

Responsibly Inventing History: An Interview with Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien is the author of GOING AFTER CACCIATO, which received the National Book Award in fiction. Another novel, THE THINGS THEY CARRIED, was selected by THE NEW YORK TIMES as one of the best works of fiction of 1990 and received the CHICAGO TRIBUNE'S Heartland Award, the 1991 Melcher Award, and the 1992 Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger award in France; it was also nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critic's Award. Other books are IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE, NORTHERN LIGHTS, and THE NUCLEAR AGE. His most recent novel, IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS, was published by Houghton Mifflin, October 1994.

Mr. O'Brien's short fiction has been included in PRIZE STORIES: THE O. HENRY AWARDS, THE PUSHCART PRIZE, and BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES. His story "The Things They Carried" received the National Magazine Award in Fiction and was selected for inclusion in BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES of the 80s. Mr. O'Brien is the recipient of numerous literary awards, including the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Endowment for the Arts. A native of Minnesota, Mr. O'Brien graduated in 1968 from Macalester College, served as an infantryman in Vietnam, and later worked as a national affairs reporter for THE WASHINGTON POST. He now lives in Massachusetts.

This interview took place at the Kellogg Center on the campus of Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan on April 7, 1994. It was the third day of O'Brien's visit as a guest speaker and the day before he had read from THE THINGS THEY CARRIED and discussed his Vietnam experiences, as well as his experiences as a writer, to a class of students in a course on the war.

One of the principal issues I discussed with Mr. O'Brien during his visit was his reaction to his recent visit to Vietnam—the first since he served there as an infantryman. Because my own interest

focused so heavily on the relationship between historical reality and the way O'Brien's combat experiences appear in his fiction, we spent considerable time discussing copies of his military unit's Daily Staff Journal logs. Mr. O'Brien reviewed the same logs at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., prior to his return visit to Vietnam.

Catherine Calloway, who has compiled the most complete bibliographic record of works by and about Tim O'Brien, participated in the interview and provided selected questions. She is a Professor of English at Arkansas State University.

McNerney: During a recent trip to Vietnam you got to go back and look at the ground where you served during the war. Were there surprises?

O'Brien: The geography of Vietnam is sacred ground to me in the way that for any of us our backyards, our front yards, are sacred in memory—where our sandboxes and swings used to be. Those memories we carry with us for the rest of our lives, because of the important events that occurred on such ground. When I returned to Vietnam [17 February-4 March, 1994], I found a few backyards and a few front yards and a few places where I spent my adult-childhood, and the terrain, in its way, hadn't changed. The paddies were shaped as they were by events which occurred twenty years before. There's nothing left on my firebase in terms of barbed wire or buildings, not a scrap. But the outline of the hills on which the firebase was placed is the outline as it was a long time ago, minus all the buildings. In a spooky way, it looks as if ghosts are inhabiting the place now. It's not used for anything because it's heavily mined. The ARVN took it over after we left, and they mined the place. None of the villagers use it for anything now. It's not tilled; it's just there, preserved in a vacuum. And I have a feeling it will be that way for a long time to come.

Twenty years ago, when I wrote *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, I penned a line somewhere in it like, "years and years from now, some veteran will take his wife, or girlfriend, or children over here, then walk the same soil and I'll bet the mines will still be here. The

earth will not yet have swallowed and disarmed them.” It’s a kind of bitter statement saying that this stuff is still here and if you think this war is right, come over and walk this land and see how you like it. That prophecy was in a way fulfilled when I returned. The ghosts are still there. It’s as if you close your eyes, you can see the paddies and villages and firebases and so on; you can almost hear the soldiers laughing and drinking. It makes you believe in a spirit world.

McNerney: In “Field Trip,” in *The Things They Carried*, you wrote about your vision of what it would be like to go back to Vietnam on an imaginary trip with the character Tim O’Brien’s daughter Kathleen. In what ways did your trip confirm the expectation you portrayed in that story?

O’Brien: Pretty much identically. The human imagination is a powerful faculty. We use it all the time in our lives; we live our lives by it. It has to be powerful. You imagined the questions you were going to ask today, for instance, and you imagined the answers. If I were to say I saw a Martian with a green head in Vietnam, you would be surprised, because you expect to hear a different answer, the answer you imagined. When we take a sip of coffee, and we’ve taken a lot of sips before, the next sip is going to taste pretty much as the sip before it. In all kinds of little ways we use our imaginations to live our lives. We worry about smoking because we imagine dying of cancer. This doesn’t stop us from smoking, but it makes us worry—we imagine death—that worry, that bad feeling we have now and then when we take that drag on that cigarette is based on the imagined event for the future: our own death, our own suffering, our own pain. We imagine it more or less fully at times. Sometimes not so fully, other times more fully.

Writing my fiction, I was basing my imagined chapter or story on prior events, what Vietnam had meant to me, what it had been to me, what I had seen there. My knowledge of how geography operates is that it changes very slowly. My imagination of what I would want to do when I got to Vietnam in actuality or imagination was to find hallowed ground. The spot where Kiowa died is the made-up event in the “Field Trip” story. And when you imagine these things, then you act on your imagination, you are

bound to find some correspondences, including emotional ones. And the emotional correspondence was very precise. A kind of quietude—that sense of ghosts I just talked about. There is something just out there, the sense that things just hadn't changed a lot geographically. I could find places, a sense of barely heard voices in the background. In the case of "Field Trip," it was the interpreter and the daughter laughing and the guy showing her magic tricks. In my own case, it was a camera clicking—the *Time* photographer took pictures. And although the villagers' voices were the present voices, I was hearing the voices of yesterday, voices of twenty-five years ago. So in a large way, the feeling of going back to Vietnam was exactly the way I'd imagined it. That's the power of human imagination. That's why I think we love stories so much. They are future predictors.

