

# My Heroes Can't Always Be Cowboys: The Influence of Popular Culture in *The Nuclear Age*

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The struggle every man faces between being a hero and being a coward undergirds Tim O'Brien's central theme, regardless of his book title. In the United States, an important part of the masculine mystique remains the perceived notion that men must prove their bravery in the face of great danger. They ask themselves, "What would I do if my family were trapped in a burning building? What would I do if a stranger were drowning in a rushing stream? What would I do if I were drafted to fight in a war that I did not believe in? What would I do if . . .?" This internal struggle is intensified in a popular culture where no gray areas of masculine definition exist. Cowboys wear either white hats or black hats. The "good guys" always win, the "bad guys" are blatantly evil, and anyone, anywhere, can tell the difference. The heroes look like movie stars; the cowards are faceless and nameless, unidentified and unnoticed in the credits. There seem few places in our culture for ordinary men. Idealism demands that people make a difference. Bravery and cowardice are concrete, provable traits. Ordinary men simply survive. They never save their families from burning buildings or charge up heavily reinforced bunkers with bullets ringing past their ears. Therefore, these men question where they fit into the American macho mystique. The question haunts Tim O'Brien's characters throughout his works, in which each struggles with the concept of bravery and cowardice without resolution, except in *The Nuclear Age*, where dignity and endurance are offered as acceptable substitutes.

In *The Nuclear Age*, O'Brien's anti-hero, William Cowling, struggles with American culture's concrete definition of bravery and cowardice in the midst of a Cold War era, when the threat of nuclear annihilation is ever present. The influence of popular culture

on O'Brien's Cowling distorts his childhood and pushes him to the brink of insanity, and as an adult, he tries to cope with the increasing threat of nuclear war. That same influence demands that O'Brien's hero demonstrate uncommon valor, preferably in the face of death, to prove his masculinity and to validate his reason for being before he can ultimately receive and wear a white hat.

Understanding William Cowling as a child is essential to understanding William Cowling as an adult. The influence of 1950's pop culture is what the adult Cowling remembers of his childhood: "I was a frightened child" (*Nuclear Age* 10), he says, and adds, "I was a happy kid. . . . Normal, normal. . . . Just a regular childhood in a regular town" (*Nuclear Age* 11). William Cowling grows up in a model June and Ward Cleaver household in Fort Derry, Montana. Everything is very "normal, normal." His "father sold real estate, [his] mother kept house" (*Nuclear Age* 11). As David Halberstam reports in *The Fifties*, "Everyone belonged to the political and economic center, and no one doubted that American values worked and that anyone with even an iota of common sense would want to admire them. In that sense the family sitcoms reflected—and reinforced—much of the social conformity of the period" (509). The new norm was depicted in the black-and-white weekly episodes of the Nelsons, the Cleavers, and the Andersons. No longer could anyone say, "We were poor, but we didn't know it, because everybody we knew was poor too." Firmly and seemingly forever, the American family paradigm was clear-cut, black-and-white, and primetime. Everyone with electricity clearly understood the new normal and tried to replicate it.

Furthermore, the American family, as reflected in television sitcoms, "liked each other, and they tolerated each other's idiosyncrasies" (Halberstam 509). When William Cowling obsesses about nuclear war (concerned about doomsday, radioactivity, and survival), his mother and father give each other an understanding "sitcom" nod and tuck William/Beaver back into bed. All is "normal, normal." William's parents demonstrate no anger, no passion, no grief. They are boring parents, in a boring town, in a boring country. But as William's dad explains, "'Culture's that way,' . . . pointing

east, ‘and . . . civilization’s somewhere over that last ridgeline’ . . . westward” (*Nuclear Age* 13). For the real action and the white hats, “cowboys” go west. The dichotomy of the culture and the proof of a man’s masculinity or heroism were satisfied by the Western movie. The culture could have “normal” families characterized by the Cleavers and still have their masculine heroes depicted in John Wayne movies and Matt Dillon gunfights. Normal was east; heroism was west.

