Metafiction in the work of Tim O'Brien

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UMI
METAFIGION IN THE WORK OF TIM O’BRIEN

by

Michael Patrick Kimmet

Bachelor of Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the

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ABSTRACT

Metafiction in the Work of Tim O'Brien

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This thesis explores Tim O'Brien's ideas on the definition of fiction, memory, imagination, the role they play in the creative process, and the functions that fiction has in the world at large. This will be explored through close examination of O'Brien's self-referential narrative technique. This thesis will answer three questions: using O'Brien's work as a single framework for discovery, whether a definition of fiction can be reached; whether an idea of what causes the impulse to tell stories be ascertained; and if the primary functions that stories serve be discovered. These questions will be explored through extensive close reading of O'Brien's self-referential texts and researching prior criticism, interviews, and reviews.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT......................................................................................................................................iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................v

CHAPTER ONE WHAT FICTION IS, WHAT IT DOES, AND WHERE IT COMES FROM.................................................................1

CHAPTER TWO FEAR AND OBLIGATION ON THE ROAD TO PARIS: MEMORY AND IMAGINATION IN GOING AFTER CACCIATO ...................................................6
  The Past Time Chapters.........................................................................................................9
  The Present Time Chapters..................................................................................................31
  The Future Time Chapters.................................................................................................43

CHAPTER THREE STORIES AS SALVATION: STORY-TRUTH AND HAPPENING-TRUTH IN THE THINGS THEY CARRIED .................................................................72
  This is True: "How to Tell a True War Story" .......................................................................88
  Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, and the Art of the Story: "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" ..................................................................................94
  Losing Kiowa: "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," "In the Field," and "Field Trip" .........104
  Stories as Survival: "The Lives of the Dead" .........................................................................114

  The Past Time Episodes....................................................................................................122
  The Present Time Episodes...............................................................................................143
  The Future Time and "Evidence" Episodes........................................................................167

CHAPTER FIVE DEFINING FICTION THROUGH O'BRIEN'S WORK ..........................................................................................184

WORKS CONSULTED........................................................................................................192

VITA.........................................................................................................................................195
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CHAPTER ONE

WHAT FICTION IS, WHAT IT DOES, AND WHERE IT COMES FROM

Coming up with a definition of fiction is no easy task. Tim O’Brien, widely recognized as one of the finest writers working today, has spent a good deal of his career trying not only to define fiction, but also examining the art of telling stories to determine exactly where the impulse to tell stories comes from and what function stories serve. O’Brien, through his exploration of the art of storytelling, has arrived at several interesting conclusions regarding what fiction is, where it comes from, and the value that storytelling has.

Tim O’Brien’s primary method for exploring fiction, its origin, and its usefulness is through extensive use of metafiction, which may be best defined simply as works of fiction with a “self-referential quality as the author, through narrators and characters, explores the craft of storytelling” (Herzog 28). Herzog further defines metafiction in the context of O’Brien’s work as “experimenting with and commenting on narrative voices, structure, concepts of storytelling, the nature of creating a work of art, the relationships between reality and fiction, the development of an author, and...the role of author as magician” (29).

This study examines O’Brien’s definition of fiction, his ideas about where fiction originates in the human consciousness, and the values fiction has through examining his
metafiction, specifically the metafiction in his three finest works, *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*, which are "classic examples of metafiction" (28).

Tim O'Brien has written seven books: *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Northern Lights, Going After Cacciato, The Nuclear Age, The Things They Carried, In the Lake of the Woods*, and *Tomcat in Love*. While all are excellent works in their own right, the four that are being excluded from this study do not focus on the art and craft of telling stories in the way that *Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* do. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a nonfiction memoir that uses narrative techniques in some interesting ways, and includes (as all of O'Brien's works do) flashes of the self-referential writing that defines metafiction, but the primary focus of the book is on subjects other than storytelling, so it will be excluded from this study. Likewise, *Northern Lights* and *The Nuclear Age*, while having elements of metafiction and dealing at times with the craft of storytelling, focus most of their energy on subjects other than telling stories. *Tomcat in Love*, while an interesting novel with some wonderful examinations of language and how language shapes relationships of people with each other, deals more with language in general than with storytelling in particular; it will likewise be excluded from this study.

In *Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, O'Brien does reach conclusions regarding what fiction is, where it comes from, and what it does. This study will consider *Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* separately; *Going After Cacciato* in Chapter Two, *The Things They Carried* in Chapter Three, and *In the Lake of The Woods* in Chapter
Four. Chapter Five will consider the conclusions that O’Brien reaches regarding what fiction is, where fiction comes from, and what values it has through these three works.

Extensive close reading of the texts is necessary when identifying and unraveling the many layers of O’Brien’s metafiction, and dissection of some of the primary elements of fiction—namely plot and characters—is required at times to get to O’Brien’s ideas. These three novels use similar techniques and very different stories to convey the same ideas about storytelling in a number of different ways. This study examines O’Brien’s self-referential prose and pieces together the similar ideas that he conveys in so many different ways, even within a single text. Through close examination of Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried, and In the Lake of the Woods separately, and by looking at the different ways each text presents the same ideas, some clear understanding will be reached about what Tim O’Brien believes fiction is, where in the mind it comes from, and what functions it can serve. While it is impossible to define what fiction is, where it originates, and what functions it has, using the writings of Tim O’Brien as a single framework for discovery is possible.

On the story level, Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried, and In the Lake of the Woods are three very different works dealing with very different subject matters; however, metafiction and the art of telling stories is a primary theme in each of them. Going After Cacciato is a Vietnam war novel, set entirely within the memory and imagination of a soldier in Vietnam. The Things They Carried is an interrelated series of short episodes that all take place in Vietnam and back home in America before, during, and after the war. In the Lake of the Woods takes place entirely in America, but events the protagonist participated in twenty years before in Vietnam come back to haunt him.
While the plot of each of the works is very different, the primary character in each uses stories as a way to escape and survive whatever situation he is dealing with. Despite the different circumstances that the characters in each work face, O'Brien shows them as using the art of telling stories as a way to conceal realities that are too difficult to face and using stories to escape the difficult realities they are trapped in. Through telling stories, through pretending, imagining, and daydreaming, O'Brien's characters manage to hide the things they cannot face and get away from bad situations. O'Brien sets up two different kinds of truths in his work: happening-truths, or what happens in reality, and story-truths, or what happens within the construct of a story. Using stories both to hide reality and escape from it does not make the stories untrue, because although the stories are being used to conceal happening-truths, they create story-truths to either reflect or replace the happening truths; story-truths become their own reality, and writing creates its own truth.

In each of the three texts being examined, the protagonists use stories in a dual sense, both as illusions of something better than reality and as a way of keeping ugly realities hidden. In Going After Cacciato, Spec-Four Paul Berlin spends a night at an observation post creating a story-truth to pass the time and also to help him escape from the unpleasant realities of his situation, if only for a while. The narrator of The Things They Carried, a fictional soldier named Tim O'Brien (who is not the real time fiction writer Tim O'Brien) creates a number of story-truths that may or may not contradict and otherwise conflict with the fictional happening-truths within the construct of the book and may greatly conflict with any happening-truths in the life of the fiction writer Tim O'Brien. The result is not only a very effective portrayal of the moral contradictions that
seemed the defining characteristics of the Vietnam war, and perhaps of any war, but also a stunning look at how stories sometimes must be used to hide realities that are too hard, too painful to face, and how stories can be used to give names and faces to memories that need to be faced to prevent madness or paralysis or worse. John Wade, the protagonist of In the Lake of the Woods, builds elaborate story-truths for much the same reason; several of the things he has lived through are simply too terrible to have ever happened, therefore, in his own mind, they couldn’t have happened. With a little sleight of memory, he is able to make them disappear, but it is his ability to manipulate reality in this way that leads to the central question of the book, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Each of these three books being considered deals with the idea of fiction, what motivates people to tell stories, where those stories come from in the human mind, and why storytelling is such an important human activity. O’Brien is at his best when he is probing these questions, examining the art of storytelling even as he tells the stories that examine the process. Through careful reading of his texts, O’Brien’s ideas on the art of fiction can be explored and enjoyed.
CHAPTER TWO

FEAR AND OBLIGATION ON THE WAY TO PARIS: MEMORY AND IMAGINATION IN GOING AFTER CACCIATO

Tim O’Brien’s first book, If I Die in a Combat Zone, asks the questions, “Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyze them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories” (31-32). A little later, O’Brien has one of his battalion commanders say “Maybe I’ll write a book… trouble is, they want philosophy in with the real action. I’d like to write it straight, just how it happened, but I can see the rejection slips already. That’s the problem, you gotta knock the military to get published. God, I could write a book” (68).

If I Die in a Combat Zone is probably most interesting because of the way that it blurs the line between fiction and memoir—but in the two quotations above show O’Brien’s writing showing the self-referential passages that will be the focus of his later works. Going After Cacciato’s epigraph is a quote from Siegfried Sassoon: “Soldiers are dreamers.” O’Brien himself later told an interviewer that he believed that “Writing is a lot like dreaming” (Bold Type 2), echoing John Gardner’s idea that “the organized and intelligent fictional dream that will eventually fill the reader’s mind begins as a largely mysterious dream in the writer’s mind” (36). In this context of the fictive dream, then, dreams do offer lessons, nightmares can have themes, and when we wake up—or put the
book down—we do analyze the dreams and nightmares the writer has presented us with, and hold our own lives and the lives of others up to those dreams. Good fiction can simultaneously show us a reflection of our own reality while providing an escape from it—very early on in his writing career, O'Brien seems not only to be aware of this but also makes his awareness show in his writing. This is perhaps the best way of defining metafiction: Herzog's definition of metafiction, a work of fiction's "self-referential quality as the author, through narrators and characters, explores the craft of storytelling" (28), is perhaps the best context to view O'Brien's work.

And we can learn something from the foot soldier, merely from his presence. O'Brien suggests that all the foot soldier can do is tell war stories. Then he wrote Going After Cacciato, a story written by a foot soldier and told from a foot soldier's point of view. The New York Times wrote "To call Going After Cacciato a novel about war is like calling Moby Dick a book about whales" (Freedman 1). Going After Cacciato may be one of the finest novels to emerge from the Vietnam war, but it is much more than that: it is really a novel about dreaming, about making up stories, and how storytelling can be not only an escape but, in fact, can be life-saving.

The main action of Going After Cacciato centers on a soldier who one day walks away from the war. "Split for parts unknown" (O'Brien, Cacciato 2). One of the story's main characters, Doc Peret, tells his Lieutenant that Cacciato has taken off on foot for Paris: "'Paris,' Doc Peret repeated. 'That's what he tells Paul Berlin, and that's what Berlin tells me, and that's what I'm telling you. The chain of command, a truly splendid instrument. Anyhow, the guy's definitely gone'" (2-3).
But O’Brien’s metafiction is already revealing itself in the opening pages of the book: the chain of command that Doc Peret speaks of is a good deal like how the reader gets the information: Tim O’Brien, the real person, tells the implied author of the work, who tells his narrative voice, who tells Paul Berlin, the novel’s main character, who then tells the reader; but Paul Berlin tells the reader in a number of different ways—through real-time episodes, through flashbacks, and through imagination, or made-up things. Through this literary “chain of command,” O’Brien manages to layer his fictional reality with several levels of meaning that, rather than cloud the simple vision that was the beginning of Going After Cacciato, adds depth and resonance to it. For as O’Brien told Don Lee, despite the novel’s complexity, it began, as all of O’Brien’s work does, “with an image, ‘a picture of a human being doing something.’ With Going After Cacciato, it was the image of a guy walking to Paris: ‘I could see his back,’” (3). From that single, flickering image—the back of a man walking to Paris—the novel builds into a complicated treatise on war, courage, human nature, and the role that stories play in all of them.

There are three narrative time frames within the novel, which can simply be grouped as past, present, and future time within the story. The past time episodes are flashbacks, development of the characters though the memory of the novel’s central character, Paul Berlin; the present time episodes are a single night Paul Berlin spends keeping watch at an observation post, imagining the future-time portions of the novel, which is Paul Berlin imagining Cacciato’s trek across Eurasia towards Paris, and his squad’s dogged pursuit.
The Past Time Chapters

Chapter One, entitled “Going After Cacciato,” is the first of the memory chapters, and the book almost immediately introduces the central image of Cacciato on his way to Paris. The chapter also serves to introduce the book’s central mysteries, which O’Brien seems to believe are the driving force in any novel: the solving of some mysteries, and the exploration of others that go unsolved. The opening lines of the book are a litany of dead men:

It was a bad time. Billy Boy Watkins was dead, and so was Frenchie Tucker. Billy Boy had died of fright, scared to death on the field of battle, and Frenchie Tucker had been shot through the nose. Bernie Lynn and Lieutenant Sidney Martin had died in tunnels. Pederson was dead and Rudy Chassler was dead. Buff was dead. Ready Mix was dead. They were all among the dead. (O’Brien, Cacciato 1)

There are eight dead men listed in the opening sentences of the book, along with some sketchy details regarding how some of them died, but one of the mysteries that the book solves for the reader is to fill in most of the details surrounding those deaths and let Paul Berlin confront them as the reader does; that is the primary function of the past-time or flashback episodes. In these episodes, Paul Berlin relates how his own history intertwines with the histories of the dead men, how the relationships between them developed, and how those relationships were abruptly ended with each man’s death. Through telling of the deaths and the events revolving around them in the past-time chapters, the reader gets a look at Paul Berlin’s memory, which is a large part of what fuels his imagination in the future-time episodes.
Most of the mysteries in the book are solved through Paul Berlin’s memories. But Tim O’Brien is at his best when he writes of the mysteries that remain unsolved, and there are two central ambiguities in the novel: of the eight dead men listed in the opening lines of the novel, only seven of the deaths are dealt with in the ensuing chapters; the death of Lieutenant Sidney Martin is never addressed by Paul Berlin’s memory. Paul Berlin’s complicity in Martin’s death and the guilt he feels because of it is one of the driving forces behind the imaginary journey that he later embarks on.

The other central ambiguity in the novel is what really happened to Cacciato. The opening pages of the chapter include the list of the dead, shifts into a list of other casualties and the jokes that grow out of the horror of death and the wounded, and then O’Brien writes, very simply, “In October, near the end of the month, Cacciato left the war” (2). There is some discussion about the absurdity of Cacciato’s departure, and then Paul Berlin’s future time cast of characters, Third Squad, is introduced by Paul Berlin himself: “Me and Doc and Eddie Lazzutti and Stink and Oscar and Harold Murphy. That’s it, except for Cacciato” (6). Lieutenant Corson, who also is a member of Paul Berlin’s imaginary future time episodes, then says, “All right….Third Squad goes after Cacciato” (6).

These are the men who will populate Paul Berlin’s imaginary future-time episodes constituting the pursuit of Cacciato. Very early in Third Squad’s pursuit of Cacciato in Chapter One, the narrative voice observes Paul Berlin daydreaming: “Pretending was his best trick to forget the war” (9).

Paul Berlin keeps on pretending to forget the war: “He tried to imagine a proper ending. The possibilities were closing themselves out, and though he tried, it was hard to
see a happy end to it” (21). This signals that the imaginary future time will come—that Paul Berlin will imagine the journey after Cacciato—but is artfully ambiguous about exactly what happens between when the past time stops and future time begins. Much later in the novel, O’Brien writes “The facts were simple. They went after Cacciato, they chased him into the mountains, they tried hard. They cornered him on a small grassy hill. They surrounded the hill. They waited through the night. And at dawn they shot the sky full of flares and then they moved in” (289). Chapter One ends with Third Squad firing its flares over the clearing where Cacciato is hiding, and with Paul Berlin, who is already dreaming, “trying to imagine a rightful but still happy ending” (22). For that to work, in order for the story to have a conclusion satisfactory to Paul Berlin, Cacciato has to get away; he has to complete the quest that Cacciato dreamed about and that Paul Berlin spends the rest of the novel imagining. Before the end of the first chapter, the layers of imagination and how they begin to conceal the facts are already clouding ‘what really happened’ within the construct of the novel. "’Go,’ whispered Paul Berlin. It did not seem enough. ‘Go,’ he said, and then he shouted, ‘Go’” (23)!

Even as the first past time chapter draws to a close, the reader already gets to see the beginning of the Paul Berlin who will later spend the night on the Observation Post, imagining what might have happened. Already in the first memory chapter, the reader sees Paul Berlin beginning to look into his imagination, to look into the future. Because of this blurring of narrative time, this fuzzy line between Paul Berlin’s memory and imagination in Chapter One (and in Chapter Forty-six, also entitled “Going After Cacciato”), what really did happen to Cacciato remains mysteriously unclear to the
reader. Walking this fine line between memory and imagination gives the reader the mysteries necessary to carry him through the book.

The next past time chapter, Chapter Four, is entitled “How They Were Organized,” and it is about Paul Berlin’s first days in Vietnam—it serves to introduce many of the characters who become central later, to introduce the crippling fear that grips Paul Berlin through much of the past-time episodes of the novel, and to begin slowly revealing what is to later happen to Lieutenant Sidney Martin: “Disobedience was sometimes organized and sometimes not. When First Lieutenant Sidney Martin persisted in making them search tunnels before blowing them, and after Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn died in tunnels, the disobedience became fully organized” (40).

The next memory chapter, Chapter Eleven, entitled “Fire in the Hole,” opens with Pederson’s body being airlifted out, and ends with the village near where Pederson met his end destroyed by American artillery. After the village is destroyed, the men make camp: “When it was night they talked about Jim Pederson. It was always better to talk about it” (71). Here O’Brien makes clear that “Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is” (Bruckner 1). Not only is Paul Berlin’s storytelling necessary in order to deal with the fear and the guilt and the avalanche of other emotions that come with the war, but Paul Berlin’s maker (Tim O’Brien himself) is showing through Paul Berlin’s stories what it is like to be in a position in which storytelling is necessary. Shay writes that “Narrative heals personality changes…narrative enables the survivor [of war] to rebuild the ruins of character” (188), which in life, certainly, supports Paul Berlin’s contention that “It was always better to talk about it.” Telling stories makes it better.
The next two memory episodes, Chapters Nine and Thirteen, “How Bernie Lynn Died After Frenchie Tucker,” and “Upon Almost Winning the Silver Star,” detail the deaths of Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn—Frenchie Tucker, shot through the nose in a tunnel, then Bernie Lynn, ordered into the tunnel by Lieutenant Sidney Martin to pull Frenchie Tucker out, shot in the throat. The former episode centers on the men fighting to save Bernie Lynn’s life. While he lies there bleeding to death, all Bernie Lynn can talk about is how he heard the shot that got him. Bernie Lynn has been hurt so badly that the first medicine Doc Peret gives him is M&M’s, which are reserved for the terminal cases. Indeed, the chapter begins and ends with Doc Peret giving Bernie Lynn green M&M’s.

The next past time episode, Chapter Thirteen, “Upon Almost Winning the Silver Star,” centers around what came immediately before Bernie Lynn was shot. This chapter shows the growing dislike the surviving men have for Lieutenant Sidney Martin and shows how Paul Berlin wants to be brave (hence the chapter’s title—the Silver Star comes to symbolize courage to Paul Berlin, and it is an image that is returned to again and again), but is unable to pull it off. When Sidney Martin asks for a volunteer to go in after Frenchie Tucker, “Paul Berlin stood alone. He felt the walls tight against him. He was careful not to look at anyone” (O’Brien, Cacciato 81). This chapter also has a curious exchange involving Cacciato, who has only rarely shown his face up to this point in the text:

“Look,” Sidney Martin said. He was tall. Acne scars covered his chin. “I didn’t invent this sorry business. But we got a man down there and somebody’s got to fetch him. Now.”

Stink made a hooting noise. “Send down the gremlin.”
“Who?”

“The Gremlin. Send Cacciato down.”

Oscar looked at Cacciato, who smiled broadly and began removing his pack.

“Not him,” Oscar said. (80-81)

This shows the reader a couple of things: first, though Cacciato is characterized throughout the book as everything from simple-minded to mentally retarded, he is brave. Paul Berlin is too afraid to go down into the tunnel, but Cacciato smiles and starts removing his gear, and would have gone into the tunnel, likely to Bernie Lynn’s eventual fate, but Oscar intervenes. This is another ambiguity O’Brien builds in: why does Oscar Johnson stop Cacciato from going into the tunnel? It’s hard to say, but this is an important scene: Cacciato is brave and Paul Berlin is not. Eventually, Cacciato will have the courage to lay down his rifle and walk away from the war; Paul Berlin only has the courage to do anything but continue to do as he is told—and the essential courage to dream his way out of the situations he is too afraid to face head on.

The next memory chapter, “Pickup Games,” is about the quiet times and the men’s growing hatred of Sidney Martin:

Once, when Martin ordered them to search a small bunker complex, Stink Harris and Vaught began making pig noises, softly at first, then louder, and others joined in. It wasn’t exactly mutiny, not quite, but it was close…no one cared much for Sidney Martin—too fastidious, too skinny…a believer…too disciplined. Too clearheaded for such a lousy war. (94)
The silence, the long period of time without encountering the enemy, builds among the men, leading to squabbles and growing resentment the men feel for Sidney Martin—Paul Berlin is just as scared of the silence as he is of the war. The chapter ends as “Paul Berlin’s head roared with quiet. Splitting—but he moved into the dark village. When Rudy Chassier hit the mine, the noise was muffled, almost fragile, but it was a relief for all of them” (99). Epitomized in this chapter are Paul Berlin’s two biggest sources of guilt: what happened to Sidney Martin and the fact that Paul Berlin is so afraid all the time. But guilt and fear—arising from all of his memories and fueling his imagination—will determine the musings that make the metafiction in the present time episodes.

The next past time episode, Chapter Twenty, entitled “Landing Zone Bravo,” ends just before one of the previous memory chapters begins: Chapter Eleven begins with Pederson’s body being airlifted out, and this chapter shows what happens just before then. The unit is being airlifted into a hot landing zone, and when the rest of the men leave the helicopter, Pederson doesn’t move. The crew chief throws Pederson out into the rice paddy, and “Behind him, the gunners strafed the paddies, red tracers and white light, molded to their guns, firing and firing, and Pederson was shot first in the legs” (117).

O’Brien never actually says that Pederson was shot by the gunners on the helicopter that he was just thrown out of, but Pederson rolls onto his back and begins firing at the departing helicopter. This implies that Pederson was indeed hit by “friendly fire,” but leaves it up in the air whether or not the gunners shot him intentionally, because he had to be thrown out of the helicopter, or whether it was an accident. But this event
recalls Sidney Martin's death; he, too, is killed by so-called "friendly" fire. killed by his
own men, but when Pederson's death is placed in the story to parallel Sidney Martin's.
Pederson's death no longer appears accidental. The narrative's ambiguous description of
Pederson's demise and Paul Berlin's refusal to directly recall Sidney Martin's death show
an important instance of when memory fails and imagination must take over.

The next past time chapter, Chapter Twenty-two, "Who They Were, or Claimed to Be." shows clearly the emotional distance between the characters, and has a few
interesting additions and omissions. There are brief sections about some of the
characters, giving each of them some defining characteristics, to add a little depth to them. Since the majority of the novel revolves around Paul Berlin's consciousness,
staying primarily with a third-person limited omniscient point of view, this adds a little
humanity to some of the other key figures: how Eddie Lazzutti loved to sing, how Stink
Harris found a naked picture of his favorite sister in Bernie Lynn's wallet, how Jim
Pederson had a penchant for acknowledging any signs of Christianity.

Of more interest, however, are the sections about Oscar Johnson, Doc Peret, and
Lieutenant Corson. Oscar's section is interesting because he is not who he pretends to
be: "He talked of Detroit but his mail went to Bangor, Maine" (127). Oscar has adapted
a persona: a rough, tough, ghetto type from Detroit, in order to make it through the war,
and when some of the other men try and give him a hard time about it,
this left Oscar cold. No smiles, and no explanations....True, his speech
could be slurred and thick and spiked with just the right inflection...deep
with the ghetto undercurrent of pending violence. All true. But to Paul
Berlin it seemed somewhat deliberate. Not an act, but not quite natural.
More like a mimic absorbing too much of his own stage style. Still, it was hard to tell. With Oscar Johnson it was always hard to tell, and this gave him power. (127)

This is interesting because it is reminiscent of what Paul Berlin himself does throughout the whole course of the book—while he has to be himself in his memories, he can be anything he wants in his imagination. And this ability to merge memory and imagination, the ability to blend reality and unreality, makes it so that it’s hard to tell. Just as this gives Oscar power, so storytelling and imagination give Paul Berlin power. And through imagination, the Paul Berlin on the observation post in the present time chapters is a different man than the one who inhabits the memory chapters.

Also, Oscar’s true history—what little the reader is allowed to know—perhaps helps explain why he wouldn’t let Cacciato go into the tunnel that killed Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn. Oscar has the tough guy persona, but it’s not really who he is; he is not an inner city man but really just a small town boy with small town values. Perhaps this helps to explain his protectiveness towards Cacciato.

The section on Lieutenant Corson in this chapter is telling simply because of its presence. Up to this point in the novel, he is not the man in charge through any of the memory chapters (save the first one), but his inclusion here marks Lieutenant Sidney Martin’s exclusion, which in turn shows Paul Berlin’s unwillingness to face the reality of what happened to Sidney Martin, though Sidney Martin is not far from Paul Berlin’s memory: most of Corson’s section is comparing him to Martin. Even Paul Berlin’s imagination offers no escape from the part Sidney Martin plays in his memory.
The character of Doc Peret is an interesting one: he is set up as some kind of foil for Paul Berlin. Paul Berlin is the dreamer, the pretender, escaping the war in make-believe, while Doc Peret is "A theoretician, a pragmatist, Doc Peret believed deeply in science…it meant the rigorous verification of hypotheses by means of repeated empirical observation" (129). Doc and Paul Berlin are very different from one another, but Doc Peret becomes Paul Berlin’s guide through the metafiction in the novel: on the observation post, in the present-time chapters, it is Doc Peret’s voice that Paul Berlin frequently hears as Paul Berlin embarks on the journey of his imagination. Doc Peret himself plants the seeds for the metafictional journey in this episode, talking about his curiosity as a child to Paul Berlin:

One day my old man brought home this new air conditioner…and I just kept looking at the damn thing, trying to figure out where the cold came from….I figured there was a little box inside where the cold was stored up. A real dumbo. So I got a screwdriver and started taking the things apart….I tore out the damn guts. But no box. Couldn’t find the cold. My old man, he went buggy when he saw the mess. ‘You stupid so-and-so,’ he says, ‘there isn’t any box. It’s a machine, it makes the cold.’ But I still didn’t get it. I kept thinking there’s got to place inside where all the cold was. Kept thinking they had to put the cold in there….My old man never did get the thing back together. Still talks about it. And I still tell him, I say, if he’d just let me alone I’d have found that damn— (130)

The reader gets the feeling that Tim O’Brien is like young Doc Peret himself—stories are like air conditioners. Tim O’Brien seems to believe there is something
magical within the stories. Stories don’t make the magic, like the air conditioner didn’t make the cold. There is something within the story where the magic is kept. And if the story is taken apart, if the storyteller is left alone long enough, that’s where the magic can be found. O’Brien’s contention is that stories don’t make magic, the magic is in the telling of them. That fine line between what is and what might be is a magic place. Through O’Brien’s examination of the act of writing and telling stories, he’s like Doc Peret, trying to find the cold.

The next memory chapter, Chapter Twenty-four, “Calling Home,” is significant because it shows the separation between all the men and between and the men and the rest of the world. Paul Berlin, Eddie Lazzutti, Doc Peret, and Oscar Johnson, while on a week stand-down, call home. After the others call home, Paul Berlin observes that they were “looking a little funny, not quite choked up but trying hard not to be. Very quiet at first, then laughing, then talking fast, then turning quiet. It made Paul Berlin feel warm to watch them” (139). Listening to Doc and Eddie and Oscar talk about their calls home, “It made Paul Berlin feel good. Like buddies. Genuine war buddies, he felt close to all of them. When they laughed, he laughed” (139).

But when it’s Paul Berlin’s chance to call home, no one answers. While the telephone is ringing, “He tried to think of something meaningful to say. Nothing forced: easy and natural, but still loving. Maybe start by saying he was getting along. Tell them things weren’t really so bad….Don’t let on about being afraid. Don’t make them worry—that was Doc Peret’s advice” (140). Here we see Paul Berlin preparing to tell a story, a story that makes him brave, or at least not afraid; listening, as he often does, to the wisdom of Doc Peret. But no one answers, and Oscar says “Maybe…who knows?
Maybe they was out takin’ a drive or something. Buying groceries. The world don’t stop” (142).

Through this moment when Paul Berlin feels close to the others, it shows how he really isn’t. Everyone else gets to talk to someone at home. Paul Berlin doesn’t. He feels close to the others, like they’re friends, watching their happiness, but this only reinforces his isolation from them. Only in this moment does Paul Berlin say he feels like the other men are his buddies, so he must not feel that way the rest of the time.

And Oscar is right—the world doesn’t stop, because of war or because there’s a story being told. Through Paul Berlin’s failure to connect with anyone at home, the reader sees the outside world’s inability to intrude on Paul Berlin’s interior world—and the inability of Paul Berlin’s interior world to penetrate the outside world. His stories—his memory and imagination—are all he has, but the world doesn’t stop.

The next memory episode, Chapter Twenty-five, “The Way it Mostly Was,” briefly shifts the focus away from Paul Berlin and takes a close look at the war—and Paul Berlin’s place in it—through the eyes of Lieutenant Sidney Martin. The chapter is a march up a steep road, and Paul Berlin is the last man in the column. Lieutenant Sidney Martin watches Paul Berlin climb: “The lieutenant felt great admiration for the boy, admiration and love combined. He secretly urged him on. For the sake of mission, yes, and for the welfare of the platoon. But also for the boy’s own well-being, so that he might feel the imperative to join the battle and win it” (147).

In this chapter, Lieutenant Sidney Martin is depicted as a man who is sophisticated but single-minded:
The lieutenant had been trained in common sense and military strategy. He had read Thucydides and von Clausewitz, and he considered war a means to ends, with a potential for both good and bad, but his interest was in effectiveness and not goodness. A soldier's interest is in means, not ends. So the young lieutenant prided himself on his knowledge and tactics and strategy and history, his fluency in German and Spanish, his West Point training, his ability to maximize a unit's potential. He believed in mission. He believed in men, too, but he believed in mission first. He hoped that someday the men would come to understand this...but he did not worry about it. (145-146)

This portrayal of Lieutenant Sidney Martin is telling for a couple of reasons. First of all, it marks an ambiguous shift in the narrative voice—O'Brien has done this before, occasionally allowing his narrative voice to at least marginally enter the thoughts of some of the other men (in the chapter "Who They Were, or Claimed to Be," for example), but never with the kind of detail or in the depth allowed in this episode. The previous shifts in narrative voice away from Paul Berlin offer up some of the other men's thoughts and beliefs, but these were all thoughts and beliefs that could be inferred from observed behaviors. Because of this, previous instances of the narrative voice appearing to enter the heads of other men besides Paul Berlin could have been Paul Berlin projecting his impressions of the other men's thoughts and beliefs; indeed, some things (like Oscar's real background) remain hidden, even when the narrative voice appears to shift away from Paul Berlin's limited point of view.
In the case of Sidney Martin, however, it is difficult to tell exactly what O’Brien accomplishes. The narrative point of view enters the mind of Paul Berlin in this chapter, as well; this brief shift from limited omniscience to unlimited—or into a third-person intrusive narrative—gives the reader a multi-layered look at Paul Berlin, Sidney Martin, and narrative technique as a means of presentation.

