

# How To Tell A True War Story

from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien



above: a water buffalo

**“You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let’s say, and afterward you ask, “is it true?” and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer.”**

In How to Tell a True War Story Tim O'Brien gives us several examples of what may be true war stories. He writes,

For example, we've all heard this one. Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen -- and maybe it did, anything's possible -- even then you know it can't be true because a true war story does not depend on that kind of truth...A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth.

(O'Brien 83)

What do you think O'Brien means by this? In your explanation of this quote, and this chapter, be sure to address the following:

- What does O'Brien mean by **truth**?
- Why can't a true war story be moral?
- How does this notion of truth affect the previous chapters in the novel?