

*Commentary by Glenn Dayley*

## **Familiar Ghosts, New Voices: Tim O'Brien's *July, July***

**T**he first time I met Tim O'Brien he wore tennis shoes, jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap. The cap was a solid color, blue maybe, "The Things They Carried" was stenciled on the shirt, the jeans were faded and worn, and the tennis shoes used to be white. I thought, so, this is the National Book Award winner—he's kind of short. I was in my final year of the three-year creative writing program at then Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University), and O'Brien had accepted the newly created position as the endowed chair of the program. The idea was to bring in a different writer each year. O'Brien was the first writer in the position.

When it was your turn to have a conference with him, you didn't meet him in his office—there wasn't much in there, blank walls, a chair, a desk, and a computer which I don't think he ever used. In fact, I don't think he ever even went in his office. He was born in Austin, Minnesota, SPAM capital of the world, but at the time (and still currently) he lived in Austin, Texas, live music capital of the world. He drove down to TSU in San Marcos once a week for the workshop on Wednesday evenings. For individual conferences, he met you before class outside the liberal arts building, either sitting on the stone benches or garden walls underneath the giant live oak trees (where you had to dodge acorns dropped by squirrels), or on the steps of the building itself. The building was smoke-free, and during these conferences he always had a cigarette in his hand. He chain smoked all during the conference, holding the cigarette in one hand and a marked-up copy of your story in the other. And it was marked-up. O'Brien takes words seriously, and he did his best to pull us up to his high standards. On one of my stories, frustrated with my apathy or laziness regarding grammar, he wrote: "PROOFREAD! The words are all we have."

At the start of each workshop we listened intently as O'Brien talked shop. A good writer avoids block-writing, avoids stasis, thinks in scenes, doesn't complicate what doesn't deserve it, avoids characters waking up and going to sleep, doesn't have characters who just talk about it—Ahab actually chases the whale—is afraid for the main character, uses dramatic devices here and there to dazzle the reader and still move the story forward, doesn't ruin good lines by adding more trying to improve them, is impor-

tant—it's easy to be cute and clever—makes the stakes high...We scribbled down everything he said, like dogs savoring scraps at the master's table.

In a reading and discussion at TSU, O'Brien captivated the audience with the story of the agony he suffered deciding to go to Vietnam. He went on and on about what he thought, what he did, whom he talked to, and what finally happened and why—it was a really good story. Then near the end, he leans in over the microphone, like he's confessing, though the look on his face made it seem more like he was the priest and we were the sinners, and he tells us everything he just said was fiction—all true, he says, but fiction nonetheless. Most people at all familiar with O'Brien's works have heard this from him before. That the real truth is not dependant on its factual status; that discussions of "facts" often only make us miss the truth altogether—we focus on the wrong things when we worry over the facts. Generally, O'Brien has presented this idea of truth and its relationship to fiction through stories about the Vietnam War. War has been the stage where his characters have played out the truth.

O'Brien says that Vietnam that gave him the courage and desire to write; before that, he wasn't brave enough to try. And the "Vietnam War—any war—automatically involves high moral and physical stakes. Issues of rectitude, freedom, sacrifice, personal choice, obligation, and, of course, life and death." O'Brien is too good of a writer to say that without Vietnam he never would have made it big. A natural passion with words and language and stories burns inside of him—with or without the war he was going to find an outlet for this fire and pressure. However, it may also be true that Vietnam promoted him from the ranks of the good writers to the upper echelon of truly influential writers.

When asked if he reads "war literature," O'Brien replied that he's read "truckloads of so-called 'war literature,' most of it awful, some of it excellent, some of it sublime." Then he listed some he's "loved": *Dispatches*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *All Quiet*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Iliad*, *The Naked and the Dead*, the poetry of Sassoon and Owen and Jarrell and Dickey and Brooke and Bruce Weigl. Afterward he lamented that he was "leaving out tons of wonderful stuff."

Despite his love of some "war literature," I once heard him complain, as most "labeled" writers do, that he is not a "Vietnam writer." And he is, of course, correct. He is a writer, period, no need to attach a qualifier. But there are always certain themes, images, ideas that float through a writer's work like spirits that simply can't be exorcised. Vietnam, the war, not the country, is the closet out of which many of O'Brien's reoccurring ghosts float. The confidence with which O'Brien writes and lives is a sure sign that he has grown, if not comfortable with, at least familiar with these ghosts. They are his after all—most of us keep ours locked up. We're lucky O'Brien

lets his out once in awhile.

