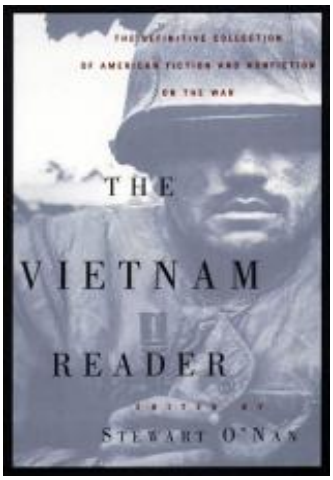
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The Vietnam Reader

by Stewart O'Nan



About the Book

The Vietnam Reader is a selection of the finest and best-known art from the American war in Vietnam, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, film, still photos, and popular song lyrics. All the strongest work is here, from mainstream bestsellers to radical poetry, from Tim O'Brien to Marvin Gaye. Also included are incisive reader's questions--useful for educators and book clubs--in a volume that makes an essential contribution to a wider understanding of the Vietnam War.

This authoritative and accessible volume is sure to become a classic reference, as well as indispensable and provocative reading for anyone who wants to know more about the war that changed the face of late-twentieth-century America.

Discussion Guide

In the following excerpt from the end of **The Vietnam Reader,** author Stewart O'Nan provides us with some thought provoking questions about the work. This excerpt can be used as a reader's companion or a guide to the collection and gives interested groups, students, professors, and individual readers an extensive range of subjects to discuss.

Reading Questions

I've gathered these sample reading questions for students as well as general readers as a way of interrogating these pieces. They're only leads, possible directions to pursue, not a prescription. I'll be the first to admit that their concerns are mine, and that readers, teachers, and students all can come up with better ones. Mine are just an easy way into the work, a first step. The important thing is to question the texts. Early in the war, the opposition to the U.S. involvement accused the government of lying, falsely representing both America's actions and motives. Likewise, supporters of the war alleged that the antiwar movement grossly overstated its case, blowing isolated incidents out of proportion. Though the official story of the war seems to have been discredited early on (and continues, with Kennedy and Johnson

administration officials such as Clark Clifford and Robert McNamara recently confessing that well before Tet the inner circle knew it was a losing cause), it was clear then and it's clear now that both sides bent the facts in hopes of enforcing their political points. The ends, it seemed, would justify the means.

That is no less true today, as each author--participant or not--creates and relates his or her version of the war. It's no coincidence that Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" is this anthology's keystone. With so many issues of truth and authority swirling around any representation of America's involvement in Vietnam, it's important that the reader not simply accept at face value what one or even several authors claim. As in any popular literature, stereotypes abound here. The veteran and the conduct of the war itself are continually subject to a dramatic warping. Twenty-five years after the last ground troops pulled out, Americans are still fighting to legitimize their mutually exclusive views of the war and what it meant, whose fault it was, why it happened the way it did, and even--astonishingly--the question of who really won. Because it split American society so deeply, the war will continue to be heatedly debated, perhaps always. By questioning the selections in this book, the reader will not only be able to join in that debate but to understand the issues that created and sustain it.

1. Green

1. Compare the narrators' attitudes toward soldiers and soldiering.

2. What are the two first-person narrators' jobs? Paul Berlin's? How might this affect their views?

3. Every narrative has a main character or "hero." How are the heroes of these three war narratives typical or atypical? Whom are we asked to identify with, and why? What traits do these heroes share with other American heroes?

4. What implicit criticisms of the way the war is being fought or handled by the American military and political systems can you find in these pieces?

5. Compare the welcome the central characters of *Going After Cacciato* and *The Green Berets* receive and how they react to it.

6. What do these narratives imply about American innocence and nobility, especially that of the combat soldier? Compare O'Brien's Paul Berlin to any of the others.

7. Examine the use of language in *Cacciato* and *The Green Berets,* especially profanity and military jargon. Who uses it and in what context?

8. How would the hero of *The Green Berets* view the hero of *Cacciato?*

9. How would the Tim O'Brien of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* see Sven Kornie's views?

10. Discuss the abundance or lack of irony and comedy across the three works. Why is there so much or so little?

11. How are the Vietnamese portrayed?

12. How do the soldiers in each piece fit into the military?

13. Examine the two in-country settings and what they say about the war.

14. What do the three texts say about courage and fear?

15. How do these pieces address concepts of masculinity?

2. Early Work

1. Contrast Casey's, O'Brien's, and Rabe's use of irony and twisted humor.

2. Examine pieces that comment on the very act of trying to relate the experience of Vietnam. What do these pieces say about the possibility or impossibility of relating that experience?

