

# American Involvement in Vietnam



- Ho Chi Minh declares Vietnamese independence from France soon after end of WWII--in Sept. of 1945. War with France ensues.
- U.S., fearing the spread of communism during the Cold War period, supports French. By 1953, carries 40% of the cost of the war.
- 1954: French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Geneva Accords temporarily divide Vietnam in half at the 17th Parallel. Elections to be held in two years.

# American Involvement, cont.



- U.S. installs staunchly Catholic, anti-Communist Ngo Dinh Diem as President in South
- Diem becomes increasingly oppressive and brutal to Buddhist majority
- Late 1950's: development of Viet Cong in the South
- Strong Buddhist protests against Diem in early 1960's; Kennedy-approved coup in October of 1963

# The American War in Vietnam



- Kennedy had been sending American “advisors”
- Johnson sends first American combat troops to Vietnam in 1965
- By mid-1967, U.S. has almost half a million ground troops in Vietnam
- 1968: Tet Offensive; My Lai Massacre
- 1969: Nixon approves secret bombings of Cambodia
- 1970: Shootings at Kent State
- 1973: Draft ends; last American troops leave Vietnam
- 1975: Fall of Saigon

# Vietnam War Literature

Outpouring of Vietnam War literature and film begins in late 1970's

## Early Literary Works

- Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976)
- Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977)
- Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977)

## Early Films

- *Coming Home* (1978)
- *The Deer Hunter* (1978)
- *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

# Early Accounts



- ⇒ Usually first-person narratives by actual witnesses
- ⇒ Anti-heroic stories-- assert moral ambiguity
- ⇒ Deflate notions of patriotism, glory

# Some Questions:

- ➔ Were the experiences of combat veterans in Vietnam unique among wars, or are combat experiences pretty much similar across wars?
- ➔ Do Vietnam War writers present their experiences differently and using unique forms or are there continuities throughout modern war literature?

# The Great War and Vietnam



- ⇒ British WWI literature shares much in common with Vietnam literature.
- ⇒ Both wars changed their country's mythic self-perceptions.
- ⇒ Both illustrate tension between romantic expectations of war and battlefield reality.

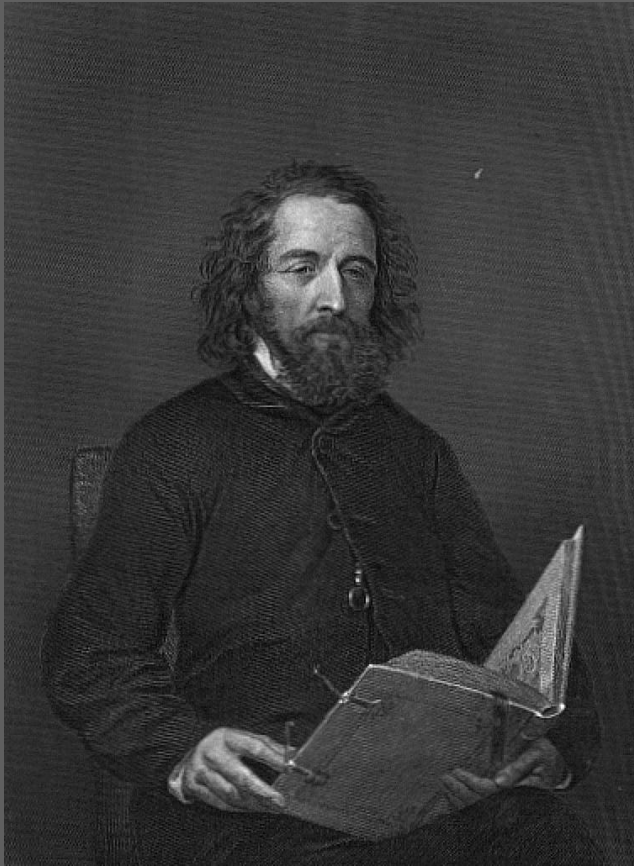
# 3-Part Structure

- 1) The sinister or absurd or even farcical preparation for battle
- 2) the unmanning experience of battle--characterized by disenchantment and loss of innocence
- 3) the retirement from the line to a contrasting scene, where there is time and quiet for consideration, meditation, and reconstruction.





