

**Humanities Core Course, Spring 2016**  
**Instructor: Tamara Beauchamp**

**Study Questions for Tim O'Brien's "On the Rainy River"**

1. How does Tim O'Brien qualify the story that he is about to tell in the introductory paragraph of "On the Rainy River"? How do you understand the rhetoric of that maneuver?
2. Why do you think that "On the Rainy River," an obviously autobiographical essay, is framed as "A Work of Fiction"?
3. What kind of justification does O'Brien believe is necessary for war? How do you relate this to the conversation about "just wars" that we had around Michael Walzer in the fall quarter?
4. How did O'Brien react to his draft notice? Why does he describe his feeling about going to war as "a kind of schizophrenia"? How does the idea of conscience figure into how O'Brien thinks about dodging the draft?
5. On page 291, O'Brien begins directly addressing his reader in the second person ("What would you do?"). What is the rhetorical function of this series of questions, in your opinion?
6. Does O'Brien end up going to Canada to evade his draft orders? Why does he say that his story doesn't have a "happy ending"?

**Study Questions for Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"**

1. In contrast to "On the Rainy River," O'Brien prefaces "How to Tell A True War Story" with the caveat "This is true." Why do you think he insists on the veracity of this account and not the other?
2. What, according to O'Brien, are the requirements of a "true war story"? That is, if O'Brien were defining the genre of a "true war story," what would the characteristics of that genre be? Are all war stories tellable, that is, capable of being represented in language?
3. Based on the characteristics O'Brien gives of a true war story, what might we assume he thinks about the enterprise of war in general? For instance, what does O'Brien make of the infamous statement by General Sherman "War is hell" (which you will remember was explicated at length by Walzer in the reading from fall quarter)?
4. How does O'Brien characterize "the angles of vision" (295) in depicting a scene from wartime? Does this relate to the depiction of combat in *Billy Lynn's Long Half Time Walk*?
5. What do you make of the story of the baby water buffalo? Why is this story somehow "truer" for O'Brien than other narratives of war? How, ultimately, does the baby buffalo

come to operate in the conclusion of the story?

6. On pages 300-1, O'Brien's reflections make extreme use of figurative language. Name three significant formal features of the passage from "How do you generalize" to "...the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity" (300-1).