

# 8

## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Structure

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a book either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution or *denouement*, in which the aftereffects of that climactic action are presented.

O'Brien mentions the deaths of several of the soldiers before he gives detailed accounts of how and when they died in later stories. Reading "In the Field" and "Field Trip" expands the reader's understanding of Kiowa's death and the narrator's reaction to the events that took place in the field. Yet, in some ways, O'Brien undermines the drama by placing "Good Form" between these two stories. This search for a nebulous and shifting truth provides continuity between the stories and, in some ways, increases the reader's tension by forcing us to question what is real.

### Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Three: The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre.

O'Brien writes, "It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through the Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented. But it's not a game. It's a form" (p. 179). Ask your class the following questions: What is the relationship between truth and fact in *The Things They Carried*? Why are facts important? How much factual information do we need to understand the truth? How might knowing all the factual information about O'Brien's service in Vietnam hinder us from understanding the book? How does the search for truth enhance the book's plot?

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one of the soldiers in the field the night Kiowa dies and write a condolence letter from that character to Kiowa's family. Ask students to consider why they choose to include some information and leave out other facts.

### Homework

Read "The Ghost Soldiers" (pp. 189-218). Have students identify at least three themes explored in *The Things They Carried*.