



Required Readings Paying Off

By SURAJ RAMBHIA
Contributing Writer

SBU students had the unique opportunity to meet with Tim O'Brien last Thursday, author of *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien held seminars throughout the day, which were filled to capacity for the most part. SBU students and faculty members got to learn first hand from the Pulitzer Prize nominee about his experiences writing the novel as well as obtaining some tips on how to become better, more creative writers. This event has become a five-year SBU tradition, where authors of the annual freshman reading assignments are invited to hold seminars with students, staff and faculty to impart their wisdom and expertise as accomplished writers.

The other novels assigned to freshman in the past four years have been *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, and *The Color of Water* by James McBride. At a first glance, it appears that SBU administration has taken a keen interest in emphasizing the academic importance of reading. U.S. News has reported recently – in February of 2005 – about the declining levels of literacy among the youth of America. The article describes, based on information from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, how nearly 70% of eighth graders and two thirds of twelfth graders read below levels of proficiency determined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This fact has startled many educators across the country, as it is widely known that the emphasis on reading increases as students attempt to obtain a college degree at a university setting.

SBU administration may have had the foresight to instate this yearly-required reading for freshman students in addition to the Diversified Education Curriculum (DEC) system, as a means of promoting literacy on campus. However, if this was the case, why did the required reading tradition start only five years ago – what did it provide that the original DEC system could not? Could there have been another reason for starting the freshman required reading?

When asked about the reasons for instituting the freshman required reading, Dean of Undergraduate Students Jerrold Stein noted that this idea was "not novel in universities even though it was new to Stony Brook." Stein also commented on the need for educational stimulation for the students that transcends the pure academic

realm, as "college students spend 80% of their time outside the classroom." Rather than instructing students in lecture halls, the common reading allows students to create their own "intellectual community," not to mention meeting the author of a highly acclaimed literary work. Stein recalled how O'Brien implored his audience of students, staff, and faculty to "look for the creativity inside ourselves," and to "take some risks when writing stories or novels," inspiring the students to attempt to reach their full potential as writers.

When asked about the process of selecting the required reading each year, Stein gave a reference to a committee of two members within the administration who were given the charge to conduct this year's required reading selection process. The two members of this committee are Dr. Peter Baigent, Vice President of Student Affairs, and Dr. Mark Aronoff, Deputy Provost, also affiliated with the Department of Linguistics. Although both Aronoff and Baigent recognize the fact that the committee has somewhat diminished in size over the past several years, they both made clear that there has been a motion to revive, that is, increase the size, of the selection committee in the future.

Baigent, who according to Stein, had initially "presented the concept" of the required reading five years ago, gathered the selection committee with several professors and administrators including Aronoff. Baigent reported that there were about 6-8 books in the running with the selection for this year's required reading. "The book has to meet several requirements. It should be relatively easy to read. It should have a contemporary touch. Something the students can relate to more easily. And, the author has to be available," he said.

Aronoff gave comments not only on the requirements of the book, but also for the author. The author not only had to be available, but he or she should be, "a good public speaker." Thematically speaking, Aronoff noted that, "the book should be of wide interest. I don't like books that take one side or another." Basically, according to what Aronoff said, the book should have a viewpoint that will not serve to indoctrinate the student. *The Things They Carried* does not have a pro-war or anti-war stance, which further allows a wide range of people to identify with and appreciate the literary work.

"The work should be well written," added Aronoff. This is clearly noted as O'Brien, after writing the short

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STATESMAN EXCLUSIVE: Interview with Tim O'Brien



Courtesy of Tim O'Brien

By JEREMY FALLETTA
Copy Editor

We recently had an opportunity to interview Tim O'Brien, author of *The Things They Carried* – this year's freshman reading assignment – when he was on campus last Thursday. O'Brien is the author of nine novels, and *The Things They Carried* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Statesman: Tell me a little bit about yourself.