Although not really a “war novel,” his latest book, *July, July* is full of familiar spirits. The setting is simple enough: a thirty year class reunion at Darton Hall College in Minnesota in July 2000. The returning students actually graduated in 1969, so the thirty-year reunion is a year late. The cast of main characters is not so simple: David Todd, who lost his platoon, his leg, and perhaps some of his sense of reality in a bloody river in Vietnam; Marla Dempsey, David’s ex-wife who hopped on the back of a Harley on Christmas Day and rode out of their marriage; Jan Huebner and Amy Robinson, who serve as social commentators for the reunion weekend, searching for sex, finding none, and bemoaning their generation’s fall from idealism to pragmatism; the country-club Republican, Dorothy Stier, who wears the scar of her mastectomy with pride and revulsion; draft dodger Billy McMann who at once hates and loves Dorothy for her refusal to run off to Canada with him all those years ago; Marv Bertel, the overweight business man, suffering through a life based on deception, waiting for both the heart attack which will finally finish him off and for the day when the aging seductress and bigamist Spook Spinelli will finally, really love him; the defrocked Protestant minister Paulette Haslo; Ellie Abbott who watched her lover and former classmate drown during a week long fling away from her husband; and the mysterious “angel” Johnny Ever, who, if he is an angel, is not one most of us would welcome.

The novel consists of a series of chapters or sections that slip back and forth between the events of the reunion and key moments that defined life for the different members of the Class of 1969. There is only one chapter or section that actually takes place in Vietnam, and David Todd is the only one of the main characters who actually served in the war. In teaching O’Brien’s works, at least one of my students inevitably asks why she (it’s always a female) has to read all these war stories. My standard response has been to try to show her that life is the great war we all have to fight; that loyalty, morality, violence, friendship, politics, futility, love, hate, passion, society are not abstract themes, but are specific realities we all must deal with, and that they certainly aren’t questions or concerns that are restricted to war; that these stories simply take place during or in war, but they aren’t “war stories.” Or as O’Brien writes in “How to Tell a True War Story”: *It was n’t a war story. It was a love story.*

In *July, July* O’Brien gives us a novel which develops and elaborates on his “war story” themes, but for the most part, he leaves out the war. And even when he doesn’t leave it out, the war is shown as the piece of life it was then and now. Vietnam—despite the rhetoric of the times, and, perhaps, despite the oddly nostalgic attitude some still today feel for those “radical, political days” when young Americans really knew how to

protest—Vietnam and the controversial swirl surrounding it was not life. O'Brien says that *July, July*, doesn't return "to the old war themes in any significant way. True, one of the characters is a veteran of Vietnam, but even in his case the story mostly focuses on his marriage and his difficulties with opening up about himself. The war is an element of this problem, of course, but not the whole of it." Or in the words of the novel:

The war went on. People ate Raisin Bran. There were new orphans and widows and Gold Star mothers. Three thousand and twenty American soldiers died that summer, and more than seven thousand Vietnamese. People took aspirin for their headaches. People requested doggie bags at fancy restaurants. Dow Chemical made a killing. From sea to sea, along country roads, in great sleeping cities, there were petty jealousies and erotic fantasies and grocery lists and upset stomachs. The earth kept spinning...For Jan Huebner, as for most others, the summer of 1969 would later call to mind not headlines, nor global politics, nor even a war, but small, modest memories of small, modest things: rumpled beds and ringing telephones and birthday cakes and dirty pictures and catchy tunes about everyday people. There was a fatal Ferris wheel accident in Oregon. There were Crazy Day sales on a thousand sun-drenched Main Streets...Small, simple things, yes, but as in some great nationwide dark-room, the most ordinary human snapshots would be fixed in memory by the acidic wash of war—the music, the lingo, the evening news.

Most readers will find *July, July* more overtly concerned with, in O'Brien's words, "how the really important things are timeless, or entirely removed from time." This is not a book which a student could justifiably label a "war story."

Perhaps of particular interest to some readers is that many of the main characters are women. This is unusual for O'Brien, and it is a sign of his skill and maturity as a writer that his women characters *are* women. "Every novelist must imagine lives other than his or her own, and gender is only one of infinite such imaginative struggles," O'Brien says, and "Writing from the point of view of female characters was no easier and no more difficult than writing from the male perspective. It's all hard!"

At TSU, O'Brien read a section of a novel I was writing, and he wrote on the margin "What does your main character want? Ten pages into it and I have no idea." In *July, July*, all of the characters, the women and the men,

clearly, desperately want something. The characters in this book spend the reunion weekend reliving their lives. Only this time around they have had plenty of time to think about their decisions, and they hope present logic will overcome their past emotion—mind over gut. The characters think they are more aware of what they want and of what is or should be important in their lives, but the way they make decisions is really no different from how they behaved as college-aged youth. The difference now is that the years have trimmed away the excess from their dreams.

