



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## **This Boy's Life**

by Tobias Wolff



# Table of Contents

## This Boy's Life

About the Book .....	3
About the Author .....	4
Discussion Questions.....	5
Credits .....	6

### Preface

Winner of a 2014 National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama, Tobias Wolff is a novelist, memoirist, short story writer, Vietnam veteran, Stanford professor, family man and a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellow. His memoir, *This Boy's Life* (Grove Press, 1989), tells the story of his early days in the 1950s—moving with his mother from Florida to Utah to Washington state—and his rough years as a young adult at the hands of an abusive stepfather in a small town north of Seattle. It was made into a 1993 film starring a young Leonardo DiCaprio. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* describes the memoir "as grim and eerie as *Great Expectations*, as surreal and cruel as *The Painted Bird*, as comic and transcendent as *Huckleberry Finn*." "So absolutely clear and hypnotic," says *The New York Times*, "that a reader wants to take it apart and find some simple way to describe why it works so beautifully." Says *The Independent*, "Tobias Wolff writes like a man winning his way towards truth."

"When we are green, still half-created, we believe that our dreams are rights, that the world is disposed to act in our best interests."

### What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



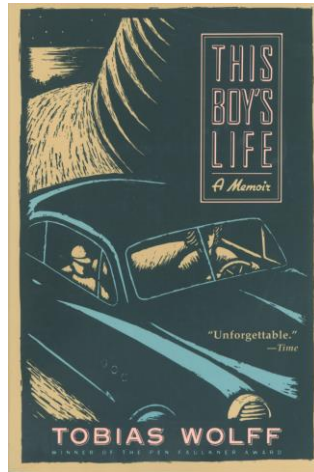
# About the Book

"[This] extraordinary memoir is so beautifully written that we not only root for the kid Wolff remembers, but we also are moved by the universality of his experience." — San Francisco Chronicle

Tobias Wolff's memoir, *This Boy's Life* (Grove Press, 1989), is a story about a mother and son trying to survive in 1950s America. Separated from his father and brother and without good male role models, Wolff struggles with his identity and self-respect when his mother moves the two of them across the country. They eventually settle in northern Washington where Wolff finds himself in a battle of wills with a hostile stepfather. Wolff's various schemes—running away to Alaska, forging checks, and stealing cars—lead to an act of self-invention that releases him into a new world of possibility. "Wolff writes in language that is lyrical without embellishment, defines his characters with exact strokes and perfectly pitched voices, [and] creates suspense around ordinary events, locating the deep mystery within them" (*The Los Angeles Times Book Review*).

When Wolff is ten years old, his mother, Rosemary, decides to move them from Florida to Utah, caught up in the desire to strike it rich digging for uranium. When that doesn't work out, they move to Seattle where Wolff finds an outlet for his frustrations through shoplifting, drinking, breaking windows, and writing obscenities in public places. Rosemary, meanwhile, meets Dwight, a man from the town of Chinook, 70 miles north, who succeeds in persuading her to marry him. Wolff spends the rest of his childhood with his mother and Dwight in Chinook, enduring Dwight's petty meanness and cruel verbal and physical abuses. In an attempt to escape Dwight's relentless berating, Wolff joins the Boy Scouts, but Dwight makes himself an assistant scoutmaster. Wolff becomes friends with a boy in his school, Arthur Gayle, but Dwight encourages Wolff to fight Arthur, calling him a "sissy." The high school crowd Wolff eventually joins is far from upstanding. "I grew up in a world where violence was all too common—not deadly violence, so much, but beating, bullying, and threats—certainly in relations between boys, and between men, and often between men and women," Wolff told *The Paris Review*.

