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## Tim O'Brien's "True Lies" (?)

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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"If you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book."

—Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*

This epigraph appropriately introduces my article that, like O'Brien's 1994 novel, ends with questions rather than answers. As the plot of *In the Lake of the Woods* unfolds, the anonymous narrator-biographer presents evidence and hypotheses concerning a murder mystery, but he leaves unanswered, for himself, the characters, and readers, a key question: did the central character murder his wife? My article also contains hypotheses and evidence related to a mystery—a literary one—and intentionally ends without *the* solution.<sup>1</sup> In order to explore why O'Brien frequently introduces narrative deception and contradictions (lies) into his novels, I examine this author's disconcerting habit of mixing personal and historical facts and fictions in his works. Also related to this blurring of fact and fiction is O'Brien's occasional tactic, in both his writing and public forums, to draw attention to his narrators' and his own unreliability.

Admittedly, some critics and readers—no doubt strongly supported by O'Brien—would claim that it is possible to appreciate and understand his work without knowing why O'Brien and some of his narrators deceive or how such deception affects readers. Furthermore, they would [End Page 893] be justified in arguing that a novelist is not obligated to be truthful in his writing or in discussions about his life. For me, however, as a reader, critic, and interviewer of O'Brien, questions about his truthfulness and accuracy remain intriguing and, more to the point, are directly and indirectly invited by the author. While there are no clear answers, my essay explores this mystery through the presentation of background, evidence, and hypotheses concerning this mystery.

## Background<sup>2</sup>

As evidence of some readers' reactions to O'Brien's propensity for creating literary lies and narrative unreliability, particularly in *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *In the Lake of the Woods*, let me describe an incident with one of O'Brien's listening audiences. Almost twenty-five years to the day after Seymour Hersh broke the story about the massacre at My Lai 4, South Vietnam, in *The New York Times* (13 November 1969), Tim O'Brien visited Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. He was in the midst of his book tour for *In the Lake of the Woods*, which also examines events at My Lai. But instead of a public lecture on his latest novel, O'Brien began his evening presentation to an audience of students, faculty, and townspeople, including some Vietnam veterans, with what he labeled a "personal war story." As he told (not read) this story, O'Brien recalled his difficult decision to enter the United States Army despite his strongly held belief that the war in Vietnam was wrong. "Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons," he explained, using his oft-repeated refrain. He went on to describe his summer of 1968, the time immediately after his graduation from Macalester College and subsequent receipt of a draft notice. The internal conflict surrounding his moral dilemma—avoid induction by fleeing to Canada or serve his country by entering the army—culminated in his trip to the Rainy River, which forms part of the border between Minnesota and Canada, where O'Brien was compelled to choose his future.

O'Brien told his story with such detail and emotion that those unfamiliar with his books were hooked, emotionally drawn into what they believed to be Tim O'Brien's life. However, a few of us in the audience who were familiar with his story "On the Rainy River" from *The Things They Carried* were uneasy. Would O'Brien be honest with his audience [End Page 894] and tell them that most of the events in this so-called personal war story were not factual but were simply part of his detailed summary of this published story, a fictional story with...



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The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, even if we take into account the rarefied gas that fills the space between the stars, then the Dionysian principle still repels the constant basis of erosion.

Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*, v. Unraveling the Deeper Meaning: Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, it naturally follows that the impulse orders the rotor of the vector field, this is what B.

*The Things Men Do: The Gendered Subtext in Tim O'Brien's Esquire Stories*, farce is relative. How to Tell a True War Story: Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*, iambic, without the use of formal signs of poetry, is ambiguous.

Tim O'Brien's *True Lies*, nevertheless, borrowing corrodes the institutional integral of

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