McNerney: You reviewed your unit records at the National Archives before you went back to Vietnam. What were you looking for specifically and what did you find?

O'Brien: First, I was looking just to jog my memories, to recall the names of people who'd died. You remember faces when you don't remember names, and you certainly don't remember whole names. I remember a lot of nicknames, for example. We had so many of them. So, first, to jog my memory as to who died, just the names of people. In some cases, I had forgotten entirely people who had died, because I didn't know them very well. You get a company of guys and they rotate in and out. They are just bodies essentially. So that was one reason to go to the archives, to jog my memory.

The more important reason for going there, though, was to find military coordinates, six-digit numbers where events occurred, so I wouldn't go to Vietnam and hump blindly around looking at hedges and paddies and villages, not knowing what was what. I knew that would happen and it would have happened if I'd have gone there without these coordinates—you know, here's where *this* occurred, or *that* occurred. Here's where the tracks ran over us; here's where I was wounded; here's where this guy died, that guy died. By compiling a set of coordinates I was able to go to Vietnam with a map. Once there, I was escorted around by a

former VC soldier—a retired army Colonel—who was taking me to places and, by and large, he hit it. In a few cases he said, “you’re there.” And I looked around and said No. I would get the coordinates out and say, “this is where I want to go, *here*.” And he would say, “well, you’re here,” and I would say, “I know I’m *there* and I don’t want to be *there*, I want to be *here*.” The coordinates helped. I was able to find a couple of villages that I really had to find.

A third thing happened in going to the archives that I should mention. This is important in terms of your research. As far as I know, you are the first researcher to have gone back to find some of the primary stuff, including myself. I had never gone back to it. It seems to me that this is an important thing for someone to do—to find the soil that literature grows out of. I had forgotten, as we all do, a great deal of my own history. And to recover some of that history, some of that ground—to see it freshly, to see it anew—invigorated me as a writer. It gives you courage to go on and it brings new stories to mind, things you’ve forgotten. And it makes possible another five years or ten years of writing for me in a lot of ways. So that is a third purpose for visiting the archives. It was a purpose I didn’t intend, but that occurred anyway.

McNerney: One thing I found when I looked at the archival material was the name Richard Cacciato, who arrived in country on July 31, 1969, and assumed the duties of battalion adjutant. How, if in any way, did this individual affect your character Cacciato in your novel?

O’Brien: The actual Cacciato did not affect the character, nothing like him. All I did was steal the guy’s name. I liked the sound of the name. I remember the first time I saw it, I was out in the field and some document had come in. I was the RTO [radio-telephone operator] for the company commander and the document came to me and I saw the name printed, and I said, “How the hell do you pronounce this?” And I went *catch-chee*, *cache-shee-ah*, we were joking about it. And then somebody said *Cacciato*—somebody who knew him.

The name stuck partly because we laughed at it, thinking this is not much of a soldier’s name. It sounded like the guy should be

cooking spaghetti somewhere. And also because when I did learn to pronounce the name I loved the way it came off my tongue. Sort of like “catch.” I was already probably thinking that I would be going back to the States if I survived and trying to write about this thing, and the name stuck with me.

The real Cacciato discovered I’d used his name in my book and assumed that I was trying to portray him as a deserter running for Paris. He let me know in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t any fucking deserter. And he wasn’t. He was a great guy. He was an adjutant in a firebase. We got attacked and mortared often. He was a good soldier. He later became a company commander out in the field and acquitted himself well. So I want to make it clear that the real Richard Cacciato was a terrific officer. All I did was swipe his name because I liked the sound of it.

McNerney: Let’s talk for a moment about the officers. We were talking yesterday about how some officers emphasized mission. Sidney Martin comes to mind in *Cacciato* and maybe Smith in *If I Die*. And there are other officers in your novels who have more of a connection with their men than with the mission—a Lieutenant Corson or a Captain Johansen—who don’t make the fellows go out, but allow them to report events from a safe haven. How did you respond to your officers in Vietnam, how did the soldiers make distinctions among how these officers emphasized mission or men?

O’Brien: The enlisted men—the common grunts—preferred an officer who put the emphasis of man over mission. That is to say, if we were in a situation, a village, let’s say, and we discovered a bunch of tunnels, we wanted an officer who would say, “Look, the mission here is to find weapons, find the VC, and here are these tunnels . . . but let’s just blow the damn thing.” It’s an example I use often in my work because this command dilemma occurred on a regular basis in Vietnam, almost daily. There were tunnels everywhere, bunkers everywhere. If you were to search them all—and they were generally very heavily mined and trapped—pretty soon you’d have no men left. There would be no men left to do the searching.

For me, though, my intellect told me that it was a war, and that you are supposed to *win* a war. That's what the Army's objective is supposed to be and I understood intellectually why some officers said, "Let's search. Let's follow the book and search these things. It's SOP [standard operating procedure], we're supposed to do it." I understood why, I just didn't like it. Just like I understand you are supposed to stop smoking. I don't like to stop smoking. Your intellect can know one thing, but your emotion can prefer something else—but I'll tell you this, soldiers preferred the "man over mission" approach.

