

Jim Phelan 0:29

Good afternoon. This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University. And I'd like to welcome you to the project narrative podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today, I'll be talking with Angus Fletcher, who has selected Tim O'Brien's short story, *The Things They Carried*, published in 1990, as part of his short story collection, also called *The Things They Carried*. Angus Fletcher is a core faculty member of project narrative, with joint appointments in the Department of English, and in the department of theater, film and media arts at The Ohio State University. Angus trained in neuroscience, received his PhD from Yale in with a specialization and Shakespeare. And he works in Hollywood, Silicon Valley, the Chicago Booth School of Business, the US Army Medical Corps, and US Special Operations on projects ranging from artificial intelligence to trauma therapy, to creativity training. His most recent books are *Wonder Works* for Simon and Schuster, 2021, *A Field Guide for creative thinking for the US Army*, also 21, and *story thinking*, forthcoming for Columbia University Press this year. So, Angus, why did you choose the things that carried to discuss for this podcast?

Angus Fletcher 2:01

Well, I chose this story because I found myself doing a lot of work with the Army Nursing Corps and the Army Medical Corps on trauma and therapy. And I discovered this short story is a favorite of many veterans, they find it very therapeutic, they find it very powerful, and helping them process a lot of their own experiences of conflict and struggle. And so naturally, I wanted to read it, to understand it and come to you, the guru of rhetorical narrative theory. So we could maybe kind of unlock some of the secrets and, and think a little bit about maybe some of the things that are going on in the brain. Yeah, and kind of track them back to some of the the mechanics of a narrative.

Jim Phelan 2:46

Okay, great. Yeah, I think that's a nice frame. Right. So we'll, we'll look at the story, but we'll keep in mind this effectiveness that it has for this particular audience. Okay. Well, you know, next step is for you to read. But before we begin, you begin that reading, we should let our listeners know that due to time constraints, you won't be reading the whole story. Instead, you'll read the first few pages, summarize the middle, and then read the last three pages. Is there anything else you think our listeners need to know before you begin reading?

Angus Fletcher 3:22

Well, this does depict war and violence, and there is also some bad language. So if you have children listening to the narrative theory podcast, you might like to cover their ears.

Jim Phelan 3:35

Okay, now, here's Angus Fletcher, reading *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien.

Angus Fletcher 3:41

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In a late afternoon after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her. But the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was a virgin. He was almost sure. She was an English major at Mount Sebastian, and she wrote beautifully about her professors and roommates and midterm exams. About her respect for Chaucer, and her great affection for Virginia Woolf. She often quoted lines of poetry. She never mentioned the war except to say, Jimmy, take care of yourself. The letters weighed 10 ounces. They were signed, love, Martha. But Lieutenant Cross understood that love was only a way assigning and did not mean when he sometimes pretended it meant. At dusk he would carefully return the letters to his rucksack. Slowly a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men checking the perimeter. And then at full dark, he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin. The Things They Carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near necessities, were p 38. can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, military payment certificates, sea rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together. These items weigh between 15 and 20 pounds depending on a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins who is a big man carried extra rations. He was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over poundcake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss and several hotel sized bars of soap he'd stolen on r&r in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who is scared carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid April. By necessity, and because it was standard, a standard operating procedure. They all carried steel helmets that weighed five pounds, including the liner in camouflage cover. They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers, very few carried underwear. On their feet they carried jungle boots, 2.1 pounds, and Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of Dr. Scholl's foot powder as a precaution against Trench foot. Until he was shot Ted lavender carried six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders the RTO carried condoms. Norman Goucher carried a diary. Rat Kylie carried comic books. Key hour, a devout Baptist character illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. as a hedge against bad times. However, cow will also carried his grandmother's distrust of the white man, his grandfather's old hunting hatchet. Necessity dictated because the land was mined and booby trapped it was standard operating procedure for each man to carry a steel centered nylon covered flak jacket, which weighed 6.7 pounds, but which on hot days seemed much heavier. Because you

could die so quickly, each man carried at least one large conference bandage usually in a helmet band for easy access. Because the nights were cold, and because the monsoons were wet, each carry a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet, or makeshift tent. With its quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost two pounds, but it was worth every ounce. In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up and to carry him across the paddy then to lift him into the chopper that took him away.