This chapter forces the reader to ask questions about the narrative voice: is this merely a simple shift from a limited omniscience to an unlimited? Is it really Sidney Martin’s thoughts we are hearing? Or, since the narrative has been limited to Paul Berlin’s point of view, is this Paul Berlin’s memory being infiltrated again by his imagination—is the voice we hear masquerading as Sidney Martin really the voice of Paul Berlin imagining what Sidney Martin is thinking? Or is this a shift into a third-person intrusive, the narrative voice becoming an entity in and of itself, with thoughts and opinions and the ability to voice them? And if this is a shift into the intrusive, can we believe the narrative voice? We know when the narrative viewpoint is Paul Berlin’s, his memories are blurred and disjointed by the consistent interjections of imagination, which does not necessarily make Paul Berlin untrustworthy. But since Paul Berlin is making up stories through the majority of the book and only selectively remembers things, the reader should at least question the validity of a lot of what he says. So when the voice shifts to include the thoughts of Sidney Martin, and Sidney Martin looking at Paul Berlin—does this constitute a contrast, and designed to make the reader take what the narrative voice is saying as gospel? Or is this new voice supposed to be viewed with the same skepticism that the narrative presence is viewed with when it sees through the eyes of Paul Berlin?
Narrative shifts and the way the reader constantly is forced to question the techniques being used to present the questions the readers need to consider is a good deal of what makes O’Brien great: here is a classic example of a place where a million questions can be asked but no answers are given. According to O’Brien, literature is not a problem to be solved; the important part of reading is not answering questions but asking them, and through the self-referential way in which he presents the questions, O’Brien forces the reader to focus on the questions rather than the answers, many of which simply cannot be known. The present time chapters, which take place on the Observation Post, are also self-conscious, in which Paul Berlin muses on the techniques he is using to create a story. The “Observation Post” chapters are made up of Paul Berlin’s looking inward as well as at the world of stories, but also looking at himself—since self is the most important part of any story, in that the self provides the raw material from which all stories come. But these sections show O’Brien being obvious about what he’s doing—chapters like “The Way it Mostly Was” reveal O’Brien examining the process of telling stories more subtly. Like Sidney Martin believes about soldiers, O’Brien’s interest is in the means, not the ends: he is more interested in the journey a novel takes a reader on then he is in the destination the reader reaches at the end.

The next flashback chapter, Chapter Thirty-one, entitled “Night March,” is the first in which Cacciato actually speaks—it comes at the end of Paul Berlin’s first day in the war, when he doesn’t yet know anyone. Already he is retreating to the place in his mind where memory and imagination converge: “The trick would be to keep himself separate. To watch things....A low profile. Look for the beauties: the moon sliding
higher now, the feeling of the march, all the ironies and truths, and don't take any of it very seriously. That would be the trick" (188-189).

It is in this chapter only that Cacciato is really visible, walking and talking, for any significant period of time outside of Paul Berlin's imagination. Paul Berlin moves along the trail, already using his pretending not only to keep himself separate from the war and the fear it brings, but also from the other men. "He would adjust. He would play the part. But he would not join them" (188). Paul Berlin seems to think, very early in his tour of duty, that his fear sets him apart from the other men. This chapter is set shortly after Billy Boy Watkins, the first dead man listed in the opening pages of the novel, dies of fear—or a heart attack—after tripping a mine that severs his foot. The men are joking about it, and while Paul Berlin goes through several different tricks to stave off the fear—making believe and counting and singing to keep himself from thinking—he does not seem to recognize that the men's jokes are themselves just another trick, another way to cope. "He thought about not thinking. The fear was not so bad now...now the fear was mostly the fear of being so dumbly afraid ever again" (187). The fear—which is one of the primary sources of the shame that leads Paul Berlin to retreat into his world of pretending—has a self-reflexive, protective function, just like the stories this pretending breeds. Paul Berlin is not only afraid, but he is so afraid of being afraid he has to pretend to get away from it. The more he pretends, the more he has to pretend to keep the fear at bay:

He would look his father in the eye and shrug and say, "It was pretty bad at first, sure, but I learned a lot and I got used to it. I never joined them—not them—but I learned their names and I got along. I got used to it."
Then he would tell his father the story of Billy Boy Watkins, only a story, just a story, and he would never let on about the fear. "Not so bad," he would say instead, making his father proud. (188)

Here the story becomes 'only' a story because stories only have to include what the storyteller wants. Certain facts can be omitted and others can be changed. Real life, however—the world outside the make-believe—has to be all-inclusive. What happened really happened. Paul Berlin's fear is a very real fear, a fear that is perhaps his biggest problem, in the real world, in the now, in Vietnam; in a story, the fear can be omitted, because it's 'only' a story. In his stories, Paul Berlin isn't afraid, and he makes his father proud.

The next two past time chapters, "Lake Country" and "World's Greatest Lake Country," which are Chapters Thirty-four and Thirty-five, are the episodes in which Paul Berlin finally reveals, through his memories, some of the sources of his future-time, imaginative tales. He reveals one of the reasons Cacciato is the center of his fantasies, and he reveals the roles that Cacciato and Lieutenant Sidney Martin play in the guilt that mixes with his fear to produce the imaginary tale he embarks on.

These two chapters are the only two memory chapters that not only follow each other in textual order, but also chronologically in story time. "Lake Country" shows Lieutenant Sidney Martin ordering each man to search a tunnel and each man refusing in turn. Sidney Martin is recording in his notebook each man's refusal to follow orders, and then Sidney Martin searches the tunnel himself, while the men's discuss what is to be done about Sidney Martin. Oscar Johnson proposes a solution:

"Sidney Martin seeks trouble, an' I believe he finally found it."
“You think so, Oscar?”

“I do. I think so.”

Oscar lifted the grenade from his belt. It was the new kind, shaped like a baseball, seamless, easy to handle and easy to throw.

He held it as if judging its weight.

“See my point? It’s preservation. That’s all it is—it’s self-fucking preservation.” (208-209)

Oscar leads the men in this unspoken pact:

“Touch it,” Oscar said.

He held the grenade out. He pulled the pin and clamped the spoon with his thumb.

“Everyone,” he said. “I want it unanimous.”

Stink touched it first. Then Eddie, then Harold Murphy, then Vaught and Pederson and Ben Nystrom, then Doc Peret.

“Berlin.”

Paul Berlin was pretending it was the Wisconsin woods. Indian Guides.

Deep green forests, true wilderness.

He got up and moved to the tunnel and touched the grenade.

“That everybody?”

The men looked at one another, each counting. Someone whispered Cacciato’s name.

“Where’s he at?”

“Fishing,” Vaught said. “Last I seen, he was out fishing.”
“Jesus!”

“Fetch him,” Oscar Johnson said. “Hustle it up.”

“No time for that.” Stink leaned into the hole, listened, and shook his head. “No way—the man’ll be out any second.”

“Fishing!”

“Do it,” Stink said. His face was red. He was excited. “Drop the bugger. Right now, just drop it.”

But Oscar Johnson backed away. He slipped in the pin, bent it hard to hold the spoon, then handed the grenade to Paul Berlin.

“Go talk to Cacciato,” he said. (209-210)

The chapter ends with Sidney Martin emerging from the tunnel before the men can get Cacciato’s compliance—Oscar Johnson wanted it unanimous, so Paul Berlin goes to get Cacciato to touch the grenade, and the chapter ends both indeterminately and ominously. Lieutenant Sidney Martin says “And that’s exactly how it’ll be done from here on....We follow the SOPs. I hope it’s understood” (210). Those are the last words in the novel that Sidney Martin speaks, and the last time he is seen alive. This is emphasized by the fact that his last words are directly quoted, while the last words of the chapter are indirectly quoted by the narrative voice: “Oscar smiled and said he understood perfectly” (210).

The next chapter, Chapter Thirty-five, “World’s Greatest Lake Country,” finds Paul Berlin talking to Cacciato, who was busy fishing out of a rain-filled bomb crater as the events of the last chapter were unfolding. In this chapter, as in the last, no one ever comes out and says what the plan is regarding Lieutenant Sidney Martin. The subject is
introduced elliptically by Paul Berlin, appropriate because the narrative voice is indeed supposed to be Paul Berlin’s memory, but it omits the things that he doesn’t want to face. The first time the subject is broached is simply Paul Berlin saying “So it’s for your own good....All they want is you to join in. They want it unanimous” (212).

But Cacciato says “I won’t do it...he’s not all that bad. Once he let me carry the radio. Remember that? Along the river. Martin let me carry the radio. He’s not all that bad” (213). Cacciato is showing his foolishness along with his courage by disagreeing here, in that the antenna on the radio made the person carrying it a target; most men viewed carrying the radio as a chore, not a privilege.

Cacciato won’t give in, and Paul Berlin has to live with the fact that he already has, and so begins rationalizing: “It’s a thing that has to be done. That’s all it is. It’ll be done anyway...nothing will stop it. It’ll happen anyway” (213). But the fact that Oscar wouldn’t drop the grenade without Cacciato’s agreement certainly suggests otherwise. Nonetheless, Paul Berlin didn’t have the courage to say ‘no’ to his companions, and it bothers him that Cacciato, the man that everyone else thinks is a fool, does have the courage.

Paul Berlin took out Oscar’s grenade.

“They want you to touch it,” he said.

Cacciato was silent. His head turned, and he looked for a moment at the grenade, then he looked away.

“They say you better touch it. It’s hopeless—it’ll be done no matter what. And it’s for your own good.”

“What about you?”
"I’m a messenger." (213)

Paul Berlin knows his compliance in killing Lieutenant Sidney Martin is wrong, but he keeps trying to rationalize it by saying it would happen with or without him, that joining with the others is for his own good, and that he himself is but a messenger who really has nothing to do directly with the men’s decision. Paul Berlin is also a messenger in a metafictional sense: he is the vehicle carrying the story from the author to the reader.

But Cacciato not only seems to know that the message Paul Berlin brings is wrong, but he is unwilling to let his fear allow him to compromise, and this only reinforces Paul Berlin’s feelings of guilt. So he forces Cacciato into compliance: “Paul Berlin pried Cacciato’s left hand from the line….Bringing up the grenade, Paul Berlin pressed it firmly into the boy’s hand. The grenade was slippery and cold” (213).

Paul Berlin then returns to the others:

“You talk to him?”

Paul Berlin put the grenade on the ground in front of them.

“You know how it is with a fisherman,” said Paul Berlin. “Mind’s a million miles away.”

They were quiet until the flame died. Then Oscar picked up the grenade and hooked it on his belt. “So,” he said. “That’s everyone.” (214)

And though it is never said, written, remembered, or imagined, Sidney Martin is killed in a tunnel shortly thereafter. The narrative voice—that is, Paul Berlin’s consciousness—refuses to remember or acknowledge Sidney Martin’s actual death.

The next two memory chapters, Chapters Thirty-seven and Thirty-nine, “How the Land Was” and “The Things They Didn’t Know,” can be thought of as orientation
chapters. "How the Land Was" shows how the reality of the land gets muddled up with Paul Berlin’s memory of home and his imagination, producing the landscape that will be the setting of the future time imagination episodes.

"The Things They Didn’t Know" serves two primary purposes. It shows the emotional distance between the men and the war they are fighting, and it shows an actual change—Paul Berlin’s promotion from Private First Class to Spec-Four—which is representative of the metaphoric change he undergoes: PFC Paul Berlin, whom the memory chapters revolve around, is different from Spec-Four Paul Berlin in the present-time chapters and the imagination chapters. "The Things They Didn’t Know" ends with "They did not know. They knew the old myths... but they did not know which stories to believe. Magic, mystery, ghosts and incense, whispers in the dark, strange tongues and strange smells, uncertainties never articulated in war stories, emotion squandered on ignorance. They did not know good from evil" (240-241).

"Getting Shot," the last of the memory chapters, Chapter Forty-one, recounts the last and the most gruesome of the deaths of the men listed in the opening sentences of the novel, the death of Buff. His death is the last one recounted perhaps to re-establish why Sidney Martin’s death is not included in Paul Berlin’s memory—not because it is too horrific in its details: Buff’s shooting leaves his face in his helmet after his body is taken away—but because it is too horrific in its principle. Paul Berlin did not make a pact with his men to kill—or allow the killing—of Buff or any of the other men. Therefore, their deaths, no matter how horrible the circumstances, can easily be recalled, at times in chilling detail. Sidney Martin’s death, on the other hand, depended in part on Paul Berlin’s compliance—not only did he touch the grenade, but he forced Cacciato to touch
it to make unanimous the men’s decision to kill Sidney Martin. In a way, this makes Paul Berlin perhaps more culpable than anyone else in Sidney Martin’s death, because he could have stopped it and didn’t.

The memory chapters are Paul Berlin’s memory unraveling what they can, justifying what can be justified, rationalizing what cannot be justified. Some questions are answered explicitly: what happened to Billy Boy Watkins, Frenchie Tucker, Bernie Lynn, Pederson, Rudy Chassler, Buff, and Ready Mix. Other questions are answered implicitly: what happened to Sidney Martin, and why Paul Berlin feels as he does about Sidney Martin and Cacciato. But one question is never answered, either in memory or reality: What really did happen to Cacciato? That question is left to the imagination. Paul Berlin’s imagination first, and the imagination of the reader second.

The Present Time Chapters

The present time chapters are each entitled “The Observation Post,” and there are ten of them: Chapters Two, Five, Eight, Twelve, Nineteen, Twenty-eight, Thirty, Thirty-two, Forty-two, and Forty-five. These chapters take Paul Berlin chronologically through a single night, standing watch and imagining what might have happened to Cacciato. In the first of these present time chapters, Chapter Two, O’Brien writes:

It was a splendid idea. Paul Berlin, whose only goal was to live long enough to establish goals worth living for longer still, stood high in the tower by the sea, the night soft all around him, and wondered, not for the first time, about the immense powers of his own imagination. A truly
awesome notion. Not a dream, an idea. An idea to develop, to tinker with and build and sustain, to draw out as an artist draws out his visions. (24)

Here in the present-time chapters, as the narrative voice (which seems to be a blend of Paul Berlin’s imagination and his memory) muses about the powers of imagination, the reader gets a pretty good look at O’Brien’s views on the art and craft of storytelling, and how stories are born:

Time to consider the possibilities. Had it ended there on Cacciato’s grassy hill, flares coloring the morning sky? Had it ended in tragedy? Had it ended with a jerking, shaking feeling—noise and confusion? Or had it ended farther along the trail west? Had it ever ended? What, in fact, had become of Cacciato? (25)

Paul Berlin’s speculations to escape from the terrifying reality surrounding him are likewise the speculations of the reader and the questions O’Brien himself surely asked himself in order to begin crafting this narrative. All stories are born of possibilities; stories begin simply with a writer asking himself the question *what if?* And if the writer is doing a good enough job of asking *what if*, the reader will inevitably ask the question *so then what happened?* The writer then will need to continue asking himself questions to find out what happened next—or what might have happened next.

Therein lies much of the brilliance of O’Brien’s metafiction: even as the reader is wondering what happens next, O’Brien himself is wondering the same thing. And the narrative voice is not trying to answer the questions with anything pretending to be facts—since within the realm of fiction, facts are not as important as possibilities or probabilities. O’Brien writes “what part was fact and what part was the extension of
fact? And how were facts separated from possibilities? What really happened and what might have happened? How did it end” (25)?

Within the construct of the story, there are a few facts that the reader has gleaned and which seem to be important to understanding what is happening: something happened to Cacciato, and Paul Berlin either knows or does not know what that something is. Whether Paul Berlin knows or does not know what happened, he begins tinkering with facts, playing with possibilities, going beyond those facts, in order to construct a story.

Likewise, outside the construct of the story, there are a few basic facts that seem to be important in order to understand what is happening: there was a war in Vietnam. Some men were killed there, some were wounded, and some just plain disappeared. But O’Brien begins tinkering with that fact, playing with possibilities, and going beyond that fact, to construct a story. And while O’Brien is going through the process of constructing the story, he lets the reader watch him construct it, in a sense, by allowing the reader to watch Paul Berlin construct his story. While Paul Berlin is asking himself questions that will feed the future-time episodes—the episodes that are imagination—O’Brien is asking himself these same questions, and is asking the reader to ask them, as well:

- It was an idea. It was a working out of the possibilities. It wasn’t dreaming and it wasn’t pretending. It wasn’t crazy...it was a way of asking questions. What became of Cacciato? Where did he go, and why? What were his motives, or did he have motives, and did motives matter? What tricks had he used to keep going? How had he eluded them? How did he slip away into deep jungle, and how, through jungle, had they
continued the chase? *What happened, and what might have happened?*

(27, Italics added)

According to Paul Berlin, what *might* have happened is far more important than what happened. Whether this is because he simply doesn’t know what happened or because he *does* know but doesn’t want to face it, what might have happened is what interests Paul Berlin. That’s what interests O’Brien, too. By asking these questions, he builds a story that answers some of the *what happened?* questions and doesn’t answer others, setting up thought-provoking, tantalizing ambiguities that not only keep the reader reading but also keep him thinking about those unanswered questions once he has finished reading.

In the second of the present time episodes, Chapter Five, O’Brien allows his narrative voice to offer another aspect of storytelling: “His mind worked that way. Sometimes, during the hot afternoons beneath the tower, he would look out to sea and imagine using it as a means of escape…. Pretending. It wasn’t dreaming, it wasn’t craziness. Just a way of passing time, which never seemed to pass” (43).

Paul Berlin seems concerned that spending as much time as he does hiding himself behind his imagination makes him appear mad: he constantly has to reassure himself that his imagination doesn’t make him crazy. Here he says his imagination, his daydreams, his fantasies, and his stories are merely ways of passing the time. O’Brien seems to be saying that no matter what other function stories may have, one of the primary things that stories are used for is as a diversion—to pass the time. O’Brien thus acknowledges that beyond what can be learned from hearing others’ stories, fiction is
first and foremost a way of escape. Even a reader who completely misses the point of the story he is reading still successfully passed the time it took to read it.

But stories do more than that. Stories can give easy answers to difficult questions—even if the reader never gets to find out exactly what happened to Cacciato. Paul Berlin uses his future-time story to construct an explanation that works toward satisfying him. Stories can provide happy endings that real life doesn’t. Stories can make us better than we are—through telling stories, we can be witty when real life rendered us mute or courageous when real life paralyzed us with fear. This is one of the other functions Paul Berlin’s stories serve:

But the real issue was courage…the real issue was the power of will to defeat fear. A matter of figuring out a way to do it. Somehow working his way into that secret chamber of the human heart, where, in tangles, lay the circuitry for all that was possible, the full range of what a man might be. He believed…that somewhere inside each man is a biological center for the exercise of courage…a filament, a fuse, that if ignited would release the full energy of what might be. There was a Silver Star twinkling somewhere inside him. (73)

It seems that O’Brien believes that somewhere inside of everyone there is the full range of what man is capable of. There is a place inside everyone where a fuse can be discovered that, once lit, can explode, releasing all of the power of what might be—and this place is located on that narrow line where memory and imagination converge. Walking that line, Paul Berlin manages to find a place where not only are the questions answered and the mysteries solved, but where he can be courageous—a place where that
Silver Star twinkling inside of him, that symbol of courage, is more than just a daydream. Inside his story, Paul Berlin gets to travel and find a girl he might fall in love with. He gets to see Paris. He gets away from the boredom and fear and slow-moving time that is his reality.

But even within the story, there are problems to be solved. The writer has to determine which questions he needs to answer, which ones he should leave unanswered because they aren’t important, and which ones he should leave up to the reader to answer because they’re too important to simply give away. Paul Berlin is aware of this, too—his imaginary, future time episodes border on the fantastic at times, as Third Squad continues its pursuit of Cacciato halfway around the world—and he ponders what to do about it:

It would make a fine war story. Oh, there would be skeptics. He could already hear them: What about money? Money for hotels and food and train tickets? What about passports? All the practical things—visas and clothing and immunization cards? Desertion—wasn’t that what it boiled down to? Didn’t it end in jail, the stockade? What about the law? Illegal entry, no documents, no military orders, no permits for all the weaponry? What about police and customs agents? (112)

Paul Berlin sorts through these and other questions, answering some of them, leaving some unanswered, and allowing himself as both the storyteller and audience for his tale some considerable room for the suspension of disbelief. After all, though the tale is an improbable one, it is not an impossible one, and Paul Berlin knows which details matter:
But he would explain. Carefully, point by point, he would show how these were petty details. Trivial, beside the point. Money could be earned, or stolen or begged or borrowed. Passports could be forged, lies could be told, cops could be bribed. A million possibilities. Means could be found. That was the crucial thing: Means could be found. If pressed, he could make up the solutions—good, convincing solutions. But his imagination worked faster than that. Speed, momentum. Since means could be found, since answers were possible, his imagination went racing toward more important matters…it could be done. Wasn’t that the critical point? It could truly be done. (112)

O’Brien here is pointing out what’s important in maintaining the mystery of stories. What matters is not quibbling over details, answering every question. In “The Magic Show,” O’Brien writes that a good story “does not tie up the loose ends of the future in a tidy little knot. The plot of my own life has not often, so far as I can tell, resolved itself in any neat and final way. Death itself, when it comes, dissolves into enigma. Maybe this, maybe that. But who knows? Who really knows” (180)? As long as the means could be found (since, as Lieutenant Sidney Martin showed us, soldiers are interested in means more than ends), as long as there are possibilities available for answering the unanswered questions, those details become less necessary than the story itself. A story is something more than the sum of all the details strung together to make it up. It’s the story that matters, including the asking of the questions, and not simply the answering of them. Not tying up loose ends. The only important question is the
fundamental one the reader has to ask, the question that keeps the reader turning the page: so then what happened?

In Chapter Twenty-eight, the sixth present-time observation post chapter, O’Brien gently reminds the reader that imagination is only one-half of the place where stories come from. Stories are more than just the extension of facts, more than mere imagination. They grow from the facts themselves; memory plays a role, and good stories are where what was and what might have been come together—the place where history meets the future. Chapter Twenty-eight is one of the shortest of the observation post, present-time chapters. The past starts encroaching on Paul Berlin’s present and taking him into the future even as he tells the story. The chapter is a one-page history of Paul Berlin—what he used to do, what he used to dream, what he used to pretend. “Sure, he had a history” (O’Brien, Cacciato 162). Every writer and reader has a history, and just because we’re telling a story, that doesn’t mean that history ceases to matter—indeed, it’s a crucial part of what makes stories work. Without history, imagination slips away from being a possibility into something less real, less believable. Even though history is one of the flavors of reality that we use imagination to escape from, history gives the imagination the ground it needs to stand on. History gives us the possibilities, the facts that imagination then extends to make into stories.

Through the fact that O’Brien includes these present-time observation post chapters between the memory chapters and the imagination chapters, the observation post becomes a symbol of the storyteller. The observation post, sandwiched between history and the future, becomes the place where Paul Berlin, the internal storyteller, and Tim O’Brien the external storyteller, can both look into the darkness and see the story.
But there are mysteries with solutions that never reveal themselves, even to the storyteller himself, which is the gist of Paul Berlin’s musing in Chapter Thirty. “It was a matter of hard observation. Separating illusion from reality. What happened, and what might have happened? Why, out of all that might have happened, did it lead to a beheading in Tehran? Why not pretty things? Why not a smooth, orderly arc from war to peace” (184)?

Even the storyteller can’t always tell where a story is going, or how it got where it is. But O’Brien seems to think this is something worth exploring—and the way he explores it is through looking at the process itself: “These were the questions, and the answers would only come from hard observation…observation requires inward-looking, a study of the very machinery of observation—the mirrors and filters and wiring and circuits of the observing instrument” (184). Through the observation post chapters, that is exactly what O’Brien does. He gets at where stories come from and what makes stories such an important part of human existence by examining the art of storytelling itself. He does so through Paul Berlin’s questioning and wondering about the realm of the observation post—that land between memory and imagination where stories come from. O’Brien writes:

Insight, vision. What you remember is determined by what you see, and what you see is determined by what you remember. A cycle…that has to be broken. And this requires a fierce concentration on the process itself: Focus on the order of things, sort out the flow of events so as to understand how one thing led to another, search for that point at which what happened extended into a vision of what might have happened.
Where was the fulcrum? Where did it tilt from fact to imagination? (184-185)

The fulcrum is the observation post. The place where the storyteller goes to remember and imagine the possibilities. By bringing the reader back there again and again, O'Brien shows the importance of that fulcrum, the place where fact and imagination come together, the place where what we see determines what we remember and what we remember determines what we see; the place where paying attention to what we see and remember can occasionally turn into a story.

Chapter Thirty-two is another short observation-post chapter, one in which the reader hears echoes of the opening lines of the book and which reveals the seeds of Paul Berlin's imaginary journey: "Billy Boy was dead. Billy Boy Watkins was among the dead. It was the simple truth. It was not especially terrible, or hard to think about, or even sad. It was a fact. It was the first fact, and leading from it were other facts. Now it was merely a matter of following the facts to where they ended" (196). As O'Brien has pointed out earlier, there does come a point where the facts must be extended into possibilities; a good story is going to blur the line where what happened leaves off and what might have happened picks up.

From the opening lines of the novel, "It was a bad time. Billy Boy Watkins was dead" (1), to this, one of the latter observation post chapters, O'Brien has brought the tale almost full circle—some of the important questions are being answered, and some of the mysteries have been solved through the past-time, memory chapters. These are the facts that Paul Berlin ponders, beginning with Billy Boy Watkins. Other mysteries have been explored through the future-time, imagination chapters, chapters which explore the
novel's central mystery—what happened to Cacciato—but which do not answer that or other questions definitively, do not offer any certainties. They go beyond the facts to what might have happened, deepening the question, leaving it up to the reader to decide what really happened. Through Paul Berlin's musings on the past and on the future, the reader sees how both Paul Berlin and Tim O'Brien come to decide what the important questions are, and then leaves enough questions unanswered that the reader can decide for himself how to deal with answering these questions.

By Chapter Forty-two, the second-to-the-last of the present-time, observation post chapters, the division between the various time frames working in the novel has become increasingly blurred—the present time has begun occasionally encroaching on the future time. But by now, seven of the eight deaths listed in the opening sentences of the new book have been described by Paul Berlin in the memory episodes, and Paul Berlin is introspective about what he remembers—and, more important by this point, what he can't or won't remember:

That was the curious thing about it. Out of all that time, time aching itself away, his memory sputtered around those scant hours of horror. The real war was forgotten...what he remembered was so trivial, so obvious and corny, that to speak of it was embarrassing. War stories. That was what remained: a few stupid war stories, hackneyed and unprofound. Even the lessons were commonplace...lessons of ignorance; ignorant men, trite truths. What remained was a simple event. The facts, the physical things. A war like any war. No new messages. Stories that begin and end
without transition. No developing drama or tension or direction. No
order. (255)

This echoes the line from If I Die in a Combat Zone quoted at the beginning of
this chapter: “Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having
been there? I think not. He can tell war stories” (31-32). O’Brien constantly is calling
into question the value of war stories—he seems to be attempting to silence the reader
who can’t or won’t see past the setting and therefor label this novel as a Vietnam War
novel, missing the metafiction and, by doing so, missing the point. At the same, O’Brien
is almost playfully undermining what he has so masterfully constructed—a story about
what he sees as the most valuable thing in life—stories and storytelling—something
many people see as having little value. Paul Berlin’s constant worry that his speculations
are crazy seems to echo this sentiment—writers and soldiers are dreamers, and dreamers
are fools. O’Brien shows that dreamers are not fools, and dreams and stories and make
believe are not only not foolish, but are important; indeed, sometimes all that really
matters if not all we really have. The reader gets to witness the in-depth examination of
the process Paul Berlin goes through while he remembers and imagines, which is a
reflection of the process that Paul Berlin’s creator—that is, Tim O’Brien himself—goes
through. Through these examinations of the process, the reader begins to see not only the
value of telling stories, but the necessity of it.

In the final observation post chapter, Chapter Forty-five, O’Brien gives perhaps
the most telling look at how the entire novel is structured: “The facts were not disputed.
Facts did not bother him…he could face them squarely. The order of facts—which facts
came first and which came last, the relations among facts—here he had trouble, but it was
not the trouble of facing facts. It was the trouble of understanding them, keeping them straight” (O’Brien, Cacciato 288). Here O’Brien shows where the nonlinear structure of the book comes from—this is how the mind works, not running straight through ideas or possibilities, but jumping around, from memory to imagination and back again. And with stories, the question isn’t about the facts but about the possibilities. The facts are not disputed: Cacciato left the war. Third Squad went after him. But the possibilities are endless. Perhaps Paul Berlin could stop being afraid. Perhaps Cacciato could make it all the way to Paris. “That was the end of it. The last known fact. What remained were possibilities. With courage it might have been done” (289).

The Future Time chapters

Most of the novel’s forty-six chapters are centered primarily on a single time frame and remain true to it—for instance, if an episode is set in present time, it generally remains in present time. The future time, or imagination episodes, however, are the ones in which other time frames most frequently intrude. There are twenty imagination chapters, detailing what might have happened if Cacciato had gotten away and if the squad had followed him to Paris. Reality frequently intrudes on this level of the story, as Paul Berlin, imagining it happening, is pulled away from his fantasy and back to reality, either by his memories or by places in his imaginary tale that need further pondering.

The reality of Cacciato’s journey ends at the end of Chapter One, with the rest of the men surrounding him, then firing flares and moving in; it ends with Paul Berlin shouting for Cacciato to go. From there, though, Paul Berlin asks “What happened, and what might have happened” (27)? Paul Berlin’s imagination takes over from there,
leading him and the rest of his squad—Eddie Lazzutti, Stink Harris, Doc Peret, Oscar Johnson, and Lieutenant Corson—on the road to Paris.

The imagination chapters are most interesting because they are intensely self-reflexive. Kaplan notes that “O’Brien structured Going After Cacciato like a game of Monopoly. Paul Berlin cannot pass ‘Go’ and move on to the next phase of his journey until he has dealt with certain obstacles along the way, and these obstacles are usually his most fearful memories of the war” (96). Of particular interest in the future time chapters are the specific places in the future-time episodes where reality—or memory—intrudes on Paul Berlin’s imaginary journey, the places where memory and imagination entwine.

These imagination episodes—which make up twenty of the forty-six chapters in the book—are all about Paul Berlin’s working out of possibilities, figuring out what might have happened, based on what he knows actually did happen. Steven Kaplan observes that “the main reason Paul Berlin pursues the story of going after Cacciato with such tenacity and fervor is that his imaginary journey to Paris is actually a very real and necessary journey into himself” (85). Kaplan argues that the function of this imaginary trek after Cacciato is a learning experience for the story’s author, Paul Berlin: “As Paul Berlin chases Cacciato to Paris in his imagination, he does what...most writers do when they create: he learns something new about himself” (87). This is true, but this is only half of Paul Berlin’s journey. Though much of what happens in his imaginary tales is triggered by actual memories of Paul Berlin’s wartime experiences, the imaginary events also trigger other war memories, forcing Paul Berlin to confront the ones he can and avoid the ones he cannot. Whether or not there is something to be learned from the things he has seen and done, Paul Berlin at least makes what peace he can with his own
memory, makes whatever limited sense of it that there is to be made, and uses whatever sense can be made of those events to better equip him for facing the future.

The first of the imagination chapters, Chapter Three, “The Road to Paris,” shows first how Paul Berlin at the beginning of the imaginary journey is not much different from the Paul Berlin of the memory chapters. As Third Squad begins the pursuit of Cacciato, Paul Berlin is the last man in the column, just as he always is the last man in his memories. Then, within the first two pages of the first of the imagination chapters, one of the central concerns of Paul Berlin’s is brought to the forefront; Doc Peret shows Lieutenant Corson that continuing their pursuit of Cacciato will take them out of Vietnam and into Laos. Harold Murphy wants to turn back at the border:

“I mean—you know—we can’t cross the border, can we? That’s—” He let it trail off.

“Desertion,” the lieutenant said. “That’s what it is. It’s desertion.”

“I tell you this,” Harold Murphy said. “I don’t like it. I say we turn our butts back right now. Let him go.”

Stink laughed.

“I just don’t like it.”

They rested another ten minutes. Then, without speaking, the lieutenant got up, put on his rucksack and helmet, and motioned them forward.

