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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a work of fiction. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the book more fully.

Tim O'Brien grew up in small-town Minnesota and describes himself as a dreamer, not big enough to compete in sports, who made good grades and loved magic tricks. In 1968, he was drafted into the Army's 46th Infantry and sent to Vietnam. Though politically he was against the war, O'Brien served as a foot soldier in the Quang Ngai province from 1969 until 1970, when he was hit by shrapnel from a hand grenade, earning the Purple Heart and a ticket home.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Copy and distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Book" (p. 3), "Major Characters" (p. 4), and "Tim O'Brien (b. 1946)" (pp. 5–6). Divide the class into three groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group should present what it has learned.

Fiction writers are often advised to "write what you know." Tim O'Brien followed this advice by reflecting on personal experiences and adapting them to create a work of fiction. Discuss the differences between fiction and nonfiction. How might real-life events evolve into a fictional story?

Ask students to consider if it is okay for fiction to have elements of "real" events. Is it acceptable for a nonfiction writer to create moments that never occurred to help expand or explain the story? Are the standards for "truthfulness" in fiction different from those for nonfiction? Why or why not?

### Writing Exercise

Have students write a three-paragraph essay on an object they carry now, or one from their childhood. Ask them to describe the object in detail, the mood it evokes, and reasons for its importance.

### Homework

Read Handout One: Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction and "The Things They Carried" (pp. 1-26). Ask students to make a list of the soldiers and the special items they carried.