Wolff lives much of his adolescence in his imagination, dreaming up ways to escape his reality. He finally does escape by getting accepted to a prestigious school on the east coast based on fictitious claims that he was a top



student, star athlete, and model citizen. The last time he sees Dwight is when Dwight follows Wolff and his mother to Washington, D.C. and tries to strangle his mother. He was "standing in a snowstorm, with policemen holding his arms," said Wolff. "My mother had bruises on her throat for weeks afterwards. They found a knife that he'd thrown into the hedge" (*The Guardian*). When *This Boy's Life* came out in 1989, Dwight was still alive, though very ill. "One of my stepsisters called me in a fury and said that her daughter had read aloud *This Boy's Life* to Dwight while he was lying in bed, and he was so hurt by it," said Wolff. "I think maybe she should have looked at it first" (*The Guardian*).

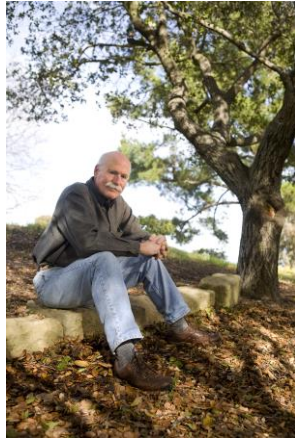
Wolff didn't set out to publish a memoir. He was more interested in recording memories "so that my children would know how I grew up," he says. "They were raised in an academic atmosphere, and my mother by that time was a very proper old lady" (*The Guardian*). "As I started getting these memories down, they took over," he said. "Writers wait for that moment when the material starts to carry them. It happens more rarely than one wants to think, and you're a fool if you don't give in to it when it does" (*The Paris Review*).

"Wolff writes in language that is lyrical without embellishment, defines his characters with exact strokes and perfectly pitched voices, [and] creates suspense around ordinary events, locating the deep mystery within them," writes *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*. *This Boy's Life* was made into a 1993 film of the same name directed by Michael Caton-Jones and starring a young Leonardo DiCaprio as Wolff, Robert De Niro as Dwight, and Ellen Barkin as Wolff's mother. It's a story that resonates in more than one medium. "We live by stories," Wolff told *The Paris Review*. "It's the principle by which we organize our experience and thus derive our sense of who we are."

# About the Author

## Tobias Wolff (b. 1945)

"Wolff's writing makes us recognize those aspects of ourselves that are hardest to acknowledge: our selfishness, our pride, our cowardice. But he also brings to light our potential for self-understanding and compassion." — *The Believer*



Tobias Wolff  
(photo: Jennifer Hale)

Tobias Jonathan Ansell Wolff was born in Birmingham, Alabama. His father was an aeronautical engineer, but also a pathological liar and con artist according to the 1979 memoir *The Duke of Deception* (Random House, 1979), written by Wolff's older brother, Geoffrey. As a result of one of these many deceptions, Wolff, who was raised a Catholic, did not discover until adulthood that his father was Jewish. His mother was a waitress and secretary known for her humor and determination. "If I'd known both my sons were going to be writers, I might have behaved differently," she once joked to Wolff (*The Guardian*).

Wolff's parents separated when he was young. His brother—who was seven and a half years older than Wolff—lived with his father; Wolff was raised by his mother in Florida, Utah, and Washington state. At the age of 10, Wolff changed his name to "Jack" after the author Jack London. He was an avid reader, idolizing writers like London, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and Anton Chekhov. He also loved writing stories. "I used to write them for friends of mine, to turn in for extra credit," he told *The Missouri Review*. "I never really made the connection between the things I read and the writing I was doing until I was a freshman in high school, when a friend of mine said to me one day, 'You should be a writer,' and the idea stuck."

Eager to escape rural Washington and life with his stepfather—experiences he recounts in his memoir *This Boy's Life* (Grove Press, 1989)—he won a scholarship to the Hill School, a prestigious academy in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. He loved the school but struggled there and was ultimately expelled because of failing grades in math. His first novel, *Old School* (Knopf, 2003), is based on these experiences. He told *The Paris Review* that the school granted him his diploma in 1990, "but only after the headmaster made sure to read a selection of Wolff's fictitious letters of recommendation to that year's commencement audience."