Angus Fletcher 8:25

They were called legs or grunts to carry something was to hump it. As when Lieutenant Jimmy cross humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps. In its intransitive form to hump meant to walk or to march. But it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive almost everyone humped photographs. In his wallet Lieutenant Cross carry two photographs of Martha. The first was kodacolor snapshot, signed love. Although he knew better. She stood against a brick wall. Her eyes were gray and neutral. Her lips slightly open as she stared straight on at the camera. At night sometimes Lieutenant Krause wondered who had taken the picture because he knew she had boyfriends because he loved her so much. And because you could see the shadow of the picture taker spreading out against the brick wall. The second photograph had been clipped from the 1968 mount Sebastien yearbook. It was an action shot women's volleyball, and Martha was bent horizontal to the floor reaching the palms of her hands in sharp focus the tongue taut the expression Frank and competitive. There was no visible sweat. She wore white gym shorts. Her legs he thought, were almost certainly the legs of a virgin, dry and without hair. The left knee cocked and carrying her entire weight, which was just over 100 pounds. Lieutenant Cross remembered touching that left knee. A dark theater he remembered and the movie was Bonnie and Clyde. And Martha wore a tweed skirt. And during the final scene, when he touched her knee, she turned and looked at him in a sad, sober way that made him pull his hand back. But he would always remember the feel of the tweed skirt and the knee beneath it. And the sound of the gunfire that killed Bonnie and Clyde. How embarrassing it was how slow and oppressive he remembered kissing her goodnight at the dorm door. Right then he thought he should have done something brave. He should have carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touch that left knee all night long. He should have risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs he thought of new things he should have done. What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly a field specialty. As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy cross carried a compass maps codebooks binoculars, and a 45 caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men. As an RTO Mitchell Sanders carried the PRC 25 radio a killer 26 pounds with his battery. As a medic Rat Kylie carried a canvas satchel filled with morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape and comic books and all the things medic must carry including m&ms For especially bad wounds, for a total weight of nearly 20 pounds. As a big man, therefore, a machine gunner Henry Dobbins carry the M 60, which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded. In

addition, Dobbins carry between 10 and 15 pounds of ammunition draped in belts across this chest and shoulders. As PFCs or spec fours, most of them are common grunts and carried the standard M 16 gas operated assault rifle. The weapon weighed 7.5 pounds and loaded 8.2 pounds with its full 20 round magazine. Depending on numerous factors such as typography and psychology, the rifleman carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines, usually in cloth bandleaders, adding on another 8.4 pounds at minimum 14 pounds at maximum. When I was available, they also carried and 16 Maintenance gear rods and steel brushes and swabs and tubes of LSA oil, all of which weighed about a pound. Among the grunts some carry the M 79. Grenade Launcher 5.9 pounds unloaded a reasonably light weapon except for the ammunition, which was heavy. A single round weighed 10 ounces. The typical load was 25 rounds. But Ted lavender, who was scared carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside Than Khe. And he went down under an exceptional burden more than 20 pounds of ammunition plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest plus the unweighted fear

Angus Fletcher 13:17

he was dead weight. There was no twitching or flopping. Kiowa who saw it happen said it was like watching watching a rock fall or a big sandbag or something just boom then down. Not like the movies with the dead guy rolls around and does fancy spins and goes ass over teakettle not like that Kiowa said the poor bastard just flat fuck fell boom down. Nothing else. It was a bright morning in mid April, Lieutenant Cross felt the pain he blamed himself. They stripped off Lavenders canteens and ammo all the heavy things. And Rat Kylie said the obvious the guy's dead. And Mitchell Sanders uses radio to report one us killed in action and to request a chopper. Then they wrapped Lavender in his poncho. They carried him out to a dry paddy established security and sat smoking the dead man's dope until the chopper came. Lieutenant Cross kept to himself. He pictured Martha's smooth young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men. And now Ted lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her. When the dust off arrived, they carried lavender aboard. Afterward, they burned Than Khe, they marched until dusk then dug their holes. And that night Kiawa kept explaining how you had to be there how fast it was how the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete. Boom down, he said, like cement... So here the story goes on to tell about more of The Things They Carried, including all they could bear and then some. It relates Jimmy Cross's desires anxieties about Martha and how his mind drifted to imagining how she was walking barefoot on a New Jersey beach what she found a pebble that he now cared for good luck, forgetting to tell his men to keep their eyes open and maintain battle order. And it tells a story of how Ted lavender died on a hot day when the platoon discovered an enemy tunnel, and Kiawa had a premonition. And a soldier picked a bad law and was sent into clear the tunnel, and how Jimmy cross got distracted thinking about Martha while the tunnel was being cleared. But Jimmy cross's wandering mind didn't matter because the soldier clearing the tunnel got out alive. And then suddenly, when everyone was relaxing outside the tunnel, Ted lavender got

shot on his way back from popping a tranquilizer and peeing in the trees, leaving the rest of the platoon to debate whether there was a moral to what had just happened. And then the story ends, “on the morning after Ted lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned Martha's letters. Then he burned the two photographs. There was a steady rain falling, which made it difficult, but he used heat taps and sterno to build a small fire screening it with his body, holding the photographs over the tight blue flame with the tips of his fingers. He realized it was only a gesture, stupid, he thought sentimental to but mostly just stupid. Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame. Besides the letters were in his head, and even now without photographs, Lieutenant Cross could see Martha playing volleyball in a white gym shorts and yellow T shirt. He could see her moving in the rain. When the fire died out, Lieutenant Cross pulled his poncho over his shoulders and ate breakfast from a can.

