

TELLING THE "TRUTH" ABOUT VIETNAM

Episteme and Narrative Structure in *The Green Berets* and *The Things They Carried*



Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*, published in 1965, is one of the earliest novels of the Vietnam conflict. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), is one of the more recent. Nevertheless, there are many similarities: both are novels-in-short-stories; both focus on American soldiers; both employ mainly jungle settings; and both feature a first-person narrator who is both one-of-the-guys AND separated from them by the status of being a writer. Moreover, each book makes an explicit claim that it tells the "truth" about the Vietnam conflict, a truth which each claims is only accessible through a fictive presentation of action and events.

My purpose is to interrogate the claims to ownership of "truth" in these two novels, and discuss how presumptions about the nature of "truth" affect the fictive shaping of the novel. By this comparison, I hope to show how these two novels form what might be called a set of bookends of the Vietnam era, with Moore's work reflecting the simplicity and naïveté of a country embarking on war, and O'Brien's work living as testament to the complexity and hard-won, although limited, knowledge from the perspective granted by a quarter of a century.

I started with some similarities that make these books ripe for comparison. The rest of my essay is devoted to their differences. A look at the titles reveals much. The synecdoche of *The Green Berets* (GB) is not accidental. Throughout the book, Moore's characters are described solely in terms of their qualifications as fighting men. Hence,

Sven Kornie was the ideal Special Forces officer. Special Forces was his life; fighting, especially unorthodox warfare, was what he lived for. He had no career to sacrifice; he had no desire to rise from operational to supervisory levels. And not the least of his assets, he was unmarried and had no attachments to anyone or anything in the world beyond Special Forces. (23)

While man and mission are submerged into the same "truth" in GB, the title of *The Things They Carried* (TTC) signals the separation of man from mission. The war, and all its paraphernalia, are the unhappy load carried on the back of the foot soldiers. The first and eponymous chapter lists pages and pages of things that soldiers carried in the war, listings which are used to highlight the soldiers' individualities as much as their commonalities:

Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April. (4)

Later in the chapter, the list of "things they carried" is enlarged to include the abstract and metaphysical. "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing" (20). There is one thing they do not carry:

They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not. (15)

O'Brien pays little attention to his characters as soldiers. As foreshadowed by the title, O'Brien's truth is always individual; it lies in the idiosyncrasies of individuals. Robin Moore, as I will show, believes in a common and objective Truth; his emphasis is on the soldierly qualities that his characters share, as idealized and symbolized by their head gear.

"*The Green Berets* is a book of truth." Thus Moore begins his introduction. He explains that while he had originally planned a nonfiction work, two things convinced him that he should employ a fictional presentation. The first is a kind of names-changed-to-protect-the-guilty routine. "Time and again, I promised harried and heroic Special Forces men that their confidences were 'off the record'" (2).

Moore's other reason is more ambitious. He praises other reporters for giving "detailed incidents," but his idea, he says, is to give "the broad overall picture of how Special Forces men operate, so each story basically is representative of a different facet of Special Forces action in wars like the one in Vietnam" (1).

Notice that Moore claims veracity for his portrayal not only of the Vietnam engagement, but of all wars like it. How does he presume to so generalize? Through Cold War Manichaeism, of course. The presumptive "truth" that underlies GB is the vision of the world as a giant struggle between Good (freedom, democracy, America), and Evil (tyranny, Communism, the Soviet Union). Moore is quite happy to employ the metaphor of an encircled jungle outpost for the state of the world, not only in his own time, but seemingly for all time:

In essence, these stories will be true of the political problems and combat situations Special Forces men are facing in 1965, or for that matter 1975, wherever Americans must fight to keep the perimeter of the free world from shrinking further. (13)

The crucial failure of the book (and, it might be argued, of America's early involvement in the Vietnam), is a refusal to see or acknowledge how this Manichaean episteme influences the perception and construction of narrative events. Robin Moore was in Vietnam. He claims much firsthand experience of the war,

including, presumably, all the ambiguity that accompanies such experience. And yet, when that experience is translated into what the author promises is a higher fictive “truth,” the reader finds it first suspiciously, and sometimes laughably, unambiguous.

In Moore’s book, shades of gray are strained out in favor of broad swatches of black and white. The Special Forces men are uniformly lionized for their courage, strength, and intelligence, while the North Vietnamese are demonized as vicious and fanatical Communists. The South Vietnamese allies are treated with suspicion and contempt. These sentiments are broadened still further in lines like: “ ‘Now we get the Oriental mind at work,’ ” Stitch said wearily to the Americans in the room. “ ‘If we stay here twenty years we won’t change them, and God save us from getting like them’ ” (46-7).

