

10-20-2011

The Significance of Stories (2011)

Megan Marimen
Valparaiso University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/core_reader

Recommended Citation

Marimen, Megan, "The Significance of Stories (2011)" (2011). *The Valpo Core Reader*. Paper 3.
http://scholar.valpo.edu/core_reader/3

This Life and Death Essay is brought to you for free and open access by ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Valpo Core Reader by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

The Significance of Stories

By Megan Marimen

What is a true war story? In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien admits that war stories are unbelievable, immoral, pointless, and raise questions of truth. O'Brien would know; he has gathered numerous, personal war stories from his time serving in Vietnam in the late 1960s. In addition, true war stories are not about violence and medals but rather "sorrow... and people who never listen" (O'Brien 85). The American soldiers that fought in Vietnam are not necessarily searching for praise, although their coping mechanisms may illustrate otherwise; O'Brien helps readers understand that soldiers just want, and perhaps need, someone to listen to their story. Choosing to ignore or not understand the depth of a soldier's story is dangerous to the progression of morality and the creation of a more compassionate community. War stories are universal, relatable, and truly "stories can save us" in a time of need (225).

According to Tim O'Brien, translated from his companion and storyteller Rat Kiley, when young soldiers argued whether they could send a woman to Vietnam, Mark Fossie, a young and in love soldier, was on a mission to prove them wrong. Mary Anne Bell, his high school sweetheart, showed up six weeks later with an open mind and an abundance of innocence. However, after only a short time the people, culture, and war of Vietnam overwhelmed her. Mary Anne commented, "Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me" (111). Having lost her innocence, Mary Anne became "lost inside herself;" she stopped smiling quite so much, cut her feminine hair, gave up jewelry and make up, and began disappearing at night to go on ambushes with the Green Berets (115). Finally, wearing a homemade and barbaric necklace of tongues, Mary Anne ventured out into the mountains and never came back.

The war quickly corrupted Mary Anne's innocence after being sent to Vietnam, just as it had done to the lively young soldiers. The parable of Mary Anne is really a horror story of coming of age and evidence of the expedited maturity required for the survival of the soldiers. Mary Anne came to Vietnam wearing "white culottes and this sexy pink sweater" and ventured to the mountains with bare feet and a necklace of tongues (90). Similarly, drafted teenage soldiers came to war in Vietnam with happiness, hope, and dreams and left as soldiers with dismal personalities, horrid memories, and possibly post-traumatic stress disorder.

In another story, a field of shit as O'Brien words it, or "the village toilet" literally consumed Kiowa, the fun-loving soldier who loyally carried the New Testament and his

moccasins in his backpack (168). The storyteller describes Kiowa's disastrous death with detail: "there was an arm and a wristwatch and part of a boot. There were bubbles where Kiowa's head should've been" (171). Kiowa's death caused much guilt in several soldiers, including the young soldier who shone the flashlight and gave away their safe location, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross who should have moved his troops to higher ground, and Norman Bowker who "could've won the Silver Star for valor" and saved Kiowa if he had not have been so distracted by the smell of the shit (146).

Norman Bowker's guilt about unintentionally contributing to Kiowa's death and the pressure to be courageous from his father became too much to handle. Norman confided this pressure in Tim O'Brien when he admitted on the battlefield, "I'd wish for my dad to write me a letter and say it's okay if I don't win any medals" (36). Due to isolation back in his hometown, feeling as if he lacked purpose, and having no one listen or understand his stories, Norman hung himself in the YMCA locker room. Norman's tragic death symbolizes society's misunderstanding of the soldiers' postwar needs. Perhaps on a larger scale, Norman's story represents the lack of understanding and communication between different groups in society and can serve as warning for the consequences of such ignorance.

In O'Brien's final and perhaps most personal story, he shares a traumatic and significant event of his childhood: the death of his nine-year-old girlfriend, Linda. Only in fourth grade, Tim swears to have loved Linda so deeply that "there were not yet words for it" (228). The two went on a double date with Tim's parents to a movie and awkwardly interacted the entire night. It was not until a bully at school pulled off Linda's red cap with a fuzzy white tassel at the tip that Tim realized Linda was very sick. A few months later Linda died of cancerous brain tumors, and Tim was forced to deal with the painful realities of death and raise questions about the significance of life, stories, and imagination.

The parable of Linda answers one of the most predominant questions raised throughout this text: why should we listen to these war stories? According to O'Brien, people tell stories because they bring the dead back to life in imaginations and temporarily take the pain of losing a loved one away. Tim imagines, speaks, and writes about the story of Linda because "in a story [he] can steal her soul" (236). Controlled stories, unlike events that actually happen, can be manipulated to vary in truth and mood to the storyteller's liking. Sometimes it can be comforting to manipulate the hard facts, the genuine truth, in a story when real life events lack desire and control.

According to O'Brien, the stories of Mary Anne becoming a Greenie, the death of Kiowa, and Linda dying of cancer are ironically not genuine war stories. Presumptuously "a true war story is never moral" because there is no morality in war itself (68). However, it does not matter that these tales are not true war stories because they are indeed meaningful. Although these three

stories contain numerous morals, their storytellers have different approaches in forcing others to understand one universal moral: sometimes the only way to journey to the future is to remember the past. Storyteller O'Brien, whom the war and death of his childhood companion presumably traumatized, tells stories to remember, heal, and continue into the future simultaneously. These stories of war, death, and loss of innocence can surely be parallel to many universal and individual problems and provide comfortable coping mechanisms. In this way, "stories can save us" (225).