O'Brien: Well, I started as a foot soldier in Vietnam in 1969. I was drafted, and went to the war. Very unwillingly, but I went, which I've written about. I've been writing since then, and I'm a professional novelist and short story writer.

Statesman: Would you say that your writing has been cathartic in dealing with your war experience?

O'Brien: That's hard to tell. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't. It certainly doesn't hurt, I'll say that. You never get some of the memories out of yourself, even if you're writing. It's still there, you know, late at night. It's like having head cancer, or if your girlfriend dumps you; any tragedy's going to stay with you even if you write about it. But it helps clarify things, when you take the time to sort through your emotions and memories. It's probably a little bit like going to a shrink, and talking a lot, where you get a little clarity out of it. But the purpose of my writing is

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story "The Things They Carried" in 1987 – the first chapter of the novel *The Things They Carried*, which he completed later in 1990 – received the 1987 National Magazine Award in Fiction. The short story was also selected as one of the 1987 Best American Short Stories and Best American Short Stories of the 1980's. For the novel *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien won the 1990 Chicago Tribune Heartland Award in Fiction, the Melcher Award, and France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger award. The New York Times deemed *The Things They Carried* as one of the year's ten best novels, also in 1990. The following year, in 1991, O'Brien was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Little known to the students, Aronoff mentioned one of the largest underlying factors in selecting the freshman required reading – money. There is a certain cost associated having an author give a day's worth of lectures. Aronoff commented, "We've had to turn down some authors because they ask for extremely high sums of money." Although he couldn't remember the cost for Tim O'Brien's visit, Aronoff mentioned that last year's author, Frank McCourt, who wrote *Angela's Ashes*, had initially asked for about \$25,000. SBU administration eventually bargained McCourt down to about half the price.

In the long run, however, the required readings were instituted for the benefit of the student body. As mentioned earlier, Stein

mentioned the "camaraderie" and "community" that the required reading created on campus. He also reported from his own understanding and interaction with students that "they identify their class with the author [of their freshman reading] coming to campus."

When asked, students appeared to be of mixed opinions on the issue over whether they supported the idea of having required readings or not. Josh Yeh, a student who attended the interview with O'Brien in the morning, reported in a matter-of-fact tone, "I had to read it as part of my ACH seminar. I think it was a good idea." Jenny Huang, another student, gave her comments, "They chose the book because of Iraq. [O'Brien] was a decent speaker, but I didn't think

the book was amazing." Thinking retrospectively of her statement, Huang added that the readings are, "useful because they broaden the horizon of the student body. Most kids wouldn't have picked up the book unless they were forced to." Student Jeff Fei nodded in agreement at Jenny's second statement. Another student, Seroos Salavati, remarked, "[There are] so many other things to read." He cited that he would rather put his academic energies into something more academic, like reading a biology textbook. When Salavati was asked about his views of the social implications associated with having such a required reading – how the students, as Jenny reported previously, "can expand their horizons" – he replied, "no comment."

Thieves on Campus

By SHARON LINDELL
Contributing Writer

There have been a few cases of theft reported inside residence halls this year. Two of these cases were at Greenley College in Roosevelt Quad. What these two cases have in common is that: they occurred on the same day, October 4; both dormitories are located on the first floor and both dormitories had their windows open.

The two thefts occurred while the occupants of the rooms were away for the holiday weekend. The windows screens were cut open. A computer monitor and cell phone were stolen from one room and two Playstation consoles and two baseball caps were stolen from the other. The thief was not caught.

University Police Deputy Chief Douglas Little says that thefts in residence halls are

a big problem. Little believes that 99.9% of people on campus are good and decent people but that .1% of people on campus are people who will take advantage of decent people. Little also said that these .1% are cowards.

According to University Police, one residence hall theft is too many in one week. Little says "We are all here to get an education and to all get the best career possible," so we must "keep ourselves safe... [and] not make yourself a victim."

