

Notes on The Lives of the Dead by Tim O'Brien:

Summary

O'Brien explains that stories can bring the dead back to life through the act of remembering. He describes the first dead body he saw in Vietnam, that of an old Vietnamese man. Others in the platoon spoke to the corpse in a mildly mocking way, but O'Brien could not even go near the body. The men proposed a toast to the dead man, but O'Brien would not join in. He tells Kiowa that the dead man reminded him of a girl he used to know.

O'Brien then segues into the story of a particular girl named Linda. Though O'Brien was only nine years old at the time, he believed he was in love with Linda, also age nine. He believed that their love was a mature love, not childish love. In spring of 1956, young O'Brien escorted Linda on their first date, chaperoned by O'Brien's parents. They went to a World War II movie whose premise was tricking the Germans by dumping the corpse of a soldier in a British officer's uniform and planting misleading documents on him. The premise upset O'Brien but he saw Linda smiling at the screen.

Linda began wearing the red cap she wore on their date to school, and her classmates teased her about it. O'Brien wishes that he would have stood up to her main instigator, Nick Veenhof, but he didn't. During class, Nick returned to his desk after sharpening his pencil and deliberately pulled off Linda's cap. Most of her hair was gone, and she wore a large bandage covering stitches across the back of her head. Linda suffered from a tumor in her brain, and she lived only through that summer. Nick told O'Brien that she had died, and O'Brien left school and went home. At home, he closed his eyes and tried to make her come back to life. In his mind, he saw her and she was healthy. She asked him why he was crying, and he answered that it was because she was dead. She told him to stop crying because it did not matter.

O'Brien then recalls how in Vietnam they had also had ways to make the dead seem alive again through the way they walked and thought about the dead. They kept the dead alive with stories, like the stories of Ted Lavender's death and those Rat Kiley told and embellished.

Returning to his memory of Linda, O'Brien describes how his father took him to the funeral home to view the body. O'Brien recalls how he made up stories so that Linda would appear in his dreams. They would talk and walk and ice skate in his dreams, and Linda would offer insights into life and death. At age 43, O'Brien still dreams Linda alive and he can see her in his dreams, as he can see Kiowa and Ted Lavender and others. Middle-aged O'Brien, a successful writer, realizes that he is trying to save his childhood self, Timmy, with a story.

Analysis

In this final chapter, the various threads of the work are finally woven together to form a cohesive message. Each of the major themes is illuminated as each of the major stories is retold. The cohesive core of the chapter is the present of "O'Brien" and his practice of what he referred to as his "Good Form" previously in the book: He objectifies his own experience, writing about himself alternating between the first- and third-person narrative voices.

"O'Brien" employs language and storytelling to postpone loss. This can be seen through the paradox of the chapter's title; "O'Brien" does bring characters back to life, imagining and animating them beyond the limits of tangible, sensory life. It is a kind of escapism, a way to think about a situation from another vantage point to understand it in a different way. Throughout the

novel, characters employ this kind of mental escapism when thinking of home and other memories because it provides a familiar comfort and a way to impose meaning on events.

The narrative situation that O'Brien presents in the final chapter is complicated because it tries to make sense of many of the stories that have been told and retold throughout. He offers readers a story within a story within a story. The general frame is one of an author and veteran thinking about Vietnam. As the author recollects and presents a story about animating the dead — the scene with the toast to the dead Vietnamese — another story within that story unfolds, O'Brien recollecting the death of his childhood friend, Linda. This layer of stories characterizes the power of stories as devices for ordering the events of life and figuring out one's response to those events.

O'Brien also revisits the problem of defining a "war story" as if it were a definitive genre. As the sequence of "O'Brien's" memories and O'Brien's stories unfold, the "war story" of the dead Vietnamese man gives way to become a story about love that demonstrates the power of stories to memorialize the dead.

Symbolically, memorials are for the living more so than they are for the dead. They serve as reminders and as mediums for those who have lost someone or something to focus their grief on. Memorials exist at the intersection of the past and the present, and they also help the living remember that they are alive, which ultimately is the denouement of this chapter and the novel: The stories serve to save Timmy's life. And the impetus for the stories in the first place is the deep longing "Tim" and "Timmy" feel, like Lt. Cross' longing for Martha's love, like Rat's despondent slaughter of the baby buffalo, and how these become "O'Brien's" memorial to the men of Alpha Company, bridging the temporal gap between past and present and the epistemological gap between story and meaning.

Glossary

- Sniper - A soldier who shoots from a hidden position.
- Jeez - Euphemism for Jesus, used variously to express surprise, anger, annoyance and so on.
- Mind trip - Refers to a state of drug-altered reality.
- The Man Who Never Was (c. 1956) - A movie which was a spy thriller about a World War II British spy trying to fool the Nazis into believing false plans for a British invasion of Greece. His nemesis is a German spy who tries to verify the identity of the British corpse on whom these false plans were planted.