The officer I most remember, however, emphasized mission over man. I wrote about him in *If I Die*. I called him Daud. His actual name is Julian Barnes. He died. He was a black Colonel. He was our battalion commander, and he was killed on LZ Gator in an attack one night in May 1969. I think it was May 12th or so. We were out in the field at the time and saw it from a few miles away, saw the firebase all night long. It was a bad attack. Not just Barnes died; I believe four others died, Americans. I discovered in my trip back to Vietnam, in talking to some of the villagers and to the VC, that this particular attack was a planned attack to target that man alone—to kill Barnes. The VC knew where to find him, where his bunker was, where his hootch was. *Because* he was such a good officer. *Because* he emphasized mission so much. That is to say, he was an ass-kicking officer. We lost a lot of men that May, because of the things Barnes was making us do, but the VC were losing a lot of people, too—and they didn't like it.

I remember the day Colonel Barnes gave us a speech. We were in stand-down in Chu Lai for three days before going on to Pinkville for an operation where many people died and were wounded. I was wounded myself in this operation. We all knew we were going to Pinkville. We didn't want to go. We had heard about it from some other soldiers who had been there.

Barnes' speech went something like this: "I'm Colonel Barnes, you guys are going out to Pinkville. It's going to be bad. We are going to lose men. I know that in advance and I don't like it, but I'm going to sacrifice you. Some of you guys are going to die and be wounded. But I have to do it. And I know you don't like it and you probably don't like me. I'm sorry, but you're in the Army and when you are in the Army, you have to do things you don't like."

The guys sort of snorted at him during this speech, yet it was a hell of a good speech. In any case, he wasn't lying to us. I think we respected him while also hating him. In some ways, though, we hated him more than we hated the VC, to be honest. The night he died—we heard about it over the radio—we began to sing, “Ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead.” I started it. I knew the song to sing. I admit it's a horrible thing. I'm embarrassed by it now—was embarrassed by it then—yet did it anyway, knowing it was an evil thing to do. *A man was dead*. At the same time, I said to myself, “I may live now if the next Colonel isn't quite so gung-ho.” That was a long answer to your question, but I had to get it said.

McNerney: I'm thinking of the “Notes” section to “Speaking of Courage.” In an earlier version of that story, in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1976, Paul Berlin figures as the main character instead of Norman Bowker and the whole incident of Kiowa and the shit field is omitted. Also, when Paul's father asks him in the earlier version what's wrong with telling war stories, Paul responds, “Nothing, except I guess nobody wants to hear them.” In the revised story, as it appears in *The Things They Carried*, you have Norman Bowker tell a war story. Has your conception of the war story changed from that first telling to the later one?

O'Brien: The main character in *The Massachusetts Review* story is Paul Berlin but in the evolution of the “shit field” stories in *The Things They Carried* [“Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” “In the Field”], the principal character is me, not Norman Bowker. I had to change the story for *The Things They Carried* because I didn't want to repeat myself from *Going After Cacciato*. Beyond that, I wanted to have an integrated novel in which an episode in one chapter—the shit field business with Kiowa—echoed in later chapters so that the incident of Kiowa's death would carry throughout the book. Further, there were things in the original version I just didn't like. I thought I could improve on the story. My notion of the war story itself didn't change much—still hasn't. I pretty much believe what I believed when I wrote *If I Die*, which is that war stories don't carry morals. You should keep them as close to the bone as possible without embroidery, without much but the

facts, though my notion of what's factual changed. I began to distrust facts more the older I got. Probably I realized I didn't know many of the facts of Vietnam, and those I did remember I had filtered through my own memory. That is to say, I'd reworked them. You forget actual dialogue. You forget the sequence of events, the chronology of events. It evaporates. What happened first, what happened second? You can't remember after a certain period of time, so how to know if something's factual?

One of the reasons I went back to Vietnam was to try to find out what actually happened there. Yet, even going back and talking to the VC and the villagers who were around, there were many versions of what happened in the various places where I'd served—you know, the numbers of people killed, where everybody was, what transpired on a given day. I guess I decided to become a fiction writer so I wouldn't have to obey the normal rules of fact and truth. You are allowed when you write fiction—in fact, you have to—to imagine, to make up your own truths. You have to manufacture a system that is coherent and meaningful and moving without having to wade through layers of competing versions of fact.

McNerney: You have to lie to get at the truth?

O'Brien: They are noble lies. The word "lie" has a pejorative connotation to it that I don't intend. I mean to state that which one knows is not true, but to do it with a noble purpose. In my fiction I state things as if they were true, knowing they are not. That is, I know there was never any Kiowa, yet I write as if there were a Kiowa. Nor was there any Jimmy Cross; nor did any of these events occur exactly as I render them. I know they are not true. Mark Twain knew there was no real Huck Finn. It's a character based on a person Twain knew; further, there was no raft, no Jim, no Duke, none of the events of the novel "happened," yet Twain presented them as if they had. That's what fiction is about. You approximate the world as it once was or could be without having to obey the rules of the historian.

McNerney: Do war stories differ from stories in general? For instance, what special effect do you intend the war story to have upon the listener?

O'Brien: All stories are meant to put a reader into the shoes of a storyteller or at least into the shoes of, if not the storyteller, then the characters in the story. That's why you're sitting in a bar and you say, "Listen, I gotta tell you this, something happened today. I was driving down the street and I saw this clown come out a bar and the clown asked me for directions." What you are trying to do to the person listening to the story is have that person imagine driving down the street and seeing a clown come out of a bar, then whatever transpires after that. That's why you tell the story, because of something that happened that you need *others* to identify with. How would you feel if this happened to you? War stories do that too. They say how would you feel if you suddenly were drafted? How would you feel if you hated the war and thought it was wrong? What would you do? What would you do if your best friend were to sink into the muck of a shit field and you felt responsible for it in some way? How would you feel if your daughter asked, "Did you ever kill anyone?" These are ways of asking the reader to put himself or herself into the shoes of the person telling the story or the characters in the story.

