

## ***The Things They Carried: "How to Tell a True War Story" Study Questions***

1. What double meaning does the title of the chapter have?
2. Based on the descriptions, discussions, and vignettes in the chapter, what are the characteristics of a true war story? What does "truth" mean in the context of a war story? Consider the statement "That's a true war story that never happened" and the characters' various attempts to express the truth inherent in a particular story ([Sanders'] frustration at...not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth", "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it").

Other quotes to consider:

- "A true war story is never moral"; "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil"
  - "there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed"
  - "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself...in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true"
  - "often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't"
  - "sometimes it's just beyond telling"
  - "[Mitchell Sanders] wanted me to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling."
  - "You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning."
  - "True war stories do not generalize."
  - "A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe."
  - "The truths are contradictory."
  - "you're never more alive than when you're almost dead"
  - "absolute occurrence is irrelevant"
  - "the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference"
3. What truths about war does the story about the girl who didn't write back to Rat Kiley express? Explain. Consider the narrator's comment that it was a love story, not a war story.
  4. What truths about war does the story about Curt Lemon's death express? Explain.
  5. What truths about war does the story about the listening-post operation in the mountains express? Explain. ("That quiet—just listen. There's your moral.") How would you explain what they heard? ("Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks.")
  6. What truths about war does the story about the baby buffalo express? Explain.
  7. Why is a true war story "never about war" but about "love and memory," "sorrow," "people who never write back," etc.?
  8. Try to write a war story that meets O'Brien's criteria for truth.

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