Booth

Volume 7 | Issue 9 Article 3

9-18-2015

A Conversation with Tim O'Brien

James A. Hanna

A Conversation with Tim O’Brien

Abstract

Tim O’Brien is the author of The Things They Carried. *Based on his experiences as a foot soldier during the Vietnam War, the short-story collection published in 1990 helped to define Vietnam War literature and is now widely taught in middle- and high-school curricula. O’Brien’s other books include the novels July, July; In the Lake of the Woods; and Going After Cacciato. His work has earned a National Book Award, the Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award, and the Pritzker Military Library Literature Award. Now retired from teaching, O’Brien served as the endowed chair of the MFA program at the University of Texas San Marcos biannually from 2003 to 2012.*

Cover Page Footnote

A Conversation with Tim O’Brien was originally published at *Booth*.

BOOTH

A JOURNAL

September 18, 2015

A Conversation with Tim O'Brien

by James A. Hanna

Tim O'Brien is the author of The Things They Carried. *Based on his experiences as a foot soldier during the Vietnam War, the short-story collection published in 1990 helped to define Vietnam War literature and is now widely taught in middle- and high-school curricula. O'Brien's other books include the novels* July, July; In the Lake of the Woods; *and* Going After Cacciato. *His work has earned a National Book Award, the Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award, and the Pritzker Military Library Literature Award. Now retired from teaching, O'Brien served as the endowed chair of the MFA program at the University of Texas San Marcos biannually from 2003 to 2012.*

James Hanna: I heard that you like to golf.

Tim O'Brien: I do.

JH: I do, too. I'm pretty bad at it. But I feel it's kind of like writing in that every once in a while you get that great swing in—or you get that good sentence—and that's what keeps you coming back. What similarities do you find?

TO: Well, that one, for sure. Golf is partly a game of muscle memory. The more you think, the worse you get. So you do lots and lots of repetitive practice, and then try to empty your mind as much as you can, even though it's difficult, especially on that first tee. Thinking too much just gets you in trouble — keep your left arm straight, follow through, do this, do that – but of course all those thoughts freeze muscle memory. Similarly, when it comes to writing fiction, I try not to over-use those

rational or critical faculties. They are always there, of course – at least to an extent – but you try to enter a dream state as best you can. You go with a kind of "muscle memory" of the imagination, allowing story and language to flow, shutting down as far as possible the so-called "rational" portion of your mind, permitting the dream of your story to unwind without excessive censorship or linguistic nitpicking. For me, at least, I need to achieve an almost hypnotic state of mind in which I can trust my own story. Same way a golfer needs to trust his swing. To trust in a story is everything. For me, anyway. It's everything. Later on, of course, the process of revision is almost entirely "rational," almost entirely self-conscious.

JH: That's fascinating. One of the things that you spoke about earlier—you seem kind of obsessed with this idea of "truth." How you can be so critical of truth and critical of your own work, but there's got to be that point where you do trust—in the writing, in the story you're telling. What are the processes of trusting in your story versus questioning it and digging deeper?

TO: One thing that's always been a constant in my life—from the time I was a little boy all the way up to the present —is that I'm a believer in the extraordinary as a requirement for a decent story. You wouldn't go into a bar and tell somebody sitting next to you, "Hey, I've got a great story for you. I got up this morning and ate some bacon. It was pretty good bacon. And then I had a waffle, and that was pretty good. Then I turned on the radio . . ." Pretty soon the guy sitting next to you in the bar would think, "Why is this idiot telling me such boring, ordinary, banal stuff? It's not even a story."

When you tell a story, there needs to be an element of the uncommon or the surprising to capture and to delight a reader's imagination. This weird, strange, marvelous thing happened today. That's what brings us to tell stories in the first place – something off the beaten path, something unique and fresh and a little surprising. And you wouldn't deviate from it very much. As a writer, you must learn to trust that extraordinary incident or anecdote or opening paragraph.

For instance, a story might begin: "Last night, my two-year-old kid recited *Romeo and Juliet.* And you'd say, "What?" And I'd say, "Yeah, the whole thing." "But your kid can't talk." "Yeah, well, now he can." "You're kidding. Gimme a break. That's not true." "Nah, it is true. Now sit back and let me tell you all about it."