# WWI and Vietnam, cont.



- ⇒ If literary romances (the poetry of Tennyson, etc.) were the sources of idealism for British soldiers in WWI, what were the sources of idealism for American soldiers going off to Vietnam?

# President's Kennedy's “New Frontier”



# Frontier



- ➔ The American western frontier was officially closed in 1890 by the Superintendent of the Census.

# Frontier Mythology

- ➔ Yet, with Kennedy, this frontier idea could remain as a metaphoric landscape of challenges and possibilities
- ➔ Space as the “new frontier”
- ➔ But Vietnam could also become a new frontier



# Frontier Mythology in Vietnam

- ➔ Americans could once again leave the corruption of the city for the rigors and virtue of nature
- ➔ On this new frontier, though, Americans would protect rather than destroy the native people
- ➔ A vision of redemption from the past.



# From *A Rumor of War*

By Philip Caputo

“The only thing I really liked about my boyhood surroundings were the Cook and DuPage County forest preserves, a belt of virgin woodland through which flowed a muddy stream called Salt Creek. . . There was small game in the woods, sometimes a deer or two, but most of all a hint of the wild past, when moccasined feet trod the forest paths and fur trappers cruised the rivers in bark canoes. One in a while, I found flint arrowheads in the muddy creek bank. Looking at them, I would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish I had lived then, before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers.

# From *Dispatches*

By Michael Herr

“Come on,” the captain said, “we’ll take you out to play Cowboys and Indians.” We walked out from Song Be in a long line, maybe a hundred men . . . It was a beautiful operation. We played all morning until someone on the point got something--a “scout,” they thought, and then they didn’t know. They couldn’t even tell for sure whether he was from a friendly tribe or not, no markings on his arrows because his quiver was empty, like his pockets and his hands. The captain thought about it during the walk back, but when we got to camp he put it in his report, “One VC killed”; good for the unit, he said, not bad for the captain either.

# The Green Berets



- ⇒ The Green Berets or Army Special Forces became a leading symbol of the New Frontier
- ⇒ Kennedy dramatically increased their numbers
- ⇒ Similar to Western hero, yet also professionalized—comfortable in “civilized” world

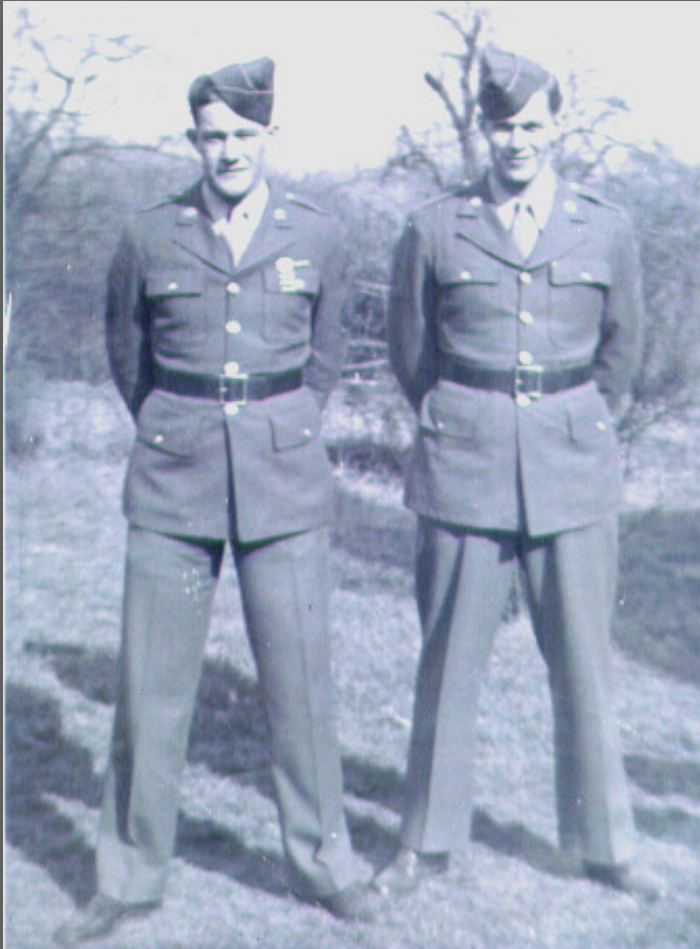


# Western hero and Green Beret come together in figure of John Wayne.



“Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest.” (Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*)

