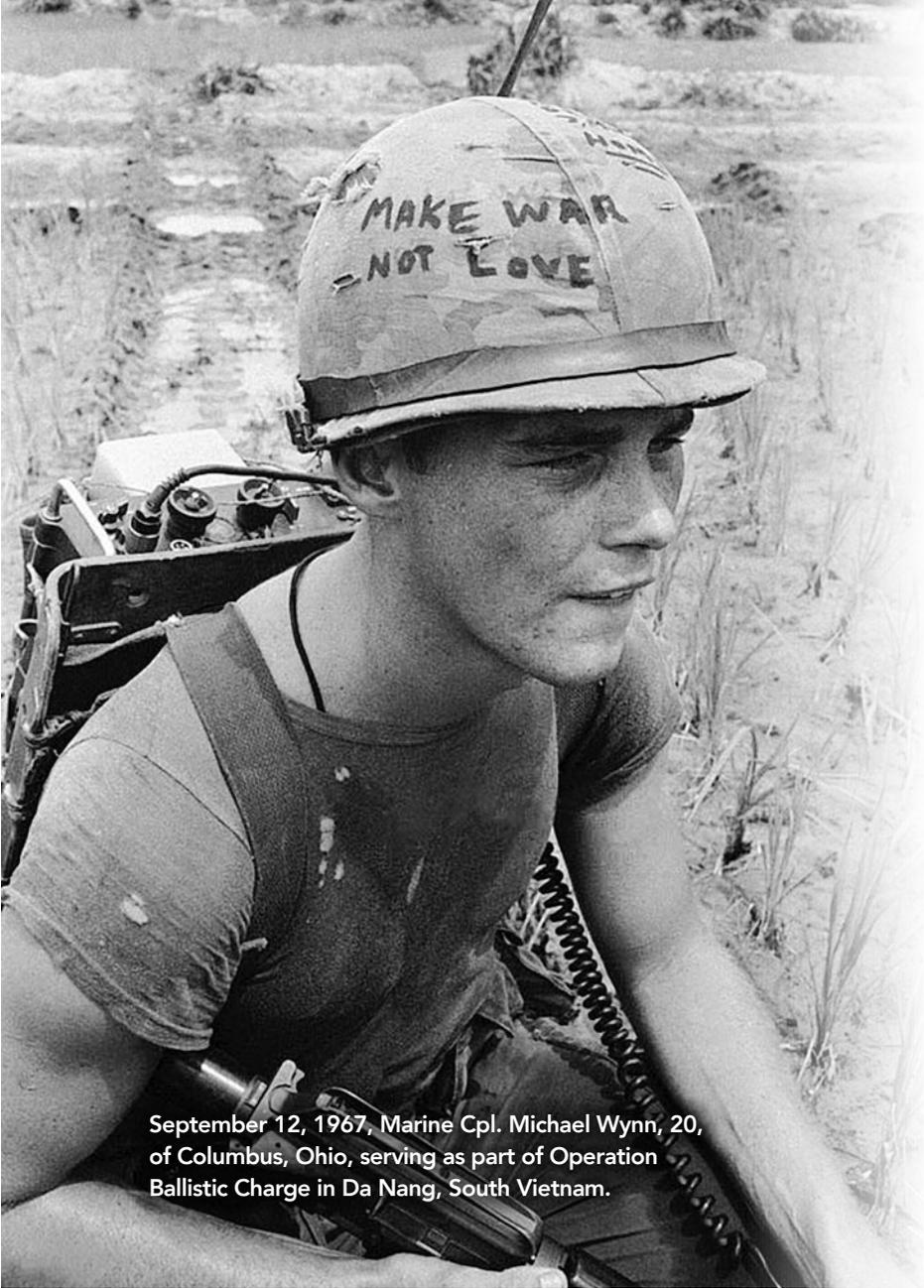
Read the book together with your community.

Get a copy from your local public library March 5 - April 17.



Hillsborough County Florida





September 12, 1967, Marine Cpl. Michael Wynn, 20, of Columbus, Ohio, serving as part of Operation Ballistic Charge in Da Nang, South Vietnam.

# The National Endowment for the Arts Big Read

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Big Read, a partnership with Arts Midwest, broadens people's understanding of the world, communities and neighbors through the joy of sharing a good book. Showcasing a diverse range of contemporary titles that reflect many different voices and perspectives, the NEA Big Read aims to inspire conversation and discovery.

Studies show that reading for pleasure reduces stress, heightens empathy, improves students' test scores, slows the onset of dementia and makes people more active and aware citizens. Book clubs and community reading programs extend these benefits by creating opportunities to explore together the issues that are relevant to people's lives.

Since 2006, the National Endowment for the Arts has funded more than 1,500 NEA Big Read programs. This is the third time the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library (THPL) will be a grant recipient.

## Together We Read

The Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library and its partners – Friends of the Library of Hillsborough County, Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay Times Newspaper in Education, Hillsborough County Department of Consumer and Veterans Services, Hillsborough Community College Department of Visual and Performing Arts Ybor City Campus and the Florida Museum of Photographic Arts – invite you to join us in the NEA Big Read celebration of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

First published in 1990, O'Brien's novel is considered one of the most important books about the experience of war. As Neal Conan of National Public Radio notes, "In war, there are no winners. That's what readers take away from Tim O'Brien's book about the Vietnam War." *The Things They Carried* is not just a story of war. It is an epic tale of the human spirit and is considered a classic piece of American literature, according to the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read.

The Hillsborough County NEA Big Read program will kick off on March 7 and culminate on April 17. The schedule of events is on Page 9. For more detailed event information, go to [HCPLC.org/NEABigRead](http://HCPLC.org/NEABigRead).

## Did you know?

The arts generate more money to local and state economies than several major industries. According to data released by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the arts and cultural industries contributed \$804.2 billion to the U.S. economy in 2016, more than agriculture or transportation, and employed 5 million people.

## Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library

With 27 branches located throughout Hillsborough County, the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library (THPL) promotes lifelong learning, an informed citizenry, individual intellectual freedom, enhanced quality of life and broadened horizons for all Hillsborough County residents. THPL maintains a network of neighborhood libraries with open access, a community focus, responsive service hours, welcoming environments, broad and relevant materials in a variety of formats and highly qualified employees.