So, you trust in the extraordinary. That's what stories always do. They illuminate the ordinary through extraordinary plots and characters and twists and turns. Ahab chasing a whale. Huck drifting down a river. Cacciato running away from a war. A good story, in my view, uses extraordinary events and characters and circumstances as

a means of shedding light on fundamental emotions or spiritual conditions that all of us experience – love, joy, despair, loneliness, anger, moral uncertainty, guilt, and so on. A storyteller doesn't dwell much on stuff such as waffles and bacon, unless it's extraordinarily bad bacon that sent somebody to the hospital with a shut-down liver. *Then* the bacon becomes a matter of life and death. In other words, a fiction writer tries to tell extraordinary stories that ultimately reflect the most basic and ordinary human emotions and experiences.

JH: It seems to me, and maybe I'm more sensitive to it, having been surrounded by stories in an MFA program, but it seems to me that now, maybe more than ever, people are talking about stories, are more aware of the power of stories in our lives. Do you feel that people are beginning to see stories as more than entertainment?

TO: Well, I think there's been a wave, since the early '60s, of stories that a certain self–referential quality. Such stories are as much about storytelling itself and about the craft of writing as they are about the characters and incidents being portrayed. I'm thinking, for example, of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five.* You know, he begins the book by writing about writing. Vonnegut tells us about meeting his new publisher, and he tells us about his wee-hour phone calls to old friends in which he obliquely discusses the very book we are now reading. Vonnegut tell us, in effect, "Well, I'm about to write my Dresden novel."

It's a self-consciousness about stories that wasn't explicitly present in the work of Jane Austen or George Eliot or Sinclair Lewis or Charles Dickens or Ernest Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald or Irwin Shaw or Willa Cather or Joseph Conrad. I mean, Conrad—maybe a little bit. Especially with *Heart of Darkness* and that opening scene in which Marlow begins narrating his story. But even with Conrad, it's not really self-conscious, it's not self-referential, it's just a means of segueing into his tale of a journey into the darkest human savagery. I think the writers I mentioned a moment ago would be very surprised at the ways in which contemporary fiction so often — and so directly — addresses fiction itself, craft itself, story itself. Writers such as John Barth and Donald Barthelme and Borges and Marquez – they opened up a new and fascinating aspect to the art of storytelling.

JH: Do you think that's just a natural stage in storytelling evolution? Or is there something more to it?

TO: I think it's progress of a sort. A powerful new mode of investigation, a powerful new tool for writers. The same as in the sciences. You come up with something like "evolution" and you apply it, not just to biology, but also to anthropology, chemistry, physics. All kinds of things—sociology. We're permitted as writers to be conscious of

ourselves as *writers.* We're permitted to be explicit about the fact that we're making something out of nothing. We're given the liberty to call attention to the made-up, invented nature of the story we're telling, the "untrue" truths of the entire fictional endeavor. Today, writers of novels and short stories have the freedom to examine one's their objectives and motives and storytelling strategies. The freedom to remind readers, at least now and then, that they are in the presence of make-believe, in the presence of artistic imagination, but not in the presence of so-called "reality." The freedom to walk alongside one's own story, the freedom to guide or to comment, the freedom to wonder aloud about issues that were in the past held strictly secret from the reader. I view these liberties as great assets.

JH: So, one of the things that struck me about your story is that you graduated and then were drafted into the war. I graduated my undergrad right before 9/11. Fortunately for me by then the draft was—

TO: Gone.

JH: Yeah, it was history. But it was pretty easy to imagine having to go over there. And it just struck me how differently soldiers were treated, especially between those two wars. There was really that sense, going into Afghanistan, that going after the terrorists was the right thing to do. I was living in Texas at the time, and there were strong feelings about that. But then Iraq came along, and the pendulum of public opinion swung back the other way. People were still really supportive of the troops. Maybe not of the war, but of the troops. Have you thought much about how public opinion has changed in response to soldiers?

TO: Well, I have. I've been asked about it and talked about it a lot. And it's extremely complicated. I feel always helpless because there's so much to say, so many facets to it. In general—yeah, public opinion seems to be supportive of the military in a way that probably wasn't there during my war, Vietnam.

JH: Were you ever harassed when you came back?

