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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Old School

by Tobias Wolff



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Preface

Tobias Wolff's *Old School* is the story of an ambitious, idealistic, and insecure teenager who makes a serious mistake and eventually inherits the consequences. Wolff's unnamed narrator seems so very real that it is hard at times to remember that the book is fiction. The gripping plot has the unpredictability of real life—by turns funny, alarming, satiric, and sad—as well as the moral weight of lived experience. With writers like Tobias Wolff at work it's easy to be optimistic about the future of American literature.

“There is a need in us for exactly what literature can give, which is a sense of who we are... a sense of the workings of what we used to call the soul.”



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

Introduction to the Book

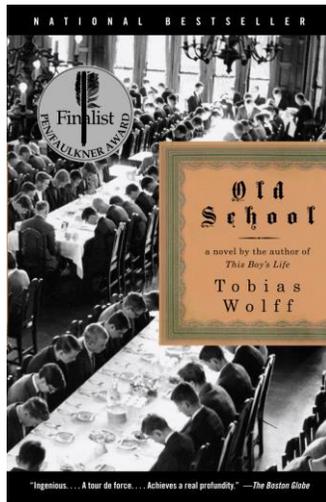
It is November 1960, and the unnamed narrator of Tobias Wolff's *Old School* (2003) is in his final year at an elite Eastern prep school. Proud of his independence but trying to fit in and advance himself, he conceals the fact that his ancestry is partly Jewish. Eventually, he—and we—discover that almost everyone on campus has some closely guarded secrets.

Every year, the school invites three famous writers to visit and give a public talk. In anticipation of these visits, senior students submit their own poems or stories to a competition, and the author of the winning submission is granted a private interview with the writer. One of the novel's most intriguing elements is the presentation of these writers—Robert Frost, Ayn Rand, and Ernest Hemingway—and its shrewd, penetrating assessment of their works and personalities.

The lives of the narrator and his friends revolve around these visits, and the competitions produce pressures and strains in their relationships, raising issues of honesty and self-deception. In his zeal to win an audience with his idol, Hemingway, the narrator will plagiarize someone else's work, an action with profound consequences—and not for him alone. In the end, we find out what he has made of his life many years later, and what has happened in the lives of some classmates and teachers. A surprising final chapter enriches our understanding of the novel's deepest meanings.

Another of *Old School's* many pleasures is the way it conveys the significance of literature to our lives, raising fundamental questions of who we are and how we live. As one of the English teachers says, "One could not live in a world without stories... Without stories one would hardly know what world one was in."

The unsparing but sympathetic insight of Tobias Wolff's acclaimed short stories, the emotional honesty and directness of his classic memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), and the precise, elegant craftsmanship that characterizes both his fiction and nonfiction—all these qualities come together to make *Old School* one of Wolff's most satisfying books.



Major Characters in the Book

The Narrator

An outsider in the cloistered East Coast world of the prep school he attends, *Old School's* unnamed narrator wants desperately to belong. His literary ambitions will bring him the distinction he craves, but in a very different way from what he had imagined.

Bill White

Bill is the narrator's roommate. Along with their passion for writing, the two boys share the unspoken secret of their Jewish heritage. Bill has another secret, one that haunts him more and more throughout the novel.

Jeff Purcell

Another classmate and friend of the narrator's, he has a privileged, upper-class background. Proud, stubborn, and frequently contemptuous of everything and everyone, he nonetheless has a fundamental core of decency and generosity of spirit.

Robert Ramsey

One of the English teachers, Mr. Ramsey is disliked by many of his students. However, by the end of the novel the narrator sees him as compassionate and wise.

Susan Friedman

Susan is the author of the story that the narrator plagiarizes. When he finally meets her, he finds her to be "an extraordinary person," and she shows him a very different perspective on some of the things most important to him.

Dean Makepeace

A "regal but benign" figure to the narrator, the Dean seems remote and assured. But his personal crisis of integrity underscores some of the novel's deepest themes.

Three of the most famous American writers of the twentieth century appear, directly or indirectly, as characters in *Old School*:

Though born in San Francisco, **Robert Frost** (1874–1963) is forever associated with New England, the setting for most of his life and work. Quietly dazzling in their technical perfection, his enormously popular poems, such as "Mending Wall" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," subtly explore the depths of nature and humanity.

Russian-born **Ayn Rand** (1905–1982) was the controversial author of a number of philosophical works and two bestselling novels, *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Her writings expound her philosophy of Objectivism, which emphasizes rationality and self-interest. It also rejects religion, altruism, and all forms of social collectivism.