# Vietnam vs. World War Two



- ➔ Works often emphasize the difference between Vietnam and WWII--sometimes called “the good war”



- ➔ The cultural myths from WWII DON'T describe reality.
- ➔ Vietnam War literature is often brutally graphic and shocking, relating atrocities committed both by the Viet Cong and by American soldiers.

# A Different Kind of War



- Guerilla warfare.
- Jungle, mountain terrain
- Difficulty in distinguishing between enemies and civilians.

# Differences



- ⇒ Widespread opposition at home to the war, especially after 1967

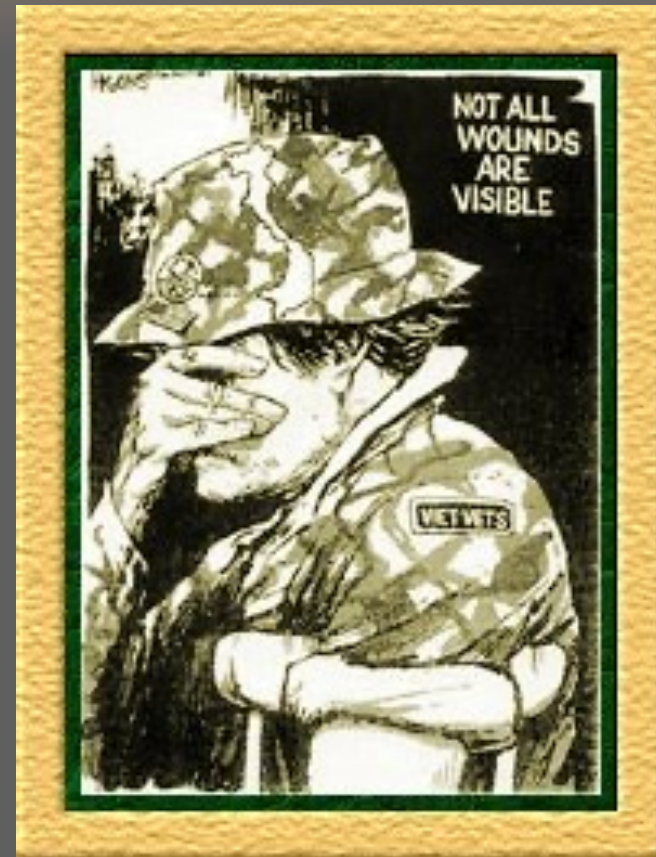
# More differences



- ⇒ A “contained conflict” without distinct battle lines.
- ⇒ Emphasis on body counts as indicators of battle-field success.

# Combat Trauma

- Unusually high incidence of delayed psychiatric casualties after the war (PTSD)



# Some Probable Causes of Increased PTSD

- A soldier entered and exited war individually rather than in a military unit
- One-year tour of duty (short-timers syndrome)
- Brief post-combat transition period for soldiers returning to U.S.





# Race and Class Issues



- First fully integrated war
- Drew disproportionately upon racial minorities and poor
- Racial tensions among the troops, though not so much on front lines
- Class tensions between troops and officers

# From *Dispatches*

By Michael Herr

“I been here mor’n eight months now,” he said. “I bet I been in mor’n twenny firefights. An’ I ain’ hardly fired back once.”

“How come?”

“Shee-it, I go firin’ back, I might kill one a th’Brothers, you dig it?”