TO: I mean, that's where it gets complicated. All those stories about being spat on, being called a baby killer—I never witnessed any of that. None of it ever happened to me. Nor did I ever see it happen to others. I think 99 percent is bullshit. No doubt there were some such incidents, and I'm sure that sort of thing occurred occasionally, but not on the almost universal scale that Vietnam vets seem to suggest. I suspect that many veterans heard about this stuff, or read about it, and unconsciously appropriated it for themselves. "Yeah, I came back from the war. I was spat on." There wouldn't be enough saliva to go around for all the times I've listened to these identical, almost

word-for-word anecdotes about being spat on or being publicly decried as a baby killer. I fear that part of it is self-deception mixed with a kind of self-pity, you know, and also a way of making claims upon the pity of others. "Poor me! I'm a victim!" These days, of course, vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are endlessly told, "Thank you for your service." I suppose it's meant to be a corrective to our understanding of the mistreatment of Vietnam vets. In fact, I hear those words myself quite often – "Thank you for your service." But it gives me the creeps. I don't want to be thanked for killing people, for participating in the deaths of three million Vietnamese. Moreover, the folks who say "Thank you for your service" – even with the kindest intentions – have not the slightest idea about what they're thanking me for. And on top of that, they don't want to know what they're thanking me for. They don't want to hear the ugly realities. They don't want to know about dead children, about decapitated old women, about fried villages or about raped teenagers or about the lifelong bitterness and cynicism and guilt that I carry with me to bed every night. A good friend of mine, Larry Heinemann, a Vietnam veteran who won the National Book Award for his novel *Paco's Story,* feels as I do about this "thank-you-for-your-service" stuff. "When people utter those words to me," Larry once said, "I just tell them, 'No thanks needed." That's exactly my view. No thanks needed.

JH: It seems like you're talking about the "willful ignorance," and I wonder, too, if what you're trying to do with your stories, having written about war, is to expose that.

TO: It is. It is. Big part of it. Huge part of it. And all its complication. Not just your standard gore stuff. You can get that on any movie channel, night or day. It's the moral quandaries and uncertainties and struggles that go on, not just during the war, but for years and years and years afterward, as Vonnegut wrote poignantly in *Slaughterhouse*. Most of that book takes place out of the war, after the war. It's Tralfamadore and Billy Pilgrim's home. War has been over for a long time. And Billy Pilgrim is a classic tormented soul who can't forget his terrifying and ugly experiences. It's post-traumatic stress, I guess, of a *wild* caliber. But, yeah, my labors as a writer are in part a way of doing battle against willful ignorance and platitudes such as "Thank you for your service."

The older I get, the more I—I hated war to begin with, but I'm more and more that way now. There's so little worth killing people for. And Vietnam is a glaring example of the utter waste of it all. I mean, look, we lost that war. And yet who in this country goes around forty-five years later thinking, "Oh dear, what a catastrophe! My life's a nightmare! I've lost all my liberties! Dominoes toppled all across Asia! Communists landed in San Francisco!" *Nobody thinks such stuff. NOBODY!* Myself included. And I'm a veteran of that war. Three million dead Vietnamese. God knows how many orphans and widows, God knows how many mutilated children, God knows how

many lost arms and legs, God knows how many grieving mothers and fathers and wives and lovers and sons and daughters. For what? Right now, at this instant, American tourists are bicycling up and down Highway One in Vietnam. American high school and college kids are eating noodle soup on the streets of Hanoi. American businessmen are cutting deals in Saigon. Three million dead Vietnamese, about 60,000 dead American boys, and now no one in this country devotes a waking thought to the fact that we lost that war. On a personal, daily basis no actually cares. And if no one cares, why did we go through all that horror and brutality in the first place? Three million dead people, and we don't give it a thought.

JH: One of the things I'm fascinated about in your writing is the dichotomies you point to, and the fact that you're here talking about the ugliness of war. That's what war is, but at the same time you've written about it in such beautiful ways. You've captured the paradoxes and the things that are so hard to express that make war beautiful, in a way. Not war itself, obviously, but the stories. Is that something you've thought about consciously? Trying to bring some kind of beauty to war?

TO: Not to war, but to expressions about war. It's a little bit like the Gettysburg Address [chuckles]. It's a beautiful, short document, every word in its place. Its language is poetic and flowing. There's great beauty in it. But the intent of the Gettysburg Address is not to say, "Boy, those bodies over there. All those dead people—boy, are they beautiful." Lincoln's gorgeous language was certainly not intended to endorse or to celebrate the ugliness of war. The purpose was to express sadness and mourning and moral paradox and pathos—through beautiful language.