War stories have other functions too. Among them is the moral function, which, again, is not just for war stories. All stories have at their heart an essential moral function, which isn't only to put yourself into someone's shoes, but to go beyond that and put yourself into someone else's moral framework. How would *you* behave in that world? What is the moral thing to do and not to do? What would *you* do if you were a company commander and knew you had to try to win a war, but also preserve your men? Sometimes you can't preserve your men and win a war. How are you going to make the moral judgments? How would you behave in this or that world?

Fiction in general, and war stories in particular, serve a moral function, but not to give you lessons, not to tell you how to act. Rather, they present you with philosophical problems, then ask you to try to adjudicate them in some way or another. But it's an imperfect world, and we can't find perfect solutions in an

imperfect world. And yet, even in this imperfect world, we seek proximate solutions. That's the business of living, and fiction tries to address that.

McNerney: You once said that William Cowling, from *The Nuclear Age*, is the only hero you've ever created in your fiction. If you still feel that way, might it in some way be related to the way you have Cowling deal with courage and with cowardice and the specific discoveries he makes dealing with things he finds terrifying?

O'Brien: What is a hero? What I mean by a hero is someone who behaves in a way that corresponds with his or her beliefs—if you believe you should be doing a thing, then you do it. It's a correspondence between a moral judgment and one's behavior in the world. Heroism is not determined by outside criteria; it's determined by criteria inside one's own psyche, one's own conscience. Cowling is the only character I've created who behaves in the real world in a way that corresponds with the things he believes about the world—he believes that the Vietnam War is immoral and he doesn't go to it. Instead, he runs from it. He believes the world is going to end, and not just in a literal sense: apocalypse or nuclear war. Such an end is only a metaphor for something much larger in the book, which is the business that we are all going to die—the whole business, in other words, of mortality. And not only human mortality, but the mortality of the universe as well: the sun is going to flare up and roast the earth and then die out.

If you believe in the Big Bang, then you also believe the corresponding idea, as most scientists now do in some form or another, that the universe will collapse in on itself at some point. Or else, if it doesn't collapse, it will just continue to expand to eternity and everything will dissolve. These are huge questions, but they are questions most of us aren't bothered by because they are so far in the future. Our own deaths are in the future. The end of the universe is millennia away. But now and then in our dreams and daydreams we do stop and say, "Hey, I am going to die someday," or "there are bombs out there than can blow up East Lansing in a second," or "the universe is going to collapse on itself."

When we hit such moments of realization of the endingness of things, ordinarily we just shut off and make ourselves stop thinking about it or go to a bar or eat our next meal. But Cowling is the kind of person who can't shut himself off. In that sense, he is abnormal, the way a lot of obsessed characters in fiction have been abnormal—Captain Queeg in *The Caine Mutiny*—all kinds of characters. Lord Jim is obsessed by his own failures, and so on. When you create characters in fiction, you usually go for the extraordinary, the offbeat. You don't go for the common Joe on the street who doesn't think about anything or care about anything. Generally you go for a character who cares in a magnified way about the world. Cowling is an anomaly in the world, a person who can't stop thinking about the question of mortality, the emptiness of things. Further, he acts on his beliefs. As weird as Cowling's behaviors are, they are still courageous behaviors, though in literature most people who behave as Cowling does end up defeated—the way Ahab ends up defeated by the whale.

The way to survive in this world is not to be a hero. The way to survive is to act in a kind of ordinary way, not cowardly way, but sort of forgetful way. That is how most of us behave in the world. But heroes behave in an extraordinary, self-defeating fashion. That's what I think Cowling does.

McNerney: You once said you might rewrite *Northern Lights*. Then you did rewrite and republish substantial portions of both *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*.

O'Brien: And *If I Die*. I revised much of that.

McNerney: Could you talk about your process of revision? For example, you say in "How to Tell a True War Story" that one of the characteristics of a true war story is that it must be continually retold. Is this emphasis on reworking your fiction part of that idea of working toward the ultimate true war story?

O'Brien: I revise often simply for writerly reasons. That is, I make writerly kinds of mistakes; in *Cacciato*, a lot of things I changed had to do with the section in Teheran when the characters make their escape. I wanted a cartoon feel to this section, some kind of

dream-like feel to this jail escape. Berlin's imagination fails him in that jail and so he just imagines this cartoonish escape. But the effect on the reader, at least on this reader—me—was that it was too cartoonish. I thought it needed to be toned down, and I spent a lot of time trying to cut, just to tone it down.

A second category of revision has to do with this business of the multiplicity of truth, or the multiplicities of truth. That is, there are different versions to some of my stories. "Speaking of Courage" is probably the most obvious. There are two published versions of this story. I'm always up against conflicting possibilities. When you are composing a world, making a world up, there are always alternatives. She could say *this* or she could say *that*. He could do *this* or he could do *that*. The book could end this way or that.

I've taken this business to an extreme in my new book, *In the Lake of the Woods*. The situation is that a woman is missing and no one knows what has happened to her and no one will ever know. So I make up alternatives throughout the book. Maybe this happened to her; maybe that happened to her; maybe she drowned; maybe she got on a bus to go to Seattle; maybe she left her husband for another man; maybe she got lost. Each maybe is a little "Hypothesis," as these chapters are called. Maybe she and her husband planned to run away together because she and her husband couldn't stand the world as it was pressing in on them anymore. All kinds of possibilities. I've intentionally built into one novel many alternatives as to what might have transpired.