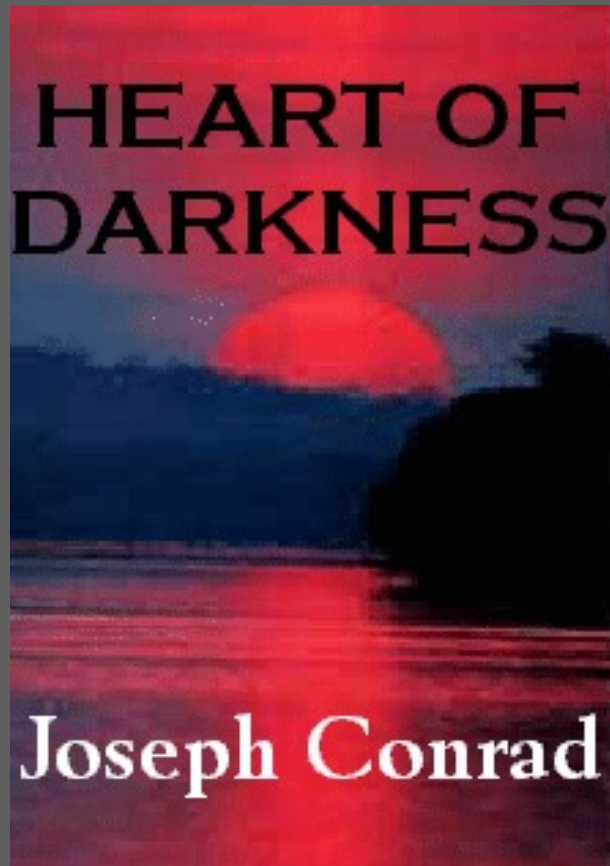
I nodded, no Viet Cong ever called *me* honky, and he told me that in his company alone there were more than a dozen Black Panthers and that he was one of them. . . .”

# “We Never Know”

By Yusef Komunyakaa

He danced with tall grass  
for a moment, like he was swaying  
with a woman. Our gun barrels  
glowed white-hot.  
When I got to him,  
a blue halo  
of flies had already claimed him.  
I pulled the crumbled photograph  
from his fingers.  
There's no other way  
to say this: I fell in love.  
The morning cleared again,  
except for a distant mortar  
& somewhere choppers taking off.  
I slid the wallet into his pocket  
& turned him over, so he wouldn't be  
kissing the ground.

# Heart of Darkness



- Often Vietnam War literature parallels structures found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
- Moral explorations of individuals, stripped of civilization's restraints, confronting evil, primal emotions, chaos, savagery.

# From “How to Tell a True War Story”

By Tim O’Brien

“The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorous, the purply black glow of napalm, the rocket’s red glare. It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not” (181).

# From *A Rumor of War*

By Philip Caputo

“It was soon dark. I still could not hear anything but the wind and crackling branches, and now I could see nothing except varying shades of black. The village was a pitch-colored pool in the gray-black paddies. Beyond the inky line of the jungle bordering the stream, the Cordillera was so black that it looked like a vast hole in the sky. Even after my eyes adjusted, I could not see the slightest variation in color. It was absolutely black. It was a void, and staring at it, I felt that I was looking into the sun’s opposite, the source and center of all the darkness in the world.”



From *When Heaven and Earth  
Changed Places*

By Le Ly Hayslip

“All in all, the years with my sisters and Sau Ban were among the best of my life. Ky La then--between the French and American wars--was a childhood paradise, full of tropical birds and buffalos; dogs and chickens and pigs we called our pets; rushing rivers to swim in; and wide fields where we could run and laugh and be with our families. We had fresh rain to cool us down and a hot sun to dry us off--in short, everything little kids needed to grow up happy and strong and full of love.”

# The Ordinary Foot Soldier



- ➔ Ordinary soldiers usually not blamed for atrocities depicted.



From *Dispatches*  
By Michael Herr

“It seemed the least of the war’s contradictions that to lose your worst sense of American shame you had to leave the Dial Soapers in Saigon and a hundred headquarters who spoke goodworks and killed nobody themselves, and go out to the grungy men in the jungle who talked bloody murder and killed people all the time.”

# Search for Form



- Vietnam War writers search for literary forms to adequately express their experiences
- Question underlying much literature of the later 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21st Century: How does one write about atrocity?