If you are a victim of a theft inside your residence hall, the University Police advise that you do not touch anything and call them immediately to file a report. The Police will then do the best that they can to help you. In some cases, the report will go to Detective Stephen Varga. He says that when a thief is caught the thief is usually scared, proving that they are indeed "cowards."

Varga also believes some cases of theft can be prevented or thieves caught ahead of time by just one anonymous phone call about a "suspicious person." Varga says that recently he and a colleague tried to look suspicious and tried going through a window in perfect view of someone on a cellular phone. There were no calls made to the police alerting them to this incident.

Alana Elia, a freshman student who resides in the Roosevelt Quad, worries about thefts in her resident halls. "I am very cognizant of locking the door when I'm not there," she says, but "people always leave [the front] doors propped [opened]." She also had a theft of her own. Her father had sent her flowers to her dorm room and someone else signed for them and took them. She "felt really bad too [because] her father sent them for [her] birthday." This is what the University Police is trying to prevent

– students feeling like victims.

Some students are not overly worried about thefts, like freshman Jack Eustace. He believes he is a "scary motherf--ker" and no one would want to steal from him "unless they go after [his] shoes," believing they are his only things of value. But he claims that he takes the proper precautions so that he won't be made a victim.

Little recommends that you keep your door closed and locked, talk with roommates about doing the same, and lock your windows. If more students are more aware then thefts in the residence halls can be decreased. Also, students that see suspicious people around residence halls should not hesitate to call the University Police. If you are worried about your property being stolen from your dorm room, insurance is available from the school. For more information, you can visit the Office of Campus Residence.

USG Executive Council: *Finding an Unexpected Surplus*

By KERRI WALSH
Staff Writer

The Undergraduate Student Government Executive Council Meeting held last Thursday showed a great deal of improvement over the last week. The meeting began almost promptly at 5:17 PM with seven council members in their seats. Two more council members showed up late.

The meeting started off by discussing the court case that Rob Romano had brought up. After the USG Senate approved the ten-dollar raise in the student activity fee, Romano decided to drop the case. Also, because there was an enrollment higher than what was expected, there

is now approximately \$97,000 that needs to be allocated somewhere. Clubs and Agencies may apply for some of this money.

The next issue on the agenda was the Student Faculty Staff Retreat, for which \$2,500 was allocated from the Council's budget.

Another allocation made was to the SUNY Student Assembly. Four students from the branches of USG will be attending this conference. The Council allocated \$860 dollars to this event.

There was an impeachment hearing for justice Alan Chen of the USG Judiciary. After a brief executive session where all gallery members were asked to leave, the Council decided to impeach Alan Chen for never show-

ing up, negligence, and failing the student body.

The Council reports were far more substantial than the informal talks of last week. Among the notable agenda items was the Academic Bill of Rights, which gives both students and faculty certain academic rights. Currently, Stony Brook is taking a stance opposing the Academic Bill of Rights; however, the final decision will be made by SUNY and will affect all SUNY schools. USG is working on running financial workshops for students.

Also, there is a meal plan committee that is trying to work out student concerns with the meal plan – there should be a town hall meeting regarding meal plans in November.

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An Interview with Tim O'Brien

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not for catharsis, the purpose is to make good stories.

Statesman: So, would you say that the purpose of your writing is entertainment, then?

O'Brien: Well, that's part of storytelling, in the same way that Ernest Hemingway would look at it, or Joseph Heller or Homer. The purpose is partly entertainment, partly education, partly just touching the human heart. Whatever stories are is what I do. I'm not quite sure what they are, I mean, I know a good story when I hear one, but I'm not quite sure what a good story does for us, except that there's a human craving for stories.

Statesman: How would you say that the war affected your general outlook on life?

