

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

Visiting author vies for function of fiction

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Last night, author Tim O'Brien's goal was to aim right at the hearts and stomachs of his 1,200 plus audience -- something he strives every day to do as an author.

He said his job as a storyteller is not to affect reader's heads but in a more emotional place, because sometimes the truth isn't enough.

O'Brien, author of the University's fall common reading *The Things They Carried*, visited campus last night to speak to a number of the 2,500 students and staff who participated in the common reading this semester.

Bowling Green has been promoting a common reading since 2001. This year all students in the University 100 classes and the BGeXperience program were required to read the book. Others were encouraged to participate in the common reading as well.

The Things They Carried was based on the time O'Brien was drafted into the Vietnam War and is a fictional account of the struggles he and his company went through. To O'Brien, however, students need to be able to recognize the importance of storytelling.

"Stories I think are underestimated by virtually all of us ... stories are among the things that all of us carry," he said. "We carry stories about our childhood, our hometowns, our mothers, our friends and in my case, Vietnam."

And some stories aren't true, O'Brien said. But these stories serve a purpose as well.

To illustrate his point, he told a few stories during his speech. One story came directly from *The Things They Carried*. It was the emotional chapter where he shot an enemy soldier.

In the book, O'Brien's daughter asks him if he killed anyone in the war. He tells her, "No, of course I didn't." This is an example of the leverage an author can have using fiction versus non-fiction, O'Brien said.

"I have no daughter, but for this I needed a child for the story," O'Brien said. "An adult would never say, 'Did you kill someone?' because they are too polite. But a child will ask that question."

Also, O'Brien didn't kill the Viet Cong, as the book says he did. However he said, in truth, it is likely he did kill someone in the war.

"I will never know whether a bullet from my gun killed a man," O'Brien said. "But in [this part of the book], I can take personal responsibility for a man's death and I should -- after all I was there, I was a soldier, I fired my weapon."

"So in some ways, it was a true story, even if some of the details were made up," he said. "It creates the truth of what was inside of me then and what has been inside of me the last thirty years."

Leveling with the audience, O'Brien said people must be careful how they interpret the truth and recognize the importance of stories.

Ironically, because of Iraq, his stories have again become familiar, he said.

"Looking at recent headlines about the war in Iraq, the factors and the real stories behind the factors, bring about some

relevance to a very good many of you in this room," he said.

It is important that stories go beyond war clichés and show the war has had an effect on people, he said.

"It's not political, it's personal and that is just one way Iraq is similar [to Vietnam]," O'Brien said.

O'Brien also told students that as human beings they have to go out and decide what the truth means.

University students were not his only young targets because there were high school students in the audience as well. Bowling Green High School's Senior AP English class has had O'Brien's novel on its reading list for years. Some of the students said it was an extra bonus that this year O'Brien was invited to the University campus.

Senior Caroline Cota said she felt his speech clarified why he has chosen to write about the importance of war stories.

"It helped me come to terms that things may not be real," Cota said. "But it doesn't really matter, because fiction can sometimes be more powerful than the truth."

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