THPL is a member of the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative and the Tampa Bay Library Consortium. THPL is a department of Hillsborough County government. For more information, go to [HCPLC.org](http://HCPLC.org).

## Going beyond the text Journaling your life

In the chapter "Love," in *The Things They Carried*, the narrator, a fictional version of Tim O'Brien, and Jimmy Cross discuss the past, Ted Lavender and Martha. Cross confides in O'Brien. If you could talk about the most significant moment in your life to only one person, who would it be? Where would you begin? Start with a significant event or moment that changed your view of the world. Describe your experience through images or word pictures. Write a journal excerpt about this moment.

Just like in *The Things They Carried*, societal events affect our lives every day. The Vietnam War changed Tim O'Brien's life in incomprehensible ways. What events have influenced your life? Look in the *Tampa Bay Times* for examples. Choose headlines, photos, captions, articles and advertisements and write about the effect in your journal.

“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 they 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. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.”

— Tim O'Brien, “How to Tell a True War Story,” *The Things They Carried*

## ***The Things They Carried***

Celebrating its 30th anniversary, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is not a “combat story of pride and glory,” according to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). “It is a compassionate tale of the American soldier, brimming with raw honesty and thoughtful reflection.” The novel is split into 22 chapters, or vignettes, drawn from O'Brien's own experiences.

## **Standard operating procedure**

They were grunts humping through the jungles of Vietnam.

O'Brien writes, “The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between 15 and 20 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism.”

And that is just for starters.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is an empathetic tale of American soldiers. The novel is teeming with raw honesty, thoughtful reflection and brutal reality – well – blurred reality. After all, the book is a novel, a fictional account of a nonfictional experience.

The book's fictional narrator, also named Tim O'Brien, tells the tale of a platoon of infantrymen through the jungles of Vietnam. Readers see the soldiers trudge through the muck of a constant downpour, get hit by sniper fire, pull body parts out of a tree, laugh while they tell their stories to each other, and fall silent when faced with making sense of it all – in the moment and 20 years later.

Sources: *National Endowment for the Arts*, *The Things They Carried*

**Novel: an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events.**

**Nonfiction: writing that is about facts and real events.**

## **Vignettes**

“Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it – the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier. You're at the bow of a boat on the Rainy River. You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest.

“What would you do?”

“Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?”

— Tim O'Brien, “*On the Rainy River*”

The chapter “The Things They Carried” describes what the soldiers carry with them — both literally and figuratively — as they march: food, canteens, flak jackets and weapons, as well as grief, terror, secrets and memories.

In another chapter, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O'Brien tells of a young medic who brings his high-school sweetheart to his aid station in the mountains of Vietnam, chronicling her transformation from an innocent girl in a pink sweater to a cold night stalker who dons a necklace of human tongues. Yet another chapter, “Speaking of Courage,” tells of a soldier back from the war who drives his Chevy around his Iowa hometown, struggling to find meaning in his new life.

Central to the novel is O'Brien's writing style, which blurs the lines between fact and fiction, then examines how and why he does just that. For example, the story is told by a fictional narrator with the same name as the author.

Through his narrator, O'Brien challenges readers to ponder larger philosophical questions about truth and memory and brings the reader closer to the emotional core of the men's experiences: experiences that most people cannot begin to imagine.

O'Brien's prose paints pictures that draw the reader into a world that seems far away and many years ago and is also very relatable in the challenges and emotions brought to light. The characters in O'Brien's novel are flawed, at times difficult to understand, but still worth knowing.

As Joseph Conrad wrote in *Heart of Darkness*, “The mind of man is capable of anything — because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future.”

Source: *National Endowment for the Arts*; *The Things They Carried*

# A brief history

## 1940s

- 1945: World War II ends.
- 1946: Tim O'Brien is born on Oct. 1. In December, the first Indochina War begins, as the Viet Minh attempt to gain independence from France.
- 1948: With *The Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer sets a new standard for American writers about war.

## 1950s

- 1953: Dwight D. Eisenhower is inaugurated President of the United States, heralding a period of economic prosperity.
- 1954: The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu. French Indochina is partitioned into Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam and South Vietnam.
- 1955: The U.S. offers aid to the South Vietnamese government.
- 1959: The second Indochina War, known as the Vietnam War to Americans, begins as Ho Chi Minh declares a People's War to unite Vietnam.

## 1960s

- 1960: John F. Kennedy is elected President of the United States.
- 1961: The U.S. sends helicopter units to South Vietnamese troops and becomes involved in combat operations.
- 1963: South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem is overthrown in a military coup. President Kennedy is assassinated; Vice President Lyndon Johnson succeeds him.
- 1964: An incident between North Vietnamese and U.S. battleships in the Gulf of Tonkin prompts President Johnson to order the first U.S. airstrikes against North Vietnam in August.
- 1965: The first U.S. combat troops are sent to Vietnam in March.
- 1967: Nearly 100,000 people march in Washington, D.C., to protest the war in October.
- 1968: The beginning of the Tet Offensive, a major show of force by North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. O'Brien graduates from college and is drafted into the army. Richard Nixon is elected President.

## 1970s

- 1970: O'Brien is sent home with a Purple Heart and the rank of sergeant.
- 1973: O'Brien publishes *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*.
- 1974: President Nixon resigns over the Watergate scandal.
- 1975: Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese, ending the Vietnam War in April.
- 1975: O'Brien publishes *Northern Lights*.
- 1978: O'Brien publishes *Going After Cacciato*.
- 1979: O'Brien's third novel, *Going After Cacciato*, wins the National Book Award for Fiction.

## 1980s

- 1981: The Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees receives the Nobel Peace Prize for aiding the escape of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese "boat people."
- 1981: O'Brien receives the Guggenheim Fellowship National Book, Fiction award.
- 1982: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall is completed in Washington, D.C.
- 1985: O'Brien publishes *The Nuclear Age*.