After working briefly on a ship, Wolff joined the U.S. Army in 1964. He spent a year learning Vietnamese, and then served in Vietnam as a paratrooper. Out of these experiences came his second memoir, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (Knopf, 1994), which was a finalist for the National Book Award. After his discharge, he enrolled in Hertford College of Oxford University, where he earned a degree in English. In 1975, he earned a master's degree in English from Stanford University, where he was also awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing. In the meantime, he did stints as a waiter, night watchman, high school teacher at a Catholic school for boys, and reporter for *The Washington Post* during Watergate. "My desk was right next to Carl Bernstein's, and he was showing me some of the unbelievable stuff he and Woodward were coming up with. It was very exciting" (*Boston Review*).

Wolff taught at Syracuse University in New York from 1980 to 1997. The novelist Richard Ford and the short-story writer Raymond Carver were among his friends and colleagues. Since 1997, Wolff has taught English and creative writing at Stanford University, where he holds the Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods professorship in the School of Humanities and Sciences. "I'd always thought that as soon as I made enough money to give up teaching and just write, I would," Wolff told the *Boston Review*. "But I'd become addicted to the company of writers and people who cared about learning and literature. I couldn't live like Salinger, for example, and shut myself up alone. I needed that intellectual friction, and I liked the sense of helping younger people along in their work." Known for his short story collections as well as his novels and memoirs, Wolff has received such honors as the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Rea Award for the Short Story, three O. Henry Prizes, two National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellowships, and a 2014 National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama.

Wolff has been married to his wife since 1975. They have two sons and a daughter. "I find that all the best things in my life have come about precisely through the things that hold me in place: family, work, routine, everything that contradicts my old idea of the good life," Wolff told *The Paris Review*. "It's the gravity of daily obligations and habit, the connections you have to your friends and your work, your family, your place, even the compromises that are required of you to get through this life. The compromises don't diminish us, they humanize us."

