

Tim O'Brien and Flannery O'Connor

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He was a tall, lumbering man with a small, honest voice; she was a frail lady on crutches with a biting wit. He advised students from the podium; she devastated them with her speeches. He sifted soldiers from his memories of Vietnam; she conjured freaks on her own from the Deep South. He raised ghosts; she bred peacocks. And yet, despite differences, they were two of the twentieth century's greatest fiction writers. They both mastered the art and, oddly enough, agreed on the crucial components of a story: sensory detail to create a superficially unbiased sense of reality; gradual contextualization to reveal a multifaceted world; and a fine spattering of local mannerisms to hint at a life rich with culture. He respected and reflected her doctrines in his "How to Tell a True War Story"; she flanked his feigned reminiscing in her *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. He was Tim O'Brien; she was Flannery O'Connor.

At a glance, some may argue that "How to Tell a True War Story" is so much a make-believe memoir that it is unable to create that verisimilitude, that heap of sensory details left for the reader to sort and judge. O'Brien seems to barge into the story uninvited, molding the reader's mind as he sees fit, cutting the long line of concrete imagery to give his own two cents on how best to tell a war story. The first sentence of the story is not setting the scene *in medias res*, but instead seems to be O'Brien's voice, loud and clear: "This is true." Between the tales of Curt Lemon and Mitchell Saunders and Rat Kiley, O'Brien seems to intrude with his little bits of wisdom, veteran to reader: "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie."

And yet O'Brien has not intruded on his own story—in fact, O'Brien is not even present. He has merely assumed a persona dangerously close

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to his own identity; he was not the soldier who harvested Lemon's limbs off the branches or who watched an antsy Rat Kiley await the reply to his heartfelt letter. His words of advice, sandwiched between anecdotes, are a slippery type of concrete detail. As a first person narrative, "How to Tell a True War Story" must speak from the perspective of the assumed persona. Nevertheless, the assumed persona does not serve to pass judgment on the events of the story or to analyze them for the reader. O'Brien has not, as O'Connor states, "[called] the reader's attention to this point and that, directing him to give his special attention here or there, clarifying this and that incident for him so that he couldn't possibly miss the point." O'Brien does not pause to explain the significance of Rat Kiley's methodical murder of the baby buffalo, nor does he psychoanalyze the six-man patrol to pin down the reason for their aural hallucinations. His assumed persona is there to present his part of the story, and to do only that; his musings, in the context of this story, are as concrete as the clinking of martini glasses at the Viet Cong glee club. From the soldiers Rat Kiley and Mitchell Saunders to the stories they tell, each is unfurled in vivid and unforgettable detail. The reader hears the "terrific mama-san soprano" echoing in the valley and smells the "smoke and filth and deep greenery" as the baby buffalo struggles to rise again with the bullets in its knees. No sensory detail, like the heavy humidity, no action, like the cruel humming of "Lemon Tree," can be eradicated without rendering the tale a little more two-dimensional than the original.

The gradual contextualization of "How to Tell a True War Story" reveals three layers intertwined in the story: the actual events of the death of Curt Lemon and the delusions of the six-man patrol, the accounts of the events by O'Brien's persona and Mitchell Saunders, and the commentary on, and struggle with, the concept of war by O'Brien's persona many years later. There is no section of the story in which O'Brien sits the reader down and takes him by the hand to explain the complex three-layer format; the reader must sort it all out on his or her own. "How to Tell a True War Story" starts off with the reader looking through a peephole with his right eye at the unacknowledged letter that Rat Kiley writes, and slowly but steadily the context of Curt Lemon's death comes into focus. The peephole is enlarged into

a small window as Mitchell Saunders recalls the six-man patrol with a bit of creative license, and finally the window frame and all forms of visual constraint disappear when O'Brien's persona comes into full view, wrestling with the concept of a war story. As O'Connor puts it: "Reading [a] story is at first rather like standing a foot away from an impressionistic painting, then gradually moving back until it comes into focus. When you reach the right distance, you suddenly see that a world has been created—and a world in action—and that a complete story has been told, by a wonderful kind of understatement." It is this contextualization, this organic blossoming of the story, which makes this story unable to be boiled down and retold with the same subtle realization for the reader in any other way. In an anaphoric manner, O'Brien slowly unravels the story by repeating certain sections, certain phrases, from before, such as the sudden illumination of Lemon's face and the white blossoms. Each repetition introduces more and more substantial sensory details and subtleties. In the first two pages, all the reader knows is that there is a dead soldier and that he is a close friend of Rat Kiley; by the third, the reader knows his name is Curt Lemon and receives a purely observational explanation of his death with a rigged 105 round while playing with smoke grenades. And by the end of the story, the reader has witnessed the cruel consequences of Lemon's death for Rat Kiley and the cathartic killing of the baby buffalo. With the storytelling advice, the story itself comes into focus: "And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war."

From "C-Rations" to "humping," the vocabulary of the American military is too rich and distinct to let the reader ignore a believable war story. "You get the manners from the texture of existence that surround you. The great advantage of being a Southern writer is that we don't have to go anywhere to look for manners; bad or good, we've got them in abundance. . . . There is nothing worse than the writer who doesn't use the gifts of the region, but wallows in them. . . . The general gets lost in the particular instead of being shown through it," O'Connor explains of the ideal seasoning of cultural flavor. Throughout "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien uses military terms such as "rigged 105 round," "cooze," and "gook" only when necessary. For example—like the inability to simultaneously condense a story and retain its qualities—

since the word “gook” is specific to the Vietnam War era, it reveals both the blunt racism of soldiers who are immune from accusations of racism and the dehumanization of the Vietnamese that makes their killing more bearable to the killers.

He was Tim O’Brien; she was Flannery O’Connor. He wrote “How to Tell a True War Story”; she wrote *Mystery and Manners*. Through unbiased sensory detail, gradual contextualization, and the use of colloquial mannerisms, they both organically tend the blossoms of their tales, watch the petals unfold with the reader, and create fiction that is here to stay. ●

Works Cited

O’Brien, Tim. “How to Tell a True War Story” in *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.

O’Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.