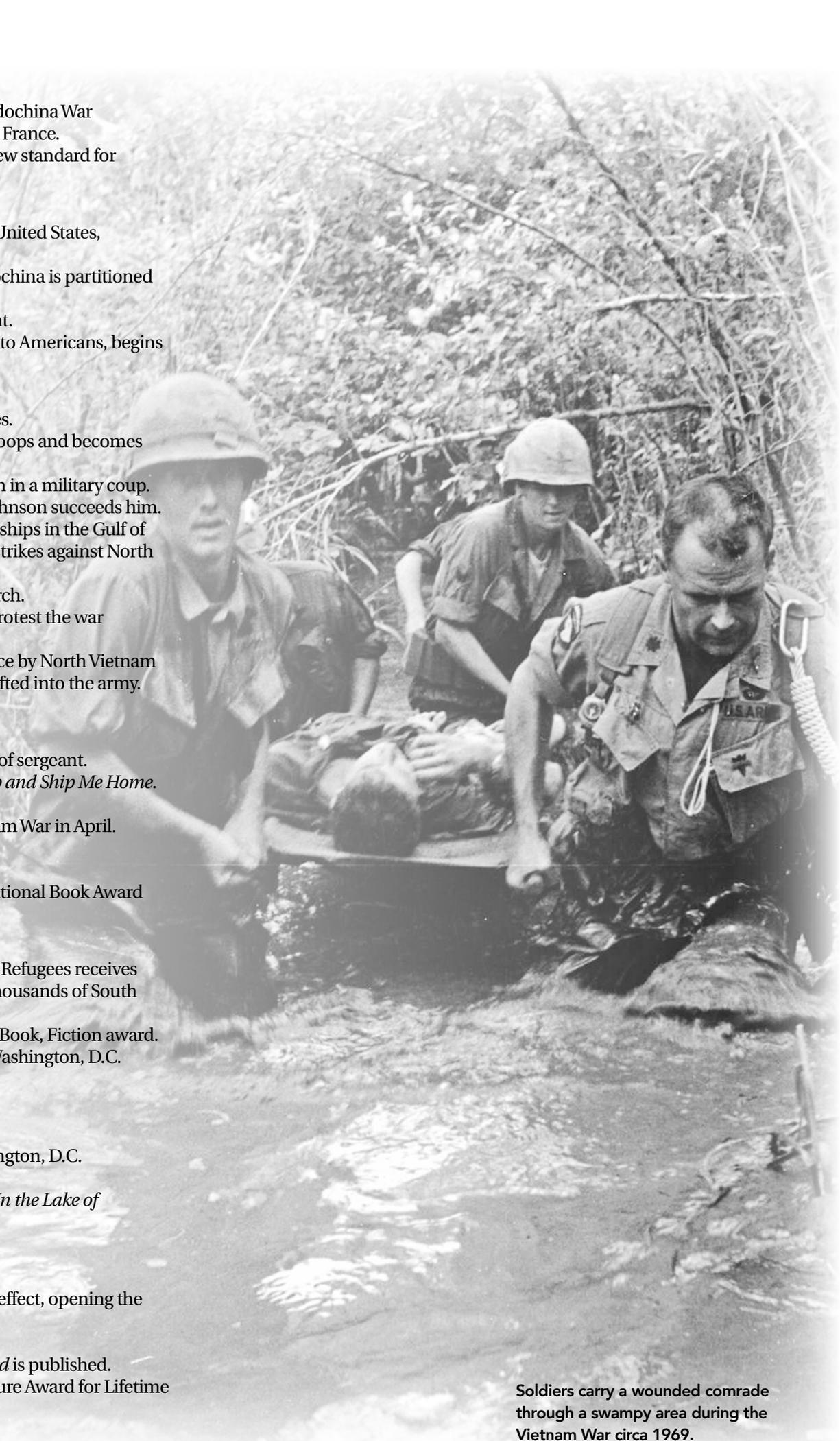
## 1990s

- 1990: O'Brien publishes *The Things They Carried*.
- 1993: The Vietnam Women's Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C.
- 1994: O'Brien publishes *In the Lake of the Woods*.
- 1995: O'Brien receives the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for *In the Lake of the Woods*.
- 1998: O'Brien publishes *Tomcat in Love*.

## 2000s

- 2001: The U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement goes into effect, opening the American market to Vietnamese goods in December.
- 2002: O'Brien publishes *July, July*.
- 2010: The 20th anniversary edition of *The Things They Carried* is published.
- 2013: O'Brien is awarded the Pritzker Military Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing.
- 2019: O'Brien publishes *Dad's Maybe Book*.

Sources: National Endowment for the Arts; Chicago Public Library; Publisher's Weekly and Famous Authors



Soldiers carry a wounded comrade through a swampy area during the Vietnam War circa 1969.

# How to tell a true war story

“For the common soldier,” O’Brien writes in the chapter “How to Tell a True War Story,” “war has the feel — the spiritual texture — of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true.”

*The Things They Carried* is not just a tale of war, and the book’s themes are no less relevant today than they were decades ago. This award-winning work is a brutal, sometimes funny, often profound narrative about the human heart — how it fares under pressure and what it can endure.

O’Brien writes, “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It’s a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true, and the normal stuff isn’t because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness. In other cases, you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling.”

The blurring of fact and fiction, the shifting of perspectives and points of view is essential to the novel as well as the reality of a true war story.

“In the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.”

Source: *National Endowment for the Arts*; *The Things They Carried*

## Going beyond the text Emotional displays

The men in O’Brien’s novel display many different emotions: anger, frustration, fear, love and even compassion. Compassion is an important emotion that you find in many fictional characters. Emotions can be complicated for some people, even fictional characters. Find an example of each main character in *The Things They Carried* displaying an emotion: Tim O’Brien, 1st Lt. Jimmy Cross, Bob “Rat” Kiley, Kiowa, Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins. Find a quote in the novel to support your ideas.

Next, look through the pages of the *Tampa Bay Times* to find an article, a photo and a cartoon that show a person or character displaying the same emotions as the characters in the book. In your journal, explain how this character displays the emotion. Write a blog or Facebook post about what you have learned. Share the information with your classmates.



Marines riding atop an M-48 tank cover their ears as the 90mm gun fires during a road sweep southwest of Phu Bai, Vietnam, April 3, 1968.