O'Brien: It did two contradictory things. One, it made me much more cynical than I had been about myself, my country, and our leaders. I had kind of a naïve, romanticized version of myself and the world, and that naïveté and romanticism was blown away by what I saw and did in Vietnam. I don't mean to say just things that I witnessed, but also things I did myself. On the other hand, having come through the war, I think I'm more appreciative of peace than I had been before.

Here we are at peace, and most people don't think much about it. Peace is a shy thing that doesn't brag about itself. A war lets you know it's there, but we take peace for granted. When you've been in a war for a year, with all the noise and the horror, and the fear, and all that stuff is suddenly gone, you really appreciate the quiet and the safety. So it gave me something good, not just bad.

Statesman: What would you say your most poignant memory is?

O'Brien: I think that would be returning home. One minute you're in the bush, and you're in a war, and a helicopter plucks you out of it, and then you take a shower and get on an airplane, and you fly out. You leave really fast. Within six hours you go from being in a war to being aboard a plane with flight attendants, and those TV dinners they used to give you, and tweed seats and muzak. And you look out the window and there goes the war, you just watch it go. I remember looking down and just seeing the lights of America, all the glitzy stuff you take for granted. Like Target, and McDonalds, all that stuff, it

was home. It really brought an emotional choke to my chest, it surprised me. It was kind of tawdry looking down at strip malls and stuff in an ordinary world, after coming out of such horror. It was America.

Statesman: Was the book planned out when you began to write it or did it just develop as you were working?

O'Brien: The book was planned. I mean, I planned to write a novel in the form of a memoir. So I banged all of the rules of a memoir. Using my name, dedicating it to the characters, and trying to make it feel real. Like it really happened. And then periodically to remind the reader that it's made up. Novelists find forms to try to convey the spiritual, emotional and psychological truths, not the literal truths of things, but the feel of heaviness, and the feel of fear, the feel of indecision. All the emotional things are true. Any novel is grounded in some level of reality, but then you leave it in the world of fiction. I left it quickly. The difference between what I did and what others did is that I was up front about it. As a writer, my main aim is artistic.

Statesman: How do you feel about coming to *Stony Brook* and your book being the freshman reading assignment this year?

O'Brien: Scared, flattered, honored – all that. Because I'm a private person – which you have to be as a writer, it's not like being a movie star or anything – it's much different from the rest of my life. Here I'm analytical, and I have to talk about things that I don't even think about when I'm doing them. You don't analyze everything you do, you try to tell a good story and make it meaningful, and have bits of humor and pace, but then here you go into another mode. It's like an English teacher mode. But by the end of the day I'll be into the swing of it and it'll be fun.

Statesman: What advice would you give to a young writer trying to start out or get published?

O'Brien: I'd say read a lot. And then read a lot more, and read a lot more. Eventually, if you have any talent, you'll soak up the sound of a good sentence. There are lots of different sentences. You'll soak up what a clumsy sentence is if you read enough of them. You'll know what a clunker sounds like. You'll soak up stories, you'll know what's been done before, and what's melodramatic, etc.

Your taste will slowly become elevat-



Courtesy of Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien, Pulitzer Prize Finalist and author of *The Things They Carried*.

“Peace is a shy thing that doesn't brag about itself. A war let's you know it's there.”

ed. And then the second thing is tenacity. You have to put your butt down and keep it down; you have to be willing to write a whole bunch of bad sentences and bad stories, until you find a good sentence. Then you back up and say, “OK, what's the next good sentence I can write?” You do that until you can see something, you know, like a guy falling in love with someone, or somebody watching his mother die. Until the sentence is as good as the material that you're looking at in your mind's eye.

You have to put in the hours, be kind of a mule. No stories or novels have ever happened without muledom. Talent, yes, you have to have an ear for language, which you can develop by reading. But you can't make good at it without sitting in front of a piece of paper. It's impossible.

You have to be really stubborn. Once you're into the habit of doing it, then you love it. It's like working out every day, it's hard to start but after a month or so, you miss it if you don't do it.