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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great book is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

The Things They Carried is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of literature about the Vietnam War. Robert Harris, book editor for the *New York Times*, wrote:

Only a handful of novels and short stories have managed to clarify, in any lasting way, the meaning of the war in Vietnam for America and for the soldiers who served there.

Tim O'Brien captures the war's pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers. But he goes much further. By moving beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear, by questioning the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of truth, he places *The Things They Carried* high up on the list of best fiction about any war.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. Do they agree with Robert Harris's review of *The Things They Carried*? A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Tim O'Brien create in *The Things They Carried*? What elevates a work of fiction to greatness?

Ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Things They Carried*? Is this a great book? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay exploring their personal reactions to *The Things They Carried*. Students should go beyond expressing like or dislike. Ask them to make a list of emotions they felt while reading the book, and to examine why. Which characters and scenes did they relate to, and which remained strange or difficult to comprehend? Was the resolution of the book satisfying? Comforting? Disturbing? Why?

Homework

Have students choose from the list of Essay Topics provided in this guide. Ask students to come to the next class with a draft of their essay.