# In the author's own words



The author of eight novels and recipient of numerous awards and accolades, Tim O'Brien has been writing in some form since elementary school. During a recent telephone interview from his home in Texas, he says he has always loved listening to and reading stories.

## On structure

"I wanted the book to replicate how memory works. The here and now of the book is way after the war. The Tim O'Brien character has grown up and he's married, and he has a daughter. That's the present of the book and sometimes it just shifts back and memory jumps back, but not in a chronological sort of way because I don't believe that my own memory works that way.

"Part of my structure was kind of playful. I'm going to write a novel, and I'm going to write fiction, but I'm going to use my own name, and I'm going to incorporate a few true things from my history — Macalester College, drafted into the war, where I served, that I was a foot soldier — and use those as kind of a launching pad into a model.

"Every novelist does what I did in that book, except they don't admit it... Nothing is written out of a vacuum. I was trying to call attention to the medium, the process where fiction is made. Partly it comes out of the real world ... but partly it comes out of the imagination.

"When you're writing a novel, you've taken not just what happened, but also what almost happened or what could have happened or what should've happened. So, in my own case, I probably should have walked away from the war in Vietnam. I didn't. But in *Going After Cacciato*, I have a soldier do what I didn't do, walk away."

## On the Vietnam War

Vietnam is "a guerrilla war without uniforms, without front lines, without a rear area. ... The war is all around you all the time. As a soldier it's hard to know ... what to shoot at as you're being shot at and know who your friends are, who is opposed to you, who is indifferent among the villagers. So, it was a very confusing, bewildering war to be immersed in when you don't have a sense of who the enemy is.

"For young soldiers, it's frustrating and sometimes makes you very angry when it feels like the people you're there to help are the very people you're fighting against sometimes. In my own case, most of our casualties were suffered by land mines. I'd say 80 percent, which is very similar to what's happening in the Middle East ... You can't kill a land mine or an IED. It's already dead. It's inanimate. And so, there's that frustration that gets layered on top of the other ones. Who's the enemy? Then the bitterness begins to take over."

## On point of view

"Most people really don't realize that there are probably as many wars as there are soldiers. If you're looking north and your buddy is looking south, you see a different battle. He sees one thing, and you see something else. If you're in a helicopter, you see a different battle than you would see if you're on the ground. If you're an officer, you see a different war than an enlisted man. The differences among veterans are enormous.

"Some veterans hate my books; other veterans think they're wonderful. And there are those in between. The veterans who don't like them, they always complained, 'Well, that's not the war I saw. It wasn't that way for me,' forgetting that they were in a different place probably at a different time. The war in the Middle East and the war in Vietnam, both of them have radically evolved over the years.

"They've become different kinds of wars as time goes on. If you were there early in Vietnam, you may not like my books. If you were there after I left, you may not. It may not echo what is familiar to you, and that's true. Veterans like to have their experiences validated, essentially, and if it doesn't validate their experiences, they think that's not accurate."

# On blurring reality

“I think for every soldier there’s a blur ... There are some who don’t know what happens to them. Let’s say you’re in a firefight ... Five minutes later you sit around, and one guy saw one thing, another guy saw something else ... and they talk about it. There are as many battles as there were soldiers ... and so there’s a blur. What happened first? What happened second? Where was the enemy located? Often you don’t even know. It’s just gunfire. You can’t see any soldiers.

“The truth is sort of blurred right afterward, and then as time goes by, memory starts to erase details. Then five decades pass, and you’re left with a few snapshots of memory. Most everything vanishes: slapping mosquitoes, walking, which is mostly what you do as a soldier – march from village to village. It’s just one step is forgotten and the next step, and then the next. Then what you’re left with are a few very powerful memories: an album of snapshots, most everything else erased.

“A whole bunch of acts called truth is simply erased by memory. You just don’t remember the truth as you maybe once did. So, memory speaks to us, but memory stutters. It speaks in ellipses and leaves lots out ... What I’m trying to say is that the truth blurs by itself. I’m not doing it as an author. Its world does it by erasing detail and leaving us with a blurred kind of impressionistic view of our own lives.”

# On the fallibility of memory

*If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* set out “to be my memoir of my time as a soldier. It was a selective memory. The memoir was written two years after getting home. Much had been forgotten, much was blurry, and a few powerful memories lasted, and those are the memories that I tried to write about. But even then, I didn’t remember everything I said, what others said to me, and I don’t remember every blade of grass. A few images remain, and that’s pretty much it. So even in nonfiction much is omitted.

“If you think about all nonfiction ... you’re getting these broad strokes. ... So much of history vanishes even as it happens ... I guess that’s why *The Things They Carried* was written. I wanted, in this whole blurring of true things, to get at what I’ve been talking to you about: the fallibility of memory and this illusion we have that we have a solid grasp on our own lives.”

# On *The Things They Carried*

In fiction, “You take something that happened in the real world, but you expand on it and you move into another world. The world of fiction. The world of what if.

“What’s real and what’s not real in the book. That’s fun to talk about because I’ll start with something that really happened, but then I’ll make them understand that I’m not so sure a lot. The reality is what I think was real. It’s all blurry in my memory and full of unknowns.

“Memories I remember from childhood, for example, I can’t remember anything that preceded me sitting in a sandbox or what followed it. All I can remember is just sand, and I can’t remember why I was in the sand or what I was doing in the sand, but I just have this vision. Vietnam’s that way. They are very powerful discrete memories, but they’re not attached to much, including even emotion many times.