While Asians are routinely described in phrases such as “the sinister little brown bandit” (36), the ethnic ideal for the Special Forces men is chillingly Aryan. Talking about “the ideal Special Forces officer,” the narrator states with pride that Sven Kornie, “joined the German Army and miraculously survived two years of fighting the Russians on the eastern front” (22). Thus, in the strict dualism of the Cold War, the character’s possible Nazi past is not only pardonable but praiseworthy, because he was fighting Communists. Kornie’s men—given the names Borst, Schmelzer, Stitch, Bergholtz—seem to have a lot in common with their commander, a fact not lost on the narrator: “He introduced me to Sergeant Bergholtz, and I sensed my guess was correct that a Germanic-Viking crew had indeed been transported intact to the Vietnam-Cambodia border” (25).

Moore’s plots are as predictable as his characters. In each of the nine stories, the heroic Green Berets are beset by overwhelming odds, or treachery, or the restrictions imposed by short-sighted career army officers who don’t understand the dictates of “unconventional” war. The linear narratives rise to dramatic climaxes that usually take the form of a battle where a smashing victory is snatched from the jaws of near certain defeat.

In one story Moore even employs his own version of a Fisher King myth. “Home to Nanette” has the Green Beret hero, Arklin, sent to singlehandedly transform a peaceful Meo village “into an orderly paramilitary operation” (177). The villagers treat Arklin as a demigod, presenting him the choicest

young virgins. He at first resists this heathen practice, but finally “bowed to the inevitable” (173) and accepts a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl “much lighter colored than the others, smaller breasted, and more delicately boned” (172). (She turns out, of course, to be half-French, conveniently blending a Western epitome of sensuality with the native allure.) Arklin, a married man, stoically refrains from sex with the willing native. However, he finds the Meos surly and uncooperative because of this rejection. So Arklin, a true Green Beret, must do whatever it takes to fulfill his mission. As Moore tells it:

Out of desperation born of his inability to circumvent his morals and nearly inflexible sense of responsibility, Arklin drank three gourds of Meo liquor. The alcohol produced the release and Arklin consummated his ‘marriage’ to Nanette. Once breakthrough had been effected, Arklin so thoroughly pleased and satisfied his young bride that the Meos, seeing her the next day, knew at once that the American was finally one of them

Tasks were accomplished much more quickly now. The weapons room was finished. . . . Sandbags were filled and molded into bunkers, and on the firing range the Montagnards worked hard to improve their marksmanship. (175-6)

Thus the erect penis of the Green Beret restores vitality to the stagnant community. Besides the poorly concealed prurience, there is also the irony, apparently lost on Moore, that the “fertility” his Fisher King instills portends unmitigated catastrophe for the village. By the end of the story most of the Meos are dead, the village is on the brink of being overrun, and the survivors must be evacuated by airplane. But in the book’s perspective, the operation is a success because, in Arklin’s words, “They [the Meos] inflicted heavy damage on the Communist buildup” (220).

Robin Moore’s fictional imperative, as it turns out, is to strain out the moral ambiguity of war, as well as the tactical ambiguity of jungle warfare, in favor of his vision of Morality (Green Berets are always the good guys), and Justice (they always win). This formula of rendering the Vietnam war as a series of

gritty but simplistic action-adventure narratives probably accounts both for the novel's pop culture presence¹, and for its dismissive treatment by scholars of Vietnam war literature.²

Robin Moore attempts to use the fictive constructs to present the truth about Vietnam. As I have tried to show, Moore betrays, and is betrayed by, those selfsame constructs. *The Green Berets* is, at best, a part of what Neil Sheehan calls the "Bright Shining Lie" of Vietnam. At worst, it is gruesome comedy, a testament to the naïveté, self-delusion and arrogance that launched the United States into its Vietnam nightmare.

As GB demonstrates, while the traditional plot structure—rising action, climax, denouement—is well suited for war literature, it is not politically neutral. By imposing order and coherence on events, the plot invests them with significance. Whether the plot culminates in triumph or tragedy, the plot tends to bless its subject with meaning, even glamor.