3. How are the Vietnamese treated by American personnel in these five readings? Especially look at Halberstam's use of Thuong as a point-of-view character and at Rabe's very different use of Zung.

4. How are Americans who stayed home viewed?

5. Discuss how women are portrayed in the five selections.

6. How do the authors make use of pop culture?

7. How is the body (or bodies) used?

8. With whom are we supposed to identify in *Sticks and Bones?* How does Rabe achieve this effect, and why?

9. How do the authors portray previous generations?

10. How do the authors employ language and formal innovation (or conversely, traditional methods) to convey this new material?

11. How (and where) does David's return in Sticks and Bones challenge Arnerican myths? How does Rabe attempt to indict the culture as a whole?

12. In what ways is this protest literature? What judgment do these works pass on the war and on America, and how?

13. Examine the relationship of the individual to the group in two or more pieces.

14. Compare the views of the war given by the minor characters in *If I Die in a Combat Zone.* Taken as a group, do they offer the FNG O'Brien a coherent or consistent picture of the war (or of their own ability to make sense of it)?

15. Where do the authors attack what they see as the gaps between the professed virtues of the American system and the realities?

16. Again, how do these authors present soldiers and soldiering? How are these versions different from the typical warrior-hero model?

17. Find examples of or allusions to American innocence and American evil. To whom (or what) are they attributed, and why?

18. In Casey's "Learning," the narrator says he enjoyed reading about Caesar's fighting. Discuss the aesthetic allure of combat violence--why people like to read about it--and some of the moral challenges this poses to the writers of these five pieces.

19. Contrast Halberstam's use of history with the other authors'.

3. First Wave of Major Work

1. Compare the end of Caputo's prologue to O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and discuss the paradox inherent in their resignation concerning the power of their separate testimonies. Examine their claims to be writing fiction or nonfiction, reportage or stories.

2. Discuss the very different literary techniques used by these five authors.

3. How do Kovic, Caputo, and the men in *Fields of Fire* and *Dispatches* fit into the stereotypical categories of American soldier?

4. How do Kovic, Caputo, and Herr explain the attraction or thrill of war? "You know how it is, you want to look and you don't want to look."

5. Examine Philip Caputo's musings on the morality or culpability of the American combat soldier in Vietnam. Now Paul Berlin's. How might Michael Herr criticize Caputo's or Berlin's explanations? How might Webb's Goodrich agree with them?

6. Though these pieces come from the first wave of major literary works about the American war, all five postdate their authors' tours of duty by at least five years. Examine Caputo's prologue (especially his claim that *A Rumor of War* is not a political document) and Paul Berlin's imagining with this quotation from *Dispatches* in mind: ". . . afterward you can make up any kind of bullshit you want to about it . . ." How does this serve as an analogy for any vet writing about the war (and how we as American readers must approach their work)?

7. In all five pieces, find instances where the authors question the nature of truth, reality, facts, lies, etc.

8. Discuss Caputo's view of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. How might this influence a civilian jury's evaluation of his guilt or innocence as the defendant in a murder trial (the victims being Vietnamese)? Examine his statement about the killings being substantially and fundamentally different from killings in Los Angeles. Now look at Paul Berlin's view of

civilians. How about Goodrich's musings on the one hundred NVA dead and the old lady?

9. Discuss Herr's portrayal of Americans in Vietnam.

10. Herr cites Hemingway's tide "A Way You'll Never Be." Discuss how Kovic, Webb, Caputo, and Herr show the difficulty (impossibil ity?) of bridging the gap between combatant and noncombatant, soldier and American civilian. How is this an analogy for the writer and America?

11. Locate instances of participants feeling a nostalgia for the war or unable to reconnect with society. How does this play into contemporary (1976-78) cliches about the Vietnam vet?

4. The Oral History Boom

1. In contrast to "the gap," or the impossibility of relating the experience of the war to the American public found in earlier texts, these oral histories purposely attack that very problem. How do they try to bridge the gap? What do they do that previous texts could not? Do they run into the same problems or adopt the same tactics as earlier work?

2. Discuss the problems of authority in these oral histories. How do the editors establish the speakers' right (even duty) to relate their stories?

3. Fiction versus nonfiction: Look at *Nam's* uncredited epigraph. Examine the contradictions of the oral history and the oral tradition of storytelling. (It wouldn't hurt to keep Michael Herr's *Dispatches* in mind here, and his penchant for telling emblematic yet way-over-thetop stories, then attributing them to someone else, or even no one in particular.)