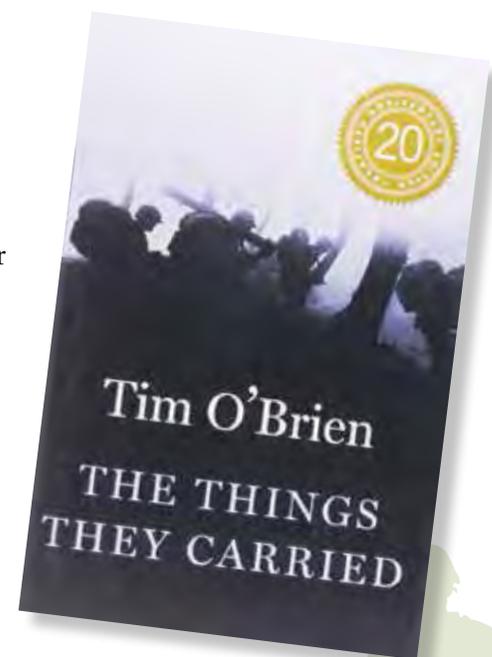
“In a way it doesn’t matter. In the end, it’s whether the stories are good or not, whether it happened, that’s the thing that high schoolers, especially, have big trouble with. If they had a doubt that a thing happens, they’re less interested and they’re sometimes angry and frustrated ... Moreover, 200 years from now, Vietnam will be a little footnote, just the war, much less Tim O’Brien. What’s going to matter is whether the story is compelling, whether it makes a person think. Would I kill people? What would I kill people for? Would I be a coward? Would I be courageous? Would I send my child to a war, or wouldn’t I?

“The goal really isn’t whether a thing is real or not. I don’t even know if my own life is real sometimes. Sometimes I doubt it, especially when you look back on our war and think, ‘God, did I really do that?’ That’s partly why I use my own name, by the way. What matters to me is not whether things happened or not ... what matters is whether it endures as a work of literature, whether the story moves your heart, makes you laugh, makes you sad, makes you afraid. Those are the things that for a fiction writer really matter. ... But you write a book, you hope for the ages, you hope it’ll be checked out of our library, you know, 100 years from now, 300. And you can’t count on realities carrying the day’s warrior. You’re going to count on the power of a story to make the things feel as if they’re happening right before your eyes.”

## Going beyond the text Creating a story

Tim O’Brien says writing a fiction story involves taking something that happened in the real world and then moving it into a “world of what if.” Choose one of these ideas to write a short story. Be sure to use proper short story structure, including a beginning, middle and end.

- Using the *Tampa Bay Times*, find the plot for a story in one of the news articles. Use the basic idea in the news article and then create a “what if” scenario based on the basic facts you have read.
- Using the cartoons in the *Tampa Bay Times*, take any character and put that character in a “what if” situation in an experience in your everyday life. How would this character act, react, fit in and behave in your world?



“As a fiction writer, I do not write just about the world we live in, but I also write about the world we ought to live in, and could, which is a world of imagination.”

— Tim O'Brien, from a lecture at Brown University



## An all-American childhood

A former reporter for the *Washington Post*, Tim O'Brien is the award-winning author of nine works of fiction. O'Brien grew up in rural Minnesota in the 1950s. Born Oct. 1, 1946, in Austin, Minn., O'Brien was raised in Worthington, a town in the southern part of the state. His mother was an elementary school teacher, and his father, a World War II veteran, was an insurance salesman.

O'Brien played Little League, practiced magic tricks, and spent a lot of time in his local library. In 1968, he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in political science from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. While attending college, O'Brien attended peace vigils and protested the war in Vietnam. His goal was to be a writer.

After college graduation, O'Brien got his draft notice.

He once stated in an interview that “even getting on the plane for boot camp, I couldn't believe any of it was happening to me, someone who hated Boy Scouts and bugs and rifles.”

Source: National Endowment for the Arts

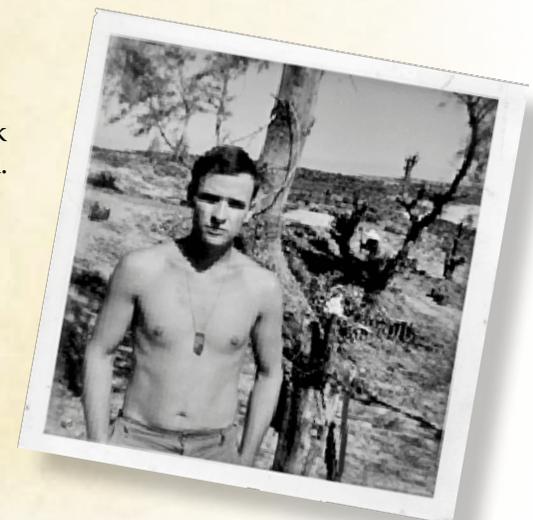
## Tour of duty

“O'Brien spent his tour of duty from 1969 to 1970 as a foot soldier with the 46th Infantry in Quang Ngai province. For some of that time he was stationed in My Lai, just one year after the infamous My Lai Massacre. He was sent home with a Purple Heart when he got hit with shrapnel in a grenade attack,” according to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

His first book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, was published in 1973 during his graduate studies at Harvard University. O'Brien then spent a year as a national affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*.

*The Things They Carried*, published in 1990, is part memoir and part fiction. O'Brien wishes readers luck figuring out which is which.

Source: National Endowment for the Arts



### Going beyond the text

## Connecting the past and the present

The Vietnam War was one of the longest military conflicts in U.S. history. The war claimed the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and wounded more than 300,000. Estimates place the number of killed or wounded North and South Vietnamese at roughly 4 million soldiers and civilians. O'Brien's novels focus on an unpopular war and time in American history many would rather not talk about.

Retired Hillsborough County teacher and Vietnam War veteran Bruce Burnham says veterans' stories are important. “Don't bury these men's stories just because the war was unpopular. Each one of them gave a part of their life, a valuable part of their life, a young part of their life, and every one of them was affected by the war.” Burnham notes that many veterans, including him, were so deeply affected that they have never gotten over some aspects of the war.

Author George Santayana says, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” What does this phrase mean? Discuss this idea with your class. Using articles, political cartoons and pictures from the *Tampa Bay Times* and [tampabay.com](http://tampabay.com), make a connection between “then” and “now.” Images and metaphors should express feelings and attitudes as well as behaviors and events. The overall effect should reflect your viewpoint on whether the present world has learned the lessons of history. You may focus on only one theme or on several issues that you find particularly relevant to your own life. Share what you have learned with your class.

# NEA Big Read events

## Dramatic rendering of *The Things They Carried*

A drama by Jim Stowell based on the book by Tim O'Brien.

