

The Things They Carried: Notes on “How to Tell a True War Story”

The page numbers given here are for the Broadway Books edition first published in 1998.

General notes:

- double meaning of “tell”: how to *compose* or *narrate* a true war story and how to distinguish a true war story from a false or fictional one (or at least one that doesn’t convey truth effectively)
- war is absurd, irrational, paradoxical: story must avoid reducing its meaning to the rational, moral, etc.
- the soldier’s experience of war is characterized by periods of normality, even mundanity, punctuated by sudden violence or madness
- telling a true war story is not a matter of getting the facts straight—it’s about the *way* the story is told
- the goal is to make the listener feel the experience of war—one of the many aspects of it
- even this chapter itself is paradoxical, seemingly contradictory

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- Rat is oblivious to the reaction Curt’s sister is likely to have to his description of her brother

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- “talking dirty” = telling the harsh truth about the evil and ugliness of human nature

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- significance of sunlight: surreal beauty

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- top: subjectivity, surrealism are fundamental qualities—avoid “God’s eye view” (see also 78: no generalizations, abstractions, analysis)
- two sources of war’s surrealism: extreme objective circumstances; perceptions skewed by fear, desperation, madness

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- shared hallucinations? – perhaps reflective of shared desires
- truth isn’t in the factuality of the details, in words, but in *feeling*—the point of a war story isn’t to convey transitory (and objective) *facts*, but universal (and subjective) *experiences*

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- “Vietnam talks”: for those who become sensitive to the land, the country, the people, who develop some kind of sympathy or understanding, their thoughts and perceptions reveal truths about Vietnam

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- bottom: “the whole war is right there in that stare”—awareness of truths that can’t be verbalized

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- a true war story has no neat resolution or artificial closure: it resonates with universal significance, unanswerable questions, consequences for one’s view of life; continues to haunt the listener
- the relativity of truth in its relationship with human beings: can the “final and definitive truth” ever be pinned down?
- only those who have been in war can truly understand
- war results from, and continues because of, a *failure to listen, to heed, to care*

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- moral of story is ineffable: can’t be captured in words
- war is too complex, as both a phenomenon and an experience, to be reduced to a simple moral

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- war must be seen as a subjective, personal *experience*—that’s what really matters
- baby water buffalo symbolizes innocence and what violence does to it
- extreme violence and cruelty is a reaction to frustrated desire for revenge, madness and irrationality of war
- the evil and absurdity of Rat’s actions are a reflection of the evil and absurdity of war

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- paradoxes/contradictory truths about war

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- a war story is characterized by “the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference”: because war itself is a situation in which normal standards of morality are suspended—they become abstract and insubstantial in the face of the violence, absurdity, and extremity of war
 - the “beauty” of a firefight consists in this indifference: one of the paradoxes of war
- “almost nothing is true” as an isolated fact: it’s the *effect* of the story that must express truth
- war, and the omnipresence of death, inspire a sublime intensity of feeling, awareness, appreciation
 - intense awareness of mortality brings about an appreciation of life
- war story must convey the ambiguity, uncertainty of war: “nothing is ever absolutely true”

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- Curt Lemon’s death: war highlights the fragility of human life, fine line between life and death

- singing “Lemon Tree”: war causes aloofness, absurd behavior; simultaneous presence of tragedy/horror and humor is profoundly disturbing
 - war is so overwhelming that it can’t be processed normally: humor is a defense mechanism
- true war story must be grounded in real experience, tragedy, absurdity, irony (e.g. the soldier throwing himself on the grenade but being unable to save his fellow soldiers), but not necessarily specific details: “absolute occurrence is irrelevant”
 - general truths conveyed in details that may not be true; not conveyed as generalizations

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- a true war story must make you feel what those who experienced it felt: “if I could ever get the story right...you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed”

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- a true war story is never about war”: it’s about the truths of human experience *illuminated* by war