(O’Brien, Cacciato 29)

Paul Berlin sees Cacciato’s act of defiance, simply departing the war—deserting—as the purest act of courage. Paul Berlin desperately wishes that he has that kind of courage, to just walk away and stop being afraid all the time, but even in his
imagination, at least at the beginning, he does not—he requires Lieutenant Corson to lead him away from the war. They reach a river that divides Vietnam from Laos that they must ford in order to continue going after Cacciato, and Lieutenant Corson says “No bridges….I guess that’s one good thing. No bridges to burn behind me” (31).

The lieutenant is old, frail, in poor health, and collapses one day into on the march. Oscar takes charge at this point, as he often does—as he did when he took charge in dealing with Lieutenant Sidney Martin—and calls for a vote, whether to go on or turn back. Harold Murphy still wants to turn back, and Eddie Lazutti agrees. Stink and Doc and Oscar vote to move on, so only Paul Berlin has yet to vote. “Paul Berlin looked at Murphy, then looked at the fire. The possibilities were endless. ‘Keep going,’ he said. ‘See what happens’” (33). When the men wake up to move on in the morning, Harold Murphy is gone. Of the surviving men who entered the pact to kill Sidney Martin, only Oscar, Doc, Eddie, and Paul Berlin himself finish the journey, but the reason why only these four make it all the Paris is never made clear.

The beginning of the imaginary journey triggers Paul Berlin’s memories of the beginning of his real journey: his arrival in Vietnam, detailed in the memory chapter “How They Were Organized.”

Chapter Six, the next imagination chapter, entitled “Detours on the Road to Paris.” introduces the other character that joins Third Squad on their trek: Sarkin Aung Wan, the Vietnamese girl whose buffalo is killed by Stink Harris. Already, this early in the imaginary trip, Paul Berlin is slowly becoming more than he is. When Stink Harris begins firing at the buffalo, Paul Berlin hits the ground and takes cover. But he is not necessarily afraid. Paul Berlin is on the ground as Stink is firing, but instead of wetting
himself, as happens frequently in firefights, “Paul Berlin, sprawled now in the center of the road, had the rare courage to peek” (47). This episode is telling because already through his imagination, even this early in his fantasy, Paul Berlin is using possibilities to become something more than he is. Also the entire concept of what constitutes a story is opened up. That night, as they make camp, Paul Berlin is staring at Sarkin Aung Wan, and within his imagination, reality intrudes briefly: “A possibility. A thing that might have happened on the road to Paris” (51).

Likewise, in Chapter Seven, the next imagination chapter, entitled “Riding the Road to Paris,” reality again intrudes into the story Paul Berlin is constructing. Sarkin Aung Wan is trying to convince Paul Berlin to take her to Paris, and Paul Berlin tells her “It’s only a possibility” (54). Even within the construct of Paul Berlin’s story, he is beginning to examine the process he is going through in creating the story—the possibilities.

The episode ends with the men following a trail of M&M’s that Cacciato has left them, and then Stink Harris catching up to Cacciato briefly before Cacciato slips away. The M&M image triggers in Paul Berlin the memory of Doc Peret feeding M&M’s to Bernie Lynn, after he was shot in a tunnel. The linking of past, present, and future in Paul Berlin’s mind shows exactly where the imagination episodes are coming from: certain images and ideas in the imagination episodes are built off images and memories from Paul Berlin’s own past, which in turn trigger other memories, much as the process happens outside the construct of the book, in real life.

The image of Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker dying in tunnels triggers Chapter Ten, the next imagination episode, “A Hole in the Road to Paris,” in which Third Squad
and Sarkin Aung Wan fall into a tunnel. This unlikely event has to happen, because immediately before they fall into the hole in the road, Lieutenant Corson has decided that Sarkin cannot accompany them any further. After the decision, Paul Berlin thinks to himself “He could not imagine a happy ending,” after which Sarkin Aung Wan says to him “Wish it. Close your eyes and wish we might see Paris together” (67). Paul Berlin, within his imaginary tale, imagines himself in Paris, and Sarkin Aung Wan acknowledges the power that the storyteller’s imagination can wield: “You will find a way....I am certain of it. You will” (67).

Paul Berlin does find a way, which is making the characters in the tale he is imagining fall into a hole in the road. In the next imagination episode, Chapter Thirteen, “Falling through a Hole in the Road to Paris,” Sarkin Aung Wan congratulates Paul Berlin for his creativity. “Isn’t it lovely? I knew you’d find a way! I knew it” (75)! Within the tunnel complex, they meet a Vietcong deserter named Li Van Hgoc, sentenced to life in the tunnels for his desertion. The issue of desertion is raised frequently in Paul Berlin’s imagination. First Cacciato deserts, then Third Squad deserts in their pursuit of him, then Third Squad encounters other deserters like Li Van Hgoc along the way.

After meeting the Vietcong deserter, reality briefly intrudes into the imagination of Paul Berlin as he meditates on the differences between his imaginary episodes and the memory episodes: “He had never seen the enemy or the tunnels, or the Silver Star, but he might have. Drowsy now, and yet still excited, he felt himself falling. The fear was gone” (76, italics added). Because in the story, the imaginary Paul Berlin is able to face the living enemy without fear, the real Paul Berlin imagining the story is slowly coming to a place where he is no longer afraid.
Touring the tunnels in his imagination and peering through the periscope back up at the world above triggers the memory of a time when Paul Berlin encountered a tunnel. Frenchie Tucker got shot in the tunnel, and Lieutenant Sidney Martin asks for a volunteer to get him out. Paul Berlin was too afraid, Cacciato volunteered, but Bernie Lynn went in and was shot. Bernie Lynn was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his valor, but Paul Berlin was too afraid. Through the course of the story, however, Paul Berlin’s fear is slowly dissipating as his imaginary journey takes him closer and closer to Paris. This, in turn, changes the Paul Berlin of the memory chapters through the imagination chapters into someone a little braver by the time the present tense chapters occur, which is just about halfway through his tour of duty.

At the beginning of Chapter Fifteen, the next imagination chapter, entitled “Tunneling Toward Paris,” Li Van Hgoc tells Paul Berlin one of the values storytelling can have, saying “things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings” (82). Through his imaginary journey to Paris, Paul Berlin examines and begins to come to terms with some of the horrible things in his memory. By looking at these events in a new way, he discovers understandings that perhaps would have been unreachable any other way except through storytelling.

In “Tunneling Toward Paris,” the men learn that Li Van Hgoc has been lost in the tunnels for ten years, and that there is no easy way out. The repetition of the environment in his imagination makes Paul Berlin remember the month of July, when the war stopped for a while: there was no more mortaring, no more snipers, nothing. The enemy seemed
to withdraw for a while, and the silence just as maddening to Paul Berlin and his companions as the fear of war was.

The next imagination episode, Chapter Seventeen, "Light at the End of the Tunnel to Paris," begins with Sarkin Aung Wan leading the men out of the tunnels and into the streets of Mandalay, in Myanmar. While in Mandalay, O'Brien comes about as close to telling the reader why what really happened to Cacciato must remain a mystery: Sarkin Aung Wan asks Paul Berlin what will happen if they actually catch Cacciato, and he replies "Back to reality....If we catch him, then it's back to the realms of reality" (103). That's why O'Brien refuses to answer certain questions: once the questions are answered, the spell is broken, and the reader is jerked out of the fictive dream and has to re-enter the realms of reality, just as Paul Berlin will; once the questions are answered, Paul Berlin will have to return to present time, which is where the war is.

Chapter Eighteen, "Prayers on the Road to Paris," reaffirms this idea of Cacciato as unattainable goal, of Cacciato's fate as an unanswerable question. As the men of Third Squad try and formulate a plan for searching the streets of Mandalay for Cacciato, Eddie Lazzutti asks, "What if we find the dude?" Lieutenant Corson made a vague, dismissive gesture with his hand. Then they began the search" (106). Within the confines of Paul Berlin's narrative, the goal of the quest has become something so abstract that no one is quite sure what will happen if it is actually attained; the journey itself has become more important than the destination. This reflects the metafiction that O'Brien is creating. The asking of the questions is more important than the answering of them; the journey that causes the reader to ask the questions becomes more important than the actual destination, or the answering of the questions. Consequently, Cacciato is
never caught in Paul Berlin’s imagination as he is never caught in the novel, and he can thus continue forever running in the imagination of the reader.

But in order to continue fueling interest to sustain the quest, the goal must be periodically held out as attainable. Paul Berlin catches a glimpse of Cacciato in Mandalay, among a group of monks during evening prayers, but when Paul Berlin attempts to capture him, he is thwarted and beaten by the monks. Cacciato manages to escape in the confusion caused by the monks, so the pursuit continues. In Paul Berlin’s imagination, the confusion with the monks leads his memory back to a time when there was confusion that cost someone his life: the time when Pederson was killed getting off a chopper in a hot landing zone.

Having remembered Pederson’s death, Paul Berlin can move on. The next imagination episode, “The Rail Road to Paris,” Chapter Twenty-one, has the men on a train to Delhi, searching the train and frisking the occupants, looking for Cacciato. Searching the train in his imagination leads Paul Berlin briefly in his memory back to times when Lieutenant Sidney Martin made his men search villages and frisk villagers. From this point forward, Sidney Martin will begin showing up more and more frequently, intruding into Paul Berlin’s memory as well as his imagination more and more often. The very next memory episode, “Who They Were, or Claimed to be,” introduces many of the other characters, but very noticeably omits Sidney Martin. Whenever Sidney Martin intrudes into Paul Berlin’s imagination, Paul Berlin usually avoids allowing Sidney Martin into the memories immediately following.

The next two imagination episodes, “Asylum on the Road to Paris,” and “Repose on the Road to Paris,” Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-six, detail the men’s stay in
Delhi, where the Lieutenant falls in love. The opening line of “Repose on the Road to Paris” echoes the opening lines of the novel: “The time in Delhi was a good time” (151), compared with “It was a bad time” (1), which is the opening of the novel; Paul Berlin is using his imagination to escape the bad times of reality.

While in Delhi, the men enjoy their repose and temporarily abandon their search for Cacciato, following the lead of their love-stricken Lieutenant. These two imagination episodes are separated by two memory episodes: Chapter Twenty-four, “Calling Home,” a logical memory to come from this imaginary good time, considering how the men make themselves at home in Delhi; and Chapter Twenty-five, “The Way it Mostly Was,” the curious memory episode in which the limited omniscient point of view temporarily shifts away from Paul Berlin’s perspective and briefly enters the head of Sidney Martin. This marks a turning point in the novel; the events leading up to Sidney Martin’s death will begin intruding on Paul Berlin’s imagination as well as Paul Berlin’s memory; in fact, the entire novel concerns Paul Berlin’s struggle with the issue of courage and attempting to come to terms with the part he played in Sidney Martin’s death. From this point in the novel—almost exactly the midpoint—Paul Berlin begins getting closer and closer to articulating in his memory exactly what happened to Sidney Martin and the part he played in what happened, even as he and the rest of the men get closer to Paris in his imagination. In the case of Sidney Martin, however, imagination ends up being more successful than memory. Paris is reached but Sidney Martin’s death is never acknowledged.

In “Repose on the Road to Paris,” the men are ready to move on, but Lieutenant Corson won’t leave. Doc Peret tries to convince the Lieutenant that the war may be over,
but the men still need him. The Lieutenant replies “Cut the dumbness, Doc. Just cut it. The war’s not over. We left the bloody war—walked away, ran. Understand that? No more crap about duty and mission. I’m out of it” (155).

Doc tells the Lieutenant again that the men still need him, to which the Lieutenant replies “‘You need me? The way you needed Sidney Martin?’ Paul Berlin felt a dullness behind his eyes. He remembered Lake Country—the deep craters and tunnels, the rain, the sad thing that happened to Sidney Martin” (156, Italics added).

In these few short passages, O’Brien has hit all of the major themes of the book: duty and desertion, courage and complicity. The Lieutenant, having already allowed his men to walk away from the war, now tries to walk away from them. And Paul Berlin is forced by Lieutenant Corson to remember the ‘sad thing’ that happened to Lieutenant Sidney Martin in Lake Country.

But Lieutenant Corson passes out while drunk, so the men kidnap him and take him with them on a train to Kabul, in hot pursuit of Cacciato. Lieutenant Corson’s knowledge of what happened to Sidney Martin is juxtaposed with his own kidnapping, since the men kidnapping him “are of course the same men who had killed Corson’s predecessor” (Kaplan 98), Sidney Martin himself.

This intrusion of real world horror—the death of Lieutenant Sidney Martin, the one memory that Paul Berlin will never face—leads Paul Berlin in a different direction in the next imagination episode, “Flights of Imagination.” He is trying to escape the memory of Sidney Martin by taking a fast train through Afghanistan, but as Kaplan notes,
When Paul Berlin tries to accelerate the speed of his journey to Paris, his mind pulls him back to the memories of the murder of Sidney Martin...as Paul Berlin and the others get closer to Paris, his memories of the war increasingly infiltrate the imagination chapters. It’s as if his recalling mind will not let his imagination complete the trip to Paris until he has gained at least some perspective on the fragging of Sidney Martin and on how this event shapes his own first six months in Vietnam. (99)

This episode is a future time episode, but at least half the chapter deals with the past—this chapter tells of the only real battle that Paul Berlin has fought in, the battle in which Ready Mix was killed. Paul Berlin is trying to flee the past through imagination, but his memory will not let his imagination get away that easily; thus O’Brien shows the close link between memory and imagination, and how one really cannot function without the other, and how the two working closely together constitute the locus where stories are created.

Near the end of this episode, the men rest at the house of a man who is a history-teller, and he tells the men, “I speak only of history...never of the future. Fortune-telling is for lunatics and old women. History is the stronger science, for it has the virtue of certainty without the vice of blasphemy. God alone tells futures. God alone makes history” (O’Brien, Cacciato 160). Paul Berlin contradicts this statement in a number of ways. Storytellers deal with history, but they deal with the future, as well. And history is not necessarily the stronger science, because as Paul Berlin’s own experience shows, history does not always have the virtue of certainty. The fact that Paul Berlin cannot or will not remember certain things from his past removes certainty from memory, and the
fact that the future that Paul Berlin is creating has certainty when his memories do not removes the idea of blasphemy from looking into the future through stories. O'Brien himself has said “our daydreams are real; our fantasies are real” (Herzog 80). There is nothing blasphemous in looking into the future, because it is not true that God alone can tell futures and make histories. Paul Berlin the storyteller and Tim O'Brien the author are doing exactly the same thing.

The history-teller refuses to tell Paul Berlin's history. He tells Paul Berlin “You are too young….Come to me when you have had time to make a real history for yourself. I cannot tell unmade histories” (161). Even in his imagination, Paul Berlin can see how importance of creating a history for himself. He still has an unmade history, and he is trying to reinvent himself, making himself into something that he isn’t but could possibly be.

That imagination episode triggers a short present-tense episode, with Paul Berlin speculating on his own history, and then he leaps back into the future, in an episode entitled “Atrocities on the Road to Paris,” Chapter Twenty-nine. The men reach Tehran, where several significant things occur in Paul Berlin’s imagination. Lieutenant Corson has been suffering from poor health throughout the journey, and in Tehran, Doc Peret finally diagnoses the Lieutenant’s disease:

Nostalgia—that’s the basic sickness, and I never heard of a doctor who can cure it….The old man’s suffering from an advanced case. Nostalgia, it comes from the Greek. I researched it: straight from the Greek. Algós means pain. Nostos means to return home. Nostalgia: the pain of returning home. And the ache that comes from thinking about it. See my
drift? The old man's basic disease is homesickness. Nostalgia for the
goddamn war, the army, the lifer's life. And the dysentery, the fever, it's
just a symptom of the real sickness. (164)

Doc Peret also describes the remedy: "Time...the only antidote for nostalgia.
Just give the man time" (164).

In Paul Berlin's fantasy, Lieutenant Corson serves as a strange kind of voice of
reason. Despite the fact that he is indifferent to their mission, ceding control of his squad
to his men and allowing Cacciato to lead them, the fact that he is homesick for the war
provides another aspect of the central issue of desertion as it applies not only to the
Lieutenant but to all of them equally: in running away from anything, even something as
horrific as the war, there lies the risk of being stricken with the disease of nostalgia. This
is not something that Paul Berlin ever considers in real time; instead he explores possible
consequences through his imagination.

Later in this episode, the men witness a beheading. Paul Berlin wants to leave,
but Doc Peret won't let him. He says to Paul Berlin, "Watch this...Your fine expedition
to Paris, all the spectacular spectacles along the way. Civilization. You watch this
shit....I want you to watch this. Pay attention, look for all the pretty details" (166). So as
the execution is about to happen, "Paul Berlin tried to be calm. Concentration, that was
the answer—remember the details, store them up for future understanding" (167).

Though Peret voted to continue at the beginning of the journey, Paul Berlin has to take
responsibility for the tale as its teller. And even within the confines of Paul Berlin's
imagination, Doc Peret is the pragmatist, ever urging Paul Berlin to try and learn
something about himself by carefully examining the process of examination itself—
immediately following this future time episode is a present tense. Observation Post
episode in which Paul Berlin remembers Doc Peret’s advice about how to learn
something about yourself through vision and memory, which “requires a fierce
concentration on the process itself” (185).

The men later learn that the boy being beheaded was a deserter from his country’s
army, and then they themselves are arrested for being deserters. Doc Peret talks them out
of that arrest, saying that they are protected by international law because of the unusual
circumstances of their journey, and the episode ends with Doc Peret and the Iranian
officer who arrested and then released them drinking and having an extended debate
about duty and honor. The man Doc debates has a romanticized view of what it means to
be a soldier. He believes what keeps men at their post is a simple sense of purpose. Doc
disagrees, saying “Maybe purpose is a part of it, but a bigger part is self-respect. And
fear...that’s why soldiers don’t run...we stick it out because we’re afraid of what’ll
happen to our reputations. Our own egos. Self-respect, that’s what keeps us on the line”
(179). Through this imaginary conversation in Paul Berlin’s imagination between Doc
Peret and the Iranian, Paul Berlin’s worst fear and one of his biggest sources of guilt is
voiced: the fear of being thought a coward. This haunts Paul Berlin, keeping him in the
war. There is also his fear of going against the majority that led him to join his
companions in the murder of Sidney Martin—the fears that have paralyzed him through
his six months in Vietnam—fears that Cacciato does not seem to have. Cacciato has the
courage to say no to the rest of the men; he has the courage to walk away. Paul Berlin
wishes he had the courage, and that is why he chases after Cacciato in his dreams.
Paul Berlin’s imagination is still occasionally intruded on by reality, but in the passages where reality does intrude, the reader gets a look at the intense power of imagination. While imagining being in the nightclub where Doc Peret debates the idea of duty, “Paul Berlin slipped back to his observation tower along the South China Sea. Partly here, partly there. Hard to tell what was real. Concentrating, he took a deep breath and let himself go. Yes, music and flashing lights and people dancing, and it was neither real nor unreal, it was simply there” (179).

In the hallucinatory setting of the war, where young men are killed and other unspeakable things happen with startling frequency, what’s real and what’s not real is often difficult to determine, since things too awful to happen are happening all the time. Imagination becomes not only important, but as important, or even more important than reality. Daydreams and fantasies may not be any more or less real than actual situations, or things in the memory, but they are there.

After Doc finishes debating the issue of courage, talk turns to war stories. Oscar Johnson wants Doc to tell “the best story…the ultimate war story” (182), the story of how Billy Boy Watkins died of fright. Even inside his imagination, talk of Billy Boy’s death makes Paul Berlin sick, but after this imagination episode comes the memory chapter dealing with Paul Berlin’s first day at the war, the night after Billy Boy Watkins died, and the first time Paul Berlin met Cacciato.

The next imagination episode, Chapter Thirty-three, “Outlawed on the Road to Paris,” has the men being arrested again for desertion, only this time sentenced to death by beheading. The officer who let them go previously is trying to establish the facts of their situation, and he lays all of the facts as he understands them for Doc Peret. Doc
responds by saying “Facts are one thing....Interpretation is something else. Putting facts in the right framework” (210). Again Doc Peret serves as the voice of pragmatism, telling when imagination becomes necessary: sometimes memory and reality provide insufficient frameworks for understanding the facts: that’s another reason why people tell stories, to offer new possibilities for interpretation.

The men are told to “pray for comfort in the certainty of your innocence. In the purity of your own motives” (201). Paul Berlin, both within the construct of the story he is creating and in reality, is unsure how to articulate his motives:

Paul Berlin’s motives, as shapeless as water, washed through his imagination: a briny, sodden pressure that weighted him like gravity, layers of inclination pressing him deeper and deeper....Things were out of control. Gone haywire. You could run, but you couldn’t outrun the consequences of running. Not even in imagination. (201)

But that’s all Paul Berlin wants: to run. To go wherever it is that Cacciato has gone, to stop being too afraid to run away so he could stop being afraid all of the time. But he is too afraid to act, so he relies on the only form of courage he knows he has: “Imagination—sometimes it seemed he’d wasted his whole life that way...elaborate plans, working up a strategy, using his imagination as a kind of tool to shape the future. Not exactly daydreams, not exactly fantasies. Just a way of working out the possibilities. Controlling things, directing things. And always the endings are happy” (202). And it disturbs Paul Berlin that in this possibility of imagination, “Sometimes he would slip back to his observation post by the sea, looking down, and he would be struck by a vision of doom. Desertion—wasn’t that what it really was? And in the end weren’t there
always consequences? A calling to account? No question, it was crazy from the start. None of the roads led to Paris” (203). Within Paul Berlin’s fantasy, the men are made to confess to desertion and to admit that they walked away from the war. Their interrogating officer commands them to “tell me this...this mission, this so-called mission...tell me it is fiction. Tell me it is a made-up story. Tell me it is an alibi to cover cowardice” (206). That is why the possibilities begin to fail Paul Berlin in this story. Even running in his imagination makes him feel like a coward, and the one thing Paul Berlin loathes more than anything else by this point is feeling like a coward.

Immediately after this episode, being forced to confess in his imagination to acts of cowardice, Paul Berlin’s memory steps in and takes him back to Lake Country, coming as close as he ever does to telling exactly what happened to Lieutenant Sidney Martin.

But Paul Berlin never does come out and tell what happened. The next imagination episode after the memory of the pact the men make that that ends up in the killing of Sidney Martin is Chapter Thirty-six, another episode entitled “Flights of Imagination.” This episode opens with the men condemned to beheading for their desertion. But this is not an acceptable ending to any story, so “In his tower by the sea Paul Berlin considered the possibilities. A miracle, he thought. An act of high imagination—daring and lurid and impossible. Yes, a cartoon of the mind” (215). Paul Berlin’s imagination faltered in the previous chapters as real feelings started intruding into his story, but here he re-asserts his authority over his own imagination: the dreamer can do anything he wants within the confines of his own dreams. Having re-established himself as the sovereign figure of his own daydreams, he begins exploring another
possibility, one that will get him back on the road to Paris. That’s where possibilities come in handy: no possibility is too farfetched when dealing with the realm of imagination.

So Cacciato shows his face again in Paul Berlin’s imagination: he slips his M-16 through the window of Third Squad’s cell, helping them escape. Echoing Paul Berlin’s cry of “Go” after Cacciato at the beginning of the novel, Cacciato screams for the men to go. The fantasy gets more and more unbelievable the further Paul Berlin gets into it, but this chapter is positively surreal, with lots of noise and confusion and running. But after being imprisoned, both in a cell within his imagination, and in the army in reality, the running is sublime to Paul Berlin:

It was the soldier’s greatest dream—fierce, hard, desperate full-out running. No honor. No thoughts of duty or glory or mission. Just running for the sake of running, nothing else. Like that time in the mountains, twitching, not wanting to die, twitching and cowering and imagining how far and how fast he would run if he were only able. (216)

Here Paul Berlin is back in control of his imagination, knowing that anything can happen. “A miracle, he thought, and he closed his eyes and made it happen. And then a getaway car—why not? It was a night of miracles, and he was a miracle man” (216, Italics added). Storytellers can make miracles simply by closing their eyes and imagining it; anything can happen within the confines of a story.

So Paul Berlin’s fantasy gets wilder still: the getaway car is a tricked-up 1964 Impala, and the getaway route takes the men down Eisenhower Avenue in Tehran. But it’s just a possibility. In fiction, it’s all about the possibilities. Not so much what
happened, but what might have happened. As unbelievable as the events here are, they are not implausible. Merely possibilities, but stretching the possibilities to the limits, going to the land of probable impossibilities, beyond the land of improbable possibilities.

Third Squad disappears into the city, trying to make good its escape. Oscar, who once again takes charge, drives, and ends up driving the men into an ambush. They take fire, and the men are screaming, especially Paul Berlin. He "tried to make it stop. 'Stop,' he said, then louder—"Stop!"—but it was beyond his powers of control" (218). Having reasserted control over his imagination in order to make their escape, Paul Berlin now finds himself losing control again momentarily. After getting away, however, Paul Berlin, who is always the "follower rather than a doer, which is symbolized in his being the last soldier in his squad and in his platoon in march formation" (Kaplan 83), takes control again, at least symbolically: after Oscar takes charge and gets the men to safety, Paul Berlin drives while the rest of the men sleep. But while he drives, "for a time he was in two spots at once" (O'Brien, Cacciato 219), drifting between his imagination and reality. The sun is coming up in reality, so he accelerates the car in his fantasy to make sure that the fantasy accelerates with it, so he can finish the story before the sun comes up, the rest of the men wake up, and reality takes over again.

But though he is driving the car in his imagination, at least presenting the illusion of control, the situation is "Out of control, and maybe it always had been. One thing leading to the next, and pretty soon there was no guiding it, and things happened out of other things. Like... Lake Country... The way things led to events, and the way they got out of human control" (220). Again, Paul Berlin is allowing reality to intrude on his story. The memory of Sidney Martin's death, Paul Berlin's passive participation, and
Cacciato's unwilling participation in it, again comes close to being made explicit: "he'd pressed the grenade against Cacciato's limp hand. Was it touching? Was it volition? Maybe so. maybe not....' A sad thing,' Cacciato had said on the day afterward" (220). Paul Berlin replies to Cacciato's observation by saying "Accidents happen," but he knows better; he knows that he is the reason that Sidney Martin is dead, not only because he agreed to go along with Oscar's plan, but because he told the rest of the men that Cacciato would go along with it, too: "A very sad thing. Cacciato was dumb, but he was right. What happened to Lieutenant Sidney Martin was a very sad thing" (220).

The episode ends with the men coming out of the hills and to the sea. Reaching the ocean in his imagination leads him back to some sense of control over the possibilities he is exploring. "It can be done....By God, yes, it can be done" (222).

Coming to the end of the land reminds Paul Berlin of the land in Vietnam, leading him back to the memories of the only thing he knew well in Vietnam: the land. He knew the land and loved the sea, but before the night at the observation post where he followed the possibilities as far as they'd take him, "He did not think of Paris" (226).

But the night in the observation post happens, and the imaginary story becomes Paul Berlin's reality for one night. Remembering the sea triggers the next imagination episode, Chapter Thirty-eight, "On the Lam to Paris," which details the men's journey by ship from Izmir to Athens. When the men arrive at Piraeus, the docks are swarming with police, and Stink Harris gets spooked and jumps overboard to escape. The rest of the men are resigned to capture, but Stink Harris refuses to surrender. Why he and Harold Murphy (who abandoned the trek very early), both members of the squad who participated in the death of Sidney Martin, begin the journey but do not finish it is
another question that neither O’Brien nor any of the critics writing on the novel have answered satisfactorily. O’Brien’s failure to answer this question, however, is a sin of commission, not of omission. Some questions are not meant to be answered, because the various maybes—the various possibilities—are what stories are all about.

With the unanswered questions Stink’s disappearance provoke, Paul Berlin is led to meditate on the things about Vietnam that he and his companions did not know, which leads into the next imagination episode, “By a Stretch of the Imagination.” Chapter Forty. Paul Berlin realizes that having the journey end there is unacceptable. He realizes that he could not end his story with

Nothing fulfilled, no answers, the whole expedition throttled just as it approached the promise of a rightful end. It wouldn’t have happened that way. And it didn’t. Again—back for an instant in his observation by the sea—again, this wasn’t a madman’s fantasy. Paul Berlin was fully awake and fully sane. Not a dream, he thought, nothing demented or unconscious or fanatic about it….He was speculating. Figuring the odds.

(242)

The men head north without Stink Harris, and along the way they hitch a ride with a radical girl from California in a VW van. She is one of the only people along the imaginary journey who admires the men for their desertion: “I really do admire you….There’s so darned much rhetoric…it drives you nuts. But you guys did something. You saw evil and you walked away” (245). She is the first person the men meet who does not condemn them for their desertion, and Oscar orders her out of the car at
gunpoint, hinting that Paul Berlin, the storyteller, doesn’t want to be commended for doing what he feels is the right thing, even if only in his own mind.

The episode ends with the men on a train crossing the Rhine River, drawing close to Paris, and spirits are high. Nonetheless, after this, there is one more death that Paul Berlin is willing to face, so he remembers the gruesome episode in which Buff was shot, which leads back into the next imagination episode, “The Peace of Paris,” Chapter Forty-three. If Kaplan’s Monopoly theory (Paul Berlin being unable to pass “Go” in each stage of his journey until he has remembered some significant event from his past) is correct, then it follows that the last death he is able to face must be remembered before in his imagination he can arrive in Paris. Sidney Martin’s death is something that Paul Berlin either cannot or will not face, but Buff’s death—one of the more horrific things Paul Berlin has seen—is something that must be overcome before his fantasy can progress to its conclusion.

“The Peace of Paris” opens on April 1 in Luxembourg, six months after Cacciato left the war and Third Squad followed him, as the journey is coming to an end. In this episode, the men arrive in Paris, and Paul Berlin, over the six hours of real time and six months that have lapsed in his head, begins to take more control of his own situation. When the train arrives in Paris, Paul Berlin, the follower, “is the first to step down” off the train (260). As Paul Berlin takes some control, he is no longer following blindly. As the men settle into the routine of peace in Paris, Paul Berlin tells Sarkin Aung Wan that he is in love with her and talks of settling down with her in Paris:

“I’m in love,” he told her.

She was walking barefoot along the river. “How lovely!” she said. “Isn’t
love nice?”

“It’s true.”

“I thought you only spoke of possibilities, Spec Four.”

“No,” he said firmly. “It’s the truth.” (262-263)

Even within the construct of the story, Paul Berlin has always spoken only of possibilities, not truths. But the possibilities can lead to truths—and the truth is, it could have been possible for Paul Berlin to fall in love on his way after Cacciato. And the possibility of that becomes truer than Paul Berlin’s reality on the observation post, at least as long as he continues dreaming.

But the episode ends with the authorities closing in on Third Squad again, asking questions, and the urgency of their mission to capture Cacciato becomes paramount once again, to prove that they were, in fact, not deserters but on a legitimate mission.

In the next imagination episode, Chapter Forty-four, “The End of the Road to Paris,” the men have to move out of their hotel and become soldiers again: sleeping under their ponchos in the park and spending their nights out on patrol, looking for Cacciato.

As the fantasy breaks down and Paul Berlin looks like he is in danger of losing the happy ending he has been pursuing, Doc Peret says “You can’t get away with this shit. The realities always catch you….No maybes. Reality doesn’t work that way” (44). And Doc is absolutely right: reality does not work that way. Reality ends up ending however it’s going to, and very often the people it is happening to have little or no say in what happens: they just have to accept what is happening and move on. But that’s not the case in stories. Stories can go almost any way the storyteller wants, and are limited only by imagination. As the fantasy turns dark again, “Impossible, Paul Berlin thought. Hard
to figure a happy ending” (276). But reality has nothing to do with it. “It was a failure of imagination” (280). In stories, that is perhaps the deadliest kind of failure.

Then Paul Berlin finds Cacciato. From there, the chapter makes a radical shift into a fantastic mock peace negotiation between Sarkin Aung Wan and Paul Berlin, in which they each state their positions on obligation and fear. The narrative shifts briefly into second person while the setting of the scene is described: “Imagine it,” the narrative voice commands (287). This shift not only removes the reader from the imaginary episode by pulling him out of one fantasy into another, but also pulls Paul Berlin out of his fantasy. “The End of the Road to Paris” is the last episode in the book that is completely within the realms of imagination—reality is becoming more immediate.