Hillsborough Community College  
Ybor Campus  
Mainstage Theater  
1411 E 11th Ave., Tampa

**Thursday, March 5, 2020 • 1 p.m.**

Open to high school students and the community, admission is free.

**Thursday, March 5, 2020 • 7:30 p.m.**

\$15 general admission, free for Hillsborough Community College students and faculty.



## Hometown Heroes Community Fair – NEA Big Read Kickoff Event

**Saturday, March 7, 2020  
10 a.m. – 1 p.m.**

Veterans Memorial Park,  
3602 U.S. Highway 301 N, Tampa

Celebrate our Hometown Heroes! Meet local organizations that support our community, bring the kids to touch a truck, and spend time visiting the different areas of Veterans Memorial Park. This date honors National Vietnam War Veterans Day and coincides with the 30-year anniversary of the release of the book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. This is the kickoff event for the NEA Big Read.



## Going beyond the text Community action

The mission of the *Tampa Bay Times* is to serve our community. When there is a situation that requires community action, the newspaper reports on the problem and all the different individuals and

groups that have an interest in the problem. People who are affected by a situation are often called “stakeholders.”

- Read news stories about a problem or concern in your community.
- Identify the different stakeholders who are proposing different solutions to the problem.
- Collect the information and write it down on a piece of paper.

- Develop a solution of your own. What solution would you propose that is different from any of those proposed by the stakeholders?
- Interview family members and friends. Ask their opinions about the problem. Ask them for their solutions.
- Write a letter to the editor or a blog post discussing how the other solutions are different from yours.

## Photo exhibit

The Florida Museum of Photographic Arts is creating an exhibition of photographs by veterans to showcase



their unique perspective on returning to civilian life after many years in the armed forces. For some of these veterans, this photographic project and exhibit will serve as a healing process in part for severe PTSD and combat-related injuries. The exhibition supports the NEA Big Read project and the anniversary of the book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. It will be displayed at the SouthShore Regional Library at 15816 Beth Shields Way in Ruskin from **March 15 – April 17, 2020**. This event is funded by the Friends of the SouthShore Regional Library.

## Library events

Throughout the months of **March and April**, various events, including book discussions, music events and a veterans' writing workshop will take place. For a list of events, times and locations, go to [HCPLC.org/NEABigRead](http://HCPLC.org/NEABigRead).



## We Gotta Get Out of This Place: American Songs from The Vietnam Era Sunday, March 29, 2020 • 3 p.m.

New Tampa Regional Library  
10001 Cross Creek Blvd., Tampa

Experience a tribute to the music that helped soldiers and veterans connect to each other and to life back home and to cope with the complexities of the war they had been sent to fight. This event is funded by the Friends of the New Tampa Regional Library.

## An Evening with Author Tim O'Brien – NEA Big Read Special Event

**Friday, April 17, 2020 • 6 p.m.**

Jimmie B. Keel Regional Library,  
2902 W Bearss Ave., Tampa

Join National Book Award-winning author Tim O'Brien as he discusses his book *The Things They Carried* and his experiences in the Vietnam War. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) is considered one of the finest books about the Vietnam War. Talk to be followed by a question-and-answer session and book signing. This is the culminating event for the NEA Big Read. This event is funded by the Friends of the Jimmie B. Keel Regional Library.

NEA Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) designed to broaden our understanding of our world, our communities and neighbors through the joy of sharing a good book. Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library is one of 78 not-for-profit organizations to receive a grant to host an NEA Big Read project between September 2019 and June 2020. The NEA presents NEA Big Read in partnership with Arts Midwest.

“Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. It was a comforting theory. It dispensed with all those bothersome little acts of daily courage; it offered hope and grace to the repetitive coward; it justified the past while amortizing the future.”

— *Tim O'Brien, “On the Rainy River,”  
The Things They Carried*

# Enrichment and enchantment

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities and neighbors through the joy of sharing a good book. The NEA Big Read initiative is a community reading program designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. A book, such as *The Things They Carried*, can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort readers.

## Crack open a book

“When was the last time you read a book, or a substantial magazine article? Do your daily reading habits center around tweets, Facebook updates, or the directions on your instant oatmeal packet? If you’re one of countless people who don’t make a habit of reading regularly, you might be missing out: reading has a significant number of benefits,” writes Catherine Winter for [lifehack.org](http://lifehack.org).

Reading books and newspaper and magazine articles provides many benefits including mental stimulation, stress reduction, vocabulary expansion, memory improvement, increased analytical thinking skills, improved focus and concentration, improved writing skills, entertainment and, of course, increased knowledge.

Books can take you to new worlds, entertain you and teach you new things.



An infantryman is lowered into a tunnel by members of the reconnaissance platoon during Operation Oregon, a search and destroy mission conducted by an infantry platoon of Troop B, 1st Reconnaissance Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), three kilometers west of Duc Pho, Quang Ngai province on April 24, 1967.

## Fiction: a gateway

“Everything changes when we read,” states author Neil Gaiman. In a lecture for the Reading Agency, delivered in London in 2013, the science fiction author discussed the importance of reading for adults and children, and how the concepts are interconnected. The following is an edited excerpt from his speech.

“Literate people read fiction. Fiction has two uses. Firstly, it’s a gateway drug to reading. The drive to know what happens next, to want to turn the page, the need to keep going, even if it’s hard, because someone’s in trouble and you have to know how it’s all going to end ... that’s a very real drive. It forces you to learn new words, to think new thoughts, to keep going and to discover that reading per se is pleasurable.

“Once you learn that, you’re on the road to reading everything. Words are more important than they ever were: We navigate the world with words, and as the world slips onto the web, we need to follow, to communicate and to comprehend what we are reading. People who cannot understand each other cannot exchange ideas, cannot communicate and translation programs only go so far.

“The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity. That means, at its simplest, finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books and letting them read them.

“We need our children to get onto the reading ladder: anything that they enjoy reading will move them up, rung by rung, into literacy.

“The second thing fiction does is to build empathy. When you watch TV or see a film, you are looking at things happening to other people. Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, and you alone, using your imagination, create a world and people it and look out through other eyes.

“You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You’re being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you’re going to be slightly changed.

