

Inventory

In Tim O'Brien's Vietnam war novel *The Things They Carried*, our most vivid impressions of the major characters come from an inventory of their physical burdens. Here's a famous passage from the book:

Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April. By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds including the liner and camouflage cover. They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear. On their feet they carried jungle boots – 2.1 pounds – and Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of Dr. School's foot powder as a precaution against trench foot. Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried 6 or 7 ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchel Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught at Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother's distrust of the white man, his grandfather's old hunting hatchet. Necessity dictated. Because the land was mined and booby-trapped, it was SOP for each man to carry steel-centered, nylon-covered flak jacket, which weighed 6.7 pounds, but which on hot days seemed much heavier. Because you could die so quickly, each man carried at least one large compress bandage, usually in the helmet band for easy access. Because the nights were cold, and because the monsoons were wet, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or makeshift tent. With its quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost 2 pounds, but it was worth every ounce. In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away.

Similarly, in his rather crass, but hugely entertaining, crime novel *The Shark-Infested Custard*, Charles Willeford gives us an analysis of a female character based upon the contents of her handbag.

Choose one of the following fictional inventories to evoke a character or group of characters...or, alternately, devise one of your own:

1. The contents of an abandoned self-storage garage
2. The trash left behind after a summer youth dance at the local swimming pool
3. Everything found in the wallet of a stabbing victim
4. The contents of a new age self-help guru's iPod
5. The contents of a pizza delivery guy's 20-year-old Honda Civic
6. The portfolio of a self-destructive art student
7. The contents of a foreclosed Florida beachfront condo
8. The lost-and-found box at an alternative middle school for chronically distracted children
9. A closet full of old VHS videocassettes in a third-rate nursing home
10. Everything kept in the booth of a full-time parking lot attendant