It is interesting how little politics enters into the lives of these characters. Their college years were drenched in politics, but 30 years later their worlds have shrunk down to a few essential, personal and human concerns and emotions. As O'Brien says, "the expectations and ideals of that generation were so elevated, the realities of middle-age and ordinary human life made for a pretty terrible, pretty painful fall from 'grace.'" They no longer strive for world peace; they would be thrilled with personal peace. They aren't draft dodging to Canada; they're trying to escape the monotony of their suburban lives. They aren't searching for Prince Charming or Sleeping Beauty; they would feel more than satisfied with an imperfect, but genuine lover. They aren't seeking restitution or revenge; they're hoping for forgiveness and friendship. And this hope is the common motivation for these characters.

Their stories narrow as you reach the end of the book. There are pages where the narration rapidly hops between the characters' stories. This technique speeds the pace of the book, despite the lack of any great, physical action. I remember O'Brien arguing that stories need "forward tilt" (a term he said he took from someone else, I think). As we read along and the number of pages left to go shrinks, we find ourselves rushing along with the characters in search of closure. How is this story going to end we ask, even as the characters are reluctantly rushing to finish their reunion. And in the end there is hope, even if just a dot of light. But then, how much hope do we need? Hope's kind of like cayenne pepper in beef stew, a little goes a long way. Just a pinch and we can find ourselves, like characters in this and other O'Brien stories, strung along for years, decades even, lifetimes. O'Brien again:

I believe that hope is the essential thematic and emotional conclusion to the novel. Each character keeps on going, keeps struggling for a modest, pared-down sort of happiness—"the essential renewing fantasy of splendid things to come." No one gives up. They keep dreaming, though their dreams are no longer grand. Spook and Marv end up on the plane fantasizing about a life together. David and Marla

finally start talking on the chapel steps. Jan and Amy head out to an all-night diner, talking about how maybe they'll finally meet Mr. Right—they don't quit trying. Ellie feels a "hopeful breeze" go through her thoughts as she stands in the shower after confessing to her husband. Paulette and Billy end up together—a "miracle," as they call it. Dorothy hikes home from the reunion, tripping, high on acid, stripped of at least some of her conventionality, optimistic that she'll beat the cancer—though the reader knows she probably won't survive long.

This is what we read O'Brien for: stories that make us question our own wants and needs and hopes. His works can, at times, be very humorous, but that is not why we read him. Like all good stories, in the end, *July, July* is about life and death. There aren't any answers here. It isn't till near the end of the book that we find what could be called "almost-answers." Really, what can O'Brien or anyone else say about Vietnam, about war, or about life? As the characters seem to conclude, it isn't a matter of controlling life—that is impossible; it's a matter of endurance and understanding and compassion. Dorothy seeks understanding and expresses at least part of this idea of endurance to David as they drop acid in the men's restroom. She shows off the "Purple Heart" of mastectomy scar tissue on her chest and says:

Yes, but here's the deal. Nam and cancer, it's like...It's not like anything, is it? Once you're there, you're there. You don't come home. Am I right? And what the heck can you even say about it? Not much. I guess you can say wow, or yuck, or hey, or 'Thank you very much but enough of that, I'll take a rain check, I'll take what-the-fuck-ever.'

And David continues to endure and battle through his own life despite the advice of the "angel," Johnny Ever, (we're never quite sure if he's an actual being or simply a manifestation of David's loose, troubled mind) who counsels him to just give up:

"Man, I warned you," said Johnny Ever, contemptuous and self-important. "Warnings here, warnings there. Had to be a hero. Had to suck it up and take the heat, thirty years' worth, who knows how much more still to come? Wake up, my man. All you gotta do, you just gotta yell 'Uncle.' I take it from there. I mean, Holy Ghost and shit on a shingle, what the hell's wrong with you people? This ain't Thermopylae, it ain't

the movies. You're allowed to quit."

It would be difficult to claim there is a single answer for life's questions as presented in O'Brien's books. In the end, what can save us from our own traumas and failures and disappointments? One answer O'Brien does offer explicitly and implicitly throughout his works is described as David ponders his past, present, and remaining life.

He'd believed in his own vision of things, and in the end, to a greater or lesser degree, the belief had birthed the facts...He would never quit hoping. He would drink too much, smoke too much, care too little about the consequences. He would never remarry. To his last day, and perhaps beyond, he would regret his own failure of nerve, which was also a failure of imagination, the inability to divine a happy ending.

Imagination is the source of hope. Those who fail to imagine, or are incapable of doing so, are doomed to failure in life, no matter how successful they may appear outwardly.

When asked what role war literature and literature in general may play in the lives of former and current military personnel, O'Brien said, "[You] got me. [I] don't know. But I do wonder." Anyone who reads O'Brien knows he's lying.

War literature, if it's good, is like any other literature, if it's good. It forces us to confront the truths of humanity, the good and the bad. I think it was John Lennon who said that if everyone demanded peace instead of another TV set, we'd have peace. And it was Plato who said that only the dead have seen the end of war. In the fiction of Tim O'Brien, including *July, July*, it is obvious that we are all still demanding TV sets and that we are all still very much alive.

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