Angus Fletcher 16:52

There was no great mystery he decided in those burned letters. Martha had never mentioned the war, except to say Jimmy take care of yourself. She wasn't involved. She signed the letters love, but it wasn't love. And all the fine lines and technicalities did not matter. Virginity was no longer an issue. He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her, love too, But it was a hard hating kind of love. The morning came up wet and blurry. Everything seemed part of everything else, the fog and Martha and the deepening rain. He was a soldier after all, half smiling Lieutenant Jimmy cross took out his mats. He shook his head hard as if to clear it, then bent forward and began planning the days march in 10 minutes or maybe 20. He would rouse the men and they would pack up and head west where the maps showed the country to be green and inviting. They would do what they had always done. The rain might add some weight, but otherwise, it would be one more day layered upon all the other days. He was realistic about it. There was that new hardness to his stomach. He loved her, but he hated her. No more fantasy she told himself. Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the daydreams. This was not mount Sebastian. It was another world where they were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity. Kiawa was right. Boom down and you were dead, never partly dead. briefly in the rain. Lieutenant Cross saw Martha's gray eyes gazing back at him. He understood. It was very sad, He thought, the things men carried inside the things men did or felt they had to do. He almost nodded at her but didn't. Instead he went back to his maps. He was now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence. It wouldn't help lavender, he knew that. But from from this point on, he would comport himself as an officer. He would dispose of his good luck pebble, swallow it maybe or use li strong slingshot are just dropping along the trail. On the March he would impose strict field discipline, he would be careful to send out flank security to prevent straggling or bunching up to keep his troops moving at the proper pace and at the proper interval. He would insist on clean weapons. He would confiscate the remainder of Lavender's dope. Later in the day, perhaps he would call them in together and speak to them plainly. He would accept the blame for what had happened to

Ted lavender. He would be a man about it. He would look them in the eyes keeping his chin level. And he would issue the new standard operating procedures in a calm, impersonal tone of voice, a lieutenant's voice, leaving no room for argument or discussion. Commencing immediately he tells them, they would no longer abandon equipment along the route of the march. They would police up their acts, they would get their shit together and keep it together and maintain it neatly and in good working order. He would not tolerate laxity, he would show strength, distancing himself. Among the men who would be grumbling, of course, and maybe worse, because their days would seem longer and their loads heavier. But Lieutenant Jimmy cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved, but to lead. He would dispense with love. It was not now a factor. And if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture. He might give a curt little nod, or he might not, he might just shrug and say, carry on. Then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward the villages west of Than Khe.

Jim Phelan 21:03

Okay, Angus, that's great. So maybe we could start with just some general thoughts on why this story has the kind of effect that you saw it have on those with military experience.

Angus Fletcher 21:20

Yeah, so you know, one of the things that fascinates me about this story is how it has this outside/inside relationship to Jimmy Cross's experience, and he's the focal point of the emotion of the story. And what he carries with him out of the story is a sense of grief, of shame, of survivor's guilt, of being responsible for this terrible act happening. And

Jim Phelan 21:51

He also does this, yeah. So that, right, but then he also carries out this resolve, right to be different, you know, no more daydreams, etc. Right. And, you know, adopt the correct command posture and so on. How do you see those two things relating in are, you know, those two responses in Cross, you know, multiple responses, but sort of, you can divide them a little bit into, you know, the grief on the one hand, and, you know, taking responsibility, and then this, okay, I'm going to be even more of a soldier.

Angus Fletcher 22:26

So this is the extraordinary thing about the narrative structure of the story is that when Jimmy Cross says those things at the end of the story, when he says, I'm going to be a different person, if we had spent the entire story inside Jimmy Cross, and we were completely aligned with him, we would simply say in that moment, oh, this is a change of heart, this person has completely reoriented, he's become a new person. And you know, we have this kind of, you know, transition. Right. But because the story establishes this inside/outside relationship to Jimmy, I'm not sure how close we are to him in those final moments. I mean, do we really completely believe him? Or do we maintain a sense of, of

ironic distance from what he's saying, and those and kind of questioning. And I think that it's the opening up of that space, which makes this moment, so therapeutic, because it's not about a simple kind of change of perspective, it's about us gaining a sense of a wider perspective on someone coping with tragedy and struggling with tragedy and trying to go through tragedy and their own sense of striving against it. But also, we can kind of feel a certain sense of, of futility or difficulty or strain in that.

Jim Phelan 23:34

so maybe we can talk a little bit about how the outside sort of adds to that in terms of the reader's perspective on it, right. So we have this inside thing. But we also have this outside thing which has consequences for the way in which we respond to the inside thing, right. So maybe you could talk a little bit more about how the outside thing, you know, has its effects?