This episode is followed by the final Observation Post chapter, in which Paul Berlin watches the sun come up six hours after his imaginary journey had begun. Paul Berlin, through his imagination, has come to face the facts of his first six months in Vietnam; in doing so, he has looked at what will be necessary to get him through the next six months. “What remained were possibilities. With courage it might have been done” (289). In reality, Paul Berlin has spent the first six months of his tour afraid. Through his imaginary exploration of possibilities, however, he appears to have found the courage to make it through the rest of his tour.

Chapter Forty-six, the final episode in the book—entitled, like the first of the memory chapters, “Going After Cacciato”—begins as an imagination chapter. Lieutenant Corson and Sarkin Aung Wan have left together to go back to the war, leaving Oscar in charge of Doc Peret, Eddie, and Paul Berlin as they prepare to go and finally get Cacciato.
In the same way that Oscar led the men in the unspoken pact to murder Sidney Martin, making each man touch the grenade they used to kill him, “There were no arguments. Oscar unwrapped Cacciato’s M-16 and held it out. Doc touched it. Eddie touched it. Paul Berlin touched it” (291). Oscar outlines the plan, and tells Paul Berlin that he doesn’t want Paul Berlin to do anything, because he is too afraid. “I don’t want you. You’re a fuckup. Man, you’re the worst….You heard me. Go home. Go hide your head” (294), showing once again that Paul Berlin is braver in his dreams than he has been in reality. He challenges Oscar’s decision and is allowed to go along to get Cacciato. But even though he is standing up to his companions, showing some courage, he is still afraid:

Paul Berlin made his thoughts into a revolving sphere, a tiny marble, and he concentrated on the marble. He watched it turn. A silver, shining marble. He could feel the fear coming, but it kept his attention on the marble. Focus on it, watch it spin in the dark, a brilliant glowing sphere. Like a star. Be brave, watch the silver star. (294)

In his imagination, Paul Berlin tries to narrow his thoughts to keep the fear at bay, and in narrowing his thoughts, they turn into the symbol of his courage, the Silver Star. Oscar sends Paul Berlin into Cacciato’s room first, and from there, Paul Berlin feels the fear, and the fantasy dissolves into noise and gunfire and ends with Paul Berlin collapsing to the floor and wetting himself.

From there, the narrative picks up exactly where the first chapter ended; with Third Squad surrounding Cacciato on a mountain and firing its flares and moving in on him. That situation was also marked with noise and gunfire and also ended with Paul
Berlin collapsing to the ground and pissing himself; like the murky end of the imaginary journey, the reality—where the facts for Paul Berlin ended and the possibilities began—ends with no clear resolution, with no easy answers as to where Cacciato went, and with Paul Berlin too afraid to do much of anything. The novel ends with Lieutenant Corson calling Cacciato in as Missing in Action, with the men talking about rumors of being assigned to the Observation Post where Paul Berlin will spend the present tense episodes of the novel, and with Paul Berlin and Lieutenant Corson talking about possibilities. The possibility that Cacciato might make it not only intrigues Paul Berlin but also the lieutenant:

"There's worse things can happen. There's plenty of worse things."

"True enough, sir."

"And who knows? He might make it. He might do all right." The lieutenant's voice was flat like the land. "Miserable odds, but—"

"But maybe."

"Yes," the lieutenant said. "Maybe so."

Chronologically, this episode happens before the observation post chapters, but in this scene, despite the fact that Paul Berlin is still afraid, the reader is beginning to see the hints of the Paul Berlin who will use the powers of imagination to make himself ready to face the rest of the war. Paul Berlin, through his storytelling, and through his exploration of memory and imagination and the art of storytelling, becomes something more than the scared kid who can't control his bladder at the first sign of trouble. Without storytelling—an essential human activity—it would never have been possible for Paul Berlin to make the changes that he makes.
One of the most useful functions of writing stories is obvious: writing and telling stories is the act of committing to the page or verbalizing ideas: ideas are abstract, intangible things, that, as O’Brian has shown through the jumbled, nonlinear presentation of this novel, often come randomly. The stream of consciousness presents ideas as they come, as they influence other ideas, as they form new ones. Seizing the ideas and writing them down, or telling them, makes them tangible. They are not just ideas anymore, they are something that can be broken down, examined, organized, re-organized, patterned. Writing and telling ideas makes them real.

Another useful function of stories is made most apparent by the novel’s setting—setting the novel against the horrific, confusing, occasionally senseless background of the Vietnam war shows exactly that kind of chaos that makes stories necessary: events in the real world very often cannot be made sense of, but once they become part of a story, sense can be made of them. In a story, answers can be found to questions unanswerable in real life; there can be happy endings where real life ended in death; there can be a right answer and a wrong answer when real life offers only moral ambiguities. The possibilities are endless in stories.

In his imagination, Paul Berlin is able to do what he was not in real life, but what Cacciato was able to do: have the courage to walk away, have the courage to stand up to the others. Though it is never explained if there is a causal relationship between the murder of Sidney Martin and Cacciato’s departure, it is clear that Cacciato leaves not soon after it happens. This becomes Paul Berlin’s only real example of moral courage in the novel, so it makes sense for Paul Berlin to go after him. Paul Berlin cannot face some of what has been done both by him, to him, and around him; he has been grappling with
issues of his own courage in his present and past, so courage becomes an issue that doesn't come up in his imagination. He is brave in his stories, which forces him into recalling some of the things he has survived in the past. And facing in memory something unfaceable in real life is a form of courage, which perhaps will lead to the ability to face similar things in the future: through his courageousness in his stories, Paul Berlin learns how to be courageous in facing his past, and theoretically, how to face his future.

There are three distinct Paul Berlins in the story: there is PFC Paul Berlin, the scared kid who populates the memory episodes; there is Spec Four Paul Berlin, the imagined character who, while if not truly brave in the story of his journey to Paris, is certainly not afraid; and there is the Spec Four Paul Berlin who spends the night on guard duty, dreaming about the road to Paris. The Paul Berlin who exists in the present—because of the fact that through his stories he appears to have learned how not to be afraid—is a lot closer to the imaginary Spec Four Paul Berlin who goes after Cacciato then the scared PFC Paul Berlin who spends the first half of the war afraid. Stories save Paul Berlin.
CHAPTER THREE

STORIES AS SALVATION: STORY-TRUTH AND HAPPENING-TRUTH IN
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

The epigraph of The Things They Carried is a quote from John Ransom's Andersonville Diary: “This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the ‘late war’ or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest” (qtd. in O'Brien, Things !). The title page of The Things They Carried announces it as a work of fiction, but the book is dedicated to the main characters of the novel. There is also a wonderfully ambiguous disclaimer on the publisher's imprint page: “This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary” (ii, italics added).

Except for a few details regarding the author’s own life—that could mean almost anything. The Things They Carried is written primarily from the first person point-of-view, and the narrator of the work is a foot soldier named Tim O’Brien. Later in the work, we learn that this fictional Tim O’Brien has some things in common with the author Tim O’Brien: both are from Worthington, Minnesota, both wrote books entitled Going After Cacciato and If I Die in a Combat Zone, both attended graduate school at
Harvard. These similarities were probably added by author Tim O’Brien to prompt the reader to ask: where does the real Tim O’Brien end and the fictional Tim O’Brien begin? What’s real and what’s not real? What’s the truth?

O’Brien’s answer would likely be, what difference does it make? You’re missing the point. The point isn’t answering those kinds of questions; the point is asking them in the first place. O’Brien’s implied contention seems to be that what makes good fiction work is not answering the questions, but making the reader ask them. Good stories should keep you guessing; that’s what keeps them interesting. “Above all, writing fiction involves a desire to enter the mystery of things: that human craving to know what cannot be known” (O’Brien, “Magic” 176). And while part of the magic of telling stories is that ability to know things that are unknowable in real life, a story that tells you everything would quell the human craving O’Brien speaks of, remove any sense of reality and necessity from the story, and once the mystery is removed, the story’s not interesting anymore. As O’Brien wrote in “The Magic Show,”

there is something both false and trivial about a story that arrives at absolute closure. With closure, the facts of today have no bearing on the facts of tomorrow. (It seems ironic that most so-called mystery stories conclude with no mystery whatsoever. The killer’s methods and motives are exposed. Ah, we think. No wonder. All is explicable, all is settled. The case is closed.) A satisfying plot, I believe, involves not a diminution of mystery but rather a fundamental enlargement…the solution to one set of problems must open out into another and even greater set. The future must still matter. The unknown must still issue its call. (181)
This is Tim O’Brien’s fiction at its best: issuing the call of the unknown, drawing the reader into the mysteries he is constructing, weaving a tangled web of questions that are sufficiently intriguing to keep the reader thinking about O’Brien’s work long after the book has been put down.

Who They Are: “Love,” “Spin,” “The Things They Carried,” and “On The Rainy River”

O’Brien begins The Things They Carried in very much the same way that he began Going After Cacciato: The book is dedicated to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa; this list of men echoes the opening lines of Going After Cacciato, with its litany of dead men. O’Brien clearly likes to get his characters introduced to the reader right away; the first episode of the book, also titled “The Things They Carried,” introduces within the first two pages almost all of the men who will populate the book. There is one notable omission, though, as the characters are introduced: the fictional character of Tim O’Brien (in order to avoid confusion between the author Tim O’Brien and the character in The Things They Carried named Tim O’Brien, the two will be referred to as “author O’Brien” and “character O’Brien,” henceforth) does not show up in the first story. The character that “The Things They Carried” primarily focuses on, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, seems to be a little bit like Paul Berlin. In the first paragraph of the story, Jimmy Cross is escaping the war through make-believe: “In the late afternoon, after a day’s march, he would dig his foxhole…and spend the last hour of light pretending” (O’Brien, Things 3). Jimmy Cross carries letters from and pictures of a girl named Martha, and his daydreams of her are his escape:
“Whenever he looked at the photographs [of her], he thought of new things he should have done” (6).

That’s part of the allure of fiction, that ability to think of things you should have done and have a forum to make them actually happen—Jimmy Cross and the narrative voice are aware of this and make the reader aware. The narrative voice in the first story is similar to the voice of Going After Cacciato: it is third person limited omniscient; only Jimmy Cross’s thoughts are presented, but at times the narrative voice shifts far enough away from Jimmy Cross that it reveals things that he couldn’t know, yet without ever entering anyone else’s thoughts. The story is interesting in that none of the dialogue is directly quoted; all of the dialogue is filtered through the narrative voice, and exactly who that voice belongs to is unclear: Is it Jimmy Cross’s memory or his imagination? A little of both? Is it the voice of character O’Brien or author Tim O’Brien? Or is it a voice outside all of them? The answers are irrelevant. The questions, however, are not.

The character of Tim O’Brien is first introduced in the next episode, simply entitled “Love.” Lieutenant Jimmy Cross comes to visit him years after the war is over, and Jimmy Cross is still carrying his love for Martha: “Nothing had changed. He still loved her” (30). It is now many years later in the story, but only a turn of the page away in the book. Whether the two stories are read in sequence or not, nothing will have changed: Jimmy Cross will still love Martha. If you go back and read the stories again, nothing will have changed: Jimmy Cross will still love Martha. Later in the book O’Brien writes “You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it” (91).

Memories fade, but stories are forever; every time you come back to a story, nothing will have changed. The things you know you will still know, and the things you
don’t know, you’ll still not know. That’s certainly a major point of a much of O’Brien’s fiction: to give the reader the option to come up with a different resolution every time he reads it. For instance, author O’Brien ends the “Love” episode with a wonderful question mark. In the story, character Tim O’Brien is bidding farewell to Jimmy Cross after his visit:

I told him I’d like to write a story about some of this. Jimmy thought it over and then gave me a little smile. “Why not?” he said....“Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.” He hesitated for a second. “And do me a favor. Don’t mention anything about—”

“No,” I said. “I won’t.” (31)

Jimmy Cross’s first request—that character O’Brien make Jimmy Cross into something perhaps more than he was—is one of the powers that writers have. Writers can make their friends and themselves into something more than they truly are. The storyteller holds all the cards. Just as Jimmy Cross was pretending early in “The Things They Carried,” pretending that he’s not bearing the burdens that he is, pretending that he’s not responsible for his men’s lives, pretending that he’s not in a war, pretending that he’s home and that Martha is in love with him, here O’Brien shows that the storyteller can do the same thing: pretend Jimmy Cross into anything that he, the author, character O’Brien, chooses.

The second request that Jimmy Cross makes, the one that he doesn’t finish, is a wonderful ambiguity. What is it that Jimmy Cross doesn’t want character Tim O’Brien to mention in his story? Jimmy Cross burned the pictures and letters from Martha
because he felt guilty when one of his men, Ted Lavender, is shot. He was thinking about her, daydreaming when it happened: “He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war” (16). Is this shame the unmentionable thing? Does character Tim O’Brien betray his fictional friend by telling it? Or does character Tim O’Brien honor his friend’s request? Is the story character O’Brien tells different from the one author O’Brien tells? Is there some secret that is kept from the reader? What in the world could it be that the narrator is holding out on us, if in fact he is? These questions, and the fact that there are no satisfying, complete answers, are Tim O’Brien at his finest: the mystery, the wonder, and the eternal questioning are certainly part of the magic of his stories.

The next episode is entitled “Spin.” It deals with some of the times when the war wasn’t so bad: “On occasions the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance” (35). This is what stories can do—put a fancy spin on things, make them dance. Make the ugly things beautiful, make the beautiful things heartbreaking, make the heartbreaking things insignificant. “The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. But the war wasn’t all that way” (36). Stories are like that, too: they live in their own dimension, good or bad, replaying themselves over and over again. They never stop happening.

This episode also introduces character Tim O’Brien’s fictional nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen, which marks another significant difference between character O’Brien and author O’Brien. As Bruckner notes,
Most of the convincing personal details about his [author O’Brien’s] life and family, is made up. It is disappointing to learn that Tim’s [character O’Brien’s] 9-year-old daughter is an invention, not just because she is so appealing but because her father’s feelings about her role as an interrogator of his conscience are so powerful. She was the most difficult of all the characters to create, Mr. O’Brien said: “I had to keep going back and cutting a lot of the verisimilitude. But, you see, in a way, she is real, the child I do not have. Storytelling can do that for you.” (3)

While author O’Brien and character O’Brien should not, as per the book’s disclaimer, be confused for being the same people, even in their differences we can see their similarities. Character O’Brien has a daughter who forces him to consider his very essence, that of a writer still writing about the Vietnam war; author O’Brien is able to create a daughter for his alter ego, but she serves the same purpose for both O’Briens. Author O’Brien uses something that character O’Brien has but he does not: a daughter to serve as a sort of conscience, to provide him, filtered through his voice within the text (character O’Brien), a means and a forum in which to examine why he does what he does.

Character O’Brien’s daughter, Kathleen, is convinced her father should stop writing about the war and write about something cheerier, but O’Brien knows a thing or two about memory and the effect it has on imagination:

In a way, I guess, she’s right: I should forget it. But the thing about remembering is that you don’t forget. You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The
memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up in your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for the ride, putting things down as they come at you. That's the real obsession. All those stories. (O’Brien, Things 38)

This connection between memory and imagination is the place where Paul Berlin lives in the novel Going After Cacciato. The Things They Carried is perhaps even more complex because the character at the intersection of remembered and dreamed here is named Tim O’Brien, and he’s a writer, and he’s a likeable guy. So likeable, in fact, that as a reader you want the fictional man to be the real man. He has a wonderful daughter that you want to be real, too. You want to believe the stories he’s telling you. You want to stop questioning everything he says, wondering if it’s true or not. But for author O’Brien, that’s not the way stories work:

The war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing left to remember but the story. (40)

Stories aren’t about facts or anyone’s idea of what really happened. Telling stories is not about arriving at any universal truths, but rather objectifying personal truths. As O’Brien told Lowenthal, “Fiction is about telling noble lies, sublime lies. It’s lying to
tell the truth” (1). Through the shaping of experience into narrative, memory and imagination and all of the intangible things that go along with them are transformed into permanent records of what was.

Author O’Brien likes to introduce right away some of the questions the narrative will be examining, and part of what makes his work so challenging is deciding what he will tell the reader and what will be left up to the reader to puzzle out: In Going After Cacciato, he fills in a lot of the blanks regarding the deaths of the men introduced in the novel’s first lines, but leaves the reader a lot to either figure out on his own or just keep wondering about; The Things They Carried works off that same principle; some significant details are provided, but some are not, leaving some questions never really answered. “Spin” introduces what will become one of the book’s central unsolved mysteries:

A red clay trail.

A hand grenade.

A slim, dainty man of about twenty.

Kiowa saying, “No choice, Tim. What else could you do?”

Kiowa saying, “Right?”

Kiowa saying “Talk to me.” (O’Brien, Things 40)

The question of the man that character Tim O’Brien may or may not have killed is one that recurs throughout the book: since the characters all exaggerate, contradict each other, take credit for each other’s stories, and often recant the stories they tell, it is never made clear whether or not this young man, this young enemy soldier, was killed by
character O’Brien, killed by someone else, or not killed at all. As Bruckner notes, many of the stories in *The Things They Carried*

retell in a different way stories already told. Narrators dispute the accuracy of what they themselves are saying. Occasionally a narrator will come to the end of a harrowing tale and then insist that the protagonist did not do the terrible or heroic things he has just recited, but that he himself did them. Characters snatch stories from one another’s mouths and tell them in a different way, with different incidents. A character may take part of a story away from a narrator and refashion it. A first-person commentator who intervenes to critique or correct a story just told, and who can easily be mistaken for Mr. [author] O’Brien, may turn out to be a character in a later story. The stories themselves seem to be engaged in a dialogue about invention. (1-2)

This dialogue about invention is what makes extracting any kind of facts from the stories so difficult; but the “facts” are not all that matters to Tim O’Brien. There is so much more to life than just the facts: possibilities, perceptions, dreams; these all work together to shape O’Brien’s work.

The next episode in the novel, “On the Rainy River,” shows character Tim O’Brien receiving his draft notice and fleeing his Minnesota hometown for the Rainy River, which separates Minnesota from Canada. While there, O’Brien spends six days with an elderly man named Elroy Berdahl at a place called the Tip Top Lodge, contemplating whether to go to war or flee. Character O’Brien begins the story with a confessional tone:
This is a story I’ve never told before. Not to anyone....To go into it, I’ve always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us. a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession. For more than twenty years I’ve had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I’m hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. Still, it’s a hard story to tell. (O’Brien, Things 43)

This opening confession has confused more than one critic: Franklin referred to the book as “mostly autobiographical” and thought that “On The Rainy River” was about author Tim O’Brien rather than character O’Brien, and “his life’s crucial event on Minnesota’s Rainy River...the moment when, just yards from Canada, he didn’t flee the draft” (2).

But LaVelle counters, “[O’Brien] has never been in that area of the state [on the Rainy River]. He really spent the summer of 1968 golfing and worrying. That is not a good story, though, and so he embellishes it” (1). Embellish may in fact be too gentle a word for what author O’Brien does: he makes it all up. It’s all fiction.

Lavelle further contends that “The story adds to life, it becomes enlarged. The stories from self aren’t always good stories so the author embellishes them” (1). But there is a definite overlap between author O’Brien and character O’Brien as he appears in “On the Rainy River” in the opening, confessional lines of the story. When the narrator, Tim O’Brien says that he has been living with this story for twenty years, that’s the author, Tim O’Brien, speaking, too. Not because it really happened, but because it could have happened. As O’Brien pointed out through Paul Berlin in Going After Cacciato.
once the facts have been exhausted, what remains are possibilities. And "On the Rainy
River" explores the possibility that he could have run, that he could have done what he
believed in his heart to be the right thing, rather than going against what he believed and
doing out of cowardice what was expected of him:

Intellect had come up against emotion. My conscience told me to run, but
some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me
towards the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame.

Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my
parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler
Café. I was ashamed to be there...I was ashamed of my conscience,
ashamed to be doing the right thing. (O’Brien, Things 54-55)

This is a theme that echoes through many of O’Brien’s works: Paul Berlin also
went to war because he did not have the courage not to go, and he admires the simple-
minded Cacciato for having the courage to lay down his rifle and walk away. If I Die in a
Combat Zone has a chapter about Tim O’Brien constructing elaborate plans to flee to
Sweden, but like his characters, the Tim O’Brien who narrates that work also went to
war: “It was over. I simply couldn’t bring myself to flee. Family, the home town,
friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run. I went into the hallway
and bought a Coke. When I finished it I felt better, clearer headed, and burned the plans.
I was a coward. I was sick” (73). In the end, character O’Brien of “On the Rainy River”
sees himself much as the real Tim O’Brien, who went “to Vietnam, where I was
soldier...I survived, but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war”
wrote “I thought of Canada. I thought about jail. But in the end I could not bear the prospect of rejection: by my family, my country, my friends, my hometown. I would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love. I have written some of this before, but I must write it again. I was a coward. I went to Vietnam” (4).

Later in *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien will set up the difference between “story-truth” and “happening-truth;” that is, the difference between what happens within the construct of a story and what happens outside that construct—that is, what happens in real life. In some cases the two overlap. If the same theme can show up in fiction and non-fiction, in fact and in possibility, in story-truth and happening-truth, that does not mean that the reader should confuse the possibilities with the facts, nor mistake O’Brien for one of his characters. The truth is what matter, not the facts. Soldiers may be more interested in means then ends, but a good writer has to be interested in both. As long as the truth is conveyed, the shame, the feeling of being too much of a coward to stand up for what he believed in and fighting in an unjust war because of it, the guilt—if these can be conveyed as effectively in fiction as they can in fact, what difference does it make which is the story-truth and which was the happening truth? What difference does it make what happened within the logic of the construct and what happened in real life? What is being read here, the text, the work of fiction, or “real life?” These are more of O’Brien’s questions that end up being more important than any answer to them could be. Since *The Things They Carried* is a work of fiction, so the reader must come to accept as the truth what is happening within the logic of the construct as what matters.

Because this is fiction and not fact, story-truth and not happening-truth, the Rainy River in the story becomes a symbol: O’Brien’s work is carries many symbols of
division, of dichotomy, of indecision (consider Paul Berlin's surname, a divided city).

The Rainy River itself becomes a symbol: "I headed straight west along the Rainy River, which separates Minnesota from Canada, and which for me separated one life from another" (O'Brien, Things 50). The Rainy River becomes a symbol of the line that divides one possibility from another: cross that line, and the narrator is a courageous outcast who stuck to his convictions; don't cross it, and he's a coward who goes to war.

On one side of the line is what happened, on the other side is what might have happened. The facts are on one side, the possibilities are on the other side. The Minnesota side of the river comes to represent memory, the Canada side becomes imagination. That line has been walked by author O'Brien in many different works, fiction and nonfiction, but it is a line easiest confronted in fiction. Real life—history, the facts—these did not give author O'Brien anything as concrete as a river to look at when he mulled over whether or not to go to war. The story's river presents the division much more effectively. Even if the story can offer no easier answers than real life did, the story takes the conflicting emotions from thirty years ago and makes them immediate, makes them real to readers who may never have felt what the author felt, makes us see the division between fact and fiction, between what happened and what might happen. This clear division between story-truth and happening-truth becomes like Paul Berlin's observation post: a place where memory stops and imagination begins, a place where the process of change from what was to what if can be examined; the place where stories come from.

O'Brien gives a telling and almost playful look at his narrative technique; he all but comes out and tells the reader exactly what he is doing in "On the Rainy River" and the rest of The Things They Carried:
Looking back after twenty years, I sometimes wonder if the events of that summer didn’t happen in some other dimension, a place where your life exists before you’ve lived it, and where it goes afterward. None of it seemed real. During my time at the Tip Top Lodge, I had the feeling that I’d slipped out of my own skin, hovering a few feet away while some poor yo-yo with my name and face tried to make his way toward a future he didn’t understand and didn’t want. (57)

Wonderfully ambiguous, this, and another place where the two Tim O’Brien’s (character and author) overlap. The author is constructing events that did, in fact, happen only in another dimension: in his own imagination. This place is where life exists before you’ve lived it, and where it goes after. The author is in fact away from his own skin, observing these events, observing a character with the same name and the same face who shared a lot of the same feelings but not necessarily the same experiences, who share more truth than facts. Likewise, it makes the other Tim O’Brien, the character, acknowledge that these events never really happened anywhere but in someone else’s dreams.

Irsfeld provides an excellent definition of fiction:

“A making up of imaginary happenings,” a transmogrification of the stuff of life into something that could have happened, or might have happened, in some cases into something that should have happened. The internal lives of characters I have created and portrayed...are creations of mine, not of nature. In short, I have not told what happened last summer but what happened next summer. (ii).
This is the other dimension that O'Brien speaks of: not the land of what happened last summer, but the land of what happened next summer; not what was, but what could have been or even should have been. O'Brien could have used the stories to make himself courageous, fleeing expectations and not going to war (in fact, the protagonist of his novel *The Nuclear Age* does exactly that), but here he chooses to make his story-truth align somewhat with the happening-truth: different means are used in real life and the story, but the ends are the same. Tim O'Brien, the author and the character, both go to war.

As the story builds to its climax, the character Tim O'Brien is in a boat on the Rainy River, fishing, yards away from Canada, courage, and possibilities, willing himself to jump out of the boat and swim towards Canada, and “Chunks of my own history flashed by” (O'Brien, *Things* 60). A river of images floods O'Brien, including the images of “a nine-year-old girl named Linda who had died of a brain tumor back in the fifth grade” and “a slim young man I would one day kill with my hand grenade along a red clay trail outside the village of My Khe” (60-61), both of which will become central images later in the novel and which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. O'Brien's past and future converge on him, and his memory and imagination overwhelm him as he bobs in a fishing boat on the symbolic line between the two, the Rainy River itself. But in the end, “I couldn’t endure the mockery...even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn’t make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that’s all it was. And right then I submitted. I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was too embarrassed not to” (62).
There is another dimension where things can be made to happen differently. Things can end differently, or they can end the same while happening differently. This dimension can objectify personal experiences and feelings too hard to get at otherwise, and can allow us to step outside ourselves, seeing ourselves in a way we imagine others may see us. This dimension can give us symbols to mark the divide between what we did and what we might have done. It can offer us a line in the sand when real life offered only a mud puddle. This dimension can take what happened last summer and offer other possibilities: what might have happened next summer? It picks up where the facts ends and continues on to where the possibilities go. It is located at the intersection of yesterday and today, the corner of remembered and imagined. Whether it is Paul Berlin’s Observation Post or character O’Brien’s Rainy River, it is the place where stories begin reconciling the past with the future.

This is True: “How to Tell a True War Story”

The first four episodes are separated from “How to Tell a True War Story” by two chapters entitled “Enemies,” and “Friends,” about Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk, a fight they had, and a pact they made: Lee Strunk dies at the end of “Friends;” another death of a main character. These two brief sketches give the discerning reader a breather between the multi-layered, self-reflexive metafiction of “On the Rainy River” and the thoughtful chapter on “How to Tell a True War Story.”

The opening words of “How To Tell a True War Story” are “THIS IS TRUE” (75). Throughout the 1991 Penguin paperback edition, the first several words of each episode are capitalized, but nowhere is that typography used as strikingly as at the
beginning of this chapter. Those three words are the entirety of the first paragraph, and that they are writ large re-emphasizes the slippery notions of truth and fiction that has been examined throughout the book up to this point.

The opening paragraphs of this episode tell the story of Rat Kiley, writing a letter to his best friend’s sister after that friend, Curt Lemon, is killed. In the letter, “Rat pours his heart out,” and then “mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back” (76).

This is O’Brien’s example of a true war story. He goes on to explain Rat’s choice of language: “You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty” (77). The reason this is offered as an example of a “true” war story is because

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 men 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 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. (76)

From there, O’Brien describes how Curt Lemon is killed, by stepping on a booby trapped 105 round. There is a paragraph describing how Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley are
goofing around right before it happens—playing catch with a smoke grenade underneath “the shade of some giant trees—quadruple canopy, no sunlight at all” (77). Many references to double and even triple canopy jungles have been made in many other works about Vietnam, but here it’s quadruple canopy. Is this exaggeration? O’Brien writes “It’s all exactly true” (77).

But what is true and what isn’t true? “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed” (77). So the necessary distancing of self from events in a story develops a new kind of truth: what seemed to happen, even if it’s really not what happened, becomes the new truth. Individual perception and recognition replace objectivity—or the illusion of objectivity—in the telling of a story, because “The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed” (78).

This is O’Brien blowing right out of the water the idea that any kind of storytelling or reporting—especially about war—can be objective. Two people could witness the exact same event, and in telling about it later, both tell very different stories while both being completely honest. Each person could be completely faithful to the facts as they seemed from his perspective, yet the two stories could completely contradict one another. This will not diminish the truthfulness of either story. What is important isn’t how it was, but how it seemed; not what happened, but what one experienced.
This difference between illusory objective truth and the truth of how it seemed is why "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 incredible craziness" (79).

Having made this point, author O'Brien has Mitchell Sanders, one of his wisest characters, tell a story to character O'Brien. The first words out of his mouth are "God’s truth" (79), and from there he tells a story about a six-man patrol which goes on listening post duty and starts hearing strange things in the mountains—music and voices. In the middle of Sanders’ story, there is an interesting exchange between the characters O'Brien and Mitchell Sanders:

"This next part," Sanders said quietly, "you won’t believe."

"Probably not," I said.

"You won’t. And you know why?....Because it happened. Every word is absolutely dead-on true."

Sanders made a sound in his throat, like a sigh, as if to say he didn’t care if I believed him or not. But he did care. He wanted me to feel the truth, to believe the raw force of feeling. (81)

The story concludes with the men unable to handle the things they are hearing, ordering in air strikes and artillery, and then not speaking a word when they return to base and are asked what happened. A colonel demands an explanation for the firepower the men requested,

But the guys don’t say zip. They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole thing is right in that stare. It
says everything you can’t ever say. It says, man, you got wax in your ears.
It says, poor bastard, you’ll never know—wrong frequency—you don’t
even want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away,
because certain stories you don’t ever tell. (82-83)

Then Mitchell Sanders walks away; author O’Brien writes “You can tell a true
war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever....It all happened” (83).
So later that night, Mitchell Sanders come back to character O’Brien and tells him, “Just
came to me...The moral, I mean. Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothing” (83).

The next morning, Sanders comes up to O’Brien and tells him “I got a confession
to make...Last night, man, I had to make up a few things” (83), and the few things he
confesses to making up all came after his assertion that what he was saying was “God’s
truth” and “absolutely dead-on true.”

“Yeah, but listen, it’s still true,” Sanders says, to which character O’Brien replies.
“All right...what’s the moral?” Mitchell Sanders’ stories always have morals, and he’s
always looking for the morals in the stories others tell. “For a long while, he [Sanders]
was quiet, looking away, and the silence kept stretching out until it was almost
embarrassing. Then he shrugged and gave me a stare that lasted all day. ‘Hear that quiet,
man?’ he said. ‘That quiet—just listen, There’s your moral’” (84).

Author O’Brien then goes on to explain the importance of figuring out what a war
story means:

In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes
the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without
unraveling the deeper meaning....True war stories do not generalize.
They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis....It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. (84)

The reason that instinct becomes the key for judging truth is because “In war you lose your sense of definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (88).

O’Brien illustrates this point by saying “I’ve told it before—many times, many versions—but here’s what actually happened” (85). He then tells the story of how Rat Kiley, after Curt Lemon died, tortures a baby water buffalo, shooting not “to kill; it was to hurt” (85). At the end of the episode, O’Brien writes “Now and then, when I tell that story, someone will come up to me and say she liked it. It’s always a woman...of kindly temperament and humane politics....The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad...she wasn’t listening” (90). He can only shake his head at people like that, because

All you can do is tell it one more time, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, No Rat Kiley. No trail junction. No baby buffalo...beginning to end, you tell her, it’s all made up. Every goddamn detail...especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. None of it. And if it did happen, it didn’t happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy, and one night a guy named Stink Harris woke up screaming with a leech on his tongue [Stink Harris is a character in Going After Cacciato]. You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it. (91)
Because what matters is not the answer to the question “is it true?” O’Brien writes, “If the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (89). Again we see O’Brien’s contention that the function of fiction is not answering questions but asking them. O’Brien believes in such a thing as “a true story that never happened” (90). That’s the emotional truth that O’Brien is trying to expose: not what happened but how it felt, and to get at what it felt like, the truth becomes flexible; “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer then the truth” (89).