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien makes the problem of locating truth the central theme. Instead of promising the truth, O'Brien spends most of his time hacking away at the very idea of "truth" when it comes to war. The term is too closely aligned with "meaning," "coherence," and "significance" for his liking. O'Brien's strategy, throughout the book, is to hook the reader into an engaging story, then radically disrupt the narrative. O'Brien wants to pull the rug out from under the reader, explode the complacencies, keep the reader on edge and guessing. This state of never coming to conclusions, never being allowed to settle into a truth, paradoxically provides a "truer" sense of the experience of Vietnam than a consistent narrative could do. Responding to this point in a letter to me, O'Brien writes, "Thing is, I *do* state conclusions. Many, many conclusions. But as I say at one point, 'the truths are contradictory.' They swirl. There are varieties of truth, angles on truth, reports of truth, etc." He continues:

In general, I guess, I'm saying that "truth" does not seem to be . . . something we can touch and eat for breakfast. Take a look at the Rat Kiley stuff about story and believability and truth in "Sweetheart"; take a look, too, at the fat bird colonel thing in "How to Tell a True War Story": how we *hear*, what

we *bring* to a report of truth (say a story being told) determines in part our judgments about “truthfulness.” (How can a thing *be* true if we don’t *believe* it’s true? No way, unless you accept the notion of noumenon.) The fat bird colonel has wax in his ears, wrong frequency— i.e. military rank and rear-echelon-ness and officerlike values add up to the inability to hear or listen to or believe what those six guys experienced up in the mountains. For the colonel, that cocktail party in the fog *cannot* be true— not literally, not metaphorically. Same-same with Rat’s “Sweetheart” story: nobody believes him because they’ve come to the story with certain values and conventions about women and combat. Rat explicitly disputes these conventions, yet doesn’t convince his buddies—the guys never do believe him, though he claims to have witnessed certain events with his own two eyes. (August 1993)

As illustrated in this quote, O’Brien brings an ingenious arsenal of weapons for disrupting reader expectations and complacencies. His narration is recursive rather than linear. He happily contradicts himself.

A strategy which O’Brien uses over and over again is the invitation to and the denial of the authorial fallacy. This begins even before the reader gets to the first story, and discovers that the narrator’s name is “Tim O’Brien.” The front matter of the book contains the routine disclaimer that, “all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary.” But a page later, the author “lovingly” dedicates the book “to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa”— that is, to those selfsame names and characters we have just been assured are imaginary.

In many places the narrative claims to be dropping the pretense of fiction in order to tell the reader what “really” happened, only to snap the fictive trap. Nowhere is the reader more thoroughly indicted than at the end of the chapter called “How to Tell a True War Story.” Here the narration of an

episode in the setting of Viet Nam makes one of its frequent meta-narrational jumps into a more familiar time and place, only this time the reader is given an actual stand-in:

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*. (90)

The meta-narrator's voice continues in this indignant tone, damning the kindly woman (and by extension, all readers) for accepting the writer's earlier portrait of a moving moment in a horrible war. Now he insists, "Beginning to end, . . . it's all made up. Every goddamn detail—the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. *None of it*" (91).

And then the O'Brienesque quick reversal: "And even 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" (91).

At this point, the poor woman might be forgiven if her temperament became less kindly and she demanded of the author, *What in the hell do you want from me?* It seems that both writer and reader are caught in a double bind. As any Vietnam vet will tell you, you can't know what it was like unless you were there. But O'Brien adds that you can't know what it was like even if you were there, and even when a writer succeeds in touching the reader's emotions, there is still the ever present danger of melodrama and sentimentality. In this section, more than anywhere else in the book, the writer's frustration is evident.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien most directly attacks the romantic treatment of war. Here's the plot: a soldier is killed; his friend writes a long letter to the dead man's sister; she never writes back. Interwoven with the fragments of this narrative are didactic pronouncements on the nature of a "true" war story. Among them:

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 that 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. (76)

O'Brien is, as usual, talking only indirectly about war itself; his contempt is reserved for the *stories* of war.

Throughout TTC, one finds a preoccupation with epistemology, so that it turns out to be as much a book about a man trying to write a book as it is a book about the war. O'Brien never forgets, or lets the reader forget, that no reader ever has direct experience; the "experience" we read is always mediated through the memory and imagination of the writer, which complicates the search for truth:

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. (78)

The metaphors weave in and out. In an earlier chapter, "Spin," O'Brien compares the process to a traffic circle:

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. (38)

In "How to Tell . . ." he employs the metaphor of the weave of cloth:

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. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story except maybe, "Oh."

True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. (84)

After all the generalization and abstraction, the reader must do a double take at that last line. What then, is O'Brien saying about Truth? Where is the locus of reality? I believe O'Brien's book points to a complicated and dynamic version of reality: it can never exist in the details, for details are whimsical and accidental. It can never exist in generalizations, for they are prey to politics and romanticism. And yet, those are the only two choices, the only constructs at hand, so they must be used. But the undercutting of the authority of either one is just as important as its authoritative delivery, and real truth exists, if at all, in glimmers and glimpses, in an unstable ethereal place that occurs just above the rabble of raw detail and below the Olympian realm of generalization and abstraction. There is never a conclusion, there is only endless process: "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (91).

