



## READING GUIDE

### GENERAL:

1. What is the significance of the book's title, literally and metaphorically?

### STYLE:

1. Why do you feel O'Brien chose to write this book as fiction? Why does he call the book fiction when so many of the stories seem autobiographical? What is the relationship between facts and truths?
2. Why does O'Brien start his book with a list of what the men carry? What effect does the cataloguing of items have? What are the most significant things they carry?
3. Describe the humor that often accompanies these stories. What function does it perform in connection to the tragic circumstances?

### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

1. Why did Norman Bowker and others have a difficult time returning to the lives they had left behind in the United States? What knowledge did the soldiers find impossible to convey to their home communities?
2. How do the stories help you understand the disillusionment of so many U.S. troops who fought in Vietnam?

### STORYTELLING:

1. Why does O'Brien tell incidents several times and why are his "recollections" different each time? Describe how stories you've told change over time.
2. "By telling stories, you objectify your experience," O'Brien writes. "You pin down certain truths". Describe at least one truth you feel O'Brien pins down.

### PHILOSOPHY AND PERSONAL CHOICE:

1. Norman Bowker learns in "Speaking of Courage" that sometimes "the difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid." Explain O'Brien's insistence on showing how courage, cowardice, love, and hate can exist side by side within individual soldiers.
2. What choice does Jimmy Gross in "The Things They Carried" make on the first page of the story? The last page? How would you describe the changes in Jimmy from beginning to end?
3. After reading "On the Rainy River," how do you think you would have reacted to the possibility of being drafted for the Vietnam War? Would you have made the same decision O'Brien made?

### WAR:

1. When we read a war story, what do we usually associate with courage and war? How does courage connect to morality? What does O'Brien say motivates the men in his company? What is the relationship between war and shame, according to O'Brien?
2. What is the role of a citizen during war? If you think war is unjust, should you say so, or is that unpatriotic? Describe the various forms patriotism can take during wartime, even protesting the war.



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### **GENDER/CLASS/CULTURE:**

1. Describe the different roles of women in the stories in which they appear.
2. The soldiers in *The Things They Carried* note cultural and ethnic differences, but these differences seldom seem to inhibit communication and cooperation. Why do the differences that often provoke hostility (at home) mean so little in war?
3. The overwhelming and surreal “otherness” of the Vietnamese culture, climate, and landscape often frightens and overwhelms the soldiers. How does it alter the meaning of the book?

### **POPULAR CULTURE:**

1. How do the Vietnam War films that you have seen compare to other war (WWI, WWII, Korea, etc.) films?
2. The subject of the Vietnam War continues to resurface in music, literature, and film. Why do you think this is so?