

PREPARING to Read

Ambush

Short Story by TIM O'BRIEN



Comparing Literature

Traditions Across Time: War in Vietnam

The Vietnam War lasted nine years, claimed about 58,000 American lives, and left another 365,000 wounded. Night after night during that war, Americans at home watched footage of shocking combat scenes on the evening news programs. Like the soldiers described in John Steinbeck's essay, "Why Soldiers Won't Talk," the soldiers in Vietnam endured horrors—death, injury, physical hardship, and emotional trauma. In this story, Tim O'Brien recounts an incident in one soldier's combat experience and its effects on his life.

Points of Comparison As you read, look for the similarities and differences in the ways war and its effects are portrayed in "Ambush" and in "Why Soldiers Won't Talk."

Build Background

Uncertainties of War During the Vietnam War, even though the American soldiers were better equipped and better trained than the enemy, they fought in a foreign land they did not understand and for a cause that became increasingly unpopular at home. The Vietnamese communists were skilled at guerilla warfare, using small armies in surprise raids. Their knowledge of the land enabled them to disappear whenever the U.S. forces attacked. These tactics often created a climate of frustration and fear among American soldiers. Tim O'Brien, who served 14 months as an infantryman during the war, presents the soldier's response to the fear and confusion in Vietnam and the troubling memories that haunt him after the war.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS INTERNAL CONFLICT External conflict—the struggle between a character and some outside force—is usually easy to identify in a work of fiction. Internal conflict—a struggle within a character—may be more subtle and complex. For example, an internal conflict may revolve around a decision a character has to make, or it may be reflected in behavior that is contradictory. As you read this story, watch for the development of internal conflicts in the main character.

ACTIVE READING CONNECTING TO EXPERIENCE Unlike many stories, this story presents a situation—a combat zone during the Vietnam War—that is unfamiliar to most readers. In order to enter into the experiences being related, you can use the following strategies:

- Pay attention to all the details the writer gives.
- Try to imagine what being a soldier in combat might be like.
- Call to mind any movies, books, or articles about the Vietnam War that give you some idea of what being in that war was like.
- Recall any situation involving extended conflict—living in a high-crime area, for example—that you have encountered or heard about. Think about what similarities are present in all conflicts.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read, keep notes about which details in the story you can connect with in some way. Also note any aspects of the story with which you find it difficult to relate.

AMBUSH

TIM O'BRIEN

When she was nine, my daughter Kathleen asked if I had ever killed anyone. She knew about the war; she knew I'd been a soldier. "You keep writing these war stories," she said, "so I guess you must've killed somebody." It was a difficult moment, but I did what seemed right, which was to say, "Of course not," and then to take her onto my lap and hold her for a while. Someday, I hope, she'll ask again. But here I want to pretend she's a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories:

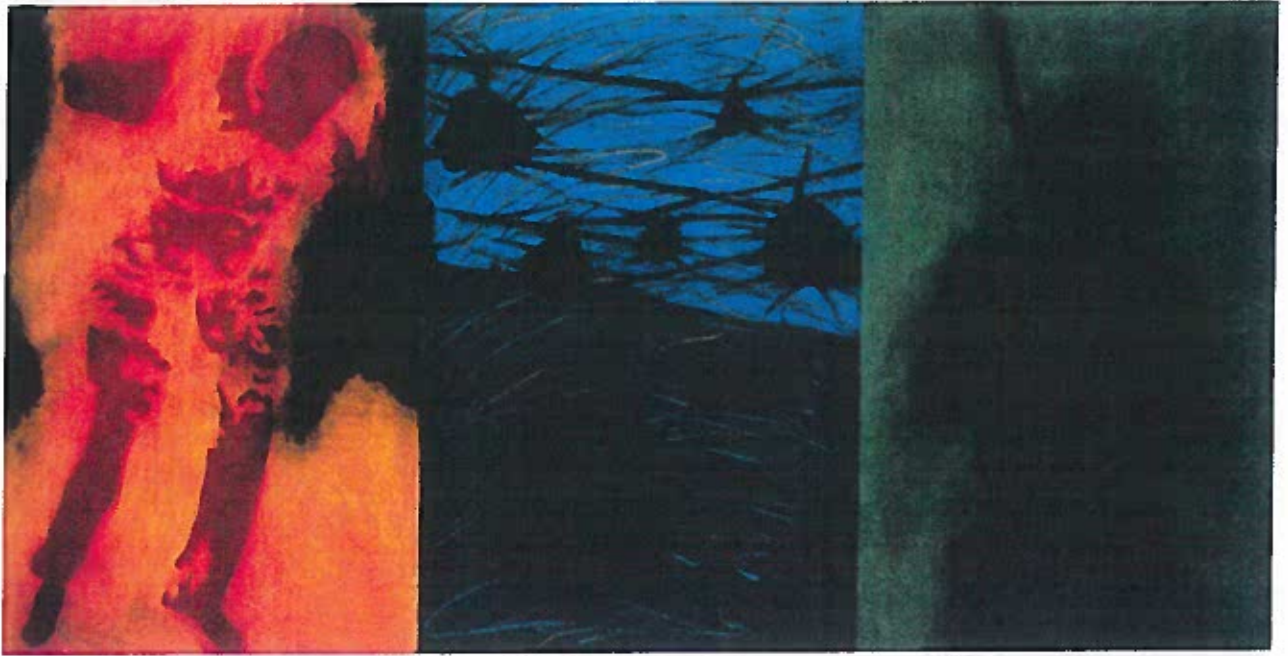
He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him—afraid of something—and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him.