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) was arguably the most influential American novelist and short-story writer of the twentieth century. Renowned for their unique style, such masterpieces as *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) brilliantly evoke the physical world and the experience of the senses, and stress themes of courage, stoicism, and the need to be true to oneself.

Plagiarism

The narrator of *Old School* is found to have won the interview with Ernest Hemingway by submitting someone else's short story as his own work. This act of plagiarism is met with dismay and anger by the school's administration and sets in motion a chain of events that has a significant effect on the lives of more than one character. To understand the full importance of this situation in the novel, one must have a clear awareness of what plagiarism is and why it is such a serious matter.

Anyone can recognize the flagrant dishonesty involved in passing off as one's own work something in fact written by someone else. Most of us realize that a piece of writing—whether imaginative or intellectual—is a form of property, and that its owner/creator is entitled to whatever credit and profits his or her efforts and talents might generate.

Yet it is all too easy, when copying snippets of someone else's ideas and even someone else's very words, to succumb—as the narrator of *Old School* does—to the notion that we have somehow made them our own, that mere appropriation is a form of authorship. Modern technology has made this even easier. Instantaneous access to the infinite amount of material available on the Internet creates the impression that ideas and words are all just there for the taking, especially when all one needs to do is highlight, copy, and paste.

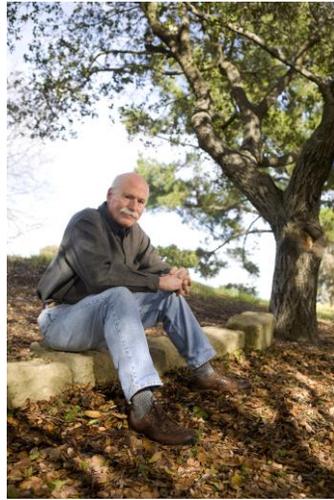
But theft is still theft and fraud is still fraud, no matter the scale. Anyone who uses another's thoughts without proper attribution to the source has stolen that person's intellectual property. Even when proper attribution has been given, using the actual wording of the source material without identifying it as direct quotation is perpetrating a fraud.

Teachers are also upset when their students appropriate the work of others because such an act makes a disturbing statement about the offender's values. If those who would never dream of stealing another's belongings have no compunction about taking someone else's written work, they are saying—whether they realize it or not—that they have less respect for ideas and how they are expressed than for material possessions.

About the Author

Tobias Wolff (b. 1945)

Tobias Jonathan Ansell Wolff was born on June 19, 1945, in Birmingham, Alabama. His father, Arthur, was an aeronautical engineer but also a pathological liar and supreme con artist, as detailed in the 1979 memoir *The Duke of Deception*, by Tobias's older brother, Geoffrey. As a result of one of these many deceptions, Tobias, who was raised and remains a Catholic, did not discover until adulthood that his father was Jewish. His mother, Rosemary Loftus Wolff, a waitress and secretary, was a woman of spirit, resilience, and great intelligence, who met the many reverses in her life with humor and determination.



Tobias Wolff. Photo by Jennifer Hale.

Wolff's parents separated when he was very young. He was raised by his mother in Florida, Utah, and Washington state. Eager to escape rural Washington and life with his mother's second husband (experiences vividly recounted in his memoir *This Boy's Life*), he won a scholarship to the Hill School, a prestigious academy in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. He loved the school but struggled because of his poor academic background. Ultimately, he was expelled because of failing grades in math.

In 1964, Wolff joined the U.S. Army. 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* (1994). After his discharge in 1968, he enrolled in Hertford College of Oxford University, where he earned a degree in English in 1972. 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.

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. Among his honors are the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Rea Award for the Short Story, and three O. Henry Awards. In 2015, Wolff received the National Medal of Arts.

Tobias Wolff married Catherine Spohn, a social worker, in 1975. They have two sons and a daughter.

An Interview with Tobias Wolff

On January 5, 2008, Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Tobias Wolff at his office at Stanford University. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Dana Gioia: Would you characterize *Old School* as an autobiographical novel in any sense?