“Empathy is a tool for building people into groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals.

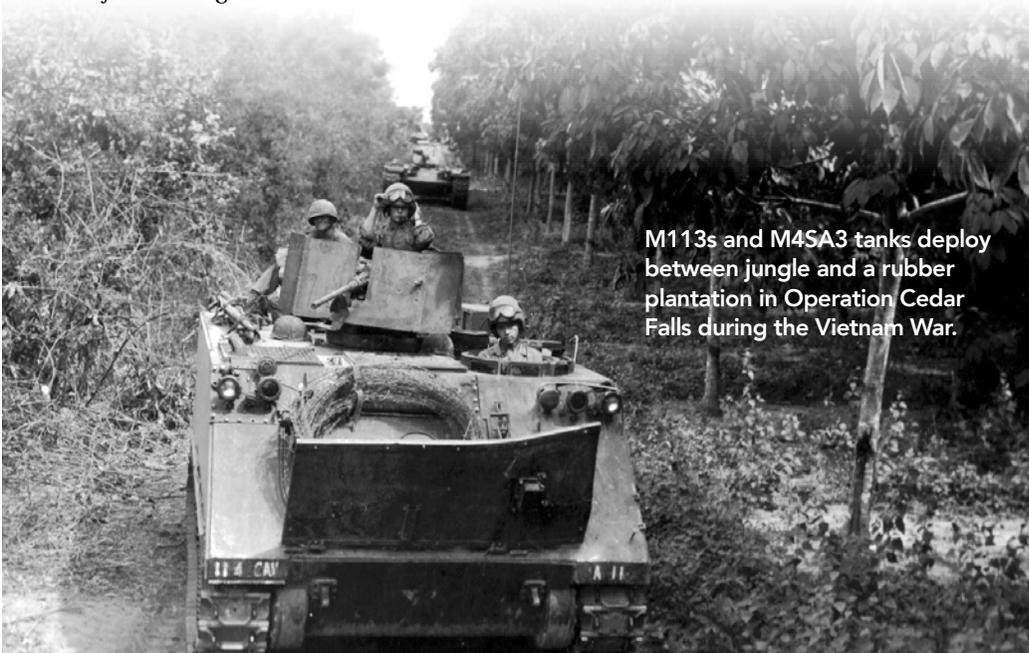
“Fiction can show you a different world. It can take you somewhere you’ve never been. ... Books are the way that we communicate with the dead. The way that we learn lessons from those who are no longer with us, that humanity has built on itself, progressed, made knowledge incremental rather than something that has to be relearned, over and over.”

# Benefits of reading

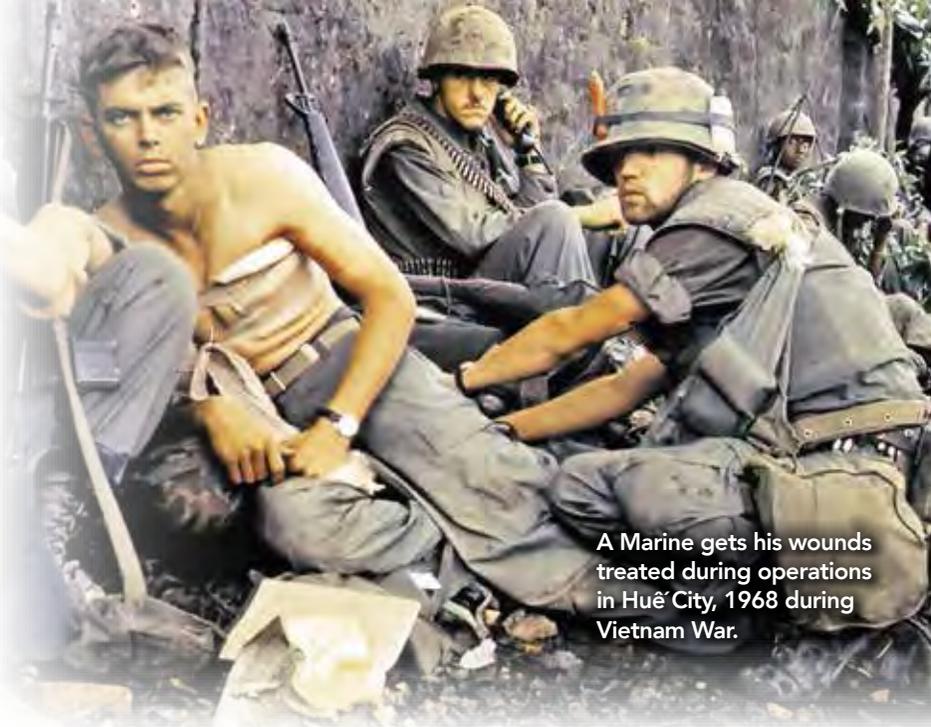
**Catherine Winter, freelance reporter, editor and podcast producer, notes there are 10 significant benefits of reading.**

1. Reading is good exercise for your brain and can keep your brain active. Mental stimulation may slow the progression of Alzheimer's and dementia by keeping your brain active and engaged.
2. Losing yourself in a good story is a great way to reduce stress. Winter writes, "A well-written novel can transport you to other realms, while an engaging article will distract you and keep you in the present moment, letting tensions drain away and allowing you to relax."
3. Reading keeps you in the know. Everything you read provides knowledge.
4. The more you read, the more expansive your vocabulary will become. As Winter notes, "Being articulate and well-spoken is of great help in any profession." Having a more expansive vocabulary also can improve your self esteem and socialization skills.
5. Reading can help improve your memory. Keeping track of characters, plot twists, time changes and character backgrounds is a great way to keep your brain active.
6. Reading can improve your analytical and thinking skills. Paying attention to the details in a book is a great way to increase your analytical skills, especially with mystery novels or when critiquing a plot.
7. Reading can improve your focus and concentration. When reading, all of your focus should be on the story, so you can immerse yourself in the experience.
8. The best way to improve your writing skills is by reading. As Winter points out, "This goes hand-in-hand with the expansion of your vocabulary: Exposure to published, well-written work has a noted effect on one's own writing, as observing the cadence, fluidity and writing styles of other authors will invariably influence your own work."
9. Reading can bring about tranquility, depending on the content of the books you choose.
10. Last, but, not least, books can provide free entertainment. Though books can be purchased, they also can be borrowed for free from your local library. Your local library will never run out of reading materials.

