

Note: This paper refers to the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story" from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, and to *Stonewall* by John J. Dwyer (my 12th grade History teacher). Be aware that the O'Brien reading contains profanity (none is in this paper).

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English
8/19/03

“Historical Fiction” and Truth in War Stories:

While it is difficult to tell exactly what Tim O’Brien’s definition of a “true war story is,” one thing is fairly clear – a “true war story” is true if it survives. When O’Brien defines a “true war story,” what he is talking about is a good war *story*, a story about war that lasts, that is retold. At the beginning it does seem as though he is concerned with actual, factual truth in a war story, as in how to tell a war story that reflects what really happened. By the end of the story, however, it is clear that this is not his intent.

“Absolute occurrence is irrelevant” (89), he says. What counts is if the story *matters* to you. If the story matters to you, it’s true. Not necessarily factual, but “true” by O’Brien’s definition. If a story matters to you, you’ll retell it, and thus it becomes a real *war story*, a story about war that gets around – that survives. This is his definition of a “true war story.”

Stonewall is both true and untrue by O’Brien’s definition. It is true, because at least to Mr. Dwyer the story *matters* enough for him to dedicate a significant amount of time to telling it. But it is untrue because it is concerned with teaching morals and truth. O’Brien’s definition would apply to *Stonewall*, except to him the purpose of a “true war story” is not to teach a lesson, but to survive. *Stonewall*’s purpose, however, is to do more than just survive. If the entire intent behind the book was to be retold, it would have been shorter, more shocking, more exaggerated. While just about any story wants to survive, most, like *Stonewall*, have a higher purpose. *Stonewall* describes events in a

way that tries to remain basically true to what *actually occurred*, while telling them in a manner that conveys the morals and character of the people involved.

O'Brien's type of "true war story" is like a web virus. Its whole purpose is to survive and spread, whether it's true is irrelevant. Ideal "plain" history (as opposed to historical fiction) is the opposite. Its purpose is to tell what actually happened in the past, regardless of whether people want to retell the story. Historical fiction is somewhere in between. It is willing to sacrifice certain details in order to make the story entertaining to readers, but remains based on truth in order to teach in the process. Mr. Dwyer and Mr. O'Brien's definitions of a "true war story" would obviously vary, but it's really a non-issue. What is an issue is whether Mr. Dwyer would agree with O'Brien's *purpose* behind telling a war story, "true" or not. Mr. Dwyer would strongly disagree with O'Brien's idea that the reason for a war story to exist is to spread, regardless of content. Clearly, Mr. Dwyer's primary intentions in *Stonewall* are to (1) tell the story of the Civil War truthfully and to (2) show the fruits of a life dedicated to Christ. Both of these intentions directly contradict O'Brien's theory. To O'Brien, both truth (that is, actual occurrence) and morality are irrelevant.

As mentioned earlier, ideal "plain" history runs directly counter to O'Brien's form of storytelling. Ideally, History text books would contain no bias and would exist only to tell the story *exactly* as it happened, with no ulterior motives to sell well or to matter to readers enough to be retold. In reality, however, O'Brien's theory does pertain, although still not to a great extent. Publishers, by and large, exist to make money, and writers generally want to be known for their works. Thus, in the interest of profit and fame, History texts may be, in a way, O'Brienian "true history stories." They may omit some

details and embellish others in order to make their work acceptable to their audience – in order to make their work survive.