Tobias Wolff: The events of the novel are themselves, to some extent, autobiographical, in that as a boy of that age I was in such a school. The school that I went to was like this one, a very literary place. Edmund Wilson had gone there, and I heard Robert Frost there. There was a great sense of excitement, always, around the visits of these writers, around the literary magazine, about trying to get stories published or even to get on the editorial board. In some schools, of course, it would be the football team, and football was no small thing at this school either. So my somewhat vague ambition of being a writer really became solidified there. The actual events of my time there would not have lent themselves to a memoir. I was certainly aware in bringing this forward in this voice, in this situation, that a lot of readers familiar with either or both of my memoirs would make assumptions about this being, in fact, a memoir disguised as a novel. And I really didn't mind that.

DG: As a fiction writer you've been most associated with the short story. What for you, imaginatively or creatively, are the differences between writing a short story and writing a novel?

TW: When you write a short story you at least have some confidence you're going to be able to finish it! From the time I first put words to page on this book and the time *Old School* actually was published, it was five-and-a-half years. Aesthetically I can't say that I find the experience that much different—the kind of pressure you put on yourself to get the right voice, to write the sentence perfectly, to rewrite, to rewrite, to rewrite—all that is similar. Really, in each case it's mainly going to the desk every day. I often am quite mystified about what I'm going to do when I sit down. And the work teaches me how to write it as I go. My first drafts would really make you wonder, if you saw them, why I ever chose this line of work. Revision is crucial to my work.

DG: One of the strokes of genius in *Old School* is that at the very end, just when you think the story's over, it continues with a twist in another voice. Did you have this coda in mind when you began the book?

TW: No, but it was important, I think, because although the narrator talks about writing, we never really see him writing anything, and we don't get any of his stories. He's always talking about telling other people's stories and telling us what this friend wrote and what that friend wrote, but where's his story? Finally he tells a story. He is, after all, a writer.

DG: Do you have any thoughts on the human purposes of fiction?

TW: Fiction gives us a place to stand outside ourselves and see our lives somehow being carried on, to see the form that our lives take in some apprehensible way. Most of the time, experience washes over us moment by moment, in a way that makes it difficult to discern the form in lives—the consequences that choices have that will only appear years later, in many cases. Fiction shows us those things in a kind of apprehensible form and something we can comprehend, and see, and actually feel. We kind of see our lives almost acted out in front of us in miniature. And that's both exciting and also often very chastening, I think.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Tobias Wolff

1940s

- 1943: Robert Frost wins Pulitzer Prize for poetry and Ayn Rand publishes *The Fountainhead*.
- 1945: Tobias Wolff is born on June 19 in Birmingham, Alabama.
- 1945: World War II ends in August.
- Viet Minh (the Vietnamese liberation movement) declares independence from France in 1945; French military forces resist the revolt in 1946, beginning an eight-year conflict.

1950s

- Wolff, his mother, and his stepfather live in Washington State.
- 1954: Ernest Hemingway wins the Nobel Prize in Literature.
- 1954: The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu; Vietnam is partitioned into North and South Vietnam.

1960s

- John F. Kennedy elected U.S. President in 1960; assassinated on November 22, 1963.
- Ernest Hemingway dies in 1961. Robert Frost dies in 1963.

1970s

- 1973: The last U.S. combat troops withdraw from Vietnam.
- 1975: Wolff earns a master's degree, marries, and publishes his first book.
- 1975: Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese.

1980s

- Wolff teaches at Syracuse University; he publishes a novella, two collections of stories, and his memoir *This Boy's Life*.

- 1982: Ground is broken for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.
- 1982: Ayn Rand dies.

1990s

- Wolff begins teaching at Stanford; publishes his Vietnam memoir and his third volume of short stories.
- 1993: The film version of *This Boy's Life*, starring Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Ellen Barkin, is released.
- 1995: The U.S. restores diplomatic ties with Vietnam.

2000s

- 2005: April 5 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.
- Wolff publishes *Old School* in 2003 and *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories* in 2008.

Other Works/Adaptations

Wolff and His Other Works

Perhaps because of the prominence of Tobias Wolff's memoirs and short stories, when *Old School* appeared in 2003, many assumed that it was his first extended work of fiction. In fact, it was his third. Wolff's first novel, and first book, was a Vietnam story, published in 1975, called *Ugly Rumours*. As the spelling would suggest, it appeared in England (and only in England). While he has not made a concerted effort to erase all traces of its existence, Wolff does not include it in listings of his published works. His second book-length work of fiction was the novella *The Barracks Thief* (1984), which won the highly regarded PEN/Faulkner Award. It deals with the intense and ultimately explosive relationships among servicemen in the shadow of war, specifically three soldiers guarding an ammunition dump at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, as they wait to be sent to Vietnam.