Angus Fletcher 23:54

Yeah. So I mean, so one of the one of the things that I often think through when I when I read this story is I think, well, the original veterans literature was Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy was written by veterans, often written about wars and largely performed for veterans. And it's now staged today and has a similar therapeutic effect or has been shown to have this therapeutic effects for veterans and, and we know psychologically, one of the reasons for that is because it allows for these moments where we feel like we have experienced what the the suffer in the story. So Oedipus, for example, is going through we feel like we have experienced that before him because of the way the story is told. And so when he's undergoing his terrible moment of pain in the story, we feel like we can actually reach out and help him. And he's Greek tragedies frequently have moments where the character in pain turns the course and asks for help, and receives help. And then thanks the course and by extension, thanks us and we know that when someone who is suffering asks you for help, and you feel like you can help them, that builds something known as self efficacy in the brain, it increases your ability to heal yourself from trauma. And that distance is the same effect that has been generated here through the narrative where we don't feel as though we're inside Jimmy cross all the way through, we feel like we go inside him and we feel his experience, but we also feel a distance from it, we feel like we can see things he doesn't see. And that allows us the space to feel like we can maybe help him and assist him. And in doing so, convince ourselves that we can lift someone else up and therefore lift ourselves up.

Jim Phelan 25:30

Okay. All right, great. So yeah, I think, you know, the first part of the story that you've read with, with, you know, the sort of recitation of all the things they carried. We sort of, I think O'Brien is kind of setting up this interesting kind of inside/outside thing, right. So one of the threads in the story is one of the things that carried and in the middle that you just summarized, right, we get even more of The Things They Carried. And then we go back to Jimmy and, you know, kind of we end with him. And then the other think thread

that he's working with is the death of Ted Lavender. Right? And that's, that gets narrated sort of multiple times, right, we get it from the beginning, and then we come back to it. And, you know, Kiawa has to tell about it. And, you know, Jimmy keeps thinking about it, and so on. So, you know, I there, you have thoughts about sort of the three threads and how they relate and how that might have, you know, effects on an audience.

Angus Fletcher 26:37

Sure, well again, the fact that the death is malt is narrated multiple times, this is a classic thing you get from Greek tragedy, where you have the prophecy, and you know, it's going to happen, and then you constantly have the prophecy reiterated through. And so it's this way of freezing a moment in time. And, and, and then kind of, kind of recursively going back, back back back over it again. Then, of course, you have this fascinating focalization on the things that they carry, which are these moments of compact storytelling, where we feel so much is revealed about these men's interiority through so little, and you just get a sense of their anxieties and their hopes, and and all these very, very delicate things, through these tiny flashes, these tiny revelations,

Jim Phelan 27:27

yeah, and this is sort of an interesting set of things, right. I mean, we have sort of military equipment, standard kind of stuff, right. And then we have things I think that sort of individualize them, right? So so you know, peaches and heavy syrup, right? For example, you know, and then we get the sort of intangible things, right, there's a sentence in the middle, that you you didn't have time to read that, that is really seems to be kind of epitomizes the way in which this sort of third category of the intangibles, you know, works. So the sentence is, they carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of The Things They Carried, right. So the awe itself becomes something else that they're carrying, right? And then it's sort of the piling on of it. A kind of meta meta carrying.

Angus Fletcher 28:31

Yeah, and how that kind of again, reveals to us that the things that they are carrying are not things in the sense of inert objects, the things that they are carrying, we would call them in narrative, actions, or causes and effects, you know, things that generate stories in themselves, and commentaries on stories, and ways of thinking about stories. And, you know, one of the things that also just deeply fascinates me about this narrator and its focus on, you know, so this narrator has this ability to go right into the pockets of all these characters and see everything and then go right into the hearts of these characters and see everything. And so one of the temptations is to say, well, this is a neutral, omniscient narrator. This is a narrator who sees everything and in kind of unbiased way, reveals all that has occurred. But it's a very focalized narrator, It's actually focused on very specific things. And so one of I think, the most brilliant sentences in the piece, one of the ones I read is just a sentence. Afterward, they burned Than Khe—how many people died? How many people die in that sentence? You have no idea how many lives



are changed to that sentence, you have no idea. And that is a sentence, which sort of tells you everything about where the focus of the narrator is and where the focus of the narrator isn't because it's telling you at the same time, as I'm telling you all these stories about these lives, I'm also not telling you all these stories about all these other lives. Right. And so it's a particular kind this is again, very much like Greek tragedy because you have a chorus onstage and Greek tragedy, which has many voices, just like the many voices here, you know, all the different. And yet, it's also a deeply subjective and biased voice. And the more you focus on a particular Greek chorus, the more you realize that even though it purports to have wisdom, and be telling you everything and know the gods, and will tell you about Zeus noise conflict, it's actually very, very micro focused on its own suffering, its own concerns, its own sense of problems. And it completely ignores everything else. And I think that that just very delicate, very brilliant narrative touch. It's just one of many examples.

Jim Phelan 30:36

I that stands out for me too. And I think it's sort of that juxtaposition, right? This, this comes right after the sort of elaborate account of Ted Lavender's death, right? So we have the single American soldier dying. And then what's the response? We burn Than Khe, right. So there's a way in which I think, you know, O'Brien, by juxtaposing that is sort of critiquing, you know, the narrator in some sense, you know, the selective attention or of the narrator, right. And to some degree, you know, just using those few words, really to say, hey, there's a bigger, there's a bigger story here.