4. What do the people in the one section of *Nam* say about America? How do they fit into the culture?

5. What do they say about going to Vietnam? How do they fit or explode the easy categories of reluctant draftee, professional warrior, psycho killer?

6. What is their grasp of American foreign policy? How does America fit into the world?

7. Discuss the radicalization of Malik Edwards, his views of the war, the American military, and America itself. Find other participants, fictional and otherwise, who share his views--especially Robert Santos's comments about the Detroit riots, and his quote: "I just thought I was white like everyone else." Address the issue of the soldier-protester, a quintessential Vietnam figure.

8. Examine how the speakers apprehend the roles of men and women in American society.

9. Critics have said there seems to be an implicit view of the speakers in these oral histories as guiltless victims of the war (which in many cultural circles is now the prevailing truth). Do you find this to be true, and if so, why? What previous stereotypes do the editors and speakers hope to overthrow or replace? In whose works have we previously seen this new version of the American soldier in Vietnam?

10. Pop versions: Several men in Nam cite John Wayne. Search for instances where vets discuss film or other media versions of the war. How do they see them? Examine Robert Santos's saying: ". . . it was like a goddamn movie."

11. Contrast the group of letter writers in *Dear America* with the speakers in *Nam.* On the whole, do their views of the war differ? Their politics (or lack of)? What might this have to do with the time when the letters were written and the pieces taped? How do the editors' choices affect our view of Americans in Vietnam?

12. Compare Anne Simon Auger's life after the war with those of other vets--Ron Kovic; Michael, Nick, and Steven from *The Deer Hunter;* David in *Sticks and Bones,* etc.

13. Discuss instances of the individual caught in the system.

14. How do these testimonies fit the *Bildungsroman* trajectory from innocence to experience? What have the speakers learned?

5. Second Wave of Major Work

1. Examine Del Vecchio's use of dialect spellings and his portrayal of Doc Johnson. Compare this use of language and cultural history with that of Wallace Terry in Malik Edwards's section of *Bloods.* Use this comparison as the kernel of a larger discussion on the representation of minority servicemen (and -women, if you can find the evidence).

2. Rufus Brooks's *R&R:* How does Del Vecchio's portrayal of Lila fit with other female characters we've seen? Examine the assumptions the male characters (and, perhaps, the male authors) make about women in general and, more specifically, women in U.S. society. Keep in mind that the Women's Lib movement was contemporary with the end of the war.

3. The usual question we ask of an American text: How do these three books portray the U.S. involvement in Vietnam? Sympathetically or not? Who do these books praise or blame?

4. How is Wright's veteran at home different from others we've seen? In what ways is he the same?

5. Examine how Wright and Heinemann push their language compared to Del Vecchio. Look at the form of the novels as well. Compare the techniques used with those of Kovic or O'Brien, Herr or Baker. What similarities do you find?

6. Discuss Wright's and Heinemann's use of pop culture.

7. Discuss Wright's view of American technology and society.

8. Dissect Heinemann's first paragraph and the next few ensuing pages in light of other disclaimers (Caputo's, O'Brien's, Moore's) or questionable claims of authenticity (Herr's, Terry's, Baker's).

9. What about Heinemann's narrator's claim that most folks will shell out to see artful carnage? Discuss whether you find this true or not and why, using evidence gleaned from the other texts and films, as well as from American culture at large.

10. How and where does Heinemann indulge in--even celebrate in an over-the-top way--the stereotypes of Americans in

Vietnam? Examine his use of caricatures and other elements of the tall tale rather than the relatively straight-ahead realism of Del Vecchio.

11. Going back to Question 1, how is Heinemann's portrait of Jonesy different from Del Vecchio's Jackson or Johnson?

12. Who is this James that Heinemann's narrator addresses? What is the significance of this story being told to a particular audience?

13. Compare Heinemann's narrator's discussion of war correspondents with other authors' views of the media, especially Herr's, who seems to be at least partly the target of these jibes. Tie in the line about the impossibility of a movie getting the truth about the war across that ends that section.

6. Memoirs

1. Usually memoirs are first-person accounts of lived experience. Examine Glasser's use of fictional techniques, as well as his choice of a third-person narrator.

2. Once again, the usual question: How do these personal narratives portray the U.S. involvement in Vietnam--sympathetically or not? Compare Glasser's view of war with Lanning's and Downs's.

3. What, ostensibly, is the purpose of each text--that is, what does it appear the author wants from his audience? Who is that audience?

4. Continuing issue: How are the heroes of these narratives similar to those we've seen in other Vietnam books? How do they differ from standard American heroes?