In comparing Moore to O'Brien, it is instructive to look at the one story in *TTC* in which the Green Berets play a prominent role. "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is one of the longest pieces in O'Brien's book, and the one that most resembles a typical "war story." The plot concerns a medic who ingeniously contrives to bring his girlfriend all the way from the United States to the Vietnamese jungle, just to be with him. The

girlfriend is happy with him for a while, but then becomes fascinated with Vietnam, with the war, and with the Green Berets who are encamped on the other side of the outpost. Eventually the boyfriend who brought her loses her to the Green Berets. She goes on their ambushes, and goes further, leaving even them in the end, to become a jungle creature, a preying cat almost, that spooks the Green Berets themselves.

O'Brien's book is about grunts, common fighting men who for the most part didn't choose or want to be in Viet Nam, not about elite Green Berets, and it's curious to see how O'Brien presents them in his book as something ghostly, otherworldly. Curiously, the enemy is often referred to in the same terms of ghosts and mystery and otherworldliness. In "Sweetheart," we come the closest to Moore's view: the Greenies, as O'Brien calls them, have adopted the ways of the enemy, and are engaging the enemy in ways that the regular grunts don't know and don't care to know. O'Brien's common soldiers are almost as wary of the Greenies as they are of the enemy. Moore would probably be comfortable with this view.

But O'Brien undercuts this credibility by making "Sweetheart" more a story about storytelling than a paean to the Green Berets. The story of the girl who goes native is not presented straight out; the book's first-person narrator gets it from another character, Rat Kiley, who is branded unreliable— an habitual liar and gross exaggerator. Other characters respond to the story as Rat Kiley tells it, providing a metafictional commentary about the story as story, what stories accomplish, and the rules that stories must follow. For example, at the point where Rat Kiley tells the others that the girl has disappeared, he pauses to gauge the audience response:

When he first told the story, Rat stopped there and looked at Mitchell Sanders for a time.

"So what's your vote? Where was she?"

"The Greenies," Sanders said.

"Yeah?"

Sanders smiled. "No other option. 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 there for a *reason*. That's how stories work, man."

Rat thought about it, then shrugged.

"All right, sure, the Greenies. . . ." (112)

In this interchange, we see an example of the complicated way that O'Brien sees story and reality working together. Rat has previously sworn again and again this is a true story he's telling, although the narrator has told us not to trust Rat. In his response to Sanders, it is almost as if Rat is making it up, agreeing with Sanders that the facts of the story dictate that the girl ran off with the Green Berets, and so he will agree to that and continue the story with that as a "fact" even if it hadn't occurred to him before. The way O'Brien italicizes the word "reason," it's clear he has Sanders using the word in the sense of "rule," as in the rules of storytelling.

Near the story's conclusion, Rat shrugs and says he doesn't know whatever became of the girl. This infuriates Mitchell Sanders, whom O'Brien uses throughout as spokesman for the rules or obligations of storytelling. These obligations are not only not arbitrary, but alleged to be connected to something essential, to "human nature" itself:

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Jesus Christ, it's against the *rules*," Sanders said.

"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)

Once again, O'Brien is using italics to link the most important parts, "rules . . . nature . . . ending," as if there is some organic, inviolable structure to storytelling.

Rat fulfills his obligation, but of course O'Brien undercuts it with Rat's disclaimer that he doesn't know the conclusion of the story from his own experience, but "I heard it secondhand. Thirdhand, actually" (124). He then goes ahead and gives the story a most romantic, sensational, and unbelievable ending:

If you believed the Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes. . . . She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill. (125)

After reading O'Brien's "Sweetheart," one can't help but think of Moore's earnest narrator as a less self-aware Rat Kiley. The reader is ever more cognizant of Moore's manipulation of details in slavish adherence to conventional rules of narrative structure. Each of Moore's stories rises to such a clear climax, conclusion and closure, with such clear good guys and bad guys, that the reader cannot help disbelieving him, because the shaping hand of the author is too much in evidence making everything come out right for the sake of story every time. In "Sweetheart," O'Brien makes the machinations of storytelling itself the central aspect of the story.