Or to go back:

Shortly after midnight we moved into the ambush site outside My Khe.¹ The whole platoon was there, spread out in the dense brush along the trail, and for five hours nothing at all happened. We were working in two-man teams—one man on guard while the other slept, switching off every two hours—and I remember it was still dark when Kiowa shook me awake for the final watch. The night was foggy and hot. For the first few moments I felt lost, not sure about directions, groping for my helmet and weapon. I reached out and found three grenades and lined them up in front of me; the pins had

"YOU KEEP
WRITING
THESE
WAR STORIES
SO I GUESS YOU
MUST'VE KILLED
SOMEBODY."

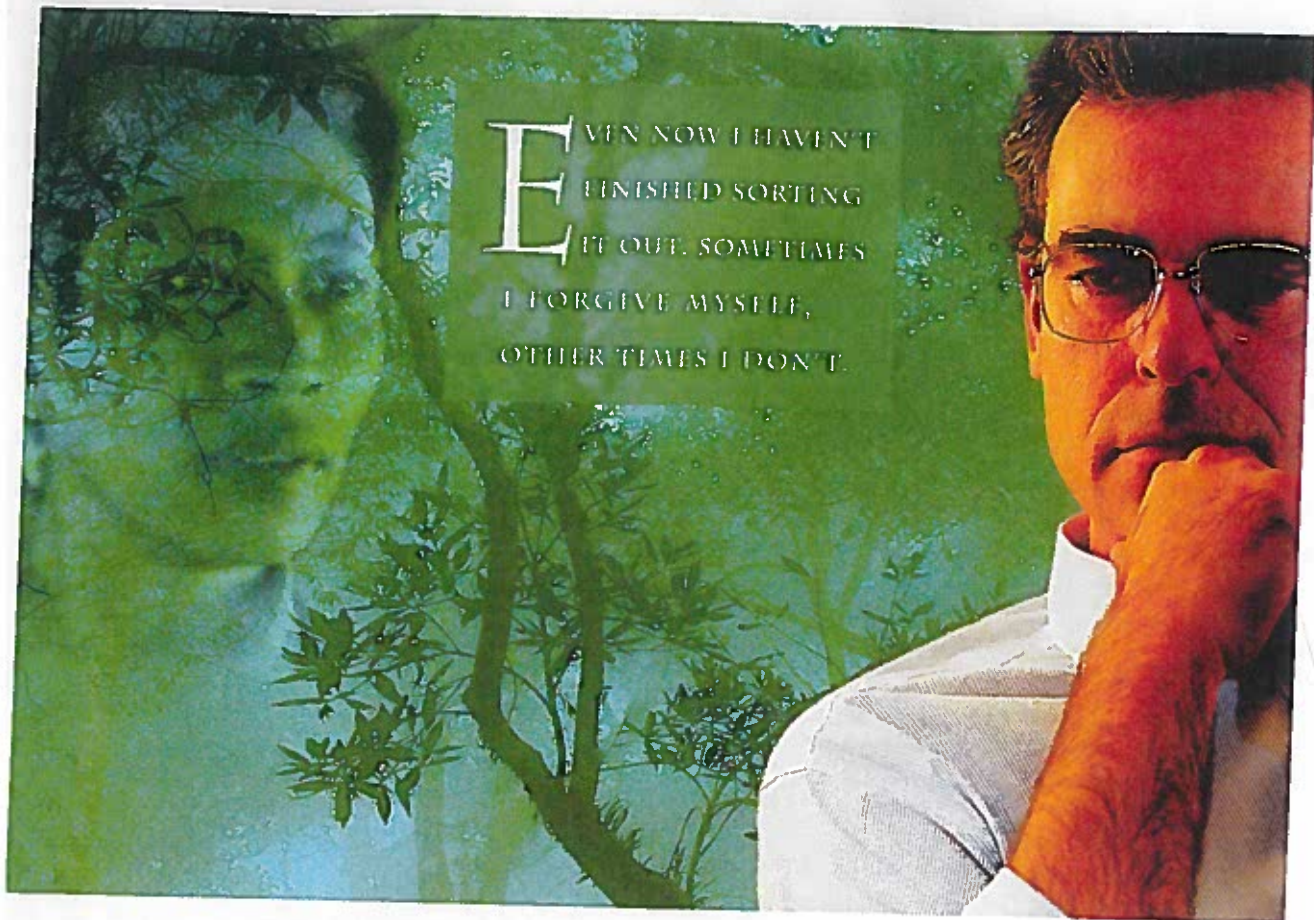
1. My Khe (mī'kě').