Memory. imagination, the intersection of how it was and how it seemed, and how what it seemed felt like: these are what make a story true. Not facts. Not happening-truths. Because “in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war….It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (91). Is it fiction or is it autobiography? How much of the voice the reader hears belongs to Tim O’Brien the author and how much belongs to Tim O’Brien the character? How much is what happened and how much is what might have happened? These are the questions, and the answers matter. But it doesn’t change how true these stories are. Anyone who believes otherwise wasn’t listening.

Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, and the Art of the Story: “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”

“How to Tell a True War Story” is followed by a short sketch about Curt Lemon called “The Dentist,” in which O’Brien shows another function of the story: “it’s easy to get sentimental about the dead, and to guard against that I want to tell a quick Curt Lemon story” (95). It’s a short character sketch to add another dimension to the character
around whose death the previous treatise on storytelling revolved, and then Rat Kiley takes center stage to tell his own story in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." This story sticks out because "the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane" (101). Rat Kiley tells his story to character Tim O'Brien, and as O'Brien explains.

Rat had a reputation for exaggerating and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts, and for most of us it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say...it wasn't a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt. For Rat Kiley, I think, facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around, and when you listened to one of his stories, you’d find yourself performing rapid calculations in your head, subtracting superlatives, figuring the square root of an absolute and then multiplying by a maybe. (101).

Rat Kiley is a creation of O'Brien's theories on true war stories, facts formed by sensation, which is probably why Rat himself doesn't tell the story—the tale is filtered through the narrative consciousness of character Tim O'Brien. Occasionally, though, the narrative voice is interrupted by Rat himself, discussing the truthfulness of his story. "'You don't believe it?' he'd say. 'Fine with me.' Then he'd tell us to listen up" (108).

And that's the thing about O'Brien's characters: they do listen up, and a lot of the stories are more than just the reader listening to stories being told; often the reader gets to listen to the characters listening to stories, gets to hear their reactions, and gets to gauge their own real-life reactions against the characters' fictional ones.
Rat's story is about a young medic in Rat's old unit named Mark Fossie who one day decided to bring his girlfriend, Mary Anne, from Cleveland to the Green Beret compound near the Song Tra Bong where their unit is located. The girl is innocent when she arrives, but slowly becomes fascinated with the war, the land, and the people. She begins to change, until one night Mark Fossie can't find her. "When he first told the story, Rat stopped and looked at Mitchell Sanders for a time. 'So what's your vote? Where was she' (112)? Mitchell Sanders, who through the course of the story becomes the expert voice on the art of storytelling, says she must be with the Green Berets, because "That stuff about the Special Forces—how they used the place as a base of operations, how they'd glide in and out—all that had to be in there for a reason. That's how stories work, man" (112). Mitchell Sanders is not here worrying about any kind of truths other than story-truths: he just assumes that since Rat Kiley included the detail about the Green Berets, they must be of some significance, not as any instrument of fact, but as a device within the story. Mitchell Sanders himself serves a similar purpose himself within the larger construct of the entire book: he is not an instrument of any kind of fact, but rather an instrument to convey ideas about the author's ideas.

Mary Anne was with the Green Berets, out on ambush. She is going native, pulling away from her sweetheart, being pulled into the living experience of Vietnam.

Midway through the tale, the reader finds out why O'Brien tells the story instead of allowing Rat Kiley to tell it himself:

Whenever he told the story, Rat had a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion. It was a bad habit, Mitchell Sanders said, because all
that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can’t clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. It destroys the magic. What you have to do, Sanders said, is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself. (116)

This is interesting because it is probably the best advice an aspiring writer could ever hear: Trust the story, don’t show off too much by philosophizing or editorializing, just let the story tell itself. On the other hand, though, O’Brien is doing exactly what Mitchell Sanders is chastising Rat Kiley for doing: Stepping away from the story occasionally to offer commentary and opinion. And it does break the spell, jerk the reader out of the story, out of that fictive dream, but in doing so, it reminds the reader that they’re in a story, which makes the reader question why O’Brien chooses to first tell his story and then interrupt himself to remind you of what he’s doing, which calls the reader back to the whole point here: asking questions is more important than answering them.

Mitchell Sanders says (and he could be talking to Rat Kiley or author O’Brien here) “The whole tone, man, you’re wrecking it...you got to get a consistent sound, like slow or fast, funny or sad. All these digressions, they just screw up your stories sound. Stick to what happened...tell it right” (117).

Rat Kiley ends the story abruptly—Mary Anne has fallen in with the Special Forces unit, and has completely changed into someone that Mark Fossie doesn’t know anymore. She’s become part of the country, and then Rat Kiley says right after that he got his orders to join Alpha company. This annoys his audience: “Jesus Christ, it’s against the rules,” Mitchell Sanders said. ‘It’s against human nature. This elaborate
story, you can't say, Hey, by the way, I don't know the ending. I mean, you got certain obligations” (122).

Rat Kiley then voices some of the storyteller's concerns; he knows he is living through something that only others who have lived through the same event can ever truly understand: “they'll never understand any of this, not in a billion years. Try and tell them about it, they'll just stare at you....They won't understand zip. It's like trying to tell somebody what chocolate tastes like” (123). Mitchell Sanders adds “Or shit” (123).

Here O'Brien is re-emphasizing the importance of filtering through the different levels of truth: the happening-truth is something that could only be understood by those it happened to. You can't explain to someone what chocolate (or shit, for that matter) tastes like; it's like trying to describe colors to a blind person. The only way to do it is to explain it in terms of things they do understand; that is, to turn the happening-truth into a story-truth, an emotional truth, that can evoke in the reader responses they otherwise couldn't experience. By making it into a story, by adding the elements of fiction (plot, characters, setting, description, dialogue), he is able to step away from the happening-truths, truths that many readers simply couldn’t understand, and turn them into story-truths, accessible to anyone willing to experience them, even readers who were born after the war ended.

In the end, Rat's story has many of the elements of what O'Brien classifies as a true war story: it doesn't really end, some of it is far too unbelievable to be completely disbelieved, and though Rat Kiley is introduced as someone not to be believed, the facts of a story (whether they are absolute occurrences, what seemed to have happened from Rat's point of view, or out-and-out lies invented to elicit from his audience a specific
response) are formed by the sensations; Rat’s story is a success. Rat is introduced as an unreliable narrator by character O’Brien, who already has confessed several times that he is not to be completely believed, either. Rat tells the story to O’Brien. O’Brien tells the story to the reader, and it’s up to the reader to figure out who to believe and to what extent.

The Living Enemy: “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Good Form”

After Rat Kiley’s story, the rest of the book focuses in on three main events, telling and retelling them from various points of view: The man whom character O’Brien may or may not have killed, the death of Kiowa, and the little girl named Linda who died of a brain tumor when character O’Brien was in the fifth grade—there are other episodes, but most of them are just brief sketches with few elements of O’Brien’s metafiction; these episodes will not be examined in detail. There are three episodes devoted to the story of the man that character O’Brien may have killed: “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Good Form.”

“The Man I Killed” is an interesting story: it is set half in real-time and half in imagination. The young man’s body is lying on the trail, and character O’Brien is staring at it, being comforted by Kiowa, imagining a history for this dead young man. Character O’Brien doesn’t say a word through the course of the story—Kiowa is trying to get him to talk, but he just stares and imagines a history for this young man: he imagines him to be a pacifist, afraid to go to war, a scholar, perhaps only fighting because, like O’Brien himself, he was afraid of shaming his family, wanting nothing to do with any kind of killing or dying. Bruckner notes that “the central character of... ‘The Man I Killed,’ is, as Mr. [author] O’Brien puts it, ‘Offstage,’ and writing a story about a character who is not
there was ‘a wonderful technical challenge’” (3). Author O’Brien is writing about a character who is no longer alive—just a corpse through the entire course of the story—while character O’Brien invents a history of someone he’s killed and will never know.

Character O’Brien does not speak; he does not talk at all. Towards the end of the episode, Kiowa covers the corpse and then says “Hey, you’re looking better…. No doubt about it. All you needed was time— some mental R&R” (O’Brien, Things 144). O’Brien still won’t speak, despite Kiowa’s repeated urging: “Why not talk about it?…. Come on, man, talk…. Talk” (144).

Storytelling is very often the only way to deal with traumas; Shay writes that “narrative heals personality changes…[and] enables the survivor to rebuild the ruins of character” (188). Shay is writing as a therapist about the traits of being able to deal with combat trauma, but his traits for being a good listener (in a sense, ‘How to Listen to a True War Story’) compliment O’Brien’s ideas about the telling of war stories. Shay writes:

The listeners must… be strong enough to hear the story without having to deny the reality of the experience or to blame the victim. We are so trained to deny the soldier’s experience that the normal response to hearing an account… is to make… excuses: this is a figment of your fantasy; if you knew all the facts, you’d see it was for the best; you’ve got a hidden agenda in saying this, it never happened, you brought it on yourself; and anyway, it’s twenty years ago, so forget it and don’t create more problems now. (188)
War stories, or at least the true ones, O'Brien tells us, make the stomach believe. O'Brien seems to be aware of the unbelievability inherent in the stories he tells; this is perhaps one of the reasons he layers so many levels of truth and lies, both outside his stories and within them. As he says in “How to Tell a True War Story,” “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” (O’Brien, Things 79). Some of the stories are simply too incredible to be believed, evoking the knee-jerk responses Shay speaks of, so O'Brien uses that fact by reversing things: if true war stories are too unbelievable to appear true, O'Brien uses fiction, telling untrue stories that become believable, because the line between reality and fiction is transversed so repeatedly and so skillfully and the two areas of memory and imagination overlap so often that the unbelievable becomes true, and in doing so, the true can then be allowed to become believable.

The next story, “Ambush,” appears in the text after “The Man I Killed,” but takes place immediately before it. “Ambush” is the fictional account of character O’Brien killing this fictional Vietnamese soldier, and is a good attempt by the narrator to objectify the experience, to step far enough away from self to watch the events occur:

There was no sound at all...in a way, it seemed, he was part of the morning fog, or my own imagination, but there was also the reality of what was happening...I had already pulled the pin on a grenade. I had come up to a crouch. It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty. I crouched and kept my head low....I was terrified. There were no thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make
him go away....I leaned back and felt my mind go empty and then felt it fill up again. I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it. (148)

There is the certain distancing from self there—the fact that the narrator's responses are automatic and that his mind empties—that gives the narrator enough of the illusion of objectivity to examine the incident a little more clearly, by making it into a story. However, "It was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way" (149).

This memory has become a story, which makes it forever. But it's not the only story available to O'Brien the narrator:

Even now I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then....I'll look up and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me...he'll pass within a few feet of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail where it bends back into the fog. (149-150)

The story is necessary: when character O'Brien's daughter asks him if he ever killed anyone, he tells her no, but "Someday, I hope, she'll ask again. But I want to pretend she's a grown-up, I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening....This is why I keep writing war stories" (147).

In "Good Form," O'Brien finally says "It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented" (203). Then O'Brien says
that "twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough....I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present" (203).

So, now O'Brien is saying that he didn't kill the man—but that doesn't matter, because then he says "But listen: Even *that* story is made up. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (203). Again, there is a blurring of the two Tim O'Briens here—is this supposed to be the author speaking or the character? "Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief" (203). This is, the reader can assume, an overlap of happening-truth with story-truth: remember, this is character O'Brien speaking here. Then O'Brien says "Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty....I killed him" (204). Character O'Brien kills a man in a story to give a face and a history to all of the unnamable horrors that both O'Briens saw in war. "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again" (204). If there was a single passage in the work of Tim O'Brien that could sum up exactly what it is he is trying to accomplish through his metafiction, through not only the stories he tells but his examination of the process that he goes through in the telling of them, this would be an excellent candidate. What O'Brien does is to make things present—by facing things he couldn't or wouldn't face then, he is able to get the reader to feel what he felt then by
telling now of things that never happened. Storytelling is the naming of things: it’s forming shapes out of the fog of memory and imagination, it’s lighting a candle while still cursing the darkness. It’s making the intangible tangible, making the invisible visible, turning the things we can’t believe in into truths we can, perhaps. It’s all about the creation of reality and the ability to feel.

Losing Kiowa: “Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” “In the Field,” and “Field Trip”

“Speaking of Courage” shifts the narrative viewpoint away from character Tim O’Brien and into a third-person limited omniscient, inhabiting the thoughts of Norman Bowker as he drives around his hometown on the Fourth of July after returning home from the war. Norman Bowker wishes he had someone to talk to about the night he almost won the Silver Star. He has imaginary conversations with his father and with an old high school sweetheart, and a surreal conversation with the order box at a drive-up hamburger joint, but in reality he can’t get anyone to listen to his story about the night that he almost won the Silver Star—the night that he wasn’t very brave; the night that he lost Kiowa.

Norman Bowker spends most of the story driving in circles around a lake where one of his best friends, Max, drowned: as he thinks about his friend, he thinks “Max had become a pure idea” (165). Almost everyone else that enters into Norman Bowker’s consciousness is little more than a pure idea: even the living people in his own head, his father and Sally Kramer, his old girlfriend, are purely hypothetical. He imagines what they might say, how they might respond, how they might feel if someone would just listen to his story. They are pure idea to Norman Bowker. And, in fact, all of the characters,
Norman Bowker included, are all pure idea, never having existed anywhere but first in the mind of their author and second in the minds of the readers.

Here is a character suffering a trauma with no one to listen to him, so he creates a forum in his head where people listen to him:

Still, there was so much to say. How the rain never stopped. How the cold worked its way into your bones. Sometimes the bravest thing on earth was to sit through the night and feel the cold in your bones. Courage was not always a matter of yes and no. Sometimes it came in degrees...in certain situations, you could do incredible things...but in other situations, which were not nearly so bad, you had trouble keeping your eyes open. Sometimes, like that night in the shit field, the difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid. The way the earth bubbled. And the smell. (166-167).

The men, camping out in an outdoor latrine area, take mortar fire: Kiowa is hit and begins sliding under the mud. Norman grabs for Kiowa but can’t hang on. “If things had gone right, if it hadn’t been for that smell, I could’ve won the Silver Star” (168-169). The longer he drives and the more he thinks about it, the more that Norman Bowker realizes that “he had taken hold of Kiowa’s boot and pulled hard, but the smell was simply too much, and he’d backed off and in that way had lost the Silver Star” (172).

Norman Bowker needs someone to talk to; he needs someone to listen to the story he has to tell: “He wished he could’ve explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be. The distinction was important...his father, who already knew, would’ve nodded” (172).
The story ends with Norman Bowker wading into the lake to watch the Fourth of July fireworks. Immersion in water seems to be a key symbol in the mind of Tim O'Brien as a symbol of courage, or at least of the conquering of fear: this is an image that shows up over and over again in his work. Paul Berlin wades into the ocean in his “bravest moment” in *Going After Cacciato* (57), and Paul Perry, the main character in *Northern Lights*, faces the pond that symbolizes his fear several times before, towards the end of the book, “He shed his clothes and at last went in. At last” (O’Brien, *Lights* 350).

“Speaking of Courage” is followed by a short piece entitled “Notes” in which character Tim O’Brien intrudes to give the background of how the story was supposedly written. The piece introduces a long letter character O’Brien got from Norman Bowker, in which Bowker writes about how he feels as if he had disappeared into the shit field along with Kiowa. Since then, he “can’t get his act together and just drives around town all day and can’t think of any damn place to go and doesn’t know how to get there anyway” (O’Brien, *Things* 179), and he suggests to Character O’Brien that he write a story about it. O’Brien makes reference to the fact that Norman Bowker had read *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (and recognized himself as a character in it), adding another similarity to character O’Brien and author O’Brien, further blurring the line between what is and what might have been, between happening-truth and story-truth. Character O’Brien takes Norman Bowker’s idea under advisement, and says that he wrote a story and tried to shoehorn it into the novel he was working on at the time, a book entitled *Going After Cacciato*. O’Brien continually makes his readers question where the real Tim O’Brien begins and the fictional one ends, even though he has continually asserted before in the text that it’s *all* made up, *all* a work of fiction, telling not what happened but what might
have happened. Then he writes a chapter like this one, in which character O'Brien shows astounding similarities to author O'Brien, and again asks the reader to ask questions: Is it true? To what extent? The answer matters, so there's the answer.

In the midst of the story, O'Brien brings up why he (and his fictional alter ego) writes about what he writes about:

In ordinary conversation, I never spoke much about the war, and yet ever since my return I had been talking about it virtually nonstop through my writing. Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into the wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done. (179)

When character O'Brien sees what their common experience has done to Norman Bowker, it makes him see how his own work, the telling of these stories, has helped him:

I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet when I received Norman Bowker's letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that really happened...and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (179-180)
So character Tim O’Brien says that he wrote the first version of the story about Norman Bowker, decided it couldn’t fit into his novel, *Going After Cacciato*, and sold it as a separate piece. O’Brien writes “The mistake, in part, had been trying to wedge the piece into a novel. Beyond that, though, something about the story frightened me—I was afraid to speak directly, afraid to remember—and in the end the piece had been ruined by a failure to tell the full and exact truth” (181).

O’Brien shows the story to Norman Bowker, who replies “It’s not terrible…but you left out Vietnam. Where’s Kiowa? Where’s the shit” (181)? And eight months later, Norman Bowker hangs himself.

So, O’Brien tells us, he substantially revised the story, and put the events leading up to Kiowa’s death into the story for Norman Bowker to think about while he drives around and around the lake. But O’Brien says

> It was hard stuff to write...for years I’ve avoided thinking about [Kiowa’s] death and my own complicity in it. Even here it’s not easy. In the interest of the truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own. (182)

Here O’Brien layers story-truths over one another: in “Speaking of Courage,” the narrator, Norman Bowker, is overcome with guilt because of a failure of nerve that he believes cost his friend’s life, not to mention cost him the Silver Star he might have won had he not frozen up at that moment. Then, another narrator, character Tim O’Brien, steps in to say that the story-truth in the previous story is not true at all: this second
narrator claims to have superimposed his own feelings over those of the narrator that he created. So the various levels of story-truth begin overlapping and blurring with each other, muddying what 'really happened' even within the construct of the book—this is confused to the point at which no real answer can be derived even within the book, before one even begins to question how the story-truths are related to any happening-truths outside of the imaginative construct. Did this happen to Tim O'Brien, the author? Tim O'Brien, the character? Norman Bowker? Whom are we supposed to believe? Norman Bowker, who is a creation of character Tim O'Brien, who is a creation of the author Tim O'Brien? Someone else altogether? All of them? None of them?

It's all a work of fiction—stories that are made up. But by constantly forcing his readers to question every move he makes, O'Brien keeps his reader questioning the very idea of storytelling, and what makes stories work, and what makes stories important.

After "Notes," O'Brien changes gears once again: With "In the Field," the next episode in the novel, he travels back in time to the morning after the night Kiowa was killed, and shifts his perspective away from Tim O'Brien the character and into a third person limited omniscient, primarily focused on the thoughts of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. Occasionally, however, the point-of-view shifts into the thoughts of a young soldier whose name Jimmy Cross can't remember, who the reader is led to assume is character Tim O'Brien. The morning after the mortar attack, the men are wading through the thick mud, trying to locate Kiowa's body. While this is going on, Jimmy Cross is trying to compose in his head a letter to Kiowa's father, trying to decide what tone to use, since he blames himself for what happened to Kiowa, exactly the way he blamed himself for the death of Ted Lavender earlier in the book. Jimmy Cross thinks, "There was nothing he
could do now, but still it was a mistake and a hideous waste....Jimmy Cross began composing a letter in his head to [Kiowa's] father, not mentioning the shit field, just saying what a fine soldier Kiowa had been, what a fine human being, and how he was the kind of son that any father could be proud of forever” (187).

While Jimmy Cross is thinking, the narrative voice shifts away from him to Norman Bowker, Mitchell Sanders, and Azar searching for Kiowa's body in the thick mud of the field. Azar is making jokes, and Norman Bowker is telling him to be quiet. Mitchell Sanders blames Jimmy Cross for what happens; he blames him for bivouacking them in such a terrible spot.

The narrative voice slips back into Jimmy Cross’s thoughts about the letter he would write to Kiowa's father. Jimmy Cross decides he would take the blame. “My own fault, he would say” (191). While he is thinking this, he sees a young soldier standing alone at the center of the field. The boy's shoulders were shaking. Maybe it was something in the posture of the soldier, or the way he seemed to be reaching...but for several moments Jimmy Cross stood very still, afraid to move...and then he murmured to himself, “My fault,” and he nodded and waded out across the field toward the boy. (191-192)

Because of character Tim O'Brien’s confession in the “Notes” episode, the reader fairly assumes that this soldier, whose name Jimmy Cross doesn’t remember and the narrative voice never reveals, is character O'Brien. The narrative point of view then shifts so that the reader can hear his thoughts: “He, too, blamed himself....Like Jimmy Cross, the boy was explaining to an absent judge. It wasn’t to defend himself. The boy
recognized his own guilt and wanted only to lay out the full causes” (192). The reason the boy blames himself is because “At one point...he’d been showing Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend. He remembered Kiowa leaning in for a look at the picture [illuminated by an ill-conceived flashlight]—“Hey, she’s cute,” he’d said—and then the field exploded all around them. Like murder, the boy thought. The flashlight made it happen...and as a result his friend Kiowa was dead” (192).

While remembering what happened, this boy (character Tim O’Brien) remembers some things that sound a lot like things Norman Bowker remembered in “Speaking of Courage:”

He remembered grabbing the boot. He remembered pulling hard...and how he finally had to whisper his friend’s name and let go and watch the boot slide away...he was alone. He’d lost everything. He’d lost Kiowa and his weapon and his flashlight and his girlfriend’s picture. He remembered this. He remembered wondering if he could lose himself.

(193).

The boy is not looking for Kiowa like the rest of the men are; he is looking for his girlfriend’s picture. Jimmy Cross goes over to the boy, discovers what the boy is trying to find, and “silently wished the boy luck. Then he closed his eyes and went back to working on the letter to Kiowa’s father” (195).

Across the field, Norman Bowker finds Kiowa, and he, Mitchell Sanders, Azar, Rat Kiley, and Henry Dobbins struggle to free the body from the muck. Azar, who was making jokes earlier, simply “sat holding his stomach. His face was pale” (196). After Kiowa is pulled out, Azar apologizes to Norman Bowker for his joking, and says, “I felt
sort of guilty, almost, like if I’d kept my mouth shut none of it would’ve ever happened. Like it was my fault” (197). Norman Bowker replies “Nobody’s fault….Everybody’s” (197).

This echoes the sentiment in the stories revolving around the man that character Tim O’Brien may or may not have killed: presence equals culpability. This in turn echoes the sentiment in “On the Rainy River:” going to war, not having the courage not to go, makes you guilty. Dealing with this culpability is difficult; “However understandable…efforts to treat Vietnam as an aberration of the past makes us all accessories after the fact” (MetroActive 5).

Jimmy Cross begins composing another letter to Kiowa’s father:

Impersonal this time. An officer expressing an officer’s condolences. No apologies were necessary, because in fact it was one of those freak things, and the war was full of freaks, and nothing could ever change it anyway. Which was the truth, he thought. The exact truth. Lieutenant Cross went deeper into the muck, the dark water at his throat, and tried to tell himself it was the truth. (O’Brien, Things 197-198)

While Jimmy Cross ponders this,

the young soldier was still…remembering how he had killed Kiowa. The boy wanted to confess. He wanted to tell the lieutenant how in the middle of the night…the field had exploded around them. The flashlight had done it. Like a target shining in the dark. The boy looked up at the sky, then at Jimmy Cross.

“Sir?” he said.
The rain and mist moved across the field in broad, sweeping sheets of gray. Close by, there was thunder.

"Sir," the boy said, "I got to explain something."

But Lieutenant Jimmy Cross wasn’t listening. Eyes closed, he let himself go deeper into the waste, just letting the field take him. (198)

This is a very powerful scene, and Jimmy Cross ponders who or what really is to blame for things like Kiowa’s death, and comes to the same conclusion that Norman Bowker had come to a few pages before: No one, nothing, is to blame. At the same time, everyone and everything is to blame. The young soldier tries to confess, and the fact that Jimmy Cross won’t listen shows that one person trying to take the blame is pointless. And because everyone can take the blame, that also means that no one can. The story ends with Jimmy Cross submerging himself in the same field that took Kiowa, and daydreaming: like Norman Bowker, who in “Speaking of Courage” feels like he disappeared into the same shit field, Jimmy Cross disappears into the shit field and starts daydreaming about being home and playing golf. Like Norman Bowker in “Speaking of Courage,” the unnamed boy who may be character Tim O’Brien—but may not be; since character O’Brien stole this story from the mouth of Norman Bowker, perhaps this is another character snatching the story from the mouth of character O’Brien—wants to tell his story, but no one will listen. Norman Bowker carries that story with him until his suicide; the boy in “In the Field” presumably goes on to become character Tim O’Brien, who writes—who performs the simple act of storytelling. Norman Bowker cannot tell his stories, so he dies with his stories untold; Tim O’Brien—the author and the character—tells his stories and survives.
The final episode dealing specifically with Kiowa is “Field Trip,” which is about character Tim O’Brien’s return to Vietnam twenty years later with his daughter, “where we visited the site of Kiowa’s death, and where I looked for signs of forgiveness or personal grace” (207).

But “Looking at the field, I wondered if it was all a mistake. Everything was too ordinary...and the field was not the field I remembered. I pictured Kiowa’s face, the way he used to smile, but all I felt was the awkwardness of remembering” (210). Character Tim O’Brien still has Kiowa’s moccasins, and he wades into the field and sends the moccasins into the mud that pulled Kiowa away from him twenty years ago. “Twenty years. A lot like yesterday, a lot like never. In a way, maybe, I’d gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I’d finally worked my way out” (212).

O’Brien works his way out of the mud that paralyzed so many of his characters, not by the symbolic act of releasing Kiowa’s moccasins into the mud, but by the actual act of writing it down. The awkwardness of remembering becomes something tangible: a story. The remembering makes the past into something immediate and makes it into something that can last forever. A story may never take the hurt away, but telling it, sharing it, finding someone to listen, makes it hurt a little less, and it can do more than that: stories help survivors continue surviving.

Stories as Survival: “The Lives of the Dead”

This episode—the last in the book—begins with an unambiguous truth, one of the few in the entire collection: “But this too is true: stories can save us” (255). The story alternates between stories of the dead the narrator saw in Vietnam and a tale of Linda, a
nine-year-old girl who the nine-year-old character Timmy O'Brien was in love with, and who died of a brain tumor.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien makes some of the Vietnam dead talk. After Ted Lavender is shot, the men ask him questions and supply the answers themselves. This manifests the essence of what stories can do: make the unliving live. Whether the unliving are dead or never existed anywhere but in dreams, stories bring them to life. “The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream it along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is an illusion of aliveness” (259-260). This illusion, this fictive dream, becomes a means of salvation: “That’s what a story does. The bodies are animated. You make the dead talk” (261).

The story recounts Timmy’s first date with Linda, the two of them going to a movie together. The movie is entitled *The Man Who Never Was*, which is fitting since the characters of the story and the book at large are all men who never were; nonetheless, through the story they come to life.

The story brings dreams together and joins the past together with the present. “Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle aged-writer knowing guilt and sorrow. And as a writer now, I want to save Linda’s life. Not her body—her life” (265).

Even as a nine-year-old, Timmy O’Brien knew the power stories could have. After he finds out that Linda has died, “I concentrated. I willed her alive. It was a dream, I suppose, or a daydream, but I made it happen” (266). Years later in Vietnam,
the man Timmy would grow up to be and his friends “had ways of making the dead seem
not so dead...by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was...we kept the
dead alive with stories” (267). Telling stories keeps people at least a little bit alive, and
as O’Brien points out, “stories were passed down like legends from old-timer to
newcomer. Mostly, though, we had to make up our own. Often they were exaggerated.
Or blatant lies, but it was a way of bringing body and soul back together, or a way of
making new bodies for the souls to inhabit” (268).

In this context, the soul seems to be little more than wisps of a former or future
existence in the mind; whether memory or imagination, these wisps can be animated
through language, given a concrete structure to inhabit: bringing people who died back to
life or giving people who never existed the chance to live.

After Linda dies, young Timmy “made up elaborate stories to bring Linda alive in
my sleep. I invented my own dreams” (271). Storytelling includes the ability to control
one’s own dreams: “It was a kind of self-hypnosis. Partly willpower, partly faith, which
is how stories arrive” (272). This magic of willing the dead back to life “is a precious
secret, like a magic trick, where if I tried to explain it, or even talk about it, the thrill and
mystery would be gone” (272). While O’Brien does examine the mystery, does talk
about the magic trick that he’s performing, he does so without ever taking that sense of
mystery, of wonder, away from his stories; the mysteries are what carry the stories
forward, and talking about the mystery does not diminish it; in fact, the opposite is true.
The mystery is deepened the more it is explored.

Tim O’Brien would live to prove Timmy wrong: how stories work, where they
come from, and what purposes they serve are so important and so mysterious that the
harder you look at the mechanism, at the magic trick, the more you realize there is to see. Through the self-reflexive fiction style he so expertly uses, O’Brien answers some questions but asks more:

in the spell of memory and imagination, as if I’m gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes....I can see Kiowa, and sometimes I see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I’m young and happy. I’ll never die. I’m skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it as Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story. (273).

In this other place, this alternate dimension where things can be any way we want them to be through stories, we can not only save those who were and those who never were, but we can save ourselves, too. Through these stories we can preserve who we were, imagine who we will be, and join them it together with who we, in fact, are. Stories make it forever; stories are salvation. After history is forgotten and memory fades, and after the future ceases to matter, the story will remain.
CHAPTER FOUR

LACUNAE IN MINNESOTA, THE MEMORY, AND THE MANUSCRIPT:
SLIEGHT OF MEMORY AND IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS

John Wade, the protagonist of In the Lake of the Woods, reveals a childhood not too far removed from O'Brien’s own; he is a quiet, dreamy boy, slightly overweight, and his passion is magic. He spends hours in front of a mirror, practicing his sleight of hand until it is perfect.

He knows that “This was not true magic. It was trickery. But John Wade sometimes pretended otherwise, because he was a kid then, and because pretending was the thrill of magic, and because for a while what seemed to happen became a happening in itself. He was a dreamer” (O'Brien, Lake 31). Watching himself in that mirror, performing the tricks that seem so real, something resembling true magic began to happen: “In the mirror, where miracles happened, John was no longer a lonely little kid. He had sovereignty over the world...everything was possible, even happiness” (65). The mirror is the place where real magic can happen, “Which was another trick: how he secretly kept the old stand-up mirror in his head. Pretending, of course—he understood that—but he felt calm and safe with the big mirror behind his eyes, where he could slide away behind the glass, where he could turn bad things into good things and just be happy. The mirror made everything better” (65-66).
O'Brien here is able to make the switch from story-truth to happening-truth very easily. In his nonfiction article "The Magic Show," he writes of young Tim O'Brien's affinity for magic, which is remarkably similar to young John Wade's: "What I enjoyed about this particular hobby, at least in part, was the craft of it: learning the technique of magic and then practicing those techniques, alone in the basement, for many hours or days....I liked the aloneness, as God and other miracle makers must also like it—not lonely, just alone. I liked shaping the universe around me. I liked the power. I liked the tension and suspense" (175).