I don't write this way as a game; I write this way because that's the way the world is. Think of someone you knew when you were in high school. Where is the person now? Maybe dead, maybe a stockbroker, maybe a mortician, maybe in jail, maybe a lot of things. You base the maybes on the scraps of memory you have from what you knew in high school about the person. And you make up little hypotheses. Some seem more probable than others. You build up these possibilities, and if you were ever to really discover what happened to that person, maybe none of the possibilities you had built up was what really occurred to the person. So there is that whole array of possibilities that you haven't even considered.

And, then, the whole business of mortality. When we die, what happens to us? Where do we go? Do we go to heaven? Do we rot and that's it? Is there life after death? There's no way we're going to know in the waking world. We live our lives more than we know in the world of hypothesis. Christians live by the hypothesis that we are going to heaven. Hindus live by the hypothesis that we are going to be reborn, and that by good acts will come back at higher and higher planes. Every religion or philosophical system is a hypothesis—maybe this or maybe that. And we live by these maybes, more than we know. The world is not as certain as we pretend. I try to write fiction that takes this “maybeness” into account. In *Cacciato*, the last line of the book is, “Maybe so, the lieutenant says.” Maybe Cacciato is out there still. Maybe he will make it, but we will never know.

Calloway: In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles offers three different endings. Further, the reader is invited to create his own ending. Have you been influenced by John Fowles?

O'Brien: I've always loved Fowles' work. A book of his I very much like is *The Ebony Tower*. But, to continue your observation, Fowles also rewrote the ending of *The Magus*. Not just the ending but other parts as well. And the thing is, he is open about it. A lot of other writers do it subtly and slyly. You don't even know about it. They just slip their revisions into the next revision of a paperback. Most scholars don't notice.

McNerney: You stated that books can work as magic acts. In the section, “The People We Marry,” from *In the Lake of the Woods*, the character John Wade dabbles in magic as a hobby. You state at one point that magic was his life. Do you see a relationship between magic and writing?

O'Brien: I was a magician as a kid. It was my hobby. You try to make up a better world than the world you are living in through the power of manipulation of that which can't be manipulated ordinarily. You can't usually make things vanish or appear out of nowhere. And yet, if you are a magician, you present, at least, the

illusion of doing that. This has flowed, I suppose, into my career as a writer in a lot of ways where I can make miracles happen in my stories. I can make people wake up from the dead—which I do in *The Things They Carried*: they sit up and talk. It's power.

For instance, if somebody dies you are close to—a father, say—and you are lying in bed a week later and he is in the ground, and it's two in the morning and you can't sleep and your father's face comes to mind. You see him walking down the street and talking to you. You can see his face and you hear him laugh and talk, partly as a memory, partly as something you are just sort of imagining happening. Those moments when you are imagining him, he *is* with you. He's as alive as he was before. He's not dead, exactly, when you see him doing these things. If he were dead, he would be lying in his coffin. But he's talking. What is animation, and what is life, really? It may not be quite as easy to define as we have thought it is. When we see movies, we know things aren't real and yet they seem real. We watch the images. There is a kind of "happening," with a reality we can't deny. When you are reading a book—Huck Finn on the raft or Ahab chasing the whale or Cacciato going to Paris—if the thing is vivid enough there is going to be a kind of "livingness" to it that is not the same as the waking world we're in, but that is like the waking world we're in, a kind of aliveness. That's what I mean. There are kinds of being alive. Shakespeare has a kind of immortality. He is dust now. Yet when we say he is immortal, we are saying that because when we see or read his plays, we're living his thoughts anew. We are living for him. When those lines of dialogue are spoken, it's not exactly the same as the living Shakespeare speaking to us, but it's *like* it.

McNerney: Your books are read in a lot of college courses. *Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and your other writings have received considerable critical attention. How has your public activity as a writer affected your private activity as a writer?

O'Brien: Well, not at all. That is one of the peculiar things about me as a human being. People who know me well comment on how I am able to isolate the problems and the realities of the world and sit down and write. I'm not saying it's a virtue, but there is something about my personality where I can shut out the most

traumatic, horrible things that are occurring in my life all around me. There can be bombs going off in the room next door and I can still sit and write. I can do that with good things as well. I can have wonderful things happening in the world next to me—awards or meeting people on trips and so on—and utterly shut them out. There is something about my personality that can just do that. It's not always good. So the answer is really—it probably doesn't sound true, but sometimes the truth doesn't—that I can shut off everything and write. That is to say, when I am praised it doesn't mean a thing to me. When I am trying to write a sentence, because the sentence is so hard to write that you are not thinking, "Boy, I'm a good writer." You're thinking, "God, I can't make this sentence go to the right place. I can't make it sound right. I can't give it a unique quality that makes it jump the way I want to make my sentences somehow seem alive. Sort of jump at you and be memorable." And if you can't do it, you don't take solace in the fact that you have done it before. You're just lost in the world of the sentence, the paragraph, and the story. It's like a lead room I walk into, and when that door closes I'm utterly alone and nothing that has ever happened in the world means anything. I'm just in a world of that page and those words and the story I'm trying to tell. I wish I could not be that way at times, because I ignore the outside world and then it catches up with me years later or months later or weeks later—the friends I've forgotten to call back, all the things you forget to do.

McNerney: You were recently singled out in a Vietnam War literature journal for your work, in the way that it was perceived as possibly anti-feminist. You have also had to defend yourself at times from accusations in which you use the words of the Vietnamese themselves, saying that you have not presented the Vietnamese perspective. Does this bother you?