5. How might the authors' relationship to the Army influence their view of the war? Think of the authors in terms of our categories of soldiers--damaged vet, psycho killer, professional, reluctant draftee, protest vet, frontier hero, etc.

6. These works focus on very different events and operations to represent the Vietnam experience. Discuss the emphasis each writer has chosen, and possible reasons for that choice.

7. What implicit critiques of American tactics and strategies do these narratives contain?

8. How America chooses its war: Glasser published his book in 1971, Downs in '78, Mason in '83, Lanning in '87. Keeping in mind that the antiwar movement was huge by '68 and the Memorial was dedicated in '82, explain how the political climate of the country may fit each text--that is, how the way the culture was seeing the war and the vet at that particular time may have matched what the author had to say.

9. Examine how the authors use atrocities or war crimes. Compare the treatment of VC prisoners in Downs's and Mason's work.

10. Examine the authors' views of relations between Americans and the Vietnamese.

11. Compare these personal narratives with literary fiction from the war. Examine how different texts emphasize action

over character or vice versa. What or whom are we supposed to be concerned about? How do these pieces of nonfiction conform to or explode the conventions of the heroic battle narrative or its twin, the protest memoir?

12. Recurring themes: Views of women, definitions of masculinity.

13. Critics often charge that American Vietnam War narratives-especially those written years after the war--focus on the personal or technical at the expense of judging the larger political and moral realities of our involvement. Do you find this criticism valid for these texts or not, and why?

7. Masterwork

1. Is this just a batch of stories strung together? A novel? Comment on O'Brien's use of form. You might compare this fractured form with that of his own *Going After Cacciato.* Or, on a grander scale, you might look at how so many Vietnam narratives have nonlinear or exploded structures.

2. Fiction or nonfiction? At times, O'Brien interrupts, often to correct or undercut the effect of a story. Discuss this odd metafictional tactic and its effect on the reader. Also, comment on O'Brien's use of himself as a (possibly fictional) character.

3. Examine the story "How to Tell a True War Story" in the context of the opening pages of Heinemann's *Paco's Story.*

4. Explain the line "It *wasn't* a war story, it was a *love* story."

5. Discuss the different audiences O'Brien is telling his stories to and what he says (or implies) about them. Compare this with Heinemann's narrator's view of Americans' thirst for war stories.

6. Innocent kids or psycho killers? How does O'Brien view the American soldier, and how does this differ from the views of other authors?

7. Views of the enemy. Compare "The Man I Killed" with other versions of VC or NVA regulars.

8. The reluctant draftee kills the reluctant draftee: Compare "The Man I Killed" with O'Brien's self-portrait in *If I Die in a Combat Zone.*

9. Examine the reactions of other platoon members to O'Brien killing the man. How might these be read as allegories for the veteran's reception by America? Look for evidence of this theme (views of the vet) in the other stories.

10. Discuss the significance of O'Brien's titles.

11. "This is true." Truth is such a loaded issue when it comes to Vietnam, yet O'Brien purposely and continually plays up the fact that he's inventing what we're reading. Contrast this with all the odc prefaces and disclaimers other authors have used to prove their authority.

12. The tall tale as a major Vietnam genre: Compare fabulous tales (*Paco's Story, Going After Cacciato,* some of the more outrageous whoppers from *Dispatches,* parts of *The Things They Carried*) with scrupulous realism (*The 13th Valley, The Green Berets,*

oral histories, and other supposedly objective nonfiction).

13. The kid with one leg and the chocolate bar: Throughout *The Things,* O'Brien uses ready-made and sentimental images and then finds a way to overcome them, put a different spin on them. Find examples and compare this effect with how he uses the reader's conventional expectations against us.

14. Look at how O'Brien uses games and toys both to characterize the soldiers as children and to comment on how his choice of form (and the war) works.

8. Homecoming

1. What are these returned vets like? How do the authors' characterizations fit into previous categories we've seen? Compare them with first-person accounts of life after service in Viemam (oral histoties, nonfiction). Have we seen these same traits from Hollywood films, TV shows, popular literature? Would you say they're stereotypes or true to life--and how can one tell?

2. Paco in his rented room, Norman Bowker in his father's car: How is the vet's relationship with America (or his community) represented? How do the authors portray the vet's view of America?

3. Look at all the instances of returned vets trying to connect with women. Examine their relationships.

4. A related question: Compare Paco's (and the narrator's) imagining Cathy having sex with Marty-boy and the gang rape of the captured VC. You might also look at the execution of the imaginary male VC. 5. Collect evidence of the gap between veteran and civilian.