Despite the superficial similarities, *The Green Berets* and *The Things They Carried* are novels that come not only from opposite chronological positions, but from opposite ends of the war's epistemological spectrum as well. Robin Moore claims to possess Truth at the cosmic level (Good vs Evil), and at the empirical level. However, he imposes fictive constructs, characterization and plot, with such programmatic rigidity that he violates a reader's common sense apprehension of the ambiguities and chaos of real life, and ends up being disbelieved despite all his claims.

While Moore tries (and fails), to make sense out of the chaos of the Vietnam conflict, O'Brien promises (and succeeds), to portray the war as a cacophony of competing truths, but not one that reduces itself to chaos or meaninglessness. O'Brien writes, "Complication isn't chaos. I was after *clarity*, of a sort" (letter to the author, August 1993). While Moore tries to bring the suspense and satisfaction of traditional plot structure to strengthen his claim on the reader, O'Brien attacks reader expectations. He distrusts any large claim of truth. He distrusts any simple explanations or answers. He even distrusts his own memory.

And yet, for all his disclaimers and disruptions, O'Brien's episteme is not nihilistic. He does believe in truth, but in his conception it's a slippery thing, dynamic, tentative, tenuous, transforming itself into untruth as soon as one gets complacent with it. Whenever he explicitly tells the reader that something is "true," the reader learns to expect that truth to be contradicted or undercut somewhere else in the book.

The transcendent concept for O'Brien is not "truth" but "story":

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 to
remember except the story. (40)

At the beginning of this essay, I referred to GB and TTH as "bookends" of the Vietnam era. Moore's experience in Vietnam was in the first half of 1964, a time the United States was precisely on the cusp of the massive political and social upheavals often referred to as the counter culture revolution. Domestic opposition to the Vietnam war was central to this inter-generational American conflict, both as a cause and an effect. That Moore's book could be a best seller reflects, I believe, its publication during the last stages of society's WWII-era combination of glorified patriotism and pervasive paranoia over the threat of a worldwide Communist hegemony. A few years later, in 1968, John Wayne's attempt to bring GB to the big screen was a famous flop. The most often cited moment in the movie is the ending, where The Duke, hand in hand with the tiny orphan Vietnamese boy, walks into the sunset on the beach. Except in Vietnam the coast faces east. A western beach sunset could only happen in someplace like . . . California. Which is where, as the wags always say, this movie is really set.

The most serious and successful film statements about the Vietnam appeared in the late 1970s, and tried to make sense of the war in mythical or archetypal terms. Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) cross-reference war scenes with, in the former case,

archetypal small-town America, and in the latter, Joseph Conrad's mythical vision of evil and the human heart.

Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1975) fits into this category. In this novel, the scenes of Vietnam warfare are interwoven with a preposterous but almost believable plot of a deserter being tracked, on the ground, all the way from the battlefield in Southeast Asia to Paris, France. Thus the longing of the frightened homesick soldier becomes transmuted into an epic and archetypal quest.

I have noticed, however, that many Vietnam veterans express dissatisfaction with these three highly acclaimed works of art. It's as if the artistic qualities of the construction interfere with the down-to-earth realism that those who experienced the Vietnam war demand. And once again we are back to the conundrum formulated earlier in this essay of generalities versus details. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* and *Going After Cacciato*, although liberally infused with gritty, even gory realism, finally exist more at the level of generalization, of mythic or aesthetic statement. At the other extreme, some of the finer works of journalism, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, say, offer extraordinary glimpses of the details of the war, but leave it up to the reader to provide any overarching meaning or point.

Which brings me back to *The Things They Carried*. This book arrived on the scene in 1990, coincidental with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Evil Empire, and the end of whole Manichean dualism that dominated political discourse since the end of WWII. What is left when the Evil Empire is gone? The story of how some men once believed in it. And how others who didn't were sent to fight a war in a faraway country by those who did. And the Truth, or Truths, or truths of the war can only be found in the reverence for story.

Reverence for story is what ultimately separates GB from TTC, and, I would argue, what raises O'Brien's book above nearly all of the imaginative representations of the Vietnam War. Whereas Robin Moore's book is a failed attempt to make story serve his version of "truth," Tim O'Brien finds truth in allowing it to serve the needs of story. In the narratives that he weaves around "Tim O'Brien," around Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Kiowa, and the rest, without glamorizing the obscenity of war, he achieves the beauty of art, and the ring of truth. ☺

Notes

1. Moore co-wrote the hit song "Ballad of the Green Berets" with Sgt. Barry Sadler; John Wayne starred in the movie.
2. Moore's book is not even mentioned in Arthur Casciato's comprehensive article, "Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War" (*Review*, Vol. 9, 1987).

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