O'Brien: It bothers only insofar as it would bother any human being who has something negative said about his or her person. You don't want to have bad things said about you. It's like being called a shitball, and you'd prefer not being called a shitball if you don't think of yourself as one, and, even if you do think of yourself as one, you don't want to be called one. To that extent it bothers

you. The question then becomes one of fairness. You have to ask yourself in a quiet moment if the criticism is valid or not.

Let's do the Vietnamese question first. I haven't pretended to present a Vietnamese viewpoint in my books, except on one or two occasions. In *Cacciato*, I present a character, Li Van Hgoc, who is a fable-like character, living down in the earth. I try to imagine what it would be like, in a grossly distorted, almost cartoonish way, to be a Viet Cong or NVA soldier living in the earth. Besides Li Van Hgoc, there is the Vietnamese man I kill off in *The Things They Carried*. There I tried to imagine what it would have been like to have been a scared, young VC draftee. Except for these two occasions, I haven't attempted to present a Vietnamese viewpoint. Why haven't I? Because I don't know it. I don't know the life of the VC and the life of the Vietnamese. I know only a smattering about what Buddhism and Confucianism are. I know only a smattering of the culture. I don't know the language at all. I'm not going to deign to speak for people who can speak very well for themselves.

When I was recently in Vietnam, I talked over this very issue with five or six Vietnamese writers at a literary magazine I visited there. I said, "Other American writers and I have been criticized for not presenting your point of view enough." They laughed and said, "Well, we don't present *your* point of view." It was obvious among us writers that you can't. They said to me and I said to them: *you are capable of speaking for yourself, and I am capable of speaking for myself*. To don the mantle of an alien culture and to pretend to speak for that culture as if you knew it seems to me hubris. I don't want to write for the Vietnamese. They are capable of writing for themselves, and have done very well. Even though a lot of their stuff hasn't been translated yet, they have a thriving literary community that is under incredible pressure from the Vietnamese government. They are always being blackballed and so on, but nonetheless they are speaking for themselves.

The feminist issue is more difficult. It is hard to talk about because things I say may sound anti-feminist, but are, in fact, not. Put another way, I think I often am much more a feminist than the so-called feminists criticizing me.

One fact we live with—and like all facts, there are layers—is that women don't serve in combat in western societies, much. And so in my stories, I don't have women soldiers walking around. Just as an environment, women are excluded. The question then becomes 'what do you do when women are by nature excluded from participation in events? What do you do with women? Which view do you take? And what role do they play dramatically in the making of a work of art? If to place a woman in a combat setting would be to violate the rules of credibility that rule verisimilitude, then you end up having characters talk about women.

There are a couple of lines—I'll just take a couple of examples—one is in *If I Die* where a soldier says "she's sort of pretty for a gook." Well, on the surface it seems like an utterly misogynistic statement, and racist at that. Which it is. But my role as a writer is not to make up a world that is better than it is. My role is to report the world as it is. And that statement is a very delicate way of saying something that is said in much stronger language and much more offensive language every day by men in a war. I wouldn't have a character say after being shot, "Oh, poop, I've been shot!" instead of "Oh, shit!" Similarly, you wouldn't have soldiers talking about women or making comments that they wouldn't ordinarily make in the real world. What I'm trying to say is that while I'm recording a thing, I'm not necessarily endorsing it. When Dostoyevsky writes about murder in *Crime and Punishment*, he's not endorsing the acts of Raskolnikov. He is thinking of the complications of a man pretending he is superman. You don't blame the messenger for the news. What are some of the statements made about my work in particular that would make it seem anti-feminist?

McNerney: There is, for example, the business at the end of "How to Tell a True War Story," where the woman comes up and says that she doesn't like war stories. And I guess some critics have said that this implies that women are not smart enough or not intuitive enough to understand a war story. As you have said before, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is a kind of answer to the depiction of women which may present them as less

understanding or less in contact with the emotional force of what's going on in your war stories.

O'Brien: I believe that, by and large, women in America don't like war stories. That is, if you asked a cross-section of women demographically selected, "Would you read a war story?" or "Would you prefer war stories to love stories, father stories, mother stories, son stories," I believe you are going to find the dominant statistical answer being, "Women don't like war stories." It doesn't mean that women are not perspicacious. It doesn't mean that they are not smart. It doesn't mean that they are not intuitive. It means that women prefer not to read war stories. The question then becomes *why*? And my answer to that is a cultural one. It is that because women are excluded by law from serving in combat, and up until recently were really discriminated against from serving in the armed forces in general. I believe they still are to some extent. This exclusion explains, I think, why women would prefer not to read about something with which they cannot identify. Beyond that, another reason that women may not like war stories has to do with how war stories oftentimes are bad stories—full of cliché, blood, death, bullets, bombs, purposeless stereotypes, glorification of war. All these are valid reasons not to like war stories. And so when the woman at the end of "How to Tell a True War Story," says, "ordinarily I don't like war stories, this one I liked," it is supposed to be a backhanded compliment to that woman. This war story she liked because, I hope, it isn't stereotypical, isn't predictable, isn't melodramatic. It touches a woman's spirit the same way it would touch a man's spirit.

What I'm criticizing is the culturally caused statistical propensity on the part of women to not give war stories the same open-minded consideration that I would give to a story about a feminist and a professor in a college. If it is expected that I should be able to read *Madame Bovary*, a book about a woman written by a man, I can expect that a woman, through acts of the imagination, acts of cultural identification, acts of socialization, would some day write a war story as good as any I could write. What I'm doing is criticizing a culture that unfairly has excluded women from the responsibility of taking part in a social phenomenon: war.