JH: Do you feel like you would have become a writer if you hadn't gone to war?

TO: Yeah. There's no way of being a hundred percent sure, of course. But, let's imagine I hadn't gone to war. I might have fled to Canada. Or I might've been locked up in a jail cell. Those were the only visible alternatives. And yet, had I ended up in jail or in Canada, I would've most certainly had some interesting, emotional, and morally complicated stories to write. A life in exile. A life in Stillwater Prison. So yes, I think I would have become a writer in any event.

Even as a little boy of nine or ten, I wanted very much to be a writer. I loved books and I wanted to make my own. I was pretty sure that I would one day devote myself to writing stories.

I think that the irony of my collision with the war is that I was not a pro-war person. I wasn't a Boy Scout, I hated mosquitoes, I hated camping out, I didn't own or shoot guns. That whole world was alien to me. So I brought to Vietnam the eyes and

sensibilities of an alien. A skepticism. A distrust. An anti-war stance. I think if I had walked into that war wholly supportive, it would have been blah writing, a bunch of standard or mediocre or outright bad pieces of prose. For any writer of fiction, I believe, it can't hurt to bring to your story a sense of the alien, of the outsider, of skepticism. Even distrust. Distrust of oneself, of one's own motives, and of the motives of others. And I'm not talking only about war. I'm talking about any subject. Skepticism keeps a writer vigilant.

JH: And that gets back to what I was going at earlier, with this being critical with your stories, while at the same time seeing the good parts of it that aren't Hallmark-y. How do you do that?

TO: It's never foolproof, but I notice little errors when I'm reading other people's books, and of course when I'm reading my own first drafts. I'll notice cliches. Grammatical blunders. Melodrama. Artificial-sounding dialogue. I'll think, "God, I didn't like that." I guess if you were a musician, you'd be attuned to hearing musical clunkers. Maybe it wouldn't always be obvious to the audience, but if you've done it enough, and if you strive for excellence, if you crave perfection while knowing you'll never achieve it, you pay close attention to such things as rhythm and pace and clarity and harmony and unity and so on. One of my pet peeves – and I'm not exempting my own prose, at least in the early drafts – is the unintentional repetition of certain words or phrases. This bothers me for the same reasons I'm bothered by someone constantly blinking at me, or constantly picking his nose, or constantly giggling at his own utterances. Writers, like all of us, will sometimes develop little tics, and these tics can ruin an otherwise graceful sentence.

JH: Sometimes I'll be reading a book and see a word that I rarely use myself, even though it's a word I know perfectly well. And it's a word I might use otherwise, but for whatever reason, it just doesn't come up in my writing, because I've got my own tics. Has the craft gotten easier for you, or has your process changed over time?

TO: No. It's always been trial and error, and it always will be. I'm endlessly seeking, through trial and error, sentences that seem to me fresh and graceful and reasonably with my own temperament and my own Midwestern diction. I'm always seeking sentences that carry a kind of natural music – natural to me, I mean. And I'm always seeking sentences that contain some sort of mystery, some sort of edgy complication or double meaning. For me, the hope is to find language that has a musical quality – a certain sound, a certain rhythm – and that at the same time carries some richness of complication, a mysterious peculiarity. "I love a good funeral." That sentence would interest me. It's efficient. It has its own built-in rhythm. It's simple. A Midwestern plumber might utter it. Yet it's also not simple. I mean, what is there to love about

death? What exactly is a "good" funeral? What is a "bad" funeral? That short sentence has nothing fancy or decorative about it – a fourth grader would know the meaning of each word – and yet the sentence leads us into ambiguities and mysteries that seem to me completely human. One of the stories in *The Things They Carried* is called "How to Tell a True War Story." The first sentence is, "This is true." What is true? I had no idea when I first jotted down that sentence. But I was intrigued. There was instant mystery. And I was also beguiled by the third word, which is the word "true." What could possibly be true enough to be declared "true"? Very little in this world strikes me as completely and absolutely "true." For most so-called "truths" I've encountered, there are opposite or qualifying or contradictory "truths". In any case, I was drawn into an entire story by a very simple three-word sentence. For me, the process of composing a story amounts to a grinding, word by word, sentence by sentence exploration of language itself, a search for beauty and coherence. As far as possible I try not to guide my own stories, but instead I try to listen to the stories as they unfold. Most often, if I listen carefully enough, I'm eventually taken to a place deep inside me, a place where my own passions and fears and moral uncertainties reside.