However, the portrayal and the expectation of the 1950’s pop culture Western hero placed the “What if” question squarely in context. As Jane Tompkins points out in *West of Everything*, “The Western plot . . . turns . . . on external conflicts in which men prove their courage to themselves and to the world by facing their own annihilation” (31). Bravery is singularly defined by a gun-toting, fearless, and unmarried man who walks down the middle of Main Street unabashed in the face of his own death and annihilation. Only a coward would not make that walk and willingly die for the sake of his masculine identity. And since the “good guy” always wins, and the “bad guy” always loses (i.e., dies), then bravery becomes juxtaposed with the final judgment.

Yet, for Cowling, annihilation must be replaced with a personally-invented mechanism for survival. William’s father may die with dignity over and over again every summer by playing General Custer in a local performance, but annihilation is damned permanent. If no one else notices the nuclear missiles planted in the corn fields, William is keenly aware of their threat. If no one else takes seriously the fallout drills at school and the Civil Defense Shelters in every major department store, William is preoccupied with the ramifications of not seeking safety, and his mind’s eye can see the results. As Halberstam notes, “the imagination could scarcely comprehend this new destructive power. . . . [that] threatened the very existence of humanity” (29). But Halberstam underestimates the imagination and comprehension in the minds of America’s children. O’Brien, by depicting William, demonstrates the power of the imagination when spiced with education and a steady diet of indoctrination. The Russians are clearly the bad guys in the black

hats with their atomic missiles pointed directly at the US heartland; Americans are the good guys in the white hats with the numbers unstated and placement of retaliatory missiles camouflaged under the guise of national security. The Gunfight at the OK Corral is being played out across hemispheric divides; it is just a question of who will be the fastest draw after the ultimatums are issued. Once again, the media and the culture indoctrinate the American family, and especially its children, with a paranoia that often debilitates William as a child—and when the threat is over, the culture forgets to *un*indoctrinate him. As William’s hometown librarian states, “Frightening business, isn’t it? We tend to forget. I suppose we want to forget” (*Nuclear Age* 25); the librarian’s “We” clearly implies the adults of the Establishment.

But William Cowling, Tim O’Brien, and the other children of the fifties cannot forget the problem for long, even when they want to forget, because their everyday world is constantly threatened by instant annihilation. Despite the heroes of movies and television, William can find “nothing worth dying for,” and for him, nuclear annihilation means no one gets the chance to die over and over again. The threat of bad guys with the power to end the world is not the Custer summer celebration at the fairgrounds with scalps in the punch bowl. The ever-active media and governmental propaganda blitz paint a horrifying picture that includes photos “of people who’d been exposed to radioactivity—hair burned off, bleeding tongues, teeth falling out, skin curled up like charred paper” (*Nuclear Age* 16). No wonder William Cowling questions his parents’ grip on reality. While they sit “watching *I’ve Got a Secret*” in the living room, William rushes to the basement to build his own pencil-covered fallout shelter (*Nuclear Age* 18). O’Brien depicts a “normal” kid trapped in *The Twilight Zone* in this obviously schizophrenic world of nuclear annihilation and *I’ve Got a Secret*. The kid is scared to death and cannot begin to understand how adults can so placidly ignore the impending and very real threat of mass chaos and death. The kid cannot fathom how his parents can watch a game show when they should be seeking to provide safety in the midst of certain nuclear doom.