mixes (1984), Rupert Garcia. Pastel on paper, 40" × 78¼", courtesy of Rupert Garcia; Rena Bransten gallery, San Francisco; and Galerie Claude Samuel, Paris. Copyright © Rupert Garcia.

Already been straightened for quick throwing. And then for maybe half an hour I kneeled there and waited. Very gradually, in tiny slivers, dawn began to break through the fog, and from my position in the brush I could see ten or fifteen meters up the trail. The mosquitoes were fierce. I remember slapping at them, wondering if I should wake up Kiowa and ask for some repellent, then thinking it was a bad idea, then looking up and seeing the young man come out of the fog. He wore black clothing and rubber sandals and a gray ammunition belt. His shoulders were slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side as if listening for something. He seemed at ease. He carried his weapon in one hand, muzzle down, moving without any hurry up the center of the trail. There was no sound at all—none that I can remember. 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 in my stomach. 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 tried to swallow whatever was rising from my stomach, which tasted like lemonade, something fruity and sour. I was terrified. There were no thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make him go away—just evaporate—and 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. The brush was thick and I had to lob it high, not aiming, and I remember the grenade seeming to freeze above me for an instant, as if a camera had clicked, and I remember ducking down and holding my breath and seeing little wisps of fog rise from the earth. The grenade bounced once and rolled across the trail. I did not hear it, but there must've been a sound, because the young man dropped his weapon and began to run, just two or three quick steps, then he hesitated,



EVEN NOW I HAVEN'T
FINISHED SORTING
IT OUT. SOMETIMES
I FORGIVE MYSELF,
OTHER TIMES I DON'T.

swiveling to his right, and he glanced down at the grenade and tried to cover his head but never did. It occurred to me then that he was about to lie. I wanted to warn him. The grenade made a popping noise—not soft but not loud either—not what I'd expected—and there was a puff of dust and smoke—a small white puff—and the young man seemed to jerk upward as if pulled by invisible wires. He fell on his back. His rubber sandals had been blown off. There was no wind. He lay at the center of the trail, his right leg bent beneath him, his one eye shut, his other eye a huge star-shaped hole.

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. Later, I remember, Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would've died anyway. He told me that

it was a good kill, that I was a soldier and this was a war, that I should shape up and stop staring and ask myself what the dead man would've done if things were reversed.

None of it mattered. The words seemed far too complicated. All I could do was gape at the fact of the young man's body.

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, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room, I'll look up and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog. ❖

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What aspect of this story had the strongest impact on you?

Comprehension Check

- What was the young Vietnamese man doing before the narrator killed him?
- What does the dead soldier “do” when he “reappears” to the narrator?

Think Critically

2. Why do you think the narrator kills the man?

THINK ABOUT

- the narrator’s mental and physical state as the man nears
- Kiowa’s remarks to the narrator
- the narrator’s statement that “there was no real peril”

3. How would you describe the narrator’s initial reactions after the killing?

4. Why do you think the narrator keeps writing war stories?

5. **ACTIVE READING** **CONNECTING TO EXPERIENCE** Look back at the notes you made in your **READER’S NOTEBOOK** about connecting to the experiences described in this story. What details drew you into the experiences the narrator relates? Were there any experiences that you could not relate to? Explain your answers.

