Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story” Reading Questions

1.) Who does Rat Kiley write a letter to?

2.) What sort of things does Rat write about his friend – Curt Lemon?

3.) What happens when he sends the letter?

4.) List at least four elements of a “true war story”.
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5.) In a true war story, why is it hard to separate what happened and what seemed to happen?

6.) Why can a true war story not be believed?

7.) What does Rat Kiley do to a baby buffalo? How do you explain his actions?

8.) The narrator quotes the familiar “war is hell,” but adds that it is “not the half of it.” What does he mean?
9.) Why does the woman cry over the buffalo but like the grenade story? What is the deeper meaning of his saying that she wasn’t listening?

10.) What does the narrator mean by saying that the story was a love story and that stories are “never about war”?

11.) O’Brien says that “none of it happened. None of it. And even if it did happen, it didn’t happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Bantangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy” If O’Brien is not trying to communicate historical fact, what is he trying to communicate? Why change the details? What kind of truth is he trying to relate, and why is the truth set apart from historical truth? Is it okay that this “true” war story may or may not be entirely true?