The leap from magician to fiction writer is not a tough one to make: without straining too much, I can suggest that the fundamentals seemed very much the same. Writing fiction is a solitary endeavor. You shape your own universe. You practice all the time, then practice some more. You pay attention to craft. You aim for tension and suspense, a sense of drama...you strive for wholeness, seeking continuity and flow, each element performing both as cause and effect, always hoping to create, or to re-create, the great illusions of life. (176)

Somewhere within the story-truth of John Wade's magic and the happening-truth of Tim O'Brien's magic there can probably be gleaned some kind of composite truth about O'Brien's view on the function of storytelling. Stories are a kind of magic, a form of make-believe in which the cause merges with the effect into something that is more than either one is separately: the story is both an illusion and the mirror behind which the reality can be hidden away.
Like *The Things They Carried*, *In The Lake of the Woods* begins with a very specific disclaimer regarding the "truth" of what is contained within: "Although this work contains material from the world in which we live, including references to actual places, people, and events, it must be read as a work of fiction. All dialogue is invented. Certain notorious and very real incidents have been altered or reimagined" (O'Brien, *Lake iv*). The real incident that O'Brien refers to here is the massacre at My Lai on March 16, 1968, when Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, Task Force Barker, Americal Division, a unit of American soldiers under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, killed an entire village of civilians; but O'Brien inserts his own fictional characters into that very real event.

*In the Lake of the Woods* is, in many ways, the logical progression from *The Things They Carried* as far as exploring the realm of fiction is concerned: while *The Things They Carried* was a study in both the relative irrelevance of "truth," or absolute occurrence and the importance of storytelling in lieu of any absolute facts, *In the Lake of the Woods* looks even further past that idea, stepping outside the surrealistic boundaries of the Vietnam War and looking into a specific relationship that both exists beyond and is dominated by that war, the relationship between John Wade and his wife Kathy.

Vietnam plays a central role in the novel, but this book, more so than any of O'Brien's other fiction, deals more with the mystery of relationships, and human beings in relationships with one another, than with the relationship between the individual and other situations faced in life, especially war. *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, through its exploration of the relationships between people, still manages to address many of the same questions that O'Brien's earlier and finer work asks: what is the relationship
between human beings and reality? How can reality even be gauged, considering the elusiveness of truth on the slippery plane of reality? Where do the facts end, and where do possibilities begin? What happened, and what might have happened?

In the Lake of the Woods is perhaps the best fictional mystery that O'Brien has created to date; while before, he was using fictional mysteries to explore the mysteries of storytelling, here, he is using the mysteries of storytelling to set up a fictional mystery.

Like Going After Cacciato, this novel blends memory, imagination, and the reality that exists within the logic of the construct into a single, linear narrative, but In the Lake of the Woods adds another twist: though the entire novel (other than the “Evidence” chapters) is written in past tense, the narrative centers on the events of a few days: these are present time episodes, detailing the days leading up to Kathy Wade’s disappearance and the days immediately following; there are also past time episodes, elaborating on significant events in John Wade’s life leading up to the events detailed in the present time episodes; there are future time episodes, offering hypotheses about what may or may not have actually happened to Kathy Wade; and, supplementing these three time frames—which are the same three that Going After Cacciato offers the reader—In the Lake of the Woods also offers up chapters simply entitled “Evidence,” chapters that offer a timeless present time reality that both plays off and influences the other three time frames that the novel offers, all of which resonate throughout the construct.

Each of the four different time frames will be examined in some detail in this chapter: first the past time chapters, which provide the background on which the plot is built; then the present time chapters, which detail the basic plot and the basic mystery of the story; then the future time chapters, which offer hypotheses as to what may have
happened, and the timeless present time reality chapters, which offer testimony playing off the former three time frames, and in which the narrative voice directly addresses the readers.

The Past Time Episodes

The first of the past time episodes, Chapter Three, entitled "The Nature of Loss," tells about John Wade's first experience with loss at age fourteen, when he lost his father. What is revealed through subsequent past time episodes and "Evidence" episodes is that Wade's alcoholic father hanged himself. At this point in his life, Wade was already learning how to manipulate reality:

In the weeks that followed...he tried to pretend that his father was not truly dead. He would talk to him in his imagination....It was pretending, but the pretending helped....He imagined all the things he could have done....In his heart, despite the daydreams, John could not fool himself.

He knew the truth. (14-15)

Here young John Wade is making believe in order to bring his father back from the dead, much as young character Timmy O'Brien dreamed Linda back to life in "The Lives of the Dead" from The Things They Carried. In that book, the young character Timmy O'Brien recognized the saving power that stories had, how imagination could bring the dead and those who had never lived to life, how it could give them bodies and faces to unfaceable things in order to make them faceable. All that young Wade in In the Lake of the Woods saw, though, was the failure of facts. Rather than using imagination...
to make the unfaceable facts faceable, Wade uses his imagination to make the unfaceable facts disappear.

The next past time episode, Chapter Seven, "The Nature of Marriage," takes the reader quickly through Wade's life: his love of magic as a boy, how he met his future wife and began spying on her, how they fell in love, how he ended up in Vietnam. His love of magic leads his superstitious companions in Charlie Company to christen him "Sorcerer" and make him into "the company witch doctor" (38).

When Wade comes home after the war, rather than calling her right away, he spies on Kathy for two days, observing that she spends the night with another man, but "They married anyway" (44). Very early in their relationship, Wade—Sorcerer—realizes that "The trick then was to be vigilant. He would guard his advantage. The secrets would remain secret—the things he'd seen, the things he'd done. He would repair what he could, he would endure, he would go from year to year without letting on there were tricks" (46).

The next past time chapter, Chapter Ten, "The Nature of Love," begins building on the facts that were sketched out in "The Nature of Marriage," adding depth to the ideas that are being laid out through the course of the past time episodes. The chapter is broken into a number of short episodes, filling in details that were omitted before. The first episode is about the passion that still existed between John and Kathy after six years together, ten years before the events transpire around which the novel is built. The next section is about the nature of love. "It was in the nature of love that John Wade went to war. Not to hurt or be hurt, not to be a good citizen or a hero or a moral man. Only for love. Only to be loved" (59). Like character O'Brien in "On the Rainy River" from The
Things They Carried, Wade went to war rather than risk rejection—the loss of love—and lied about what he did while there; he built his entire remaining life on deceit rather than risk the loss of love.

The next section of this chapter is about how John and Kathy, while dating each other, would dare each other to do silly things. “It was a way of learning about each other, a way of exploring the possibilities between them” (60). These possibilities were, they thought, still almost endless. “‘Let’s get married,’ he said” (61).

“But first, there was Vietnam, where John Wade killed people, and where he composed long letters full of observation about the nature of their love” (61). While in Vietnam, after proposing but before marrying Kathy,

He compared their love to a pair of snakes he’s seen along a trail near Pinkville, each snake eating the other’s tail, a bizarre circle of appetites that brought their heads closer and closer together....“That’s how our love feels,” John wrote. “like we’re swallowing each other up, except in a good way, a perfect Number One Yum-Yum way, and I can’t wait to get home and see what would have happened if those two dumbass snakes finally ate each other’s heads. Think about it. The mathematics get weird....I love you, Kath. Just like those two weirdo snakes—one plus one equals zero!” (61)

One plus one equals zero: this becomes a key phrase that is echoed throughout the novel. After Kathy Wade disappears and John Wade subsequently follows suit, the prophecy becomes true: the two disappear completely because of each other and because of the illusions on which their relationship is based—they become zero.
The next section goes back to Wade’s childhood, solo excursions he would make to a magic store to buy new tricks, and about how his love of magic put distance between his father and him. The loss of his father and the anger that he felt because of it—because Wade spends his entire life feeling like he had never been good enough for his father—becomes the foundation on which all of the deception that is his life is built. It was at this young age that Wade began to see that his imagination could be used to hide the realities that were too ugly or unbearable to deal with, and began using his daydreams and deceptions to hide from reality.

The next section of this chapter provides the first glimpse the reader gets of John Wade’s participation in the massacre at My Lai. “Something was wrong. The sunlight or the morning air. All around him there was machine-gun fire, a machine-gun wind, and the wind seemed to pick him up and blow him from place to place” (63). The scene shows some of the atrocities that John Wade witnesses, dead animals and dead and dismembered people, and shows the confusion that Wade felt, even at the time:

He didn’t know what to shoot. So he shot the burning trees and burning hootches. He shot the hedges. He shot the smoke, which shot back, then he took refuge behind a pile of stones. If a thing moved, he shot it. If a thing did not move, he shot it. There was no enemy to shoot, nothing he could see, so he shot without aim and without any desire except to make the terrible morning go away. When it ended, he found himself in the slime at the bottom of the irrigation ditch. PFC Weatherby looked down on him. “Hey, Sorcerer,” Weatherby said. The guy started to smile, but Sorcerer shot him. (63-64).
This is one of the few direct looks we get at Wade while he is present during the My Lai massacre. By his own final count, he only killed two people—Weatherby being one of them—but his presence alone was enough to make him guilty, not only in his own mind, but also in the minds of the voters who will defeat him in a landslide years later when his presence at My Lai becomes public knowledge.

The next short episode in this chapter tells of the night that Wade is first elected to the State Senate, and how he and Kathy celebrated, and how happy they were: “Kathy’s green eyes were wet and happy and full of the light that was only Kathy’s light and could be no one else’s” (64).

The next episode shows Wade back in Vietnam with Charlie Company, taking mortar fire. No one is hurt, but then Wade—Sorcerer—leads a patrol into a nearby village to round up the villagers. Then,

the villagers were ushered down to the beach for a magic show. With the South China Sea at his back, Sorcerer performed card tricks and rope tricks. He pulled a lighted cigar from his ear. He transformed a pear into an orange. He displayed an ordinary military radio and whispered a few words and made their village disappear. There was a trick to it, which involved artillery and white phosphorus, but the overall effect was spectacular. (65)

The reader is slowly getting glimpses of some of the horrible things that Wade has seen and would like to forget, and the next section, jumping back to Wade’s childhood yet again, shows the reader the trick that Wade uses for the forgetting, as he practices his magic tricks in front of “the old stand-up mirror in the basement” (65). Because of his
magic tricks, John Wade develops another power: "In the mirror, where miracles happened, John was no longer a lonely little kid. He had sovereignty over the world....Everything was possible, even happiness" (65).

The mirror is linked to his father, as much of the roots of Wade's slight of memory is:

In the mirror, where John Wade mostly lived, he could read his father's mind. Simple affection, for instance. "I love you, cowboy," his father would think. Or his father would think, "Hey, report cards aren't everything." The mirror made this possible, and so John would sometimes carry it to school with him, or to baseball games, or to bed at night. Which was another trick: how he secretly kept the old stand-up mirror in his head. Pretending, of course—he understood that—but he felt calm and safe with the big mirror behind his eyes, where he could slide away behind the glass, where he could turn bad things into good things and just be happy. (65-66, Italics added).

Even at this early age, mainly because of his troubled relationship with his father, John Wade, according to the narrative voice, is already living mostly inside the mirrors in his mind. He is using imagination not to extend facts, not to examine possibilities built on the facts, but to eliminate the facts, and this practice only gets worse as he gets older and has to live through more and more unpleasant and unreal things.

There are several more short sketches in this single chapter, but the most telling ones are the ones dealing with the magic tricks that Sorcerer performs:
Sorcerer thought he could get away with murder. He believed it. After he'd shot PFC Weatherby—which was an accident, the purest reflex—he tricked himself into believing it hadn't happened the way it happened. He pretended he wasn't responsible; he pretended he couldn't have done it and therefore hadn't; he pretended it didn't matter much; he pretended that if the secret stayed inside him, with all the other secrets he could fool the world and himself too. He was convincing. He had tears in his eyes, because it came from his heart. He loved PFC Weatherby like a brother. “Fucking VC,” he said when the chopper took Weatherby away. “Fucking animals.” (68)

Wade is convincing. He gets so used to hiding the things he cannot face—by convincing himself that if a thing is too horrible to be true, it can't be true—that his entire existence gets built on a foundation of illusion, on the mirrors, and reality becomes secondary. But a reality without a foundation of facts to stand on is a house of cards waiting to tumble; this is in fact exactly what happens to John Wade after he loses the election.

Through the course of the rest of this episode, Wade is elected Lieutenant Governor, spends a good deal of time spying on his wife, and in retrospect secretly falls in love with Vietnam, seduced by the mystery of it all, and by the secrets that the land, the history, and the people keep. This is so appealing to Wade—Sorcerer—because “Sorcerer had his own secrets. PFC Weatherby, that was one. Another was how much he loved the place—Vietnam—how it felt like home. And there was the deepest secret of
all, which was the secret of Thuan Yen [which is the Vietnamese name for what the Americans called My Lai], so secret that he sometimes kept it secret from himself” (73).

There is a very telling scene in which Wade tries to tell his story to his wife, but she has become so used to the fantasy, the illusions, the magic tricks that her husband performs with his own life first and with her life second that she is unwilling to listen to him. There is a wonderfully dissonant conversation in which he is finally trying to talk to her, trying to discuss the reality that he has worked so hard at hiding from her, and she refuses to listen:

“Kath, listen, I need to tell you this. Something’s wrong, I’ve done things.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.”

She smiled brightly at a spot over his shoulder. “We could catch a movie.”

“Ugly things.”

“A good movie wouldn’t hurt.”

“Christ, you’re not—“

She picked up the hamburger plate. “We’ll be fine. Totally fine.”

“Sure,” he said.

“Wait and see.”

“Sure.”

They were quiet for a moment. He looked at her, she looked at him.

Anything could have happened. (74)
Later, after all of his secrets come out into the open, Wade blames himself for everything that has happened, but this conversation shows that Kathy is not entirely blameless. Like Norman Bowker in *The Things They Carried*’s “Speaking of Courage,” Wade is aching to tell his story, but like Norman Bowker, he can’t find anyone willing to listen to the tales that he has to tell. Norman Bowker invents dialogues in his head with the people whom he needs to listen to him. John Wade tried this as a child, inventing dialogues with his dead father, but found this unsatisfactory. Rather than succumb to the paralysis that eventually kills Norman Bowker, Wade instead begins inventing a new reality behind which the facts can be conveniently slid. This does not prevent the paralysis that gripped Norman Bowker, but it does stave it off for a time; however, the end result is more or less the same. Norman Bowker feels like he disappeared when Kiowa did; John Wade disappears himself after his wife does.

But there are consequences to living an entire life based on illusions: there is no depth, no truth, and the only memories left, good or bad, become questionable. Wade moved with determination across the surface of his life, attending to a marriage and a career. He performed the necessary tricks, dreamed the necessary dreams. On occasion, though, he’d yell in his sleep—loud, desperate, obscene things—and Kathy would reach out and ask what was wrong. Her eyes would betray visible fear. “It wasn’t even your voice,” she’d say. “It wasn’t even you.” John would force a laugh. He would have no memory beyond darkness. “Bad dreams,” he’d tell her, which he believed to be true, but which did not sound true, even to himself. (75)
By pretending that there are no memories, that he has no past, and refusing to acknowledge that there are events from his past that he needs to acknowledge, Wade can only move across the surface of his life. He is subjecting himself and his wife to a life of bad dreams from which there is no waking once it comes to light that they are not dreams at all but instead just buried facts.

But late at night sometimes, the memories come back—John Wade has performed a magnificent disappearing act, but not a perfect one. There are still some things that are too powerful to remain completely hidden:

In the dark, sometimes, he would see a vanishing village. He would see PFC Weatherby, and his father’s white casket, and a little boy trying to manipulate the world. Other times he would see himself performing the ultimate vanishing act. A grand finale, a curtain closer. He did not know the technique yet, or the hidden mechanism, but in his mind’s eye he could see a man and a woman swallowing each other up like that pair of snakes along the trail near Pinkville, first the tails, then the heads, both of them finally disappearing forever inside each other. Not a footprint, not a single clue. Purely gone—the trick of his life. The burden of secrecy would be lifted. Memory would be null. They would live in perfect knowledge, all things visible, all things invisible, no wires, just that large dark world where one plus one will always come to zero. (76)

This is what happens to Kathy and John Wade—they disappear somehow, without a trace, without a footprint left behind—and though the means by which they achieved this are never made clear to the reader, John Wade does get his wish.
The next of the past time episodes, "The Nature of the Beast," outlines specifically the events leading up to and including March 16, 1968, the day that Charlie Company entered the hamlet of Thuan Yen, or as the Americans called it, My Lai.

According to a footnote in the fourth "Evidence" chapter,

The number of civilian casualties during operations in Son My village [of which Thuan Yen is a subhamlet] is a matter of continuing dispute. The Peers commission concluded that "at least 175-200 Vietnamese men, women, and children" were killed in the course of the March 16th operation. The U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) estimated on the basis of census data that the casualties "may have exceeded 400." At the Son My memorial...the number is fixed at 504.

Even on the approach in helicopters, Wade knew that "Something was wrong. Maybe it was the sunlight" (104). As they approach the landing zone, "Pure wrongness, Sorcerer knew. He could taste the sunlight. It had a rusty, metallic flavor, like nails on his tongue. For a few seconds Sorcerer shut his eyes and retreated behind the mirrors in his head, pretending he was elsewhere, but even then the landscapes kept coming at him fast and lurid" (105). Sorcerer is the last one off the helicopter, where he "found himself alone in the paddy. The others had vanished....For a time he lay pinned by things unnatural, the wind and heat, the wicked sunlight" (105). Sorcerer—John Wade—encounters scenes of death and murder as he winds his way down the trail into the village.
Sorcerer uttered meaningless sounds—"No," he said, then after a second he said "Please!"—and then the sunlight sucked him down a trail toward the center of the village, where he found burning hootches and brightly mobile figures engaged in murder. Simpson was killing children. PFC Weatherby was killing whatever he could kill....Meadlo and the lieutenant were spraying gunfire into a crowd of villagers. They stood side by side, taking turns. Meadlo was crying. Conti was watching. The lieutenant shouted something and shot down a dozen women and kids and then reloaded and shot down more and then reloaded and shot down more and then reloaded again....He found someone stabbing people with a big silver knife. Hutto was shooting corpses. T'Souvas was shooting children. Doherty and Terry were finishing off the wounded. This was not madness, Sorcerer understood. This was sin. He felt it winding through his own arteries, something vile and slippery like heavy black oil in a crankcase. (107-108)

The time during the massacre becomes slippery to Wade, just as the time leading up to his wife's disappearance does. Wade gave himself over to forgetfulness. "Go away," he murmured. He waited a moment, then said it again, firmly, much louder, and the village started to vanish inside its own rosy glow. Here, he reasoned, was the most majestic trick of all. In the months and years ahead, John Wade would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the
impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most
profound memory. This could not have happened. Therefore it did not.
Already he felt better. (108-109)

This is Sorcerer's greatest trick: the ability to unremember things that actually
happened, to slide events behind the mirrors in his mind, out of sight, where they won't
bother him anywhere but in dreams. Events that could not have happened did not happen
in his memory, because through the sleight of memory tricks he mastered as a boy, he is
able to make reality disappear and pretend that he has no history.

But there are certain things that Wade is condemned to remember:
He would not remember raising his weapon...but he would remember
forever how he turned and shot down an old man with a wispy beard and
wire glasses and what looked to be a rifle. It was not a rifle. It was a
small wooden hoe. The hoe he would always remember....He would only
feel the slightest sense of culpability. The forgetting trick mostly worked.

On certain late-night occasions, however, John Wade would remember.
(109).

Wade has almost completely erased what happened, but there are still a few
fragments that he cannot shake. But even the things that he cannot forget cease to matter
to him. They could not have happened, even if he remembers them happening, so they
did not happen. This is Sorcerer's best trick of all: making his own past disappear.

The next past time episode, "The Nature of Politics," is mainly about Wade's rise
through the Minnesota political system, but begins with Wade, eight months after the
events that transpired at Thuan Yen, extending his tour for another year. "Over the next
months John Wade did his best to apply the trick of forgetfulness” (147), and Wade begins putting himself voluntarily in the line of fire, because

He needed to reclaim his own virtue. At times he went out of his way to confront hazard, walking point or leading night patrols, which were acts of erasure, a means of burying one great horror under the weight of many smaller horrors. Sometimes the trick almost worked. Sometimes he almost forgot. (147-148)

Wade returns home a hero, marries Kathy, goes through law school, and begins working as a low level Democratic party lackey, making his way up to State Senator and Lieutenant Governor. Wade also meets Tony Carbo, the man who would manage his political campaigns, up to and including his disastrous bid for United States Senate. Carbo asks Wade if there are any skeletons in his closet that might come out and haunt him, and Wade assures him that there are none. Nonetheless, even as Carbo is asking him, “John looked away for a moment. A red ditch flashed across his field of vision” (154). John Wade is so practiced at the art of delusion, he even manages to slide the things he does remember out of sight.

Kathy becomes pregnant at an inopportune time, and the two make the difficult decision to abort the child. The decision is more John’s than Kathy’s, and this causes some tension between them, but Wade refuses to let it bother him. “He loved her. More than anything...he closed his eyes and gave himself over to the mirrors in his head. He was awed and a little frightened by all the angles at play” (157). But “They never talked about it. Never directly, never obliquely” (157). This failure to communicate contributes to the shakiness of the foundation of illusions on which John Wade has built his entire
life. "But lying there in the dark, they also understood that they had sacrificed some essential part of themselves for the possibilities of an ambiguous future. It was the guilt of a bad wager. They understood this, too and they felt the consequences" (159).

The possibilities become more important than the facts. The imaginary becomes more important than the tangible things, and though John and Kathy Wade both know it, they refuse to talk about it, refuse to acknowledge the fact that their lives are built on ghosts and missing memories, a foundation without facts, without history. When the facts are brought out, abruptly, from behind the mirrors in his mind, and John and Kathy Wade are forced to face them, their entire world—which was nothing but deception and illusions anyway—falls completely apart.

The next past time episode, Chapter Twenty-one, "The Nature of the Spirit," is set up in a series of short episodes. The first of these takes Sorcerer back to Vietnam, immediately after the massacre, showing an exchange between Sorcerer and Richard Thinbill, who is one of the other fictional characters whom O'Brien inserts into Charlie Company. Thinbill becomes a voice of conscience for the unit, who is haunted by the buzzing of flies that flocked to the corpses of the massacred villagers and wants to do the right thing and tell someone what happened that day, while Sorcerer is trying to get him to use the magic forgetting tricks that he himself is using. From there, the episode leaps ahead to the primary, after Wade's connection with the My Lai massacre is brought to light by his opponent: "The polls had gone from bad to depressing, and then to impossible, and the landslide on September 9 came as no surprise" (201). Wade gives a concession speech, learns that his longtime companion and campaign manager, Tony
Carbo, is jumping off Wade’s sinking political ship to go to work for Wade’s opponent, the man who exposed Wade’s secrets.

While Wade’s mental state deteriorates as the gravity of the situation slowly descends on him, and he is slowly being forced to face everything that he has worked so desperately to forget over the past twenty years, there is an interesting statement made about his wife: in the midst of her husband’s career dissolving, “Kathy smiled. She’d never looked happier” (202). This curious statement shows how well John Wade’s magic tricks have worked. His own ambitions have led him to completely ignore his wife’s wishes, make her ideas and dreams (for instance, of having children) disappear just as easily as he has made his own past disappear, and just as his ambitions are knocked down by the ghosts of Wade’s past that have suddenly reappeared from behind the mirrors in his mind. As his ambitions dissolve, Kathy, who wanted nothing more than a husband, is clearly happy that his ambitions have collapsed and she will return to being the center of his attention again. Sorcerer, who did all of the things that he had done only because he was afraid of losing love, made his wife’s distaste for politics disappear, as well, without his even being aware of it.

This is the other difficulty with constructing an entire existence, career, or relationship on a foundation of illusions and unreality: as John Wade begins spending more and more time behind the mirrors in his mind, it becomes second nature to make disappear things he doesn’t want to face, without even being cognizant that he is doing it. Making his wife’s disapproval disappear is a trick that Sorcerer didn’t even know he did until the past reappears from behind the mirrors in his mind, and forces him to see what else it is that he has made disappear over the years.
After telling of the night Wade conceded defeat, the narrative jumps back to Vietnam and shows Thinbill (a creation, remember, of O'Brien's, and a man who wasn't really there) and, to a lesser extent, Sorcerer himself confronting Lieutenant Calley (the real life person) about what happened at My Lai. Calley replies, "If you ask me, the guilty shouldn't cast no stones. Another famous Bible regulation" (205-206). This is the only time that Sorcerer confronts Calley about what happened, because he, too, is guilty, if only of two murders. Thinbill, however, was not guilty, and will continue to confront Calley about it. Thinbill's testimony will later be cited in the "Evidence" chapters as instrumental in bringing the events to light, as well as exposing Sorcerer as John Wade.

There is another episode that takes the reader back to Wade's childhood, and his father is making fun of him:

It was a relief when John finally started growing. By eighth grade he'd gone tall and slender, almost skinny, which looked good in the mirrors...the mirrors helped him get by. They were like a glass box in his head, a place to hide, and all through junior high, whenever things got bad, John would slip into the box of mirrors and disappear there. He was a daydreamer. He had few friends, none close....By eighth grade John had realized that secrecy carried its own special entitlements. (208-209)

Already, by the eighth grade, Wade has mastered the art of illusion in his own life, and about the same time, he begins to realize what he will need to do to fill the emptiness that concealing reality leaves in his life. Wade performs magic shows, and "it was a surprise to find that the applause seemed to fill up the empty spaces inside him" (209). This is probably what ends up steering young Wade towards politics: the ability to
fill up the empty spaces that pretending he has no history leaves in him with applause, with attention, with renown, with winning elections and feeling loved.

From there, the narrative takes the reader once more to Vietnam, and the morning after the massacre, when Charlie Company is ordered to return to the village where they killed everyone the day before. There are bodies everywhere and flies hanging over the dead village like a cloud. Some of the men are sick, but “Sorcerer took refuge behind the mirrors” (210). Calley orders the men to tear the village apart looking for VC weapons, but “There was nothing to find, they all knew that” (212). That night, then, unable to find the slightest bit of justification for the massacre that happened the day before,

Sorcerer did mind-cleansing tricks….He thought about the difference between murder and war. Obvious, he decided. He was a decent person. No bad intentions. Yes, and what had happened here was not the product of his own heart. He hadn’t wanted any of it, and he hated it, and he wished it would go away. He closed his eyes. He leaned back and punched an erase button at the center of his thoughts. (212-213)

Later, Thinbill—the conscience of O’Brien’s half-fictional, half-factual Charlie Company, a fictional man who is innocent of any atrocities—comes to Sorcerer and asks him what they should do. “You know. Tell somebody. Talk” (213). Sorcerer ponders that idea, but then realizes that “There was his future to take into account, all the dreams for himself; there was the problem of an old man with a hoe. And PFC Weatherby. He didn’t blame himself—reflex, nothing else—but still the notion of confession felt odd. No trapdoors, no secret wires” (213).
Sorcerer has spent so much of his life performing the mind-clearing tricks, dwelling in the illusory world behind the mirrors in his head, that the idea of returning to reality is almost unfathomable. Just the same, though, listening to Thinbill, Sorcerer becomes overwhelmed by the memories that he has so desperately been trying to erase: “He remembered the sunlight. He remembered a long, bleached-out emptiness....The pictures turned him upside down....Calley was firing from the shoulder. Meadlo was firing from the hip. Impossible, Sorcerer told himself, but the colors were very bright and real” (214).

All of these images swirling inside Sorcerer’s mind, despite his best efforts to erase them, overpower him, and the episode ends with Sorcerer giggling uncontrollably at the horror of it all. Living so far from reality, giggling is really the only logical response for Sorcerer. It was too horrible, it could not have happened, so therefore, it did not. The impossibility of the memory makes it seem absurd, and the absurd becomes laughable to Sorcerer.

Chapter Twenty-six, the next of the memory episodes, entitled “The Nature of the Dark,” recounts how young all of the men who participated in the massacre were, and how they dealt with the terrible things they had seen and done. “The days were difficult. The nights were impossible....The dark was their shame. It was also their future. They tried not to talk about it, but sometimes they couldn’t help themselves” (267). Sorcerer has performed his mind-cleansing, sleight-of-memory tricks well, but nonetheless, “On occasion, late at night, Sorcerer would find himself sliding back into wickedness, trapped at the bottom of a bubbling ditch, but over time the whole incident took on a dreamlike quality, only half remembered, half believed” (268). Sorcerer extends his tour for
another year, telling Kathy that "It's a personal decision....Maybe someday I'll be able to explain it. Right now I can't leave this place" (268). Sorcerer may be trying to atone for his sins in some way by remaining in Vietnam, but it is more likely that he is using that extra year to help him forget the things that he believes couldn't have happened—covering the large atrocity with a number of smaller ones, all to make the forgetting easier.

Then, "Two months before his tour was up, Sorcerer found a desk job in the battalion adjutant's office....The real war had ended. The trick now was to devise a future for himself" (269). Sorcerer has already eliminated the incident from his own memory using his magic powers of forgetting, but now he has to remove himself from the memories of others. "Not foolproof, but it could be done" (269). Sorcerer removes himself from Charlie Company's records, which "helped ease the guilt. A nice buoyant feeling. At higher levels, he reasoned, other such documents were being redrafted, other such facts neatly doctored" (269). Sorcerer then reassigns himself to Alpha Company, neatly removing himself from the massacre as My Lai as neatly as he removed the massacre from his own memory. "The illusion, he realized, would not be perfect. None ever was. But still it seemed a nifty piece of work. Logical and smooth. Among the men in Charlie Company he was known only as Sorcerer. Very few had ever heard his real name; fewer still would recall it. And over time, he trusted, memory itself would be erased" (269). This is Sorcerer's best trick yet: he makes himself disappear, on paper anyway, and trusts that the rest of the men will be as skilled as he is at performing their own disappearing acts with their memories. Because of this final trick, Wade seems to honestly come to believe that he wasn't there; when Carbo asks him if he has any
skeletons in his closet, despite the fact that he shifts his gaze for a moment, John Wade is probably not being completely dishonest when he tells Carbo no. Wade seems to believe more in his magic powers of memory manipulation than he does in reality—because Wade's powers of memory manipulation have replaced reality for him.

Shortly after performing his final trick in the army, making himself disappear from Charlie Company, Wade rotates back to America. The manipulation of reality through the mirrors in his mind that he has become so adept at during his hitch in Vietnam has altered his perceptions. "The flight to Minneapolis was lost time. Jet lag, maybe, but something else too. He felt dangerous. In the skies over North Dakota, he went into the lavatory, where he took off his uniform and put on a sweater and slacks, quietly appraising himself in the mirror. After a moment he winked. 'Hey, Sorcerer,' he said. 'How's tricks?'" (270)? Wade seems to have figured out a way to separate John Wade from Sorcerer; Sorcerer is some abstract concept that may or may not have done the horrible things that will haunt John Wade's nightmares, but John Wade did nothing. Perhaps Sorcerer did, but in his own mind, John Wade is innocent of everything.

The final memory episode, Chapter Twenty-nine, "The Nature of the Angle," is mainly about how perceptions shape reality. "It is the nature of the angle that starlight bends upon the surface of the lake. The angle makes the dream" (286). This is the same idea that O'Brien was talking about in "How to Tell a True War Story" in The Things They Carried. All that anyone remembers is what seemed to happen, not necessarily what really did happen. The facts have very little to do with the truth; perception is what shapes the truth, if truth is what you're interested in. But John Wade is not interested in truth. He's not using his perceptions in the interest of the truth; he is using perception to
eliminate the truth, which is dangerous. "The angle shapes reality....Partly window, partly mirror, the angle is where memory disappears. The mathematics are always null; water swallows sky, which swallows earth" (288). The angle, perception alone, is that place that John Wade has been seeking; not looking for truth, but hiding it away. This place where perception is everything is the place where one plus one can equal zero, and John Wade can finally make his memory—and everything else that he does not want—disappear. Kathy Wade is gone, at least offering the possibility that Wade no longer wanted her, if in fact he was involved. She has gone somewhere away from reality, the same place where John Wade's memories have gone: "She belongs to the angle. Not quite present, not quite gone, she swims in the blending twilight of between" (288).