# Can War Trauma be Communicated?



- “There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.”  
--Kurt Vonnegut
- Cliché--“If you weren’t there, you can’t possibly understand what it was like”

# Search for Form

“It is the duty of the Vietnam War writer to incorporate the seeming illogic of the war into the structure of his work. The reader should be obliged to live like the soldier, adrift in an alien universe in which the familiar. . . landmarks [have] disappeared.”

--Critic Lloyd Lewis

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- Vietnam War writers often use forms that may at first appear confusing, ambiguous or chaotic to readers
  - Often formal experimentation designed to represent the disorder and confusion experienced by soldiers in Vietnam

# Potential of Art

- Yet, the literature criticized for presenting just such a view (Vietnam War impossible to understand)
- James C. Wilson: decries “dope and dementia” view of the war
- Best Vietnam War literature often probes this problem: raises questions about the potential for art to communicate or even transform the trauma of war experience into something meaningful.

# Vietnam War Literature

*War stories aren't always about war, per se. They aren't about bombs and bullets and military maneuvers. They aren't about tactics, they aren't about foxholes and canteens. A war story, like any good story, is finally about the human heart.*

--Tim O'Brien

# Tim O'Brien—Brief Biography



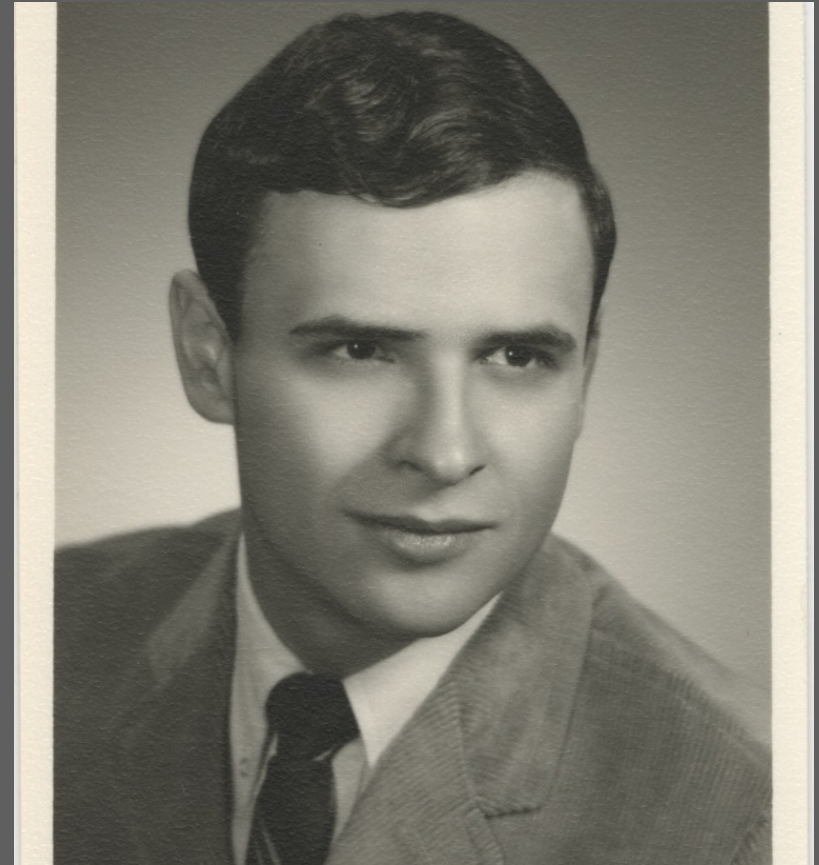
- Born in Austin, Minnesota in 1946. Grew up in Worthington, Minnesota
- Both parents were WWII veterans— father in the Navy, mother a WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service)





# School

- ➔ Active in debate and politics in both high school and college
- ➔ Graduated from Macalester College in 1968; B.A. in Political Science
- ➔ Full scholarship to graduate school at Harvard School of Government



# Vietnam



- Summer after graduation (1968) was drafted into Vietnam War
- Seriously considered fleeing to Sweden, but finally couldn't go through with it
- Served tour of duty in 1969-70
- Stationed in Quang Nai province, the same area where the My Lai massacre had occurred the previous year, though not yet disclosed to American public