Angus Fletcher 31:24

Yeah. And this to me is over and over again, the technique of the narrative is to make you feel connected to a particular perspective, and then giving you that ironic moment of break. Yeah, I mean, I feel a lot of the times that I actually connect quite closely to Lieutenant Cross, and then his obsession with Martha's virginity, and you know, his determination to turn her into a symbol, and then this whole kind of thing at the end, where he actually seems to blame her for the death of Ted Lavender, you know, he's like, oh, you know, she's actually she's the problem here, you know, I hate her. You know, and then you start having these moments of your you break away from his perspective, and you move from feeling empathy with him to actually feeling this ironic distance. And the same feeling holds with our relationship to the narrator. And it's constantly that feeling of being close to a perspective and then being pulled out of it. And that, again, is that sort of empowering sense of perspective that tragedy can give you where you can feel both kind of the closeness of an individual hearts and the kind of suffering and fears and hopes and anxieties, and then pull out of it and see the broader perspective. And to me, it doesn't make me judge the perspective that I'm in. I mean, because I realized that my own perspective is limited. And I might have similar blindnesses, and people are dying across this planet right now. And I'm not acknowledging that in this podcast, you know, I've been I'm focalized on my own, so on and so forth, you know, but nevertheless, that moment of breaking makes you aware that there is a possibility outside of that. And it's

that sense of something bigger than yourself a larger narrative beyond even the narrator, it's himself, you know, it does give you a sense of hope. And every time you detect it, I mean, this is the kind of core thing about even tragic irony is it makes you feel a sense of there is something bigger than me. And therefore, all is not lost in my own futility. And that, for me is definitely one of those moments at the same time, as I'm horrified at Than Khe. I also feel, you know, what, someone noticed that. It didn't fall out completely.

Jim Phelan 33:15

Yeah. Right. Right. And I think that's it's worth, you know, sort of then distinguishing O'Brien, you know, as the orchestrator of all this from the narrator. Right? Who who can go in and out and so on. Right. Yeah. And that, and that in and out thing, maybe there's a little bit more to say about the narrative perspective, in the sense of when it's out, and it's doing the lists. Yes, it's elective and so on, but it's also kind of distant. Right. I mean, it's, it's the things that they carried. Not, you know, and it's reporting. Right, you know, this, this soldier had these things. Right. And, and that also, I think, you know, that's an interesting choice on O'Brien's part to have that and then the focal is internal focalization with Jimmy. What sort of effects do you feel like that that has sort of over the course of the story?

Angus Fletcher 34:19

Yeah, well, that's really well, so of course, what you're saying is, it's the things that they carried and other things that we carried, why isn't the things that we carried? Yeah. And if you were to say the things that we carried, that will create a different relationship between us and the story, we would feel part of the platoon. We would feel closer to the platoon, we would feel more in the platoon. But instead by seeing *The Things They Carried* does create a sense of distance from the platoon. But it does also interestingly, tighten our relationship to the narrator, because we kind of joined the narrator in looking at them. So there's this interesting way in which a space opens up but it's actually also a space closes at the same time. And again, that sense of lift and distance and being slightly hoisted above, so that you're never kind of completely in it. That is the experience that I didn't get a chance to read this passage. But in the middle of the story, they talk about how they want to be taken home on a helicopter. And you know how for them, you know, basically, they're willing even to shoot themselves in the foot to kind of self harm. So they can have this experience of flying above and just kind of looking down at everything below them as they kind of disappear up. And it's that sense of a sky hook. I mean, that's kind of what the Greeks would call it, but just being lifted up. And the narrative just gives you that again, and again, and again. And again. And and part of the effect, I think, when you were talking about the, when these lists have this, almost like machine like, I mean, they're always telling you how much everything weighs. I mean, as I was reading this, I was like, Do we really need to know that this is 2.9 pounds, and this is 2.1 pounds, this is 10 pounds. But what's going on there is this sense of the, you know, incredible specificity of the thing, you know, the incredible particularity of the thing. And yet, at the same time, for most readers, our sense of alienation from it, it's like, what is it PRC? 25, you

know, unless you really gone through Vietnam history, you have no idea what that is, you know, yeah. And so you're constantly being confined with things that are very present very real, very in the world, but also quite distant from you, right. And that also creates this kind of interesting space, because you start to realize, you know, that even though you want to feel empathy for these young men, you actually don't know a lot about their experience, you know, there's actually a distance between you and them right now. And you're conscious of that. And I think that helps kind of ward off maybe some of our tendency to kind of judge the characters in in a kind of an aggressive sense, you know, what I mean? Yeah. And,

Jim Phelan 36:46

yeah, yeah, good, good. I think another wrinkle there is the, you know, the they as a group of men, and the kind of codes of masculinity, and I think, you know, that's relevant to the ending, right, when Jimmy cross, you know, goes into the correct command posture and so on. But, but also, there's the part in the middle, in which, you know, the narrator tells us about, you know, one of the things they carry is the fear of embarrassing themselves. Right, and that, that they would die, they would rather die actually die, then sort of embarrass themselves in front of each other. Right. And so there is this very strong, I think, you know, represent representation of this, they sort of trying to live up to some codes of masculinity.