For William Cowling, there is no real option. He reflects, “I was afraid. For myself, for my prospects as an ordinary human being. . . I could either end up like my ex-buddy, a screwball, or like my dad, a regular guy. No other options” (*Nuclear Age* 34). The options are sitcom perfect. He can end up like Eddie Haskell or Ward Cleaver. His prospects for ever becoming “an ordinary human being” are erased by the image of the “ideal father” juxtaposed against the threat of the “nuclear stuff” (*Nuclear Age* 33–34) which fills his dreams and waking imagination. “If you can’t imagine it, it can’t happen,” he repeats throughout the book. The “nuclear stuff” fills his imagination with vivid reality, while there are no “ideal father” dreams. The six o’clock news, Walter Cronkite, and the Civil Defense remind William that “The world [is]n’t safe” (*Nuclear Age* 35). The primetime families, as well as his own parents, assure him “it’s okay, it’s okay” (*Nuclear Age* 36). And for a while, the dreams disappear and “things [are] fine” (*Nuclear Age* 39).

William Cowling buys into the whole “normal” routine as a seventh- and eighth-grade adolescent. He claims:

I carved out a comfortable slot for myself at the dead center of the Bell-Shaped Curve. I wore blue jeans and sneakers. I played shortstop for the Rural Electric Association Little League team; I batted a smooth .270—not great, but respectable. I was popular. People liked me. At school I pulled down solid grades, A’s and B’s, mostly B’s, which was exactly how I wanted it. I devoted long hours to the practice of a normal smile, a normal posture, a normal way of walking and talking. God knows I worked at it. . . . it was a question of locking in with the small-town conventions, hugging the happy medium. (*Nuclear Age* 39)

For two years, O’Brien’s character does everything according to the perceived pop-culture format. He’s everybody’s perfect little Beaver. His parents are happy, his community is happy, his Little League coach is happy, and his teachers are happy. William flatly states, but “the problem was this: I didn’t fit” (*Nuclear Age* 40). Of course he didn’t fit; no one could possibly maintain that perfect sitcom image for more than thirty primetime minutes.

Yet, somehow William gears down and pulls it off for two years, while conceding he does it at “the most vulnerable time in a kid’s life” (*Nuclear Age* 39). Furthermore, he confesses that “I felt different from all the others” (*Nuclear Age* 40). “Different” is what adolescents are supposed to feel—feeling “different” is normal. But normal in 1960 is not normal—nothing about what was expected by the popular culture was normal. It was all too perfect, too happy, too artificial, too contrived, too mentally healthy. Therefore, only the reader is unsurprised when William Cowling turns into The Lone Ranger—without the silver bullet and minority sidekick, of course. By 1960, however, a new lexicon came to define cultural expectations: how actions look to others. William states, “On the surface it might’ve looked unwholesome . . .” (*Nuclear Age* 40). Despite how his actions make him feel, William, along with the rest of the country, becomes keenly aware of how things look. After all, for the first time in history, we have a generation of people who have been summarily exposed to the perfect paradigm. For the first time in American history, the American people agree in certain and singular terms how everything is supposed to look—and anything else is abnormal. The seventeen-inch measurement tool that had become a nightly ritual for most American families was about to move from the concrete black-and-white into the world of living color.

Emphasizing the increasing importance of television in the nation’s everyday life, O’Brien cleverly demonstrates—by juxtaposing the often-humorous, schizophrenic personal monologue of William with the pressure for normalcy created in the media and carried out in his own household—how perceptually abnormal this kid feels. The author poses the volatile reality of a culture expected to follow a fictional, unrealistic norm—a culture in which everyone expects to live in a split-level house, have two-point-three children, a washer and dryer, and a high-heeled, perfectly coiffed, cookie-baking mother who would never consider working outside the home. Consumerism and personal satisfaction become intertwined in the face of a constant visual reminder of what is expected of every successful American family. Children are expected to play ball, wear

blue jeans and white socks, go on hay rides, make A's and B's, and above all never give their parents any reason for concern or anger. Look out America. William Cowling is growing up!