While perception is important in shaping reality, perception has to be measured against reality. The two need to work together for us to be able to discover truths. How the world can be defined and how we can define ourselves in relationship to it constitute a big part of how we negotiate our way through life. John Wade uses his individual perceptions to make reality disappear, and without a reality to stand on, his own perceptions eventually collapse around him, and then there's nothing else for John Wade to do: he can either face reality or disappear himself into the angle, into the place where he has sent his memories, where his wife went, into that ethereal twilight somewhere between memory and imagination where one plus one can always equal zero.

The Present Time Episodes

All of the present time episodes in the book have an interrogative word in their title; either what, where, or how is incorporated into the title for each of these episodes.
The novel begins in a third-person plural limited omniscient narrative point of view with a present-time episode entitled "How Unhappy They Were."

The "they" in the title refers to John and Kathy Wade, and for the first several pages, John and Kathy Wade are referred to collectively as "they" as the novel begins setting up the basic plot of the novel: "In September, after the primary, they rented an old yellow cottage in the timber at the Lake of the Woods" (1). Right away, the setting is established; the fact that in a chapter named after their unhappiness they rented the cabin after the primary immediately reveals that Wade was a politician and that something went wrong in the primary. There is a narrative consciousness behind John and Kathy Wade, but it does not speak directly to the reader except in footnotes in the "Evidence" chapters, and doesn't speak at all until the end of the second of the evidence chapters. This narrative consciousness becomes the controlling voice behind the book, though the novel works in a third-person limited omniscient point of view, centering almost exclusively on the consciousness of John Wade.

This narrative voice adopts the persona of someone who is 'researching' the story told in the rest of the book and reporting on it, and just as in The Things They Carried, the narrative voice is a voice that is made to sound a lot like Tim O'Brien himself but should probably not be mistaken for him.

After a few pages that the narrative voice spends revealing the collective thoughts and feelings of John and Kathy Wade—"It was a terrible time in their lives and they wanted desperately to be happy" (2)—the point of view splits Kathy away and remains in the third person limited omniscient, entering the consciousness of John Wade alone and quickly beginning to set up the central mystery of the book, as is O'Brien's custom: "It
was their sixth night at the Lake of the Woods. In less than thirty-six hours she would be
gone. but now she lay beside him on the porch and talked about the ways she could make
it better” (3). Within the first three pages of the work, O’Brien has the reader asking both
questions the narrative will answer (what happened with the election?) and the questions
that he won’t (where did Kathy Wade go?), setting up right away the central and driving
mysteries of the work.

The next of the present time episodes, Chapter Four, “What He Remembered,” is
where the disappearance of Kathy Wade becomes clearer—or at least as clear as O’Brien
is willing to make it to the reader. But the narrative consciousness is trying to rely on the
memory of John Wade, and this is not an easy task, because “Some things he would
remember clearly. Other things he would remember only as shadows, or not at all” (17).
The narrative voice will later offer up hypotheses about what really happened to Kathy
Wade, but John Wade, whose own memory conceals things not only from others but also
from himself, is also wondering: “what if everything that happened could not have
happened because of those other happenings” (17)?

John Wade’s memory, upon which the narrative voice centers, is unreliable; this
further confuses the objective truths the shadowy narrator is trying to uncover, as well as
adding another layer to the mysteries the reader is left to sort through.

That chapter, the last time Kathy Wade is seen, ends with “As near as he could
remember, they went to bed around eleven. Kathy snapped off the lamp. She turned
onto her side and said, ‘Dream time,’ almost cheerfully, as if it did not matter at all that
she was now going away” (22). This requires the reader to ask: Does she now know she
is going away? Or is that John Wade’s foggy memory that knew she was going away
projecting that knowledge onto her? Or is that the narrative consciousness making an assumption of what John Wade knew, or what Kathy Wade knew, or what both of them or neither of them might have known? The text offers no answers, only theories; the reader is left to decide for himself what may or may not have happened to Kathy Wade.

In the next of the present time episodes, Chapter Eight, entitled “How the Night Passed,” John Wade’s blurry memory begins to truly cloud the facts that exist within the logic of the construct: since the central figure in the novel either does not know or is not willing to face the facts about what truly happened to Kathy Wade that night, this further removes the reader from the known facts within the book—since the narrator doesn’t know what happened, and since the fictional figure upon which the narrator focuses purports not to know what happened, the fictional facts are never clearly established. Therein, it seems, lies the brilliance of O’Brien’s fictional construct. Since no one within the story appears to know exactly what happened, those on the outside looking in—readers—will by necessity be distanced from answers, and the mystery will be deepened, heightened, magnified.

This episode is about the events of the night Kathy Wade disappears: “Twice during the night John Wade woke up sweating,” and then “he kicked back the sheets and said ‘Kill Jesus.’ It was a challenge—a dare” (47). Kathy Wade is still present at this point, but John Wade has hit rock bottom. Wade is challenging the fates to see if they can take anything else away from him; by morning, his wife will be gone.

The chapter begins by elaborating on the source of Wade’s depression and revealing a little bit about the election: “he was defeated by a margin of something more than 105,000 votes” (48). Though the text does not yet reveal exactly why the election
was lost so badly, it begins alluding to it, saying “Ambush politics. Poison politics. It
wasn’t fair. That was the final truth: just so unfair. Wade was not a religious man, but
now he found himself talking to God, explaining how much he hated him” (49).

From here on, the narrative consciousness becomes a little murky, leading the
reader to begin questioning the authority of the external narrator. The voice of the
narrative researcher freely enters John Wade’s thoughts and mentions things that Wade
himself does not know, things that only someone who was physically there with Wade
while the events transpired would know: “Stupidly, he [Wade] was smiling, but the smile
was meaningless. He would not remember it” (49).

Statements such as these lead the reader to begin question the validity of a lot of
the narrative voice says. It sets up an interesting paradox: how can a third-person limited
omniscient point-of-view enter the head of a single character and find things the character
himself does not remember? This is not something that is possible in straight
representative fiction, but here O’Brien’s narrator recalls things Wade does not. The
narrative voice, which has no definitive answers about anything, seems to be acting more
omniscient than it actually is.

After this, John Wade boils a teakettle full of water and begins pouring the boiling
water on plants, killing them. “It wasn’t rage. It was necessity” (50). The picture of
John Wade in this chapter—the key one where Kathy Wade is last seen—is the picture of
a man who seems to have temporarily lost his grip on reality. While he boils the plants,
he is “humming under his breath...he heard himself chuckle” (50). After boiling several
plants, “he refilled the teakettle, watched the water come to a boil, smiled and squared his
shoulders and moved down the hallway to their bedroom,” after which “he let himself
glide away. A ribbon of time went by, which he would not remember, then later he found himself crouched at the side of the bed. He was rocking on his heels, watching Kathy sleep” (50).

After this, only fragments of John Wade’s consciousness—including things that, according to the narrator, Wade himself does not remember—are available to the reader, deepening the mystery. Kathy Wade will not be seen again after this chapter, and if John Wade knows where she went, he either isn’t telling, or he truly doesn’t recall exactly what happened. Like O’Brien himself, Wade devotes much of his time looking beyond the facts and into the possibilities, replacing the what happened with a what should have happened.

It occurred to him that he should wake her. Yes, a kiss, and then confess the shame he felt: how defeat had bled into his bones and made him crazy with hurt. He should’ve done it...and then later he should’ve slipped under the covers and taken her in his arms and explained how he loved her more than anything, a hard hungry lasting guiltless love, and how everything else was trivial and dumb...he should’ve talked about coping and enduring, all the cliches, how it was not the end of the world, how they still had each other and their marriage and their lives to live. In the days that followed, John Wade would remember all the things he should’ve done. (50-51).

Like Paul Berlin in Going After Cacciato, John Wade is going beyond the facts into the possibilities. He is taking what happened and thinking back on what might have happened. Unlike Paul Berlin, he is not using this idea to build himself up or resolve
things in imagination that memory has left unresolved; Wade is using the possibilities here as a device to express his guilt, either because he did something to Kathy Wade that he shouldn’t have done or else because, as he says, he didn’t do something to her or for her that he should have.

"Amazing, he thought, what love could do... he squeezed the teakettle’s handle. A strange heaviness had come into his arms and wrists. Again, for an indeterminate time, the night seemed to dissolve around him, and he was somewhere outside himself, awash in despair, watching the mirrors in his head flicker with radical implausibilities" (51).

O’Brien never comes out and says whether or not John Wade had anything to do with Kathy Wade’s disappearance. Wade’s past, which he has all but erased from his own memories, also flickers with a number of radical implausibilities, which does not necessarily mean they have not happened. Franklin reaches his own conclusions as to what happened:

On the night of Kathy’s disappearance, John got out of bed in a murderous rage, poured a kettle of boiling water, and then poured another kettle full of boiling water on Kathy’s face. Fragments of her screaming death agony, buried deep under layers of denial, later keep erupting from Wade’s memory. He next concealed the crime by carefully weighting both her body and the boat and burying them at the bottom of the lake. He thus reenacts once again the murder he committed at My Lai and his attempts to expunge all records—and memory—of this act that was too awful to be possible. My Lai, in Wade’s mind, has just become a nightmare of "impossible events:" “This could not have happened.
Therefore it did not.” The most grisly detail of Kathy’s death, repeated several times in the novel, evokes the same response: “Puffs of steam rose from the sockets of her eyes. Impossible, of course.” (2-3)

There are indeed radical implausibilities from Wade’s past that he has attempted to erase from memory, which, again, does not mean that they did not happen, since he is so adept at the memory erasing tricks that he has been performing his whole life. But it does not mean that they did happen, either. If there were clear cut answers regarding what really happened, however, O’Brien probably would not have devoted so much of the book to offering various hypotheses.

In fact, the ever cryptic O’Brien himself has professed to interviewers that he himself does not know whether or not John Wade killed his wife.

The mystery of In the Lake of the Woods is so dense that not even O’Brien really knows what happened to Kathy Wade. “My sister went for the killing theory,” he claims. “My brother thinks she got lost. My dad says the two of them planned it together…My feeling is that John Wade didn’t kill her. But that’s just what I think. As an author, I just have these hypotheses, I’m sort of neutral. But as a reader, I have my own opinion. I think she just got in the boat one day and got lost. That’s how life really works, at least from my point of view.” (Edelman 2)

There is certainly evidence within the text that Wade did murder his wife, but there are equally plausible hypotheses offered suggesting that Wade had nothing at all to do with her disappearance. Trying to answer these questions in any definitive way is to
miss a large part of what O'Brien's purpose in this work; to him, the importance of fiction lies not in answering questions such as these but in asking them. The ambiguity is what makes it interesting, and the fact that a different solution can be inferred with every reading of the text makes it a text worth coming back to. Pattern is necessary to make art work, for without some kind of pattern, art cannot be distinguished from random utterance. The pattern that O'Brien uses is that of ambiguity and uncertainty, which is certainly a challenging pattern to negotiate, but this leaves it up to each individual reader to determine how to interpret each ambiguity in his texts. O'Brien is constantly forcing the reader to question everything, through his experimentation with virtually every component of his fiction, from the questionable narrative voice to the unreliability of his character's own memories to the shifting, nonlinear time frames from past to present and into imagination.

But the point is, that's the point. Fiction is not a problem to be solved, and if there are any easy answers to be had, if there is some kind of satisfactory resolution, if all questions are answered and all loose ends are tied up, then the discerning reader will walk away from the text feeling as if he has been ripped off. In life, there are few days when all the mysteries get solved; fiction that attempts to eliminate mystery rather than explore it leaves nothing for the reader to take away. Books that don't require any additional thought or an extra reading after they have been put down once are not really engaging the reader. Storytelling is a transaction, and the storyteller is more than merely a transmitter, the reader more than a repository into which the story somehow goes. The reader should have a role to play, too. The reader should be required to engage the text and interact with it; the storytelling transaction should be a two-way street, with the
reader left to answer some of the questions for himself. If everything is answered today, what does that leave us for tomorrow? Questions with or without answers; the purpose is not which approach to use when engaging a text but the fact that it is engaged at all. Once the text requires the reader to engage it, to bring something of the reader’s to the story that the author has left on the table for him, then and only then, according to O’Brien, can a work of fiction be considered a success. This, of course, places a high literary value on ambiguity, which is O’Brien’s trademark.

The next present-time episode, Chapter Eleven, “What He Did Next,” details the morning after Kathy Wade has disappeared. John Wade wakes up and makes breakfast for himself, and, while looking for Kathy, is not immediately alarmed not to find her. “At one point, he glanced behind him, startled. ‘Hey Kath,’ he said. He listened. Then he yelled, ‘Kath!’ then he waited and yelled, ‘Kath, come here a minute” (O’Brien, Lake 77).

But again, the reader needs to question Wade’s every move. He is startled by something: is this because he killed her and dumped her in the lake, and so having her come up behind him would be startling? But if he was startled because he was never expecting to see her again, why then does he call her name?

A few pages later, Wade goes back through the house cleaning up the plants that he boiled the night before, thinking

No doubt Kathy had discovered the wreckage that morning, or at least smelled it, and at some point he would have to come with a fancy piece of defense work. Extenuating circumstances, he’d say. Which was the truth. A miserable night, nothing else, so he’d apologize and then prove to her
that he was back in control. A solid citizen. Upright and virtuous. The thought gave him energy. (78)

Again, if John Wade has killed his wife (and could remember doing it), he certainly would not be planning on defending his actions to his wife, and certainly would not be energized by the thought of making his wife feel better. But did he do it and just not remember it? Did he do it and is pretending not remember it? Why provide ample evidence that Wade may have been capable of both killing her and not killing her? And since the narrative voice is unable to tell us whether or not he did it, how can it possibly know what he is thinking? Why can the narrative voice give access to some of Wade’s thoughts but not others? This constant questioning of the nature of reality, both within the construct of the text and beyond, is in great part what makes the book the engaging work that it is.

The day after Kathy Wade is last seen, John Wade gets very active. He cleans the house, exercises, begins making lists of lists that he is going to make, and starts drinking at about one-thirty in the afternoon “The booze was performing acrobatics on his nerves” and “for a considerable time he permitted himself the luxury of forgetfulness, no lists, no future at all, just the glide, exploring the void” (79-80).

This novel is more about what is missing than what is actually there: a lacuna is either a hole, pit, or pond, or else the portion of something, especially a text, that is missing. The Lake of the Woods itself is a formidable presence throughout the entirety of the text; it is a lacuna in itself, the hole into which Kathy Wade may have disappeared, according to one of the hypotheses, and the hole into which John Wade himself vanishes at the end of the work.
John Wade’s memory contains lacunae; there are many holes into which things are constantly disappearing, hiding behind the imaginary mirrors in his mind that he learned to use through his love of magic as a child.

And, finally, switching to the other definition of the word *lacuna*, there is something missing from the text: what really happened to Kathy Wade. No one in the text knows, or is willing to admit he knows, and this final lacuna is what gives the book the central mystery. O’Brien’s work is at its best when what is missing becomes more engaging than what is there—and *In the Lake of the Woods* manipulates these lacunae with its unanswerable questions and unprovable theories, offering different resolutions to every reader willing to match wits with O’Brien and his characters.

As night begins to fall the day after Kathy Wade is last seen, John Wade is beginning to feel anxious, but not too anxious; not yet. “It occurred to him that he might call someone…but the idea seemed excessive. Any time now she’d come skipping up the road. He could see it. Absolutely. It had to happen like that” (82).

John Wade has not checked the boathouse yet; it is after nine o’clock before it occurs to him to see if the boat is still there. He stares at the boathouse for an hour before he actually goes and looks inside, “watching the image compose itself” (83). He does not immediately go to look, however. “There was no hurry. Obvious, really. He knew exactly what he would find” (83). Finally, he makes his way down to the boathouse and “felt the desire to weep, but not the need” (83). This sense of certainty that Wade feels here is artfully ambiguous: It makes him appear as if he really does know what happened to his wife; earlier, however, he was equally certain that she would be coming up the road at any minute. What is O’Brien getting at? Is he leading the reader toward thinking
Wade guilty of killing his wife? Is he leading the reader into thinking Wade did nothing? Most likely, the truth is that O'Brien is just as uncertain about what really happened to Kathy Wade as any of the readers, and his narrative consciousness seems to lean one way at time and others later on, trying to keep from slipping away from offering only theories, but succeeding only at times. O'Brien likes the mystery, likes the not knowing, and passes that on to his readers, so that while he is engaging them, they have a part to play, too, engaging the text just as he does.

Wade finally makes his way to the boathouse, and as he opens the door to see if the boat is still there, realizes "It wasn’t fear now. It was certainty…. Wade considered the facts. They had been married for sixteen years, almost seventeen, and there was now the powerful certainty that the dominant track of his life had been permanently rerouted" (83-84). The boat is gone, vanished as mysteriously as Kathy Wade has. Wade pictures his wife in his mind for a moment: “In the dark she seemed to smile at him. Then she jerked sideways. Puffs of steam rose from the sockets of her eyes. Impossible, of course” (84).

Is this Wade’s memory or his imagination? The time that he lost, standing over his sleeping wife, the time that he can not remember from the night before—did he murder his wife? Impossible, he thinks. But Wade is a magician. He has the ability to manipulate reality and memory, hiding things that are too grotesque or unbelievable to be true behind the mirrors in his mind. Could he have killed his wife? Wade himself seems unsure. The narrative voice, while able to tell the reader certain things that Wade himself does not know, is not sure, either, and that uncertainty is passed along to the willing reader, drawing him further into the mystery.
Having discovered the missing boat, Wade goes up the road to the house of Claude Rasmussen, the old man who rented the Wades their cabin. Claude is the picture of stability to Wade’s dreamy persona; he is a foil, similar to Doc Peret’s pragmatic personality opposing Paul Berlin’s dreaminess in *Going After Cacciato* or Mitchell Sanders’ practicality opposing the rest of the men in *The Things They Carried*. Claude has a practical solution for almost everything, and while Wade becomes increasingly frantic—“I’m not panicked….I’m worried” (89), Wade asserts at one point—Claude remains calm and rational. The narrative voice describes Claude as “A tough bird, obviously, but right now toughness was a comfort” (87). To make the drive from Claude’s cabin back to the Wades’, Wade surrenders control to Claude symbolically and literally as he “surrendered the keys and sat back as the old man swung the Buick into the fog. None of it seemed real. Like riding through someone else’s life: the car and the road and the oncoming darkness” (86-87). This is very much what the reader is doing—riding through someone else’s life through stories.

As we know, Wade has a history of not wanting to face the unfaceable. From his childhood through his experiences in Vietnam, Wade has constructed mirrors in his mind behind which he is able to conceal unpleasant truths; here is another situation which is too difficult to face head on, so Wade willingly surrenders control of to the cooler-headed Claude.

The next present time episode, Chapter Fifteen, “What the Questions Were,” begins by describing the massive search for Kathy Wade. Sheriff Art Lux is a calm, sympathetic figure, but Vinny Pearson is immediately suspicious: he thinks Wade was definitely responsible for Kathy’s disappearance.
Art Lux, like Claude Rasmussen, is opposed to Pearson’s overtly suspicious and belligerent nature. There are a number of hypotheses about Kathy’s disappearance offered throughout the course of the book, and various characters seem to represent belief in one or another of those hypotheses: Vinny Pearson holds to the theory that Wade murdered his wife and dumped her in the lake, but Art Lux seems unwilling to believe that Kathy Wade’s disappearance was anything more than accidental. Patricia Hood, Kathy’s sister who enters the story later to join the search, seems to think that Kathy has run away to escape from Wade. And Claude Rasmussen, the shrewd old man who steadies Wade throughout, seems to think that Kathy and John Wade planned to run away together.

As Art Lux and Vinny Pearson outline the search that is unfolding, Wade is still remaining distant, likely already trying to do his magic trick of forgetting, trying to slide the entire situation behind the mirrors in his mind. As Art Lux speaks to him, Wade has to concentrate to remain attentive to the situation: “Wade tried to keep his eyes level. He felt like an actor” (119). Like Paul Berlin of *Going After Cacciato* and character O’Brien of *The Things They Carried*, Wade is using the power of make believe to provide the necessary distancing from self that this tough situation requires. Unlike them, however, he is not using it to create a reality where he can better deal with the situations he finds himself in. Wade is simply hiding reality away—or trying to hide it as completely as he can.

But even Wade is aware of possibilities. Art Lux asks Wade for a picture of his wife. Wade wants to know why that is necessary, and Vinny Pearson replies, “In case she’s damp….In case the lady turns up wet” (120). Whether Wade had anything to do
with Kathy’s disappearance or not, he doesn’t want to hear any unpleasant possibilities; that’s what the mirrors in his mind are for. Nonetheless, he hears an unpleasant possibility from Vinny Pearson, and, “Wade turned and looked into Pearson’s eyes, locking on, and for an instant something important seemed to pass between them. An acknowledgement of certain possibilities. Wade nodded at him” (120).

Wade is grilled by Lux and Pearson, and the two exhaust all the possibilities that they can imagine. As the interrogation continues, Wade feels less and less sure about what happened:

Sorrow was also a problem. He couldn’t feel much, just a shadowy uneasiness about his own conduct or misconduct. The interrogation bothered him. Important lines of inquiry, he realized, had not been pursued. Mental health, for one; memory, for another. Even now it was hard to come up with a neat chronology of those last hours together. The images did not connect—the darkness, the teakettle, the way he’d glided from spot to spot as if gravity were no longer a factor. (130)

From there Wade is flooded with a series of images—some as tangible as his vague memory of wading into the lake, some as abstract as love and tenderness, but these are some of the “Other things, though, he remembered only dimly…These were not memories. These were sub-memories. Images from a place beneath the waking world, deeper than a dream, a place where logic dissolved. It was beyond remembering. It was knowing” (131). Musing, sorting through the river of images washing over him as he tries to remember, Wade is only able to reach one conclusion: “Absurd, Wade thought” (132). But the place that Wade is pondering, that place beyond remembering, where
things are known without being remembered, that is the ethereal mist from which stories come. Since stories are able to create their own truths, they go beyond remembering, they go beyond imagining, and suddenly create something that is both truer than the truth and not true anywhere but within the logic of the construct. This is the magic of storytelling, this ability to manipulate realities and create new ones. But while Paul Berlin in Going After Cacciato uses this magic for good, for answering questions that real life does not, and for figuring out a way to make himself brave enough to survive the rest of the war, Herzog contends that Wade’s manipulations are “evil magic” (167), using the creative process not to explore but to conceal.

Wade finally manages to fall asleep for a while, and when he wakes up, Claude Rasmussen and his wife, Ruth, have moved into Wade’s cabin to help him wait it out. Wade asks if either Claude or Ruth share Pearson’s suspicions, and Claude says they don’t; however, Claude once again takes control where Wade can’t and tells him “Except it might help to start acting like a husband. Some normal concern, it’ll look real sweet to people” (O’Brien, Lake 133). Once again, Wade surrenders control to Claude.

Later that evening, Wade finally contacts Patricia Hood, Kathy’s sister. “It was a difficult conversation. They had a history between them—distance and distrust” (133), but Patricia agrees to travel up to the Lake of the Woods to join the search effort—which Wade himself has not yet done by this point, the end of the first full day after Kathy has disappeared.

The next of the present time episodes, Chapter Nineteen, “What Was Found,” begins on the morning of the second full day after Kathy Wade has vanished. It tells exactly what the search—which by this point consists of more than a hundred volunteers,
several planes, and several dozen boats—has found by this point: “Nothing at all was found. No boat, no body” (175). This is perhaps a telling reference: why is the word *body* used here? It could be that the narrative voice—or the consciousness of John Wade, which is what the narrative voice conveys through the past time and present time chapters—knows that Kathy Wade is not going to be found alive. Yet again, the choice of words forces the reader to begin questioning if either John Wade or the narrative voice knows something it is not sharing with the reader: does John Wade know, whether consciously or on some other level, that his wife isn’t coming back alive? Does the narrative consciousness, which knows things that Wade himself does not but purports not to know everything, know something that it is refusing to reveal to the reader? If either the narrative voice or John Wade knows why the word *body* was used here, both carry the secret with them to the end of the book.

It is in this chapter that Patricia Hood shows up to join in the search. While she is in the shower, Wade heats a can of soup and has a thought that echoes Paul Berlin’s musings about Cacciato: “[Wade] tried to imagine a happy conclusion to things. A call from Lux. Kathy walking in the door. Grinning at him, asking what was for lunch. The fantasies didn’t help” (180). Again, while Paul Berlin uses his imagination to escape and make himself feel better, John Wade uses his imagination to erase ugly realities. He is so used to doing so that when he tries to use his imagination for something positive, it doesn’t work.

Patricia asks Wade at one point why he didn’t tell Kathy about what happened in the war, the events that came back and destroyed him years later, and
He wondered if there was anything of consequence that could be said.

"Very noble, but it's not something you sit down and explain. What could I tell her? Christ, I barely.... Looks real black and white now—very clear—but back then everything came at you in these bright colors. No sharp edges. Lots of glare. A nightmare like that, all you want is to forget. None of it seemed real in the first place.” (186)

This again asks the reader to ask: is Wade speaking not only of his role in the My Lai massacre, but also his wife’s disappearance? Is it another nightmare to be forgotten? My Lai was too terrible to have happened, so in Wade’s mind it didn’t. If Wade had murdered his wife, that also would be too terrible to have happened, so is Wade using the mirrors in his mind to make it disappear? Is his imagination being used as an eraser here? Again, there are no conclusive answers to be found in the text. We ask the questions, however, because there are no answers, leaving only Wade’s patterns of behavior and thought to fall back on.

Late that night, Wade struggles with the holes in his own memory: “It was a bad night. Too much vodka. He kept tumbling inside himself, half asleep, half awake, his dreams folding around a theme of depravity—things he remembered and things he could not remember” (188). Wade gets out of bed and goes to the boathouse, where

A sense of pre-memory washed over him. Things had happened here.

Things said, things done. He squatted down, brushed a hand across the dirt floor, and put the hand to his nose. The smell gave him pause. He had a momentary glimpse of himself as if from above, as if through a camera lens... the dead odor revived facts he did not wish to revive. (188)
Like Paul Berlin, John Wade begins listing the known facts, what he knows, and what he can do with them. But again, unlike Paul Berlin, he is not using his imagination to extend beyond the facts into possibilities, but perhaps to cover facts he does not want to remember:

There was the fact of an iron teakettle. Kill Jesus, that also was a fact. Defeat was a fact. Rage was a fact. And there was the fact of steam and a dead geranium. Other things were less firm. It was almost a fact, but not quite, that he had moved down the hallway to the bedroom that night, where for a period of time he had watched Kathy sleep, admiring the tan at her neck and shoulders, her fleshy lips, the way her thumb lay curled along the side of her nose. At one point, he remembered, her eyelids snapped open....Even in the weak light, Wade could make out a number of grooves and scratchings where the boat had been dragged out to the beach. He tried to imagine Kathy handling it alone...but he couldn’t come up with a convincing flow of images. Not impossible, but not likely, either, which left room for speculation. (188-189)

That room for speculation is what sets Paul Berlin free in *Going After Cacciato*, giving himself the ability to make happy endings where life offered none, to make himself brave where life rendered him terrified, to give himself the opportunity to make things right when life did not. Wade’s room for speculation is his prison—the tricks his own memory plays on him, and his own ability to manipulate reality, hiding things he does not want to have to look at behind the mirrors in his mind with only a little sleight of memory, trapping him inside the shaky box of mirrors he has constructed in his head.
For Paul Berlin, the facts are a given, and they are the starting point from which all possibilities must come. Facts mean something a little different to John Wade: “The thing about facts, he decided, was that they came in sizes. You had to try them on for a proper fit. A case in point: his own responsibility. Right now he couldn’t help feeling that burn of guilt. All that empty time. The convenience of a faulty memory” (189).

Rather than using facts as a starting point to explore the possibilities, as Paul Berlin does, John Wade uses the possibilities as a way to manipulate the facts. Because of what he cannot or will not remember—or may just not know—about what actually happened, he uses the possibilities to manipulate the facts, to remove himself from everything that is too awful to accept as his own. This is exactly what he did at My Lai, which certainly leads the reader to believe had he actually murdered his wife, he could remove himself from that fact through his imagination’s manipulation. But that too is only a possibility, and the book, through its hypotheses of what may have happened, offers a number of possibilities in addition to the hypothesis that Wade actually has murdered his wife. Like Wade, the reader is left to use the possibilities presented to attempt to manipulate the facts into some kind of satisfactory resolution; like Wade, the reader has a difficult time doing so, because there are too many holes, too many lacunae in the story as we are allowed to know it.

The next present time chapter, Chapter Twenty-three, “Where They Looked,” shows Wade and Patricia Hood joining the search in one of Claude Rasmussen’s boats. Once they get on the water, John Wade, like character O’Brien in “On the Rainy River” from The Things They Carried (The Lake of the Woods is the source of the Rainy River), is bombarded by a river of images: images from the war, images from My Lai, images of
happy times from his marriage. He loses himself in all these images for a moment, and
has to be called back to the task by Claude Rasmussen. Patricia gets angry at him,
leading Wade to feel as if he’s

A prime suspect. Not just with Pat—everyone. Art Lux and Vinny
Pearson, the newspapers, the party bigwigs, the whole prissy state of
Minnesota. He couldn’t blame them. He’d tried to pull off a trick that
couldn’t be done, which was to remake himself, to vanish what was past
and replace it with things good and new. He should have known better.
Should’ve lifted it out of the act. Never given the fucking show in the first
place. Pitiful, he thought. And no one gave a shit about the pressure of it
all. Twenty years’ worth. Smiling and making love and eating breakfast
and keeping up the patter and pushing away the nightmares and trying to
event a respectful little life for himself. The intent was never evil. Deceit,
maybe, but the intent was purely virtuous. No one knew. Obviously no
one cared. A liar and a cheat. Which was the risk. You had to live inside
your tricks…. Believe or fail. And for twenty years he had believed. Now
it ends, he thought. (234)

Wade has been hiding facts behind possibilities—living inside his tricks—for
such a long time that the possibilities have become more important than the realities.
This is a dangerous place to be, because the facts—whether in life or in fiction—need to
be the starting point or the imaginary part becomes too unbelievable to support itself, and
it collapses. This is what is happening to John Wade.
The search continues for two more weeks, and then the authorities begin calling off their planes and boats until only a few private boats are left searching. Wade decides he will continue searching for his wife alone. Rasmussen is reluctant to let him, afraid that he will end up disappearing like his wife. Art Lux calls at one point, wanting to tear apart the Wade’s cabin, sure that Kathy’s body is somewhere on the grounds, and it is only then that Claude Rasmussen perhaps realizes that Wade wants to disappear, because only then does he agree to allow Wade to take one of his boats out alone, telling him that “Canada’s that hunk of dry land up at the top of most pages. Recommend it highly. I’m not saying you should change your mind, but at least there’s plenty of space up there to evaporate. It’s worth some thought. Luck to you” (279). Rasmussen seems to realize that Wade wants to follow his wife to wherever it is she has gone, a place where “the fog was all around them and inside them and they were swallowed up and gone. Not a footprint, not a single clue. All woods and water. A place where one plus one always came to zero” (249).

In Chapter Twenty-eight, the last present time episode, entitled “How He Went Away,” Wade disappears into the Lake of the Woods. Wade muses as he treks northward on the nature of his situation. “Kathy was gone, everything else was guesswork. Probably an accident. Or lost out here. Something simple. For sure—almost for sure. Except it didn’t matter. He was responsible for the misery of their lives, the betrayals and deceit, the manipulations of the truth that had substituted for simple love” (279-280, Italics added). Living inside of his own illusions, nothing is certain to John Wade.