There is another level to my response to feminist criticism of my work that is a little more angry. And that level is that it seems to me that women are going to have to acknowledge that men are being treated unfairly when they are sent to war. I don't think women have thought about it much. I think women, by and large, in western society take it for granted that they don't have to serve in combat, and it's not even thought about much. It's just a given. It's as if God has somehow granted a divine right to women: *You don't have to die in combat. You don't have to go through this horror.* Well, God didn't mandate this privilege, man did. Law did. Tradition did. Culture did. It seems to me that excluding women from combat is a clear violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to our Constitution. We should all be treated fairly. Why not only draft blacks, or only draft Albanians, or only draft Italians? There would be a revolution in this country in any of those cases. "How to Tell a True War Story" is meant to call attention to a fundamental inequity. Half our population is excluded from the horror of serving in combat. I want to call attention to that fact.

I want also to say that I think there is an unsubstantiated belief that gender determines bellicosity. Based on people like Lizzie Borden or Catherine the Great, I can't say that women are absolutely and utterly non-violent creatures. It seems to me to be a kind of denigration of women to contend such a thing. To say "we are not capable of belligerence, we're not capable of anger, we're not capable of this" seems to me to denigrate women. The so-called feminists who say "we, the women, are the nurturers; we are the lovers; we are the child-bearers of the world; we are endowed with a God-given goodness that men are not endowed with" is to violate a fundamental humanity about women. The experience of the human race is that women know what sin is, know what evil is, and have participated in both in their own ways. I'm rebelling against a stereotype. I would think a feminist would be applauding me for this. I would think a feminist would be saying "you are right!—our gender doesn't make us less than human."

McNerney: In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," you envision the possibility of a woman in combat. To a certain degree that story is a working hypothesis of what you are talking about: that

women just as much as men under the right conditions—or really under the worst conditions is what we mean—can experience the same reduction of the soul or the reduction of the self.

O'Brien: Yes, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" seems to me an utterly feminist story. It seems to me to be saying, in part, if women were to serve in combat they would be experiencing precisely what I am, the same conflicts, the same paradoxes, the same terrors, the same guilts, the same seductions of the soul. They would be going to the same dark side of the human hemisphere, the dark side of the moon, the dark side of their own psyches. It seems to me that the story is a fable—that it's meant to make explicit that which I thought was implicit in my work all along.

I'm thinking now of Sarkin Aung Wan, a female character in *Cacciato*, who is a figment of Paul Berlin's imagination. I would guess that if I were to read the literature, I'm going to find some feminist writing incorrectly about this character. I would say she might be brought up as an example of O'Brien's view of women, but Sarkin Aung Wan is to me an extraordinarily strong character. In fact, she might be an example of a hero. Maybe she is the second hero in my fiction. She is a woman who is fleeing with her aunts from horror and from terror, acting on her convictions. She is made up by Paul Berlin. She is an aspect of Paul Berlin's personality. In the Paris Peace Talks table scene, she speaks for part of Paul Berlin's personality, speaks for the good part, I think—saying, You've walked this far in your imagination, why don't you keep walking out of this war? Why don't you be brave? Why don't you walk away from the horror of this war the way Cacciato did and the way I'm urging you to? Let's live in peace and civility. She is the guide away from that war for Paul Berlin. She gets him out of trouble when they are down in Li Van Hgoc's tunnel; she is the guide out of that horror. She has a tenacity of spirit. She has a strength of endurance that belies her physical fragility. So I imagine some feminist critic of mine has probably written that she finds the language describing Sarkin Aung Wan's physical fragility offensive. But what I think such critics have overlooked is that despite her physical characteristics, Sarkin Aung Wan has an abiding obstinacy of purpose and a strength that

is meant to represent part of Paul Berlin's own personality—that which would act bravely, that which would flee from war, that which would do something difficult. So, in that character, which is written, I don't know, twenty years ago, a long time ago, I try to place a woman in a situation of incredible stress and terror and have her act nobly and well. Conversely, the character of Mary Anne Bell in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" doesn't act so nobly or well. She acts as others would act. She's seduced by it. But the capabilities of one woman, to act just as men, sometimes respond this way, other times this way, is to show that women too can succumb to violence.

McNerney: *Northern Lights* and *The Nuclear Age* over the years haven't received the same attention as your novels that are very Vietnam specific. What these books share, among their concern for issues of courage and cowardice, is that they are both set in the Midwest. The ending to *If I Die* also takes the reader over the farmlands of Minnesota and back to your home. What significance does locale play, and what are your feelings towards small towns which created such a strong gravity in you and in your decision to go to Vietnam?

O'Brien: I see virtue in the Midwest, but I also see horror. I see a kind of grotesque horror—the kind of horror that Flannery O'Connor saw in Georgia and in the South. I see lines side by side like parallel railroad tracks. I see one track through the Midwest of independence of spirit, belief in the human individual, the inviolable sanctity of the human individual. But the line next to that track is a peculiar sort of in-grown smugness—I want to say this as delicately as I can, and it's hard to do—a kind of smugness with respect to personal virtue. A kind of smugness that takes delight in ignorance in some way. Those high-falutin' Easterners, those crass Westerners, those redneck Southerners. A kind of delight, as I say, in ignorance.

I wrote in several places—I'll try to get Vietnam specific now—about how the people in my hometown didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon, didn't know the first thing about French colonialism. They didn't and probably to this day don't, by and large. If you were to give a quiz, "Name three prominent

Vietnamese figures during the last forty years," I'd say that most people in my hometown would not be able to come up with more than one, which would be Ho Chi Minh. That would probably be it. They would scratch their heads and say, "Who was that president of South Vietnam? Who *was* that guy I wanted to have my son die for?" I'm not sure they would remember Khanh or Ky or Thieu or Diem. I doubt they would. In fact, I know they wouldn't. And yet these are the guys who personified a South Vietnam that they would want to send their sons to die for. Well, that kind of smugness is what I refer to, that kind of delight in their own ignorance. They don't want to know. It makes me angry.