Extend Interpretations

6. **The Writer’s Style** “Ambush” is a work of fiction, but the story reads like a nonfiction account of a true event. Why do you think O’Brien used this style? Do you think it is effective? Why or why not?
7. **Connect to Life** The fear and uncertainty of war can affect a person’s ability to think clearly and make decisions. Think of other situations that might generate a level of anxiety and stress that would have similar consequences. Do you think decisions made under these circumstances should be judged in the same way as decisions made under ordinary circumstances? Explain your answer.
8. **Points of Comparison** “Ambush” and “Why Soldiers Won’t Talk” both portray the effects of war on the soldiers who fight in them. Which of these selections seems most realistic and convincing to you? Support your answer with evidence from the selection.

Literary Analysis

INTERNAL CONFLICT

An **external conflict** involves opposition with an outside force. The setting of “Ambush”—the Vietnam War—is a major external conflict between opposing nations and armies. Within that larger conflict the story focuses on the **internal conflicts**—the inner struggles—of the narrator. Internal conflicts may center on a decision a character must make or on problems that draw out contradictory behavior in the character. Internal conflicts often arise out of situations that are ambiguous—that can be interpreted in more than one way.


From the opening lines of the story, the narrator faces situations that generate internal conflicts for him. For example, when his daughter asks whether he has ever killed anyone, he does not know whether he should tell her the truth or not. He says, “It was a difficult moment, but I did what seemed right.”

Paired Activity With a partner, identify another internal conflict the narrator experiences. Describe the conflict and the circumstances that lead to it. Tell whether you agree with the way the narrator tries to resolve the conflict.

REVIEW **TITLE** The **title** of a work often carries more than one level of meaning. It may summarize a theme, raise a question, or make an ironic comment. Think about the meaning of the word *ambush*. Is more than one kind of ambush portrayed in this story? What is the main connection between the title and the story?

Choices & CHALLENGES

Writing Options

1. Exhibit Proposal Draw up a proposal for a multimedia exhibit on Vietnam for your public library. Briefly describe the parts of the exhibit, including any technology components. Also include materials you think will be needed, a possible schedule for producing the exhibit, and a list of staff needs. Place the proposal in your **Working Portfolio**. 

2. Points of Comparison Write a brief essay in which you analyze what happens in "Ambush" in terms of Steinbeck's ideas in "Why Soldiers Won't Talk." Consider how the two pieces

might be considered to be in conflict as well as how Steinbeck's observations might help to explain what the narrator describes.

Writing Handbook
See page 1283: Analysis.

Activities & Explorations

Movie Score Think about what episodes might go into a short movie based on "Ambush." Then look for pieces of music that would reflect the varying episodes and moods in such a movie. Put together the pieces in a sequence that could serve as a score for the film. If possible, get

recordings of the works and play them for the class, explaining your choices. – **MUSIC/SPEAKING AND LISTENING**

Inquiry & Research

Guerrilla Tactics Investigate the tactics used by the Vietcong guerrillas in the Vietnam War. Find out how their operations and attitudes created major obstacles for the American forces. Present your findings to the class, and discuss how the guerrilla tactics relate to what happens in "Ambush."

 **More Online: Research Start**
www.mcdougallittell.com



Tim O'Brien

1946–

Other Works

If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home
Northern Lights
Going After Cacciato
The Nuclear Age
The Things They Carried
In the Lake of the Woods

War and Writing In 1968, immediately after graduating from college with a bachelor's degree in political science, Tim O'Brien was drafted into the army. He was wounded in Vietnam, earning a Purple Heart. Discharged from the army as a sergeant, he accepted a full scholarship to Harvard University as a graduate student in government. While studying at Harvard, O'Brien wrote *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, a book of memoirs about his combat experiences. He subsequently left Harvard to pursue writing as a full-time career.

Major Awards O'Brien's third book, *Going After Cacciato*, won the National Book Award in 1979.

Inspired by O'Brien's own struggle with the choice of whether to go to Vietnam or flee the country, the novel tells about a soldier who decides to escape from Vietnam and the army. *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's fifth book, won the 1990 National Book Critics Circle Award as best novel of the year.

Novelist's Focus Although he writes about war, O'Brien does not consider himself a war novelist. The true concern of his writing, he says, is "the exploration of substantive, important human values." Regarding his most acclaimed novel, O'Brien said in an interview, "It's not really Vietnam that I was concerned about when I wrote *Cacciato*; rather, it was to have readers care about what's right and wrong and about the difficulty of doing right, the difficulty of saying no to a war."

Author Activity

Real-Life Experiences Read some sections of O'Brien's memoirs, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. Share with the class any insights you gain into "Ambush" from O'Brien's reflections on his own experience.