6. How do the different authors and narrators (and characters) try to bridge the gap?

7. Flashbacks: Discuss how most if not all of these vets seem to be haunted by the past. Look at the many ways the authors show the power of memory and the mind.

8. My Lai: Civilians (read: readers) agree on the insanity and immorality of war, and especially war crimes. Comment on the authors' use of atrocities.

9. The Ivy League English major ROTC lieutenant: Examine how Heinemann uses the character Lieutenant Stennett.

10. In "Speaking of Courage" and its companion "Notes," examine vets' views of other vets. Consider the position of the character Tim O'Brien looking at the character Norman Bowker, as well as Bowker's thoughts in his letter.

11. "The town did not know shit about shit." Compare Norman Bowker's view of the town to O'Brien's view of the actual Worthington, Minnesota, in *If I Die in a Combat Zone.*

12. Note the emphasis: "After Our War." Self-accusation: Find instances where these works force the American reader to look at America, to admit complicity. Is this a form of bridging the gap?

13. Analyze Bruce Weigl's "Monkey" in the light of Paco, Norman Bowker, and Henry Lamartine of Louise Erdrich's "A

Bridge."

9. Memory

1. Once again, examine the returned vets. How do they differ from other popular versions we've seen? In what ways are they the same?

2. Discuss the personae in Yusef Komunyakaa's poems and their relationship with the Vietnamese--male and female, enemy and ally.

3. And again, the relationship of vets and women: Look especially at *In Country*, in which one vet, Tom (only briefly mentioned in these sections), is Sam's impotent lover; Emmett is her bachelor uncle; and her dead father's relationship with her mother was strained by her antiwar leanings.

4. Race and the military. Examine Komunyakaa's portrayal of African American soldiers. Compare his versions with, say, Heinemann's Jonesy or Del Vecchio's Doc Johnson.

5. We see the gap from both sides in *In Country.* Compare how Sam and Emmett see it differently.

6. How does Sam try to bridge this gap?

7. How about the generation gap? Norman Bowker and his father, Sam and Emmett--or Sam and her lost father.

8. Is that you, John Wade? Is this me? How does O'Brien frame his character's guilt or innocence in Thuan Yen? American innocence? How does he explain the evils of war, and how does this fit with Caputo's defense?

9. Fact or fiction? Again, O'Brien is walking the line between documented truth and the imaginary, and includes a possibly fictional narrator/author. What effect does this situating of an overtly fictional story in a documented historical event have upon our unavoidably politicized reading?

10. Examine the position of women in *In the Lake of the Woods.*

11. Discuss memory or conscience with respect to *In Country* and *In the Lake of the Woods.* How about complicity, denial, America's historical conscience? Who does the war continue to affect?

12. Look at Emmett's big emotional scene in *In Country.* How does this fit with stereotypes of the Vietnam vet? Examine Emmett saying, "It's the same for all of us."

13. How does Balaban use history and time in "Mr. Giai's Poem"? What might he be implying about the consolations of memory? Of poetry? How might Tim O'Brien or Norman Bowker refute or agree with this view of the salvific power of memory? That is, does memory save us or condemn us? Include Kevin Bowen's "Incoming" in this discussion.

10. The Wall

1. How do the veterans in these pieces view the Wall? The war?

2. In and Komunyakaa's poems, examine the differences between generations and how they connect with the Wall and the war.

3. "I'm inside the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," Komunyakaa's narrator says. Compare this with Larry Markham's vision of himself and his son "looking out" of the Wall, and discuss how many of the vets we've seen have felt trapped or still caught inside the war.

4. Look at the mother's mementos in "Between Days" and the offerings Larry Markham leaves at the Wall. How have veterans and civilians in these and other pieces chosen to memorialize the war-keep it present and with them? How might this relate to the number of books written about the war?

5. Consider ". . . framing the blackness." Note the confusion both Komunyakaa's narrator and Larry Markham struggle with, trying to place themselves and figure out what they're seeing, where they fit in it, what it means to them.

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Author Bio

Stewart O?Nan is the author of numerous books, including WISH YOU WERE HERE, EVERYDAY PEOPLE, IN THE WALLED CITY, THE SPEED QUEEN and EMILY, ALONE. His 2007 novel, LAST NIGHT AT THE LOBSTER, was a national bestseller and a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. He lives in Boston.

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Publication Date: October 20, 1998
Paperback: 736 pages
Publisher: Anchor
ISBN-10: 0385491182
ISBN-13: 9780385491181