Slipping into drink and despair as he drifts north, Wade turns on the two-way radio and sends his thoughts across the airwaves. Wade
pooh-poohed the notion of human choice. A scam, he declared. Much overrated...no points to be had. There is merely what happened and what is now happening and what will one day happen. Do we choose sleep? Hell no and bullshit—we fall. We give ourselves to possibility, to whim and fancy, to the bed, the pillow, the tiny white tablet. And these choose for us. Gravity has a hand. Bear in mind trapdoors. We fall in love, yes? Tumble, in fact. Is it choice? Enough said...[Wade] lay under an inch of snow, mike in hand, remarking to the airwaves on how hard and how well he had fallen. Few fell further....High ambition. Eternal love....“Did I choose this life of illusion? Don’t be mad. My bed was made, I just lied in it.” (283-284)

Wade lied in the bed that he had made—he lied and manipulated everything around him, until the lies and manipulations supplanted reality, until the facts dissolved behind the mirrors in his mind until the foundation on which Wade’s reality was built disappeared and collapsed around him. Regardless of what happened to Kathy Wade, whether John Wade killed her and dumped her body into the Lake of the Woods, whether she left him, whether she got lost, John Wade was responsible for building the reality in which he and Kathy depended on possibilities rather than facts. Without facts, without memory, imagination doesn’t have a leg to stand on; when imagination is being used to supplant reality rather than supplement it, the dark side of storytelling becomes apparent. This is the place where John Wade dwelled, and he lost everything because of it. His career, his wife, and ultimately, himself. What really happened to Kathy and John Wade?
The reader will never know, and through the narrative voice from *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien even comes out and tells why:

You don't explain a thing. Which was the art of it...that magnificent giving over to pure and absolute Mystery...To know is to be disappointed. To understand is to be betrayed. All he petty hows and whys, the unseemly motives, the abscesses of character, the sordid little ugliness of self and history—these were the gimmicks you kept under wraps to the end. Better to leave your audience wailing in the dark, shaking their fists, some crying *How?*, others *Why?* (242)

O'Brien is loath do betray his readers, opting rather to allow himself—and subsequently the reader—to surrender completely to mystery. He does not want to disappoint or betray, does not want to offer explanations, does not reveal how the trick is done, preferring instead to leave the members of the audience shaking their fists in the dark.

The Future Time And “Evidence” Episodes

While the past time and present time episodes deal with facts, or at least the illusion of facts, as clearly as the narrator is able to assemble them through the muddy memory of Wade, the eight “Hypothesis” chapters—Chapters Five, Nine, Fourteen, Eighteen, Twenty-two, Twenty-four, Twenty-seven, and Thirty-one—shift away from the facts and the narrative voice offers possibilities. The fact that so much of the novel is spent looking at possibilities, like *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, shows that O'Brien's belief that imagination is just as important and just as significant to
human existence as memory, and that the place where the two converge is the place
where storytelling comes from. The fact that there are so many possibilities offered also
suggests that to interpret *In the Lake of the Woods* as a problem to be solved—that there
*is* some definitive answer to be found, if the reader looks hard enough—is a
misinterpretation of the book. Again, it is the possibilities that matter. The questions are
the important thing to O’Brien, and trying to answer them is important, but the actual act
of answering the questions in any definitive way is impossible. There are only
possibilities, and each reader’s own individual perceptions are all that can be used to
shape the possibility that seems to make the most sense. The angle shapes reality within
the construct of the novel as well as outside of it.

The first hypothesis offered in Chapter Five is perhaps the most simple
explanation:

maybe she had a secret lover. Marriages come unraveled. Pressures
accumulate….Maybe she had grown tired of tricks and trapdoors, a
husband she had never known, and later that night, when she said “Dream
time,” maybe it was this she meant—an escape dream, a dream she would
now enter. (23)

The narrative voice admits that Kathy’s disappearance as an elaborate scheme to
leave her husband for another man is “Not likely, but not implausible, either” (23).
Perhaps she simply walked away, but as the narrator acknowledges, there is no way to
know for sure. It is all conjecture, “The purest mystery, of course” (23). And of course,
the reader has his own conjecturing to do, as well.
The second hypothesis, in Chapter Nine, is similar to the first, except excluding the other man: "Maybe it was something simple. Maybe Kathy woke up scared that night. Maybe she panicked, just walked away" (53). Perhaps she woke up and watched her husband boiling plants, acting strangely, and then perhaps she sneaked out of the bedroom to watch this man whom she has realized she never really knew after twenty years together pouring boiling water onto plants. "The rest had to follow. She would've turned away fast...headed down the dirt road toward the Rasmussen place. Then any number of possibilities. A wrong turn. A sprain or a broken leg. Maybe she lost her way. Maybe she's still out there" (57-58). But again, the narrative voice reminds us that this is "Just conjecture—maybe this, maybe that—but conjecture is all we have" (53).

Chapter Fourteen’s hypothesis shows Kathy waking up the next morning before Wade, smelling the boiled plants, and feeling the urge to get away from her husband for a moment. "Something must have stirred inside her. Not panic. Just the need to breathe. Speed was essential—move and keep moving" (114). Maybe from there she got in the boat, just to go for a ride, thinking about all of the things she wants to talk to her husband about, to remedy the fact that "they never talked anymore. They never communicated, they never made love" (112). Maybe she was going through all these thoughts, thinking about ways to get to know this stranger, this secretive man she’s spent her life with, maybe "She was at escape velocity. Maybe it happened there" (116). Kathy may have left the house in the boat on her own, and then hit a sandbar. Perhaps "There was a shiver at the bottom of the boat—a snapping sound—and for an instant she was free of everything, she was light and high, she was soaring through the glassy roof of the world
and breaking out into another, and then the lake was all around her, and soon inside her, and maybe in that way Kathy drowned and was gone” (116-117).

The next hypothesis, in Chapter Eighteen, shows Kathy getting lost, daydreaming as she rides across the water. “each piece of wilderness identical to every other piece....Identical, which erased identity. Or it was all identity. An easy place, she thought, to lose herself. Which is what happened, maybe.” The narrative voice, which in the past and present time chapters, attempts to present a construct of John Wade’s consciousness based on the facts, here attempts to present a construct of Kathy Wade’s consciousness based on the narrative voice’s own conjecture, exploring what she might have been thinking about while she got herself more and more lost in the wilderness: memories of early days with John, her extramarital affair, how she had grown tired of her husband’s secrets, and how he spied on her, and how “at times she’d felt an overwhelming need to remove herself from him, to make herself vanish” (173), showing that Kathy Wade may have had a few tricks of her own up her sleeve. Perhaps she and Wade were much more alike than either could have imagined; perhaps she, too was carrying secrets, manipulating reality as expertly as he was. John Wade did it all for love, but perhaps Kathy believed that “Love wasn’t enough. Which was the truth. The saddest thing of all” (174).

This theory continues for two “Hypothesis” chapters—Chapters Eighteen and Twenty-two—and as the narrator offers ideas not only regarding what happened to Kathy Wade but also what she might have been thinking, the reader begins to question the validity of the narrative voice once again. Here in the chapters built solely on conjecture, the narrative voice is not pretending to have any sort of fact-based authority. In the past
and present chapters, the voice *does* seem to be claiming authority, despite the fact that it remembers things that John Wade claims not to, things that no one but perhaps John Wade *could* remember according to the narrative voice. This unique dissonance in the authority or feigned authority of the narrative voice leads the reader in circles, trying to figure out what to believe where. The way that O’Brien manipulates reality through this narrator’s questionable reliability and the way it constantly forces the reader to question the reality of what O’Brien is doing is a nice parallel to what Wade himself is doing: manipulating reality and perceived reality by selective remembering.

Chapter twenty-two continues the theory that Kathy Wade lost her way on the lake, finally putting ashore as night fell, building a fire, remembering a trip to Las Vegas years ago, when Tony Carbo had told her what she knew but didn’t want to hear about her husband and the nature of the business of politics:

> Like with his hobby. The man yanks a rabbit out of a hat, you don’t yell cheater, do you? You *know* it’s a trick. It’s *supposed* to be a trick. All you do is clap like crazy and think, Hey, what a clever fucker. Same with politics. Bunch of tricksters, they’re all making moves....Dirty isn’t operative. Nature of the show. (224)

Politics isn’t the only widely-recognized and acknowledged form of trickery. Storytellers manipulate reality, too, and no one calls them cheats, either. When the magic trick of storytelling is done well, as when O’Brien does it, there is nothing to do but acknowledge the cleverness of the magician/storyteller. Hey, what a clever fucker.

If Kathy knows that her husband *is* a trickster, she is unwilling to admit it, at least to Tony Carbo. But she carries her own secrets: a lost weekend with another man, the
way that John would pretend to be asleep and watch her, while she pretended not to know he was watching, the way he would yell angry things in his sleep in a voice that didn't sound quite like his own.

Remembering the trip to Las Vegas makes Kathy begin ponder the nature of relationships; how it's always a gamble, and sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Kathy knows this as she pushes the boat back into the water and starts trying to find her way back to civilization, within the construct of this particular hypothesis. As she gambles with her life, moving back into the Lake of the Woods, she perhaps pondered the nature of her own relationship. “So deal the cards, she thought. Always a chance. No play, no pay” (229). Perhaps Kathy Wade was willing to gamble on her husband one more time; perhaps she was moving towards a happy ending when she got lost somewhere along the way. Perhaps.

The following theory offered, in Chapter Twenty-four, is that maybe Kathy, finally overwhelmed by the lost election, the lies their marriage has been built on, and her own guilt for cheating on her husband, killed herself. “Certainly the pressures were enormous. She was on Valium and Restoril [the former an anti-anxiety medication and the latter a sleep aid]. The ruins were everywhere. Her husband, the election, the unborn child in her heart. So maybe she’d planned it, or half-planned it” (250). Perhaps the truth was just that simple. “Maybe there were secret forces she could not tolerate. Maybe memory, maybe drugs. Maybe in the Lake of the Woods, where all is repetition, she whispered, ‘Why?’ and then sank into the sound of the endless answer—Who knows? Who ever knows” (254)?
This is equally true within the construct of the hypothesis, the construct of the novel at large, and the reader’s engagement with the text. Kathy is perhaps searching for answers where there are none, the novel offers no answers, and the reader must ask the same questions Kathy Wade asks, and eventually come to the same answers: Who knows? Who ever knows?

Chapter Twenty-seven is the final “Hypothesis” chapter that deals with Kathy Wade’s disappearance; Chapter Thirty-one, the final “Hypothesis” chapter, deals with the disappearance of John Wade. It is in Chapter Twenty-seven that the book finally presents the hypothesis that John Wade did kill his wife.

Unreal, John Wade decided...he would remember thinking how impossible it was....Why? he kept thinking, but he didn’t know. All he knew was fury....Why? he kept thinking, except there were no answers and never would be. Maybe sunlight. Maybe the absence of sunlight. Maybe electricity. Maybe a vanishing act. Maybe a pair of snakes swallowing each other along a trail in Pinkville. Maybe his father. Maybe secrecy. Maybe humiliation and loss. Maybe madness. Maybe evil.

(273)

Even within this grisly hypothesis, the narrative voice presents John Wade as someone looking for hypotheses of his own. If he did kill her, why would he? Where would that murderous rage come from? Just as the text has no answers for the reader, John Wade’s consciousness offers no answers to him.

The final “Hypothesis” chapter, Chapter Thirty-one, is also the final chapter in the book. The narrator reminds the reader that “all is supposition” (299), and wonders why it
is so hard to imagine a happy ending to the Wades’ story. Perhaps Sorcerer had one more
trick up his sleeve, and made himself and his wife disappear into a place where they
could live happily ever after. The narrator seems to like that idea. He tells us in a
footnote that “it’s a matter of taste, or aesthetics, and the possibility of the boil is one
possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting. Besides, there’s the weight
of evidence. He was crazy about her” (300). But then the narrator acknowledges that the
idea that Wade didn’t murder his wife may be too “sentimental,” acknowledging that
“there’s no accounting for taste” (300).

But in the end, the narrator himself doesn’t know what to believe, because

truth won’t allow it. Because there is no end, happy or otherwise. 
Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts, such as they are, finally
spin off into the inconclusiveness of conclusion. Mystery finally claims
us….The ambiguity may be dissatisfying, even irritating, but this is a love
story. There is no tidiness. Blame it on the human heart. One way or
another, it seems, we all perform vanishing tricks, effacing history,
locking up our lives and slipping day by day into the graying shadows.
Our whereabouts are uncertain. All secrets lead to the dark, and beyond
the dark there is only maybe. (301)

And that is all that the narrator is willing to give the reader: maybes, possibilities
that exist only along the fringe of consciousness, on the edge of what memory and fact
can give us. In the end, we can only conjecture about what really happened inside of
John Wade’s own head, just as we can only conjecture at what goes on inside anyone
else’s head, or what really happens in In the Lake of the Woods. And so in the end, the narrative dissolves into mystery once again:

John Wade made his last broadcast in the early morning hours of Sunday, October 26, 1986....At no point during this discourse did John Wade ever admit to the slightest knowledge of Kathy’s whereabouts, nor indicate that he was withholding information. Which brings me to wonder. Is it possible that even to John Wade everything was the purest puzzle? That one day he woke up to find his wife missing, and missing forever, and that all else was unknown? That the clues led nowhere? That explanations were beyond him? (302)

The narrator, who has spoken to the reader in third person within the text, addressing the reader only directly in footnotes, finally enters the body of the text and offers what may be the most telling theory of all. “Sorrow, it seems to me, may be the true absolute. John grieved for Kathy. She was his world. They could have been so happy together. He loved her and she was gone and he could not bear the sorrow” (302).

Perhaps the most simple and believable explanation is that John Wade did murder his wife. Whether or not he did, the fact remains that he loved her, she is gone, and, one way or another, he follows her off to wherever it was she went. This is all that matters to the narrator—John loved Kathy, she went away, and he went after her. But the narrator is unwilling to jump to any conclusions, and finally, the narrator leaves the reader with questions, because that’s all there is left to leave: “Can we believe that he was not a monster but a man? That he was innocent of everything except his life? Could the truth be so simple? So terrible” (303)?
The narrator leaves us with the image of John Wade "declaiming to the wind—her name, his love. He was heading north, weaving from island to island, skimming fast between water and sky" (303). After that, no one—including the narrator—knows. But the narrator gives few very telling reasons why he—and the reader—cannot know in the other instances where he addresses the readers, in the "Evidence" chapters.

Before the final hypothesis chapter, which adds footnotes in which the narrator addresses the reader before abandoning footnotes just before the end of the book and addressing the reader in the corpus of the text, there are only seven footnotes in which the narrator speaks directly to the reader. These places where the narrator speaks expose some interesting ideas about the impetus behind the telling of this story, the art of storytelling in general, and the mysteries of storytelling and how they often mirror, intermingle with, and help shape the mysteries of reality.

The seven "Evidence" chapters—Chapters Two, Five, Eleven. Sixteen. Twenty, Twenty-five, and Thirty—offer some very interesting and varied items for the reader’s contemplation as the mystery develops. There are, among other things, interviews with a number of the fictional characters who populate the text, quotes from the memoirs and biographies of such politicians as Woodrow Wilson and Richard Nixon, quotes on missing persons, items from the Peers Commission, which investigated the incident at My Lai, actual testimony from Lieutenant William Calley’s court marshal, quotes from texts on coping with traumatized veterans, some tidbits on magic, and nine exhibits: The infamous teakettle, a photograph of the boat, photographs of the houseplant debris that John Wade boiled with his teakettle, polling data on the election that destroyed John Wade’s political career, photos of the boathouse and the cottage, a photograph of John
Wade at age twelve, in which the text insists that he is “Husky, not fat” (25), a list of the magic tricks found in John Wade’s box of tricks, and the numbers from the primary.

Seven of these pieces of evidence seem interesting enough to the narrator to comment on them in footnotes. The first such item is a quote from Sheriff Art Lux, following a quote from Vinny Pearson that accuses Wade of murdering his wife: Lux is quoted as saying “Vinny’s the theory man. I deal in facts. The case is wide open” (30). The narrator then introduces himself to the reader by saying

Yes, and I’m a theory man, too. Biographer, historian, medium—call me what you want—but even after four years of hard labor I’m left with little more than supposition and possibility. John Wade was a magician; he did not give away many tricks. Moreover, there are certain mysteries that weave through life itself, human motive and human desire. (30)

The narrator—who at times sounds very much like O’Brien himself—is further highlighting the mysteries within the text by pointing out how they mirror the mysteries outside of the text. Human motive and human desire are things that are impossible to know outside of ourselves, and while one of the powers that stories have is to allow us access through narrative to other people’s thoughts, the narrator is pointing out that the access he offers us to the thoughts of John and Kathy Wade are the purest conjecture, just as they would be in real life. “Even much of what might appear as fact in this narrative—action, word, thought—must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events” (30).

But though, like this narrator, O’Brien did indeed labor for four years on this book, it is probably just as incorrect to view this speaker as the author Tim O’Brien as it
was to confuse character O’Brien with author O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*. This is, after all, a work of fiction, not the meticulously researched document of supposed facts that the narrator makes it out to be. But this narrator—who does bear striking resemblance to Tim O’Brien himself, at times—does act as the voice of reason, telling how storytelling can be used for good, versus John Wade’s ideas that the imaginative can only be used for evil, for erasing, for forgetting.

“I have tried, of course, to be faithful to the evidence,” the narrator tells us, “Yet evidence is not truth. It is only evident. In any case, Kathy Wade is forever missing, and if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book” (30). Again, the narrator is emphasizing the fact that facts do not necessarily equal truth. They only equal evidence, since perception shapes what those facts can be interpreted to mean. There is no absolute truth to be found, inside or outside of this book, and the reader needs to be aware of that fact and keep his mind open to possibilities, not merely to facts.

The next time the reader is addressed is after exhibit nine, the results of the Primary, with Wade getting 21% of the vote, Durkee getting 73% of the vote, and “Other” getting 6%. The “Other” figure is the one of interest of the narrator. “Aren’t we all? John Wade—he’s beyond knowing. He’s an other. For all my years of struggle with this depressing record…the man’s soul remains for me an absolute and impenetrable unknown” (101). This alterity is what stories are used to explore, according to the narrator, as opposed to Wade himself, who uses stories to eliminate it, to keep others away, to hide the facts. But the narrator insists that what motivates him to continue telling this story “is a craving to force entry into another heart…to perform miracles of
knowing” (101). This is something that stories can be used for, to explore other people in ways that real life does not afford, to know that which otherwise cannot be known. But this is not true magic, because in the end, all the storyteller can do is attempt “to penetrate by hypothesis, by daydream, by scientific investigation those leaden walls that encase the human spirit, that define it and guard it and hold it forever inaccessible” (101). But in the end, it is inaccessible, and that is why this narrator sounds uncertain, why there is so much supposition, why the narrator sometimes acts as though he knows things that even the characters being explored do not know. The otherness of other people is something that fascinates us, but while entering the thoughts of others is one of the magical powers that stories afford us, acting like it’s anything other than conjecture would remove the mystery that ultimately makes the art of storytelling so fascinating in the first place. Because in the end, whether in a story or in real life, “Our lovers, our husbands, our wives, our fathers, our gods—they are all beyond us” (101).

The next footnote deals with the factual information regarding the massacre at My Lai. The narrator tells us that he visited the village during the course of researching the book, saying that “The ditch is still there. I found it easily. Just five or six feet deep, shallow and unimposing, yet it was as if I had been there before, in my dreams, or in some other life” (146). The narrator later tells us that like O’Brien, he was in fact there before, working the area around My Lai as a soldier a year after the massacre, but the narrator pulls the reader into this dream in which everyone goes through this massacre through the eyes of Sorcerer, takes the reader back there in another life, in a dream. That is another power that storytelling has—the power to take us places we could never
otherwise go, show us other worlds, through the act of storytelling, the art of dreaming out loud and leading others through those dreams.

The next footnote shows the reader why the narrator keeps on pursuing this story, keeps chasing possibilities.

I arrived in-country a year after John Wade, in 1969, and walked exactly the ground that he walked....I know what happened that day. I know how it happened. I know why. It was the sunlight. It was the wickedness that soaks into your blood and slowly heats up and begins to boil. Frustration, partly. Rage, partly. The enemy was invisible....They killed us with land mines and booby traps; they disappeared into the night....But it went beyond that. Something more mysterious...the unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness. This is not to justify what occurred on March 16, 1968, for in my view such justifications are both futile and outrageous. Rather, it’s to bear witness to the mystery of evil. (199)

This is another function that stories have: through exploring the demons that haunt John Wade, the narrator is able to exercise some of his own, because in the end, they’re all the same demons. Through the act of telling John Wade’s stories, the narrator is able to objectify his own experience, pinning down certain truths, giving some of the monsters faces, making up other truths to explain what it was like; to try and make others who couldn’t possibly understand what it felt like to be there feel what it was like.

Through this exploration, through this bearing witness to the mysteries of evil, the evil perhaps becomes a little easier to face, if not to understand.
The next footnote asks “Why do we care about Lizzie Borden, or Judge Crater, or Lee Harvey Oswald, or the Little Big Horn? Mystery! Because of all that cannot be known… It’s a standoff. The human desire for certainty collides with our love of enigma” (266). This too is another function of stories: to provide a battleground for that standoff between the desire for certainty and the love of enigma. The narrator offers a voice for Tim O’Brien here: for a story to work, those two things need to engage each other as the reader engages the text, but for a story to truly succeed, at the end of the story, there should be no clear winner. Certain things need to be revealed to carry the story forward; other things need to remain hidden to keep the story moving forward. Enigma, however, can only rarely lose, because it only rarely does in real life. The narrator finally concedes that “The truth is at once simple and baffling: John Wade was a pro. He did his magic, then walked away. Everything else is conjecture. No answers, yet mystery itself carries me on” (266).

Even as the narrator says this, the reader cannot help but apply this statement elsewhere. John Wade is a fictional character. But Tim O’Brien is a real magician, who also does not give away any tricks. He, too, is a pro. He, too, does his magic—writing In the Lake of the Woods—and then walks away; everything else is conjecture, but mystery itself carries the discerning reader forward, as well.

The next footnote refers to a quotation from Ruth Rasmussen, telling the narrator that he should probably stop chasing the ghosts of John and Kathy Wade, both long gone by now: “you should think about getting back to your own life. Don’t want to end up missing it” (295). The narrator then at once points out the greatest disadvantage and the greatest driving force storytellers have: “Missing my life—she’s right. But there is also
the craving to know what cannot be known....How much is camouflage? How much is guessed at? How many lies get told, and when, and about what” (295)? Storytellers spend their lives inventing other realities, and there is the danger of falling into the trap that John Wade fell into, living an entire life behind the mirrors in his head, and thus missing his own life. But if storytelling is used for good, not for evil, to explore the unknowable rather than erase it, then the storyteller can exist in both realms, memory and imagination, fact and possibility. Because, after all, “We find truth inside, or not at all” (295). John Wade could not find any truth inside, so he had no basis other than deceit on which to build his life. The narrator, on the other hand, seems to be on a quest to discover some kind of truth inside.

Because, finally, the narrator says in the final footnote, “For me, after a quarter century, nothing much remains of that ugly war. A handful of splotchy images” (298). The narrator has some memories in common with Tim O’Brien—the death of Chip Merrick is mentioned in this note, a happening-truth that O’Brien writes about in some detail in the nonfiction If I Die in a Combat Zone, as well as showing up in fictional form as the death of Curt Lemon in The Things They Carried—and here O’Brien, the narrator, and John Wade perhaps come as close to each other as they ever have. The narrator confesses that like John Wade, I cannot remember much, I cannot feel much. Maybe erasure is necessary....Still, it’s odd. On occasion, especially when I’m alone, I find myself wondering if these old tattered memories were lifted from someone else’s life, or from a piece of fiction I once read or once heard about. My own war does not belong to me. In a peculiar way, even
at this very instant, the ordeal of John Wade—the long decades of silence and lies and secrecy—all this has a vivid, living clarity that seems far more authentic than my own faraway experience. Maybe that’s what this book is for. To remind me. To give me back my vanished life.

Wade makes his life vanish through stories. The narrator, though, is desperately trying to reclaim the life that time and distance have erased. The only way to reclaim things that we have lost is through the act of telling stories. We find truth from within, or not at all. We use stories to make good on our own silence, as well as the silence of others. Stories give us back what we’ve lost. Stories can save us.
CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION: DEFINING FICTION THROUGH O’BRIEN’S WORK

As the shadowy narrator of In the Lake of the Woods says of the novel’s protagonist, “John Wade was a pro. He did his magic, then walked away. Everything else is conjecture. No answers, yet mystery itself carries me on” (O’Brien 266). That’s what makes O’Brien’s fiction so masterful—the mystery. He, too, is a pro, leaving the reader with no answers available anywhere but outside the logic of the construct, in the imagination of the reader. It is difficult to arrive at any firm conclusions about O’Brien’s work; reading any one of his books this study examined without an eye open for the unexpected, without a mind open to unseen and unforeseeable possibilities, is to miss O’Brien’s greatest accomplishment: mystery, pure and complicated.

O’Brien is a master craftsman, and whatever he puts into his texts is there for a reason, likewise, anything obviously left out is clearly left out for a reason. Attempting to answer any questions absolutely, attempting to fill in the blanks that O’Brien leaves us is to fail in any interpretation of his work. Once the text has been, engaged the reader has gotten involved. Once the reader is involved, once the questions are asked, the work is a success, according to O’Brien. Whether the questions are answered—or can be answered—is not as important to O’Brien as the simple asking of questions, the wondering, the engagement. Since O’Brien’s take on realism centers on the ambiguity inherent in life, he presents that ambiguity as faithfully as he can. There is no certainty in
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185

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life, and there is no certainty within the confines of the constructs that O'Brien creates in each of his texts, either. All anyone can really ever do is guess: whether something is true, how what really happened differs from what we remember, what is going to happen next. It's all beyond us. We can never really know with anything even close to absolute certainty. All we can do is make our best guesses, support our hypotheses with evidence, and ultimately just wait and see.

It is with this same uncertainty, then, that O'Brien's work must be approached. He is one of those writers for whom what is missing from the text—the lacunae, the things that he never tells us, be it what happened to Sidney Martin or Cacciato in Going After Cacciato, how character O'Brien differs from author O'Brien is The Things They Carried, or what really happened to Kathy Wade in In the Lake of the Woods—is equally, if not sometimes more, important to the things that are not missing.

This uncertain reflection through fiction of life's uncertainties makes O'Brien's work difficult to study but easy to read. This uncertainty, however, offers an ideal forum for pondering the mysteries of life—love, fear, courage, and most important of all, the enigma that is the act of storytelling.

So, this brings up the questions this study has been asking. What is fiction? Where does fiction come from? What function does fiction serve? Fiction is the magical art of telling stories, conveying not only what happened but what was experienced in the happening, and joining those elements together with what might have happened. Stories join the past to the future, the facts to the possibilities, the definite to the maybe, and fuses all of these elements into something tangible that can last forever. Stories are more than just remembering what was or imagining what might be; stories are making those
facts and those possibilities into something more than either just fact or just possibility.

As O'Brien wrote in *The Things They Carried*.

sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever.

That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future.
Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity,
when memory is erased, when there is nothing left but the story. (40)

What the best magicians do is make the invisible visible—and vice-versa—and
*that’s* the magic in telling stories: making the intangible tangible, making the abstract
concepts of memory and imagination concrete, giving us the ability to wrap words around
the unseen, and to pluck out of thin air the unseeable. Stories are the naming of things,
stories are the ability to give our worst fears and our darkest secrets names and faces,
since it’s always easier to face the devils we can see than the ones we cannot. After our
experiences have been experienced and the memories start to fade, the stories can remain,
a permanent testament to where we’ve been and where we’ve always dreamed of going.
In many situations, the story is all we have. The tougher the situation, the more
important the story becomes—to give us resolutions in our imaginations where memory
did not, to offer some illusion of certainty in a morally ambiguous world, to show us the
endless possibilities available to us. Because the possibilities in life are virtually endless,
so the most accurate representative of that is a work of fiction where the possibilities are
endless, as well. Once the facts have been exhausted, the possibilities are the only thing
remaining. Once the possibilities are exhausted, whether in life or in fiction, tomorrow
ceases to matter. Then what are we left with? Nothing. O'Brien makes certain that
doesn't happen in his fiction.

Fiction derives from the intersection of memory and imagination, the place where
facts leave off and possibilities pick up:

You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the
intersection of past and present. The memory traffic feeds into a rotary in
your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon
imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a
thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and
go for the ride, putting down things as they come at you. That's the real
obsession. All those stories. (38)

This place where the memory intersects with the imagination is the place where
Paul Berlin goes for the night while he dreams about what might have happened to
Cacciato; it is the observation post in his mind, the place where he can retreat to ask the
questions, "what part was fact and what part was extension of fact? And how were the
facts separated from the possibilities? What had really happened and what merely might
have happened? How did it end" (O'Brien, Cacciato 25, italics added)? Fiction comes
from the place where we go when we need to find out how something ends, using the
facts—the memory of our own perceptions—and supplementing those memories with
imagination to figure out what might have happened, what could have happened, or even
what should have happened. This is an important place, because life in the living does
not always organize itself into neatly ordered beginnings, middles, and ends.
Stories come from the place to where John Wade longs to disappear in *In the Lake of the Woods*, that "large dark world where one plus one would always equal zero" (O’Brien, *Lake* 76). John Wade shows the dangers of leaning too hard on possibilities alone, as he uses his imagination to hide facts rather than extend them. O’Brien’s other characters, however, show us the danger of leaning too hard on facts alone: if imagination is left out, if the possibilities are ignored, then the facts are all we have. Without the possibilities, Paul Berlin probably would never have found the courage to make it through the night on the observation post, much less the rest of the war. Without the possibilities, character O’Brien would not have been able to bring the dead back to life through his stories, and the dead would have simply faded away. Stories come out of that foggy place where memory and imagination come together, where what happened ends and what might have happened begins, where the possibilities shoot off in a thousand directions, daring us to follow them for a while, to squint into that haze between what we remember and what we dream as we watch “The letters undarken and come forth” (Wright 66).

So what is the point? “By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that really happened…and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not occur but nonetheless help clarify and explain” (O’Brien, *Things* 179-180). O’Brien point out that “the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have resulted in paralysis or worse” (179). Norman Bowker in *The Things They Carried* cannot find anyone to tell his stories to, and as a result he is paralyzed, unable to figure out how to go forward because of his inability to
look back on where he’s been and what he’s done, eventually taking his own life because of it. John Wade from In the Lake of the Woods is unwilling to tell his stories, preferring to hide them away, and the end result is more or less the same: he builds his life on illusion, and when reality intrudes, when the facts come roaring into his imaginary world, that world collapses, and he eventually disappears because of it.

In Going After Cacciato, however, Paul Berlin spends the first half of the war afraid. Through the simple act of making up a story, though, he gives himself the opportunity to see what bravery might look like, and perhaps give him the courage to be in reality who he tried to be in his dreams, and, in doing so, perhaps give himself the courage to make it through the war. Of course, O’Brien never tells us if this is what happens to Paul Berlin—it’s only presented as a possibility—but it is certainly a viable and attractive possibility.

Likewise, character O’Brien from The Things They Carried is able to use stories to keep alive the people in his life who have died, make them talk, keep them close to him, save their lives through stories where real life could not save them. And in doing so, through telling stories, we are able to save ourselves: we are able to save for today the people we were yesterday, to save for tomorrow the people we are today, and to join the people we were a lifetime ago with the people we will be a lifetime from now. Without stories, memory fades, possibilities cease to matter, and if we lose tomorrow and yesterday, all we have is now—which places limits on life that have no business being there. Stories can allow us to experience things we couldn’t otherwise experience and allow others to share our experiences, allow us to dream others’ dreams along with them,
and allow others to dream along with us. Storytelling is perhaps the single most powerful
ability we have.

Tim O’Brien is a master magician and storyteller, and he doesn’t give away many
tricks. While so much is left out of his work, all that nothingness, all of those lacunae
and unanswerable questions that he puts into his work can really only be approached one
way: rather than looking into the abyss that O’Brien leaves in his work and seeing
nothing, we must look into it and see everything.

The possibilities, after all, are endless.
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