# Discussion Questions

1. Begin the discussion by considering the book's epigraphs: "The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is, no one has yet discovered."—Oscar Wilde. "He who fears corruption fears life."—Saul Alinsky. Why did the author choose these quotes? Do you think they fit the themes explored in *This Boy's Life*? Describe the primary pose assumed by each character. Is there tension between these poses and those of other "corrupt" ones that surface?
2. Jack's tongue becomes so tied at his first confession that he finds his voice only by borrowing the sins of Sister James. Why is Jack unable to confess his real sins? The father and Sister James are satisfied, even proud of Jack, when he completes the ritual. Do you think Jack is absolved for his sins even though he lied? To the narrator, in the eyes of the church, is the act more important than the truth behind the confession?
3. Extend the idea from the last question to the act of writing a memoir: In the introduction the author attests that he tried to "tell a truthful story." Do you think the morals and themes of the memoir remain intact even if they don't always adhere to the facts?
4. When Rosemary asks if Dwight and Jack are getting along, Jack lies: "I said we were. He was in the living room with me, painting some chairs, but I probably would have given the same answer if I'd been alone." Why can't he tell his mother about Dwight? Do you think his reluctance stems from fear? What else might make Jack protect Dwight's early, nice-guy façade? Do you think this protective behavior is positive or negative?
5. Alienation defined much of Jack's childhood, in part because of his fractured family. Once settled in Chinook, his mother, Rosemary, attempts to recreate a "real" family. Jack writes, "But our failure was ordained, because the real family we set out to imitate does not exist in nature." Do you agree with this? Do you think the perfect family is a myth? What expectations does Jack have of his family?
6. The memoir is set mostly in rural Washington, high in the forested mountains. The author uses the weather common to this area as a metaphor for Dwight's badgering: "I experienced it as more bad weather to get through, not biting, just close and dim and heavy." How else does the stark Northwestern landscape enter and influence the narrative? Contrast the depiction of exterior spaces with that of the white interior one in which the family lives. What does Dwight's obsession with painting everything white, including the tree outside, suggest about his personality?
7. The residual influence of fathers plays a prominent role in the story, hinging on brief glimpses of Rosemary's father, referred to as Daddy, and the late emergence of Jack's biological father from back East. Compare the influence of these fathers—one violent, the other irresponsible—on their children. How do Rosemary's and Jack's behaviors reveal the kind of interaction they had with their fathers? Which father do you think left a more permanent "mark" on his child?
8. "But what I liked best about the Handbook was its voice, the bluff hail-fellow language by which it tried to make being a good boy seem adventurous, even romantic. The Scout spirit was traced to King Arthur's Round Table." What does this passage reveal about the imaginative space in which Jack lives? Discuss how this relates to his ability, later in the story, to invent his own persona.
9. When Jack is accused of scrawling obscene graffiti on the bathroom wall at school, we are introduced to the vice-principal and principal, men whose disciplinary approaches radically differ. Compare these two authority figures with the two father figures in Jack's life—Rosemary's first boyfriend, Roy, and her new husband, Dwight. Is there any correlation? About the principal, Jack writes, "He wore his weakness in a way that excited belligerence and cruelty." How does this relate to Jack's concept of what a man should be? How is Jack's original impression of Dwight turned upside down?
10. Pop culture references are used carefully in the text. We discover, for instance, that Jack and his friends watched *The Mickey Mouse Club*, and that he and his mother watched *The Untouchables*. What other pop culture references are used? To give the reader a sense of place and time, what, besides pop culture, does the author refer to? Did the story seem anchored in the 1950s or did it evince a sense of timelessness?
11. Leaving Seattle, Jack and Chuck become giddy because, as Jack puts it, "We were rubes, after all, and for a rube the whole point of a trip to the city is the moment of leaving it." More frequently, an intelligent, disaffected youth runs to the city to get

away. Yet Jack doesn't dream of blending into the crowd of an urban center—his one serious plan of escape is to Alaska. Why is Jack's sense of freedom so connected to open spaces?

12. Jack's botched attempt to run away to Alaska may be one of the more heart-wrenching episodes in the narrative. Why does Jack disregard the urging of his friend Arthur at the Gathering of the Tribes? Why do you think Jack is unable to carry out his plan? Discuss the conflict between Jack's desire for freedom and his desire to belong. Compare this incident to when Jack nearly gets caught writing a bad check at the corner drugstore. How does Jack regain his composure?
13. After the boys get caught siphoning gasoline from the Welches, they blame it on drinking. "Mr. Bolger nodded, and I understood that this was in our favor, so great was his faith in the power of alcohol to transform a person." Keeping Jack's encounters with his stepfather in mind, do you think the author's musing was intended as ironic? Should the boys be held less accountable for their actions when drinking? What about Dwight's actions?
14. Guns are a constant presence in Jack's life. Trace the arc of guns throughout the memoir, beginning with Jack's initial exposure with Roy and ending with his stealing and selling the guns at the pawnshop in Seattle. Does Jack's attachment to guns affect his behavior? Who, if anyone, dissuades Jack from gun use? Do you think Jack displayed any transformation or development by getting rid of the stolen guns?
15. When applying to prep schools, Jack writes all of his own letters of recommendation and transcripts. He justifies this by suggesting that only he knows the truth about himself. Do you think this assertion applies to everyone? When accepted at Hill, did you consider this a turning point in Jack's life?
16. As a young child Jack plays a game in which he is an imaginary sniper firing at people who held an "absurd and innocent belief that they were safe." As a teenager Jack goes to the Welches after his theft: "It had to make them feel small and alone, knowing this—that was the harm we had done. I understood some of this and felt the rest." Discuss the significance of these two disclosures by the author.

## Credits

*This Boy's Life* discussion questions provided courtesy of Grove Atlantic.

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