Angus Fletcher 37:46

Yeah. And you feel the way in which that traps them? Yeah, I mean, what's, what's interesting about this story is, is how trapped Sumita characters feel on so many levels, you know, they just do not have the autonomy that they want to make decisions. And so, even though they're out there in the field, apparently being able to choose the things that they care, I mean, that's one of the kind of tiny areas where they do actually have someone tell, you know, what, you know, this, we're gonna do this extra kind of space. And that's actually what becomes individuality. And their particular subjectivity is that tiny choice they're allowed to make, am I gonna carry, you know, a couple of extra, you know, sort of ammo mags with me? Or can peaches, right? Okay, these are you know, that that tiny, but then in the big domain of things, they're in a war, they can't control the war. They're trapped in these codes of masculinity, which basically, you know, through fear in prison them, and so not saying what every one of them wants to say, which is why are we going on this ridiculous March? Why are we doing these things? You know, yeah. And then also traps them with with guilt and shame. And it's clear that that most, if not all, the characters in the story are just simply not psychologically equipped to be in this situation.

Jim Phelan 38:51

Yeah, good. And then I think that that sort of takes us back to Jimmy cross in a way, in a way, particularly his judgement of himself as being responsible for Ted lavenders death. Right. And when you summarize it in the middle, I think, you know, you rightly pointed

out well, you know, the details don't really support that. Right. So, you know, how do you think O'Brien is kind of trying to position his audience in relationship to Jimmy's, you know, taking on this guilt, this responsibility for Ted Lavender's?

Angus Fletcher 39:29

Well, I think first of all, he's trying to show us that the guilt is authentic. And for the same reason that the masculinity you're talking about is there. I mean, this is something that Crossfield because it has been drilled into him. He is the officer he is in charge. And the story repeatedly reminds us on multiple occasions that this is the job of an officer, and that Jimmy Cross is not doing the things he's supposed to be doing as an officer, you know, he's not maintaining, you know, discipline and distance. Most questions long before there's the shooting. And you know, there's even that moment where Kiowa has this premonition That's something bad is gonna happen. And even that, you know, I mean, Jimmy Cross is kind of off, you know. And so, you know, we understand why Jimmy feels this way, because he's part of a narrative. He's part of a culture that's constantly telling him that he his response, yeah, that this is his fault. But in the same way that that narrative is not fully reliable in the same way that it's focused on certain things, but not on other things. No, it's focused on one group of people. They're not on Tanguay. It's not focused on the fact that what can you do? And more? Yeah, how much can anyone control? And is it any individual soldier's fault that someone else dies in war? Or is that the fault of much larger force? Yeah.

Jim Phelan 40:39

Yeah, I think in that particular case, right, we could, as you say, in the summary, you know, they do that the exploration of the tunnel, and that's really where the focus of you know, danger seems to be right. And they go through the tunnel, and, okay, there's all clear, basically, and then, and then also get shot.

Angus Fletcher 41:02

So here's something I'll throw this out. You tell me if you agree with this. Yeah. It's clear from the way that the narrative focalize is that it thinks that that's the source of the danger. Yeah. And it makes us want to think that that's the source of it. Yeah. So it's a bit like a horror movie, and a horror movie, a slow close up on the door and everything, you know, and there's just, there's nothing there. And then you get hit from Yeah, right. Right. Right. And so, so the narrative is conditioning you to think, Okay, this is the problem. But of course, this is the thing about war in general, it's a volatile, chaotic space. And, and no one understands it, like no one could possibly understand where to look, or where the right places to focus or what the standard operating procedures are. And so, you know, on the one hand, the students,

Jim Phelan 41:40

right, right, right. But I think if we, if we think about that, again, in relationship, the specific issue of is doing Cross, right, so you sort of take on responsibility for Lavender's

death, right, then I think that supports the idea that well, no, no, I mean, but yet, he can't, he can't not take it on because of the ideology of what it means to be a lieutenant and what it means to be a man in the war and all this.

Angus Fletcher 42:05

And I would also say, and you can might disagree with me on this, but I would say that we come out of the story, both thinking that he is to blame, and that he is not to blame. It's very hard for us not to emotionally blame him, because the story keeps blaming him. And because we see him acting in these ways. Even at the same time, it's we're able to get an ironic distance from

Jim Phelan 42:23

them. Yeah, I guess I would say I would say the story doesn't blame him. The story shows him continually blaming himself, but is also trying to show the, the way in which Ted lavender died, because he's a soldier in a war. Right. And, and that Jimmy crosses focus on himself. Right is similar to what happens in at the story level when we're focusing on the day. And then we they burned time k, right? I mean, in the single sentence, right. So I think that that gap, I see the gap, we're agreeing.