I go home once a year to play in a golf tournament in my hometown. I go out to the golf course and there are these people in their white shoes and polyester pants, which to me represents smugness. I don't have anything against polyester, but I have a lot against what polyester represents in my imagination, which is an attitude of smugness. And now it's an attitude of ignorance of the world and a delight in Worthington, Minnesota as the center of the universe. And America as the center of the universe. My country right or wrong. Well, it got us into a lot of trouble in Vietnam, that attitude. And it almost got me dead. I have struck back oftentimes at Worthington. I recognize the virtues such as they are. But I'm glad I don't live there anymore. In a way I never lived there. I'm not the kind of guy that's going to fit into Worthington. Truth there is written with a capital "T."

McNerney: Can the non-participant understand the combat experience through literature? Is there even such a thing as an essential quality of war?

O'Brien: No, there's not. War is everything. In "How to Tell a True War Story," I make a long list: war is adventure; war is holiness; war is pity; war is longing; war is love; war is ghosts. The list is long. War is a multiplicity of events. Maybe always, but certainly now, for me, the environment of war is the environment of life, magnified. That is, instead of mortality pressing on us twenty years from now—the possibility, say, of cancer—it is pressing on me now. The stakes of living in a war are enhanced only because of the awareness of the proximity of death. That is to say, I'm almost dead with every step I

take in a war as opposed to fifty steps to the day I get cancer or have a first heart attack. We are all living in a war. It's just that the wolf isn't quite at the door. The wolf is sort of baying in the woods, in the lives we live in the ordinary world. The wolf is out there baying, but it's a ways away. Whereas in a war, the wolf is right at the door scratching and the door is unlocked and partly open and you're trying to keep it closed. The enemy is right there; death is right there. We just don't recognize it in ordinary life, but with every breath we take, we are one breath closer to the grave.

I hope that my work will ultimately have its effect in understanding the war of living. The stakes are always high. We are always almost dead in our lives—we just don't know it. The problems and dilemmas presented in a war setting are essentially the problems and dilemmas of living itself. It's hard to be brave in the ordinary world. It's hard to know what bravery is in the ordinary world. It's hard to know what rectitude is in the ordinary world because we are often put into situations of paradox. In the daily world you are in these situations constantly, trying to adjudicate that which is ultimately insoluble. I love her but I also love *her*. What should I do? I love them both. Who are you going to live with? Who are you going to marry? Who are you going to be faithful to? That is just one example which should hit home to women, men, Martians, Albanians. It should be specific to nothing except to humanity itself. Those paradoxes which war presents with the wolf at the door are there all the time. I hope that when my books are read, they'll reverberate for those reasons, for those who have never experienced war and never will, but experience daily, a different war: the war of life itself.

I receive a lot of letters about my work. I would say that at least 80% of the letters I receive are from women. Maybe more. The letters are from the mothers of soldiers who served in Vietnam and Desert Storm and other wars. They are from sisters. Women married to these guys. All say essentially the same thing: "Thank you for writing this book because now I feel something in terms of identification, and in terms of participation that I didn't feel before. My husband can't talk about it, but now I sort of understand why he doesn't, why he can't." There is a joy that you get receiving that kind of a letter as opposed to a letter from a vet saying "I read your

book and thank you for writing it; it echoed my experience." I don't have to echo his experience. He knows what his experience was. He's been there. It's nice to have an echo, but he doesn't need it the same way that a child of nineteen needs it before trying to make up his or her mind whether to join the army. Or the citizen needs it when it comes time to enter the booth to vote. Or that a woman needs to be able to give comfort or counsel to a husband suffering or a child trying to decide to join the military or not.

What I'm trying to say is the joy I get is probably the same joy Conrad got when he would get letters from people who weren't sailors, saying, God, you know, thank you for that experience of going through that typhoon. Now I've had an experience I couldn't have otherwise. That's the joy. The joy is not the joy of touching veterans or touching people who have lived what you have lived. The joy is just the opposite. Maybe that's what hurts me when I hear that articles are being written by women saying I am anti-feminist. The whole creative joy is to touch the hearts of people whose hearts otherwise wouldn't be touched. That's why it hurts to have these things saying I am anti-feminist. It hurts me badly because the purpose of art is to touch the human heart in its solidarity and solidity. Art has very little to do with the differences among us, more to do with the similarities we share.

Calloway: You mentioned yesterday that you don't want to write another novel.

O'Brien: What I want to do is write short stories. A novel takes so much out of your life. How many years do I have left? I am forty-seven and let's say I live to eighty. Well, I haven't got a lot of years left. It takes me five to eight years to write a novel, give or take. They used to take less, but now they're taking that long. That's not many more books. I'm aware of the limits of my life now as we all are when we get older. I would prefer to be able to do fifty stories about different facets of the world as opposed to just three or four more books, which is all I probably would be able to finish. There are so few gratifications that come to the writer. And to have to wait eight years to receive the gratification of a book coming out is too long for me to wait now.

You should never trust what a writer says about his goals because they are so fluid, but given the way I feel now, I can't imagine writing another book. And if I can't imagine it, the odds are slim that I'll do it. I have to be able to imagine a thing before I can do it. What I can imagine is writing stories. Maybe forty-page, fifty-page stories. But still just stories. □