JH: So it's almost as though language is a conduit into your emotions, your passions, which can then transfer to the reader.

TO: Right. And not just to discover those emotions, but to re-express them. Even to myself. If you feel sad about a dead father, that's pretty standard. But if you can re-express it in a way that's not the typical Hallmark condolence-card stuff – well, that re-expression can open a door to freshness of emotion. By expressing things freshly one can feel things freshly. For instance, in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, a character named Meursault has recently lost his mother. Meursault feels little affect. He's not even sure if his mother died today or yesterday. He attends his mother's wake, and he just sits there. He fidgets, he gets restless, he's bored, he doesn't cry, he doesn't seem to experience any of the standard grief we expect of the bereft. And for remainder of the novel Meursault behaves exactly the same way, even to the point at which he can't seem to feel anything after killing a fellow human being. It seems to me that Camus very successfully sought a fresh way of looking at emotional attachment, and he did so through a story about emotional indifference and/or emotional repression. *The Stranger* is most definitely not a standard Hallmark card. Camus found an extraordinary story that illuminates the ordinary. And I'm fairly sure that he did this by paying heed to his own opening sentence, all the amazing possibilities that were suddenly opened up by that sentence.

JH: Just working at it and working at it until you finally touch that thing, and then you—

TO: You just discover something that's worth the rest of the story. What would happen to somebody who lived his whole life that way, with no affect? And he ends up going to the guillotine, because he's not acting appropriately for other people. You're supposed to cry at your mother's funeral. You're supposed to have a girlfriend, and you're supposed to be sad or remorseful or full of guilt when you kill people. And he's none of those things. But it's a new way of looking at the world. It does illuminate the ordinary.

JH: Have you read anything good lately?

TO: I just finished *A Moveable Feast* for the fourth or fifth time. There's a new version of it out that includes material that hadn't previously been included. The original book was stitched together after his death, largely by Mary Hemingway. Hemingway's grandson, who is a contemporary academic, had—quarreled is too strong a word—disapproved of some of her decisions, of how she arranged some of the chapters. And there is a difference. I think it's a better book now. And I liked it a lot to begin with.

JH: Can I ask you one more? What advice would you give to writers?

TO: Well, I'll offer two suggestions. One is to be incredibly stubborn. Sit your butt down, every day, or pretty much every day. Not once a week and not once every two weeks, but pretty much every day. It's a regular, returning thing. At least for creating fiction. Poetry probably operates somewhat differently. Maybe you can sit down for six hours and get a great poem out of it, and then return to poetry two weeks later. But with an ongoing story, especially with a novel, I believe regularity is required. I can think of no fellow novelist who is not reasonably disciplined — a "regular" by habit. Even if nothing happens, sit your ass down at eight o'clock in the morning, and then stay there until two o'clock in the afternoon, or whatever. Two hours a day. Six hours a day. What matters is regularity.

Why? Because a certain constancy is necessary to sustain the dream of whatever story you have embarked upon. If you walk away from your story for a week, or for a month, you might later remember intellectually what you were writing about, but the passion dissipates. You lose urgency. You lose that ineffable energy or drive that brought you to begin the story in the first place. You lose your own sense of curiosity about the plot and characters – what will become of that poor fellow who has fallen in love with a pigeon? You somehow stop caring. Or you stop caring enough. Almost always, when circumstances pull me away from a story, I feel a great staleness as I finally sit down to resume work. On some occasions that staleness has been

permanent. Where there was once great passion, great urgency, there was now only something mechanical and dull and dreary.

My second piece of advice is pretty standard. You should read a lot. You should read widely – including books and stories you fear you may not enjoy. Often you're surprised. Often doors of possibility swing open. Often you develop new standards of excellence, or radically revised standards of excellence. It's shocking to me how many people who yearn to be writers don't really read very much.

So those two things, I think, are very important. Especially the stubbornness.

James Allan Hanna joined the English Faculty of Cathedral High School in 2014, where he teaches American Literature and Creative Writing. Formerly the Assistant Editor of *Booth: A Journal* and Assistant Editor of The Frederick Douglass Papers Project at the Institute for American Thought at IUPUI, he earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Butler University. He lives in Indianapolis with his wife, two dogs, a cat, and some mice in the walls.