

How to Read *Going After Cacciato*, by Tim O'Brien

For the Incoming Junior Class: 2014 - 2015

Background Concept—Personal Storytelling and Myth

Human kind is the storytelling animal. We need story. We especially need myth—stories that matter. Storytelling may be our only defense against the universe.

Fantasy novelist Kristine Kathryn Rusch put it this way:

"For years I have pondered the "whys" of fiction. Why do human beings need story? Why do we enjoy story? Why do we think story is important? I have no scientific answer.

I have an unscientific one, based on gut and personal experience.

Fiction provides hope where there is none, adventure where none exists, and dreams where none are possible.

Fiction is central to who we are. In my opinion, it is what makes us human" (Patti Perret, ed. *The Faces of Fantasy*. New York: Tor Books, 1996. 30).

The Novel's Structure—Three Threads

Going After Cacciato features Paul Berlin, who is in the middle of an active tour of duty in the Vietnam War. And nobody needs hope and dreams more than Paul does. He may even need adventure. After all, there is a profound difference between "adventure" as seen in fiction and the random violence and terrors of real life.

O'Brien structures his presentation of Paul and what happens to him in three interwoven threads:

NOW: Now is presented in the chapters titled "**Observation Post.**"

Paul is sitting in a tower, pulling guard duty at night near the South China Sea. There's nothing to do. There's nothing to see. So Paul occupies himself by reflecting on what has happened to him since he started his tour of duty, what might have happened, what he wishes could happen, and what is happening now.

In a very important sense, the entire novel is set right here in this guard tower. Paul never leaves it.

THEN: Each of these chapters has **a unique title.**

These chapters provide a history of Paul's experiences in Vietnam over the past six months, right up to the moment Cacciato, a fellow soldier, deserts his squad. They are not presented in chronological order because each one is a vivid flashback Paul experiences as he sits guard duty.

The **juxtaposition** of these memories with the "Observation Post" chapters and the "Road to Paris" chapters is an important device: watch for how an aspect of one inspires another—just as one thought leads to another when you daydream.

MYTHIC JOURNEY: Each of these chapters includes "**The Road to Paris**" as part of its title.

In these, Paul occupies his time on guard duty by imagining a mythic journey: his squad must chase after Cacciato, the deserter, and bring him back to the army, even if this journey takes them from Vietnam all the way to Paris, France.

Because Paul is daydreaming, he uses his personal experience, things he's read, movies he's seen, and things he's heard about to create this mythic journey.

Watch for allusions, such as the allusion to *Alice in Wonderland* and the historic character, Sacajawea (who in this novel takes the form of Sarkin Aung Wan), and many others.

Pay attention to how bits and pieces of Paul's reflections in the "Observation Post" chapters and bits and pieces of his memories of what happened to him in the flashback chapters inspire aspects of this imagined adventure.

Ask yourself why Paul creates this journey in his head: how does it provide him "hope where there is none, adventure where none exists, and dreams where none are possible. And how does it help him explain his world to himself?