With a new, young president in the White House in 1960, America presents an east-coast cultural image to the world and a new heroic slogan, the New Frontier—an image that represents an ideal of the culture Americans had spent a decade accepting as the norm because of television sitcoms and Western movies. Kennedy was the first president elected primarily because of his media image—no five-o'clock-shadow, just the handsome war hero with a pretty wife, beautiful children, and money. As William Manchester notes in *The Glory and the Dream*, “for the first time in history the White House had a cultural coordinator” (893). Furthermore, Manchester points out that the Kennedy administration’s foreign policy mistakes in Cuba and later in Vietnam were a result of “confusing image and reality” (893). O’Brien is keenly aware of the conflict between image and reality throughout *The Nuclear Age*. His antihero explains the cultural conflict as “nothing mutinous, not yet. . . Vietnam was still a fairy tale. We were at peace in time of war” (76).

However, the Baby Boomers are restless, and all the Lone Rangers of America are coming of age with the lines between the good guys and the bad buys being drawn in the water between Havana and Miami. With one hundred mile-per-minute nuclear missiles only ninety miles from Miami, William Cowling was not the only United States citizen cowering during October of 1962. Nuclear annihilation seemed imminent for days on end. Kennedy faced Khrushchev in the ultimate TV gunfight, and the American public watched breathlessly as their brave new hero faced down the Russian bad guy during primetime. Khrushchev turned his ships around, and the adult public switched the channel back to Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore, eager to forget the threatening crisis and get back to normal.

The teenage population did not forget so readily. They retreated to their rooms and their radios. They tuned in, turned on, and sang along with Peter, Paul, and Mary’s *If I Had a Hammer*, Franklin’s *Respect*, Streisand’s *People*, Baez’s *Blowin’ In The Wind*, and

Dylan's *Rainy Day Women*. They lined up for Spaghetti Westerns, in which the hero wore a black hat, didn't shave, sing, or have a proper name; they longed to emulate James Bond's adventures and sexual escapades. A generation of television-trained teenagers began their high school careers where the beat went on, and notes of discord rose out of artificial harmony.

William Cowling's high school experience establishes his criteria for dealing with the reality. While describing the brutality of high school to his psychiatrist, Adamson, he proclaims that, in order to deal with "the popularity game, hay rides and dancing lessons and sadism and petty cruelty. . . sometimes you had to turn your back on it, just walk away, ignore the bastards" (*Nuclear Age* 53). Adamson concurs that high school was the "worst experience of [his own] life" (53). As William concludes his therapy sessions, he determines that he is "a normal guy in an abnormal world" (*Nuclear Age* 64). Although O'Brien expects the reader to recognize the humor in this statement, nowhere in the book does the truth ring more true. William Cowling is absolutely "a normal guy in an abnormal world" (64). Yet, William confesses his fears, comprehends the reality of nuclear war, and internalizes the incongruous expectations imposed on a generation that is unhappy with the feelings those demands impose. William and his generation find their voices in a subcultural popular music that croons, "Give me the beat boys, and free my soul, I wanna get lost in your rock and roll and drift away" (Williams). The central adult culture has captured the acceptable visual paradigm and permanently transposed and preserved it on Kinescope; the souls of a generation of Baby Boomers, however, long to be free to discover who they really are.

What was about to take place on college campuses across America was inevitable—thousands of perfect little Cleavers and Andersons began to study, drink, smoke, and copulate, only to discover they all felt the same disenfranchisement from the culture. Many were equally sick of hay rides, dance lessons, and super jocks; many had grown up terrorized by nuclear threat; many had no idea what or whom they believed in; and most had no strong personal identity. They desperately sought meaning and purpose in the midst

of addictive, insatiable consumerism, which played out against a backdrop of Dan Rather's nightly Viet Nam war report. They did not want to fight and die; they wanted to embrace their youth, not a draft number; they wanted the freedom, not conscription; they wanted a Mustang, not an M-16.