# After the War

- Entered the doctoral program at Harvard upon return
- Worked summers as a public affairs reporter for *The Washington Post* in 1972, 1973
- First book the memoir: *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) while still a graduate student



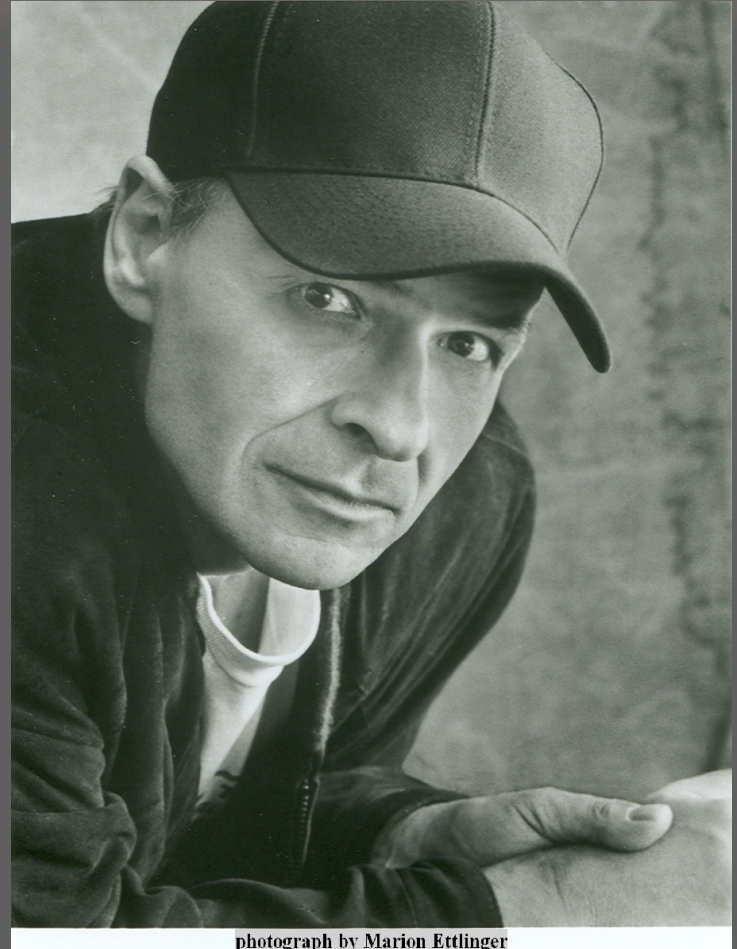
# Novels



- After publication of first novel, *Northern Lights*, (1975), withdrew from graduate school in 1976 to devote himself full-time to fiction writing
  - *Going After Cacciato* (1978), wins National Book Award
  - *The Things They Carried* (1990)
  - *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)

# Tim O'Brien

- Work tends to be as much about the process of storytelling as it is about war
  - Metafiction
  - Blurring of genres
  - Blurring of fact and fiction
  - Suspicion of historical “truth”



photograph by Marion Ettlinger

# O'Brien and Storytelling

"BUT THIS TOO IS TRUE:  
STORIES CAN SAVE US."

**TIM O'BRIEN**

**"FICTION  
IS THE LIE  
THAT HELPS  
US UNDERSTAND  
THE TRUTH."**

**TIM O'BRIEN**

"The thing about a story is  
that you dream it as you tell  
it, hoping that others might  
then dream along with you,  
and in this way memory and  
imagination and language  
combine to make spirits in  
the head. There is the illusion  
of aliveness."

**TIM O'BRIEN**

"A good piece of fiction, in my view, does not offer solutions. Good stories deal with our moral struggles, our uncertainties, our dreams, our blunders, our contradictions, our endless quest for understanding. Good stories do not resolve the mysteries of the human spirit but rather describe and expand upon those mysteries."

**Tim O'Brien**

"MY LIFE IS STORYTELLING.  
I BELIEVE IN STORIES,  
IN THEIR INCREDIBLE  
POWER TO KEEP  
PEOPLE ALIVE, TO  
KEEP THE LIVING  
ALIVE, AND THE DEAD."

**TIM O'BRIEN**