The work for which Wolff is best known is his first memoir, *This Boy's Life* (1989). Glowing reviews in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and elsewhere praised the beauty and clarity of its style, along with its unforgettable description of character and incident. While less well known, *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994), Wolff's account of his experiences in Vietnam, is, like the earlier work, esteemed for its memorable scenes and for the author's determination to describe his personality and actions with scrupulous honesty.

For many readers, the core of Wolff's achievement is his short stories, which have been collected so far in four volumes—*In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981), *Back in the World* (1985), *The Night in Question* (1996), and *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories* (2008). In story after story, Wolff presents his characters and their relationships—with spouses, children, siblings, and strangers—with a scrutiny that is always unflinching and uncompromising, but never uncompassionate. "The Rich Brother" presents a pair of adult brothers united in animosity, but also by basic qualities that create a much stronger bond. "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," which examines a self-effacing woman whose hopes have been falsely raised through the insensitivity of others, makes a surprising bid for justice.

Beautifully written without gaudiness or self-indulgence, deeply moving without a trace of sentimentality, Tobias Wolff's work seems poised to hold a permanent place in American literature.

Works by Tobias Wolff

- *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981, stories)
- *The Barracks Thief* (1984, novella)
- *Back in the World* (1985, stories)
- *This Boy's Life* (1989, memoir)
- *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (1994, memoir)
- *The Night in Question* (1996, stories)
- *Old School* (2003, novel)
- *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories* (2008)

Discussion Questions

1. The dedication of *Old School* reveals something of how Wolff might feel about his own education. If you wrote a book, would you dedicate it the same way?
2. What does the epigraph of *Old School*, a passage from a Mark Strand poem, mean? How does it relate to the novel's thematic concerns?
3. Why do you think Wolff left the narrator and even the school unnamed?
4. In Chapter One, the narrator maintains that his school disregarded issues of wealth and social background and judged its students entirely by their actions. Does this turn out to be true? How does his school compare to your own?
5. Early in the novel, the narrator says that his aspirations as a writer "were mystical. I wanted to receive the laying on of hands that had written living stories and poems, hands that had touched the hands of other writers. I wanted to be anointed." What does he mean by this?
6. Which of his classmates does the narrator feel closest to, and why?
7. How do the narrator's changing attitudes toward his grandfather demonstrate his process of maturing?
8. Discuss the portrayals of Robert Frost, Ayn Rand, and Ernest Hemingway. How does each influence the narrator?
9. Why might Chapter Six be titled "The Forked Tongue"? What are the larger implications of its very last sentence?
10. Why does Mr. Ramsey show such disdain for the use of the word "honor"? Do you agree with his attitude?
11. Over the course of the novel, the narrator writes two letters to girls. The circumstances differ, but he has the same reaction after sending each letter. What does this pattern of behavior reveal about his personality?
12. Why is the narrator shocked by Susan Friedman's attitude toward her own story, and toward writing in general? How valid is his unspoken response to her comments?
13. Why does the narrator feel such love and loyalty for his school, despite his final punishment?
14. The last sentence of the book is from the New Testament parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). How might these be "surely the most beautiful words ever written or said"?

Additional Resources

Works About Tobias Wolff

- Peterson, Anne Palmer. "Talking with Tobias Wolff." *Continuum: The Magazine of the University of Utah*, Summer 1998. [Website \(http://www.alumni.utah.edu/continuum/summer98/finally.html\)](http://www.alumni.utah.edu/continuum/summer98/finally.html).
- Prose, Francine. "The Brothers Wolff." *New York Times Magazine*, February 5, 1989.
- Woodward, Joe. "The Gun on the Table." *Poets & Writers*, March–April 2008.

If you'd like to read other novels about the campus experience, you might enjoy:

- Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, 1944
- John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, 1959
- Richard Yates's *A Good School*, 1978
- Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, 2005
- Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy*, 1953 (play)
- John McPhee's *The Headmaster: Frank L. Boyden of Deerfield*, 1966 (biography)

If you'd like to read books admired by Tobias Wolff, you might enjoy:

- Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 1886
- Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, 1925
- William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, 1979
- Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, 1981

Credits

Works Cited

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Schrieberg, David. "Interview: Tobias Wolff." *Stanford Today*. September/October 1998.

Wolff, Tobias. Interview with Dana Gioia for The Big Read. 2008.

Interview with Dan Stone for The Big Read. 2008

Wolff, Tobias. *Old School*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

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Writer: Michael Palma

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The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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