William Cowling is the only one of O'Brien's anti-heroes who refuses to be drafted. O'Brien's other principal characters are victims of their own inability to act.<sup>1</sup> They do not join the Army; they are conscripted. They fight a war they believe is morally wrong, but fight rather than embarrass their parents, their neighbors, and society by actively refusing to *not* fight. O'Brien had to write *The Nuclear Age* in order to live out his fantasy of dropping out, copping out, and having "resolution without resolve" (138). The character Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* describes the summer before his induction in his hometown of Worthington, Minnesota:

I felt isolated; I spent a lot of time alone. . . . In the evenings I'd sometimes borrow my father's car and drive aimlessly around town, feeling sorry for myself, thinking about the war . . . and how my life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter. I felt paralyzed. All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out. . . . Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war. . . I imagined myself dead. I imagined myself doing things I could not do—charging an enemy position, taking aim at another human being. (47)

"What would you do?" (*Things* 59) he later asks.

In contrast, Cowling recalls his summer of 1968:

I spent the summer in Fort Derry, a terrifying summer, a split between black and white. I couldn't decide. Like sleepwalking, except I couldn't move, the dynamic was paralyzing.

The war, of course. The world as it clearly was. . . . We are immortal until the very instant of mortality. I imagined dying as Kennedy died,

and as men died at war that summer. . . . During the days I'd drive up and down Main Street in my father's Buick, watching the small-town silhouettes. . . . Then I'd think: What does one do? (*Nuclear Age* 138–139)

Both characters are carried by the dynamics; both react rather than respond. One secretly carries his draft notice in his wallet, seriously contemplates running to Canada, cannot bear the shame that act carries, openly cries, and then reports for duty as he is told. The other openly discusses running and considers the shame, and when a woman he does not love calls and commands him to “Run,” he does as he is told. However, if “stories can save us,” as the narrator of *The Things They Carried* asserts, O'Brien must act out this story on paper to understand which reaction most validates the new paradigm of hero or coward. If a man is not a hero, then, by inference, he must be a coward. With no medals, no citations, no uncommon valor, men must therefore, by deductive reasoning, all be cowards. In every instance, O'Brien proves his anti-hero's cowardice, beyond cultural implications, but within realistic philosophical arguments. William Cowling is no exception.

Underground in Key West, William explains his cohorts' actions: “They knew the risks, they indulged in idealism. There was evil at large. Vietnam: the word itself has become a cliché, an eye-glazer, but back then we recognized evil” (*Nuclear Age* 150). William, however, does not engage in idealism with his friends. Because he is an educated, thinking man, the world and especially the war present an unending progression of questions for William, questions that produce gray areas without heroes or cowards. William wonders, “Whose interests were at stake?” in Vietnam (*Nuclear Age* 151). He concludes,

All those complexities and ambiguities, issues of history, issues of law and principle—they've vanished. A stack of tired old platitudes: The war could've been won, the war was ill conceived, the war was an aberration, the war was hell. Vietnam, it wasn't evil, it was madness, and we are all innocent by reason of temporary insanity. And now it's dropout time . . . . (*Nuclear Age* 151)

These are not the words of a coward. These are the rational conclusions of a man who is aware of current events, who is educated to ask the right questions and to question the authority of anyone who would lead the uneducated to blindly carry out previously unquestioned commands.

Additionally William's "perfect father," a symbol for those firmly entrenched in The Establishment," uncharacteristically questions the reasons for the war. He asks, "What the hell are we fighting for?" (*Nuclear Age* 160). William concludes that Vietnam means only "certain blood [for] uncertain reasons" (160); and he "did not want to die. . . . It wasn't cowardice, exactly . . . and it wasn't courage. . . . Certain blood [for] uncertain reasons, but finally you have to choose" (160). When William chooses to board a plane for Key West, the thinking, educated man has determined he is "running because [he] couldn't envision any other way, because the dangers exceeded the reach of [his] imagination" (*Nuclear Age* 170). He explains, "Safety. . . . Nothing else. Not honor, not conscience. All I wanted for myself was a place to ride out the bad times. 'It isn't cowardice . . . it's my life'" (170).

