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Eden Prairie Reads event focuses on Vietnam War

BY LYN JERDE - SUN NEWSPAPERS

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Question No. 1 in the readers' guide for Tim O'Brien's semi-autobiographical novel titled "The Things They Carried" addresses the multiple layers of meaning in the title:

"Not all the things carried by the men of the platoon are physical. What are some of the emotional burdens that they carry?"

Since "The Things They Carried" was chosen last spring as the fourth selection for the Eden Prairie Reads community reading program, Eden Prairie residents have been invited to read the book, by a Minnesota-born author, about one infantry company's experiences during the Vietnam War.

On Oct. 23, community members are invited to gather to discuss the book, and to hear from local Vietnam veterans.

The free event begins with facilitated small-group discussions of the book at 6 p.m. at St. Andrew Lutheran Church, 13600 Technology Drive.

At about 6:45 p.m., a panel discussed, emceed by Eden Prairie City Manager Scott Neal, will feature the perspectives of four Eden Prairie veterans of the Vietnam War.

According to Eden Prairie Reads planner Karen Casey, panelists scheduled to participate include:

- Tim Kasprowicz, an Eden Prairie High School technology education teacher who was in the Army.
- Lou Ellingson, who served on a Swift boat with the Navy.
- Bob Grant, who was in the Marines.
- Wes Dunsmore, who was in the Marines infantry.

The event also will include a presentation about the Eden Prairie Veterans Memorial, which will be built in Purgatory Creek Park.

Also planned is a presentation by Lynn Elling, a Twin Cities World War II veteran who is founder of World Citizen Inc., a nonprofit organization that works with educators to promote peace.

The theme of war and peace will be emphasize in a pair of closing songs offered by third-graders from Christi Kaehn's classroom at Cedar Ridge Elementary School - "We Appreciate You" (sung for the veterans in the audience) and "Everybody Say Peace" (sung in multiple languages).

Casey noted that this is the first Eden Prairie Reads event that did not include a visit from the author of the selected book. Scheduling and financial challenges prevented O'Brien - who is now a visiting professor in the creative writing program at Southwest Texas State University - from coming to Eden Prairie.

O'Brien was born in Austin, Minn., and raised in Worthington, Minn. His tour of duty in Vietnam as an infantry foot soldier lasted from 1969 to 1970.

A chapter in "The Things They Carried" offers an account of O'Brien's struggle as to whether he should answer his draft notice or flee to Canada. His opposition to this war and his lifelong sense of duty to his country were at war with each other.

O'Brien has written a memoir titled "If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home."

But "The Things They Carried" is a work of fiction, not a memoir.

Some of the discussion questions invite readers to reflect on the truths that can emerge from fiction. For example:

"What does [O'Brien] mean when he writes of one story: 'This is a true story that never happened?'"

Next book unveiled

At the Oct. 23 Eden Prairie Reads event at St. Andrew Lutheran Church, there will be display tables from which "The Things They Carried" and other works by author Tim O'Brien will be offered for sale.

Also for sale: The next Eden Prairie Reads selection, and other works by its author.

Jeanne Zetah of Eden Prairie Reads said the title of the next book - the fifth Eden Prairie Reads selection since the program began in 2004 - won't be publicly disclosed until the Oct. 23 event.

But this much is known:

- At least for this selection, Eden Prairie Reads will hold events not in the fall, but early in the year, in conjunction with "I Love to Read Month" in February.
- The author, like the authors of all previous Eden Prairie Reads selections, has ties to this area.
- The author has scheduled an Eden Prairie visit for March 4.
- For the first time, Eden Prairie Reads will include activities aimed at children, from preschool age to third grade. Eden Prairie Reads got a grant from Target for children's programs, which are in the process of being planned.
- Anyone who wants to learn more, or who wants to volunteer to help with any Eden Prairie Reads programming, may find up-to-date information at www.epreads.org.

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