Angus Fletcher 43:01

I think we're agreeing. But what I'm saying is, I might be talking sloppily, I mean, you're talking about the kind of narrative in the kind of grand sense in terms of the author. Yeah. And I'm talking about it in terms of what I would consider the kind of vocalizing perspective that's kind of tricking us into seeing certain things. So yeah, I would say the vocalizing perspective, it's a version of a story is, it had reminded us on several occasions that cross was supposed to be paying attention when he wasn't, you know, and then all of a sudden, we have a premonition. And Ted lavender goes off and take some tranquilizers and pees in the bushes. Is that proper military discipline? Should you be taking classes and peeing in the bushes? Don't you think the crusher intervener I mean, this is what the Nordics are. Now I agree with you, you know that if Ted lavender didn't die in this moment, someone else would have died at another moment. And you know, and you can maintain rigid military discipline, and someone's always going to die. You know, I agree with you. But I still think the story. So another way saying this is, as humans, just psychologically, when something bad happens, we want to blame something for that. Yes, yeah. It's almost impossible for us not to blame. And that's why you see us blaming victims and doing other things which are completely wrong, you know, materially, but psychologically feel right to us, Well, someone has to be blamed for the situation. And that's another feature of narrative and narrative, there always has to be a cause for an effect in a narrative, there can't something just can't happen without a cause. Because that's not a narrative story seeking, what's the cause of this? And something like war isn't really a cause. Because it's too disparate and random and chaotic. It's, it's a kind of, not cause except in a logical or more abstract sense, but emotionally, it's very hard. Whereas it's very easy to say, Well, what caused this, you know, I'm going to focalize in this way.

So I don't think we're disagreeing. I'm just saying that. I personally and one of the reasons I think maybe this is therapeutic is because you can come out of the story with this tension in yourself that you then have to process and work through after the story is over. And in the process of working through and processing that tension and gaining distance from it, you realize all the things that you're saying, but you have to work to get there. You don't get there automatically, like, I don't I didn't stop the story and think, oh, Jimmy cross wasn't to blame, I stopped the story and thought, Jimmy cross is deluded, you know, he's not actually going to change. And he and and, and, and, and then on top of that, I think, well, he probably should change, you know, and those the two thoughts that I have, you know, and then over time, I start to realize what he probably isn't going to change, but maybe changing doesn't matter, because this wasn't really his fault, but it takes me time to get there. And another way of saying this, is that grief and trauma are more about processing emotionally than they are having a single intellectual epiphany. Yeah, that's definitely yeah. And I think the story helps with that process. Right. Right.

Jim Phelan 45:48

Right. And so I think, yeah, if we read the ending as, as a way of processing or this is one stage, yeah, that is that exact. Not necessarily exactly. The final Yes. Yeah. And we're in the same stage is not it's not epiphany in the way that sort of No, no modernists short story might might go and then say, Oh, well, you got that. Right. Right. It's, it's, it's, if anything, it's a false epiphany.

Angus Fletcher 46:11

Yes. I mean, it's literally I hate to keep comparing this to Oedipus. But I mean, you know, I mean, at the end of Oedipus, he gouges his eyes. Yeah, yeah. And of course, says What a bizarre thing to do. Why did you gouge out your eyes? And if you felt really bad, should have killed yourself? And if you didn't feel bad, or anything, like what are you doing? And so it's in their minds the the essence of a false epiphany? It's like he thinks he's realized, yeah, but actually, he's somehow kind of mixed it up. Yeah, it's part of the tragedy. Yes, exactly. You know, and I think we feel the same way about Jimmy crosses, he's trying, and he's wrestling and he's in pain, and he realizes the need to do something, but he doesn't know what to do. Yeah. And we see that and feel that, again, because of this wonderful narrative technique of really having these multiple layers where we're in the character, but then we're in the narrator that's vocalizing and then we're in the author, you know. And I think the process ultimately reading a story is helped by the remaining stories in the collection, because those stories and help us get closer and closer to the road to O'Brien. And the more we get to O'Brien, the more we can process and process and process and process, but this story, I think, leads off to connect the collection to give us that sense of unrest pollution of feelings that we haven't been able to process. And that divided sense of blame, and blame and guilt are always entwined. If you feel guilt. You're also someone who's blaming, blaming yourself blaming other people. And what happens over the collection is I think you release the impulse to do both to blame people to point fingers to say Jimmy Cross was responsible, and also to feel guilty yourself and instead

just to let go process and realize that the past is the past. Yeah, you know, yeah. And we are all kind of like a village of Than Khe. You know, we were all in the afterwards.

Jim Phelan 47:54

Yeah. Okay, good. I want to just get your thoughts on the lessons of the story. But before we end up, but are there other things that you wanted to get to that we haven't gotten to in this podcast?