Sarah encourages and consoles William in his decision to go underground. William recalls, "Quietly, without sarcasm, she said she was proud of me. I'd done the proper thing. She knew how difficult it was, she knew about the pain. 'We all want to be heroes,' she said one afternoon. 'That's the constant. Nobody wants a bad rep. Ducking out, the big blush, I know. But I'll tell you a true fact—you can't die of embarrassment. Doesn't happen that way'" (*Nuclear Age* 184). Like Tim in *The Things They Carried*, William wants "to give" his father "the son he deserved" (*Nuclear Age* 42). The only difference in the mindsets of the two characters resides in the way each chooses to respond to "certain blood, uncertain reasons" (*Nuclear Age* 160). In each case, O'Brien's characters are "tough people. Scared, a little dazed, but [they] followed the script" (*Nuclear Age* 165). It is particularly noteworthy that each of the two men follow one of the only two alternative scripts available at the time. As O'Brien's character William Cowling so adroitly explains to his psychiatrist, "'I'm no expert . . . But the first thing is to take a

good look at yourself. Stop covering up. Stop pretending . . . . I've had some experience with this sadness stuff, and there's one thing I know for sure. Self-deception, that's the killer. You can't get well if you don't admit you're sick" (*Nuclear Age* 58–59).

Heroes, by definition, do not think; they act. If they take the time to think about their actions, the opportunity will pass. They act without regard for their own lives. They rush into a burning building, dive into a swirling stream, or race across a battlefield in the face of insurmountable odds. They do not think; they act. And William cannot be a hero. Therefore, he digs a hole, a pit, a place for him and his family to hide from the threat of nuclear annihilation, a personal hell, a personal refuge, based on the fear of horrific death; it becomes his symbolic grave to cover his lack of courage and his impassioned effort to disguise his unwillingness to capitulate to societal norms, while buying into its fears. The very culture that expects him to march across a mined rice paddy has educated him to be a thinking man. However, this same culture has offered no alternative title for the area of activity that lies between courage and cowardice.

## Note

1. In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin ultimately realizes “the war was still a war, and he was still a soldier. He hadn't run. The issue was courage, and courage was will power, and this was his failing. . . . What remained were possibilities. With courage it might have been done” (288–89). O'Brien offers the reader a footnote to John Wade's life near the close of *In the Lake of the Woods*: “there is no end, happy or otherwise. Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts, such as they are, finally spin off into the void of things missing, the inconclusiveness of conclusion. . . . Who are we? Where do we go? . . . There is no tidiness. Blame it on the human heart. One way or another, it seems, we all perform vanishing tricks . . . . Our whereabouts are uncertain” (304). John Wade's war persona, Sorcerer, admits “Secrecy was the war. A guy would do something very brave—charge a bunker, maybe, or stand up tall under fire—and afterward everyone would look away and stay quiet for a while, then somebody would say, ‘How the fuck'd you do that?’ and the brave guy would blink and shake his head, because he didn't know,

because it was one of those incredible secrets inside him” (*Lake of the Woods* 73). As O’Brien (O’Brien’s narrator in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*) struggles with whether to run away from his induction notice, he tells his friends that he will “let time decide” (26). And after his inability to embarrass his “prairie” roots by not serving “the people on the town’s draft board [who] were calling [him] to duty, smiling so nicely” (*If I Die* 26), he returns to his roots with the experienced knowledge that “Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery is” (*If I Die* 31). When Tim O’Brien (the character) in *The Things They Carried* struggles with his impending induction, he reasons, “All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. Certainly that was my conviction back in the summer of 1968 . . . . (43). However, when faced with the reality of running to Canada or going to war, Tim decides, “I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to” (*Things* 62). When he returns from Vietnam, he is no closer to a satisfying coward/hero theory. He concludes, “I survived, but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war” (*Things* 63). O’Brien’s fictional characters think, but ultimately, cultural pressures, parental expectations, and time move the characters to “[follow] the script” (*Nuclear Age* 165).

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