Source: Life Hack Blog



M113s and M4SA3 tanks deploy between jungle and a rubber plantation in Operation Cedar Falls during the Vietnam War.



A Marine gets his wounds treated during operations in Huế City, 1968 during Vietnam War.

"In the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen."

— Tim O'Brien, *"How to Tell a True War Story"*  
The Things They Carried

## Going beyond the text Facing conflicts

Many books focus on people encountering conflicts in their lives and communities. There are many types of conflicts in *The Things They Carried*, including physical, verbal and internal, societal, natural and interpersonal. Discuss conflicts you face — in your community or at home — with your class. Write in your journal about a conflict that you have faced. On a separate page in your journal, write about a conflict one of the characters in O'Brien's book encounters. Next, look for an article in the *Tampa Bay Times* that focuses on an issue or concern that affects people in your community.

Read the article carefully. Think about the author's purpose and the main idea of the writing. Explain what the main points of the article are in a summary. Be sure to include the following information: the main points, the author's intent, the details that support the author's intent and key words that indicate that intent. Share what you have written and learned about the character in the novel and the person in the newspaper article with your class. Discuss what the conflicts are and whether there are alternate ways the conflicts could be resolved or avoided.

“The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness.”

— *Tim O'Brien, “Lives of the Dead,” from The Things They Carried*

## NEA Big Read partners

### Hillsborough County Department of Consumer and Veterans Services

The Hillsborough County Department of Consumer and Veterans Services assists all veterans, their dependents and survivors in accessing federal, state and local benefits. Staff also supports services for veterans and manages veterans’ activities in the county, including events at Veterans Memorial Park and Museum, located at 3602 U.S. Highway 301 N, Tampa.

The department acts as a single point of contact for military members and their families seeking assistance with outside agencies. Staff also provides outreach and support to veterans in assisted-living facilities, nursing homes, private residences and private businesses. For more information, go to [HCFLGov.net/government/departments/consumer](http://HCFLGov.net/government/departments/consumer).

### Hillsborough Community College Department of Visual and Performing Arts Ybor City Campus

Founded in 1968 as a part of the 28-member Florida College System, Hillsborough Community College (HCC) is dedicated to creating an engaging learning environment. HCC educates more than 47,000 students each year, and its more than 190 academic options are supported by more than 2,200 dedicated faculty and staff members wholly focused on student success. The Ybor Campus, located at 2112 N 15th St., has a focus on the arts. For more information, go to [hccfl.edu/campus-life/ybor-city-campus](http://hccfl.edu/campus-life/ybor-city-campus).

### Florida Museum of Photographic Arts

Located at 400 N Ashley Drive in Tampa, the Florida Museum of Photographic Arts (FMoPA) is a museum dedicated to exhibiting important photographic art as central to contemporary life and culture. In 2006, FMoPA moved to its present location in the Waterfront Arts District in Rivergate Plaza’s architecturally significant Cube, a soaring six-story atrium recognized as one of the most impressive interior spaces on the west coast of Florida. FMoPA collects, preserves and exhibits historic and contemporary works by nationally and internationally known photographic artists. FMoPA also enriches the community by operating outreach programs to educate children and adults. For more information, go to [fmopa.org](http://fmopa.org).

**Educators** Share 100 words about how you used this resource in your classroom for a chance to win a \$15 gift card! Visit [tampabay.com/nie](http://tampabay.com/nie) for details and to enter.

## Attention, teachers

The Tampa Bay Times Newspaper in Education program (NIE) is a cooperative effort between schools and the Times Publishing Co. to encourage the use of newspapers in print and electronic form as educational resources — a “living textbook.” Our educational resources fall into the category of informational text, a type of nonfiction text.

The primary purpose of informational text is to convey information about the natural or social world. NIE serves educators, students and families by providing schools with class sets of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Tampa Bay Times* plus award-winning original educational publications, teacher guides, lesson plans, educator workshops and many more resources — all at no cost to schools, teachers or families.

In 2018-2019, NIE provided more than 1.4 million print copies and 10 million digital editions of the Times to area classrooms thanks to our generous subscribers and individual, corporate and foundation sponsors.

For a PDF of this publication and additional teaching materials for *The Things They Carried*, go [tampabay.com/nie](http://tampabay.com/nie), click on the curriculum tab, and go to the Language Arts page. For more information about NIE, visit [tampabay.com/nie](http://tampabay.com/nie), call 727-893-8138 or email [ordernie@tampabay.com](mailto:ordernie@tampabay.com). Follow us on Twitter at [twitter.com/TBTimesNIE](https://twitter.com/TBTimesNIE). Find us on Facebook at [facebook.com/TBTNIE](https://facebook.com/TBTNIE).

Using the materials in this educational publication, along with the activities provided correlates to the following Florida Standards. **Language Arts:** LAFS.912.L.1.1; LAFS.912.L.1.2; LAFS.912.L.2.3; LAFS.912.L.3.4; LAFS.912.L.3.5; LAFS.912.L.3.6; LAFS.912.RH.1.2; LAFS.912.RH.1.3; LAFS.912.RH.2.4; LAFS.912.RH.2.5; LAFS.912.RH.2.6; LAFS.912.RH.3.8; LAFS.912.RH.3.9; LAFS.912.RI.1.1; LAFS.912.RI.1.2; LAFS.912.RI.1.3; LAFS.912.RI.2.4; LAFS.912.RI.2.5; LAFS.912.RI.2.6; LAFS.912.SL.1.2; LAFS.912.SL.1.3; LAFS.912.SL.2.4; LAFS.912.SL.2.5; LAFS.912.SL.2.6; LAFS.912.W.1.1; LAFS.912.W.1.2; LAFS.912.W.1.3; LAFS.912.W.2.4; LAFS.912.W.2.5; LAFS.912.W.2.6; LAFS.912.W.3.7; LAFS.912.W.3.8; LAFS.912.W.3.9; LAFS.912.W.4.10

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