

On Tim O'Brien (and Me)

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Tim O'Brien (1946-) is an American novelist. He is best known for his book, *The Things They Carried*, a collection of semi-autobiographical stories inspired by his experience in the Viet Nam war. His novel, *Going After Cacciato*, also about Viet Nam, won the National Book Award. He teaches writing at Texas State University-San Marcos and is in demand as a speaker at colleges. He lives with his wife and two teenage sons in Austin, Texas.

I've spent the past couple of days with O'Brien in a way, or I suppose better, reacting to him. First, I watched the 2021 documentary on him, "The War and Peace of Tim O'Brien," which inspired me to read his 2019 book, *Dad's Maybe Book*. This thought responds to the documentary and book, both highly personal and revealing, as a single encounter. What I offer is not so much about the merits of the two sources but rather what came up for me as I experienced them.

What do I think of the merits of the documentary and book? Top rank, both of them. The two complement one another; I recommend engaging them concurrently. That is, if you do it at all. I'm in O'Brien's age category and, like him, a late-in-life father, and I've written for publication and taught in universities, and issues with my father in my childhood are still very present with me. I could relate to what O'Brien is/was dealing with, while you might legitimately consider them "over there" and "so what?"

Dad's Maybe Book is a compilation of extended and crafted journal entries beginning with the birth of O'Brien's two sons in the early-2000s that deal with what his boys are becoming and parenting, his Viet Nam war experience and war in general, writing, performing magic tricks, disturbing childhood experiences with his father, and advancing age and mortality. O'Brien is a superb writer and comes off as exceedingly bright and a decent and well-intentioned man, which now plays out as being a good father to his

two sons. I wouldn't go so far as saying he is especially insightful or profound, however. My guess is that he sees his basic challenge in life as writing true sentences like his idol Hemingway, whom he refers to time and again in the book. You can be true without going deep.

A consideration of any public expression needs to take into account the experiences and thoughts they evoke in the individuals who encounter it. From that frame, I'll list some things that came up for me with these two sources and invite you to do the same.

What's with the hat? 24/7, O'Brien wears a baseball-type hat. I mean, every waking moment, outside and inside, with a suit on, in the doctor's office, at the dinner table. The documentary shows him in bed, head on the pillow, with the hat on. There is about ten seconds in the documentary without the hat on and he is bald as a light bulb and looks like a little old man. Is he that self-conscious, doesn't the hat get hot, why wear a hat when you scrub the kitchen floor alone at 3:00 a.m.? I know I was supposed to be thinking about other things, but it was the elephant in the room for me. I kept waiting for him to bring it up or for someone to ask, "Why the hat, Tim?" Why do I dress in black?

What's going on with his wife? A 400-page book and her name is mentioned but a few times; no stories, no anecdotes, just her name in passing. In the documentary, she seems a pleasant housemate but not a mate-mate, if you know what I mean. I didn't get the sense that Tim O'Brien is her man in the basic biological sense, at least now anyway. I didn't see that she celebrates him or honors him or expands him. My image of her is mildly scolding and criticizing him and bringing him down a notch. She didn't appear to be near his intellectual equal or connected to his work and primary concerns. He looked alone when he was with her. I asked myself, what does being around a woman, all day, every day, who sees you like that, treats you like that, do to a man, to O'Brien, to me?

O'Brien's plays his life to middle class white liberals; I'll call them NPR listeners. They read and review his books and give out National Book Awards and take his writing classes and comprise the audiences in his college lectures. To go over with them and get what they can give him—validation, status, rewards, including financial—it makes sense that he tell them what they want to hear, and he does that, albeit exceedingly well, which is not to say that I think he is always consciously aware of doing it, or that I am when I do it.

An example from the book: O'Brien rails against the Viet Nam war and the Iraq war—boo to Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld—and war in general, all of which is sure to gets nods of approval from NPR listeners.

...who knows a single objective fact about the Dungan Revolt (around 8 million dead), the Reconquista (5 million dead), the An Lushan Rebellion (13 million to 36 million dead), the Huguenot Wars (about 2.8 million dead), the Moorish Wars (about 3 million dead), the Yellow Turban Rebellion (about 4.5 million dead), the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (800,000 dead), the Second Sudanese Civil War (1 million to 2 million dead), the Panthay Rebellion (890,000 to 1 million dead), the Paraguayan War (300,000 to 1.2 million dead), the Cimbrian War (410,000 to 850,000 dead), or the Kitos War (440,000 dead)?

An impressive list, but I picked up on what O'Brien didn't mention: the 50 million (!) human beings slaughtered in WWII in Europe alone. NPR listeners can't get enough of that war, don't be putting that one down, and O'Brien doesn't. He quotes George Orwell as saying, "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." You can have the right to do something but not the awareness and courage to do it. As talented and productive a man as Tim O'Brien is, from the evidence of these two sources, I wouldn't call him an aware or courageous man. How aware and courageous am I really?

And last, a question that came up for me: do we ever transcend childhood trauma? A number of times in the book, O'Brien refers to hiding in fear from his alcoholic father. Of course, this is highly speculative, but nevertheless I came away from my time with Tim O'Brien, book and documentary, with the impression that to understand this very fine man you need to take into account that he is still, in his seventies, at least to some extent, hiding in fear. As do I.