Angus Fletcher 48:08

Well, first of all, I just want to say that Martha just seems like the most wonderful person you know, and I think she's done such ILL service by by, by Jimmy's love, you know, and and again, like the village of Than Khe so much is said implicitly about the story that isn't being told. Yeah, okay. And we can never know that story. I mean, she's a bit like a philia. In Hamlet, we just we know we can't know the story but the flickers we get to the story, make us want to know more? Yeah, of course. I love Virginia Woolf. So the fact that she likes, you know, makes her endlessly interesting to me respects dresser, right? Yes, that's right. You know, yeah, exactly. You know, and the question of the relentless sexualization of her and all these kinds of things, I think, is very much tied to the masculinity. Yeah. Yeah. And I just think at a certain point, you know, I mean, I found it uncomfortable in the beginning. And then the more continued, the more I actually find it upsetting, you know, yeah. Right. So I think, the way he's using her Yes, exactly. You know, and you want to have empathy for him, because he has nothing in this situation. And he needs to feel loved. And

Jim Phelan 49:08

this is his way of coping. Very, yeah. uncomfortable, yes.

Angus Fletcher 49:13

But the narrative is gonna give us empathy for him while at the same time giving us that distance and having us realize, look, again, this is only part of the story, you know, right. So that's something you know, I just think,

Jim Phelan 49:24

yeah, great. Yeah. I'm really glad we got to that. You got to that? Yeah. Yeah. Excellent. All right. So the story ends right, the last the last line. Carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward the villages west of Than Khe. So, you know, sort of the given the title and given everything we've seen with carry, right. What what sort of weight does carry on carry if I can ask it that way?

Angus Fletcher 49:58

Yeah, will it carry so much weight. And there's just so many ways it's working. I mean, I mean, first of all, it's it's working in, in this perhaps, like hopeful sense, like you can you can carry this now, you know, you can, you know, you've we've changed we've had this

moment, you know, your burden has been lightened in some way it's gonna work so on and so forth. But it also has the opposite sense of almost resignation the shrugging kind of tragic sense almost like Schopenhauer, you know, carry on carry on you continuing to kind of kind of carry on in these ways, and we're just gonna continue with all these objects that, you know, I mean, the sad thing about

Jim Phelan 50:36

her Beckett way, you know, call that carrying? Yes,

Angus Fletcher 50:39

exactly. Yeah, no, no, exactly. Yeah. You know, because what happens, I think is the objects become divested of meaning in this very tragic way individually, you know, because, in the hands of the possessor, they mean so much, yeah. Because the the possessor, their part of memory and life story, and so on and so forth. But then, you know, Ted lavenders, dope gets taken up by everyone else becomes a joke, you know, and it's no longer the lucky pebble gets just thrown. Yeah, I mean, all these objects, you know, move out of the individual personal space and just become things that are carried, you know, and that ending has that sense of neutrality about it, where these are no longer personal objects, a kind of personal thing. It has that sense of, of distance and moving and then they would settle up into a column and move out towards the villages west of Than Khe. It's so appropriate and sad and awful and beautiful that the last words are Tomcat exact, which completely forgotten a face, you know,

Jim Phelan 51:37

right there, but it also calls back then they burst on chaos. Exactly. Yeah. And

Angus Fletcher 51:41

it reminds you that there was a Than Khe. Yeah. And so it's it's that same inside outside and us again, that we just get over the the story. And it's just, I think, just elegantly beautifully executed. It's such a interesting story, because it seems so crass on so many levels. And it also seems so artless on so many levels, you know, almost intentionally, so like almost viciously. Yeah.

Jim Phelan 52:05

The list that they carry this, yes. Okay. All right. Yes, yes,

Angus Fletcher 52:09

you know, and when you read it out loud, you really feel that because, you know, when you're reading on the page, your eyes can kind of move faster across listen on the pages like this.

Jim Phelan 52:18

But it's very artful. It's so thoughtfully



Angus Fletcher 52:20

written and so thoughtfully constructed. And again, this is this thing that I think is just extraordinary about powerful tragedies in general is is the beauty is in the form is in the craft is in the thought is in the care. And that's what makes you believe, through the author, that there can be some sense or meaning or purpose found in war, and tragedy and suffering. And that's the final I think redemptive therapeutic move that a story makes, is it makes you believe in something bigger. Because of that kind of lurking narrative beauty.

Jim Phelan 52:51

Yeah. Excellent. Excellent. Okay, Angus, well, thank you very much. I'm sure our listeners have been greatly appreciative of everything you've brought to the story. So I'm just going to wind up and say to our listeners that we welcome feedback on this podcast, via our project narrative Facebook page, or on Twitter. We are at PN Ohio State. And also I want to talk about coming attractions. Next month, our February podcast, our guests will be Amy Shuman. And she plans to read some folk ballads and perhaps we'll also make some reference to the podcast that we did with Brian McHale. Thank you, everyone.