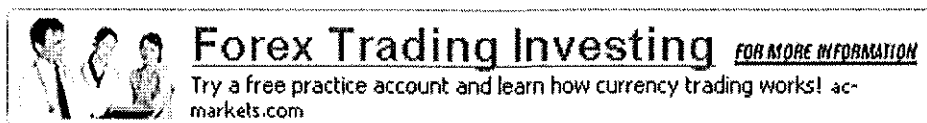


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## A class apart

Nostalgia has its uses, as Blake Morrison discovers in *Old School*, Tobias Wolff's story of youthful literary ambition

**Saturday January 24, 2004**  
**[The Guardian](#)**

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by Tobias Wolff  
198pp, Bloomsbury, £12.99



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Towards the end of his groundbreaking memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), Tobias Wolff describes how he won a scholarship to Hill School, an ivy league establishment in Pennsylvania, by forging letters of support from his teachers at Concrete High, near Seattle. The glowing references weren't as wilfully fraudulent as they appear, since he believed them: they were "the words my teachers would have used if they had known me as I knew myself". Young Toby would eventually be expelled from Hill, join the army and fight in Vietnam. But his school career wasn't entirely a disaster, since an English teacher recognised - and nurtured - his talent. Forty years, two memoirs, a novella and three short-story collections later, Wolff has paid his dues, with a concise, beautifully written novel set in a prestigious US prep school.

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Many classic novels include sequences with a classroom setting - from *Jane Eyre* and *Hard Times* to *Portrait of the Artist*. But it takes courage to stay within school bounds for a whole novel - and more than courage, in 2004, to write with nuance and affection about an all-male boarding school, one whose Anglophilia (dorms, floor wax, knitted woollen ties) was studiously old-fashioned even 40 years ago. But the claustrophobia proves oddly liberating for Wolff. Confined, he digs deep. Instead of the usual caricatures - bullying, zits, chalk dust, inkwells and farting - there's a subtle portrait of a complex community with its unwritten codes of honour and truth. It's November 1960 and Kennedy has just defeated Nixon to become president. But to the unnamed narrator and his bookish peers, any political excitement is overshadowed by the imminent arrival of Robert Frost, who will not only give a poetry reading but allow one of them - the pupil whose poem he likes the best - a private audience. So raging are the boys' hormones that they compete for literary laurels as fiercely as for honours in sport: "we cracked our heads together like mountain rams". Even the narrator, whose values are less worldly than mystical ("I wanted to be 'anointed'"), is desperate to win. In the event the winning entry isn't his but a poem shamelessly entitled "First Frost", a would-be fawning homage which the elderly poet takes to be a mischievous parody.

But two more celebrity visits follow, from Ayn Rand and Ernest Hemingway, and two more competitions encouraging warfare by literary means, "with a handful of champions waving the bloody shirt over a mob of failed pretenders". Meanwhile there's a school magazine to edit, *Troubadour*. And the annual graduation dance to attend, to which the girls from Miss Cobb's Academy are invited, an occasion reputed to be "Neronic is its carnality".

In ethos and appearance, the school is a kind of Eden: "The school lawns and fields were a rich, unreal green against the muddy expanse of surrounding farmland ... The chapel with its tall crenellated bell tower and streaming pennant looked like an engraving in a child's book. From this height it was possible to see into the dream that produced the school ... With still a month to graduation I was already damp with nostalgia."

The narrator's attachment to his alma mater is partly explained by the fact that his mother is dead. It's also connected to his

sense that he doesn't fit in, which makes him only more anxious to belong. The English are supposed to be world leaders at delineating social class, but Wolff writes very well about its place in American society - and the impossibility of avoiding it. His school prides itself on lack of snobbery; its scholarship boys are allowed to conceal their humble backgrounds. But there's no hiding the "depth of ease in certain boys, their innate, affable assurance that they would not have to struggle for a place in the world, that it had already been reserved for them".

The narrator, denied such confidence, is nervous about leaving his enclave. He feels a similar insecurity about his recently revealed Jewish origins. Raised a Catholic, he's so innocent of what Jewishness means that he upsets the school's Austrian janitor, Gershon, by unwittingly whistling a Nazi marching-song. But he notices a certain "apartness" in other Jewish boys and begins to doubt the school's egalitarian version of itself. Hence the appeal of writing, as an escape from caste and hierarchy.

Writing has its problems, too, however. For the third and final literary competition, he submits under his own name, with only minimal changes, a story written some years earlier by a girl from Miss Cobb's Academy. Hemingway chooses it as winner. But before the narrator can receive the prize, his "low, shameless, asinine hoax" is unmasked and he is expelled ("Plagiarism's bad enough," complains the president of the student honour council, "But from a girl?"). Yet when the narrator copied out the story, about a socially insecure adolescent like himself, he felt himself to be writing more honestly than ever before; it was his earlier efforts that were phoney. The complexities multiply in the last two chapters, which allude to his subsequent career as an author and to the school's invitation to come back as a visiting writer. The prodigal's return to his scene of disgrace would make a shapely ending, but Wolff resists it and moves off to a surprising coda.

There are other surprises along the way, including a hilarious demolition of Ayn Rand, a wry assessment of the writer's life (more like a banker's than an outlaw's, it's suggested) and a wonderful set-piece in which Frost defends the use of rhyme. All this makes Old School hard to categorise. Though presented as Wolff's first novel, it reads in places like autobiography - just as his memoirs *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army* read like fiction. It doesn't matter. A concern for truth underlies everything Wolff writes, and what you never doubt is the patience and scruple. The book's dedication reads "For my teachers", and these include the writers, like Hemingway, who taught him to weigh every word - a lesson he has never forgotten.

· Blake Morrison's memoir, *Things My Mother Never Told Me*, is published by Vintage.

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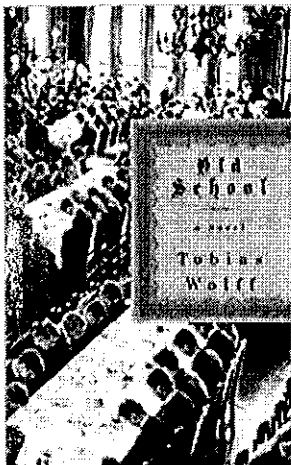
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## "Old School" by Tobias Wolff

Sure, you may have read prep-school novels before. But few books in any genre offer this immediacy, this intimacy, this feeling of truth.

Page 1



December 18, 2003 | Who wants to read yet another novel about a teenage boy of slender means, and Jewish at that, who feels awkward and out of place at a New England prep school? Then again, you know you're in the hands of a great writer if you think you've heard it all before only to recognize that you've never heard it told like *this*. "Old School," Tobias Wolff's first full-length novel, is the kind of book that, within its first few pages, startles you into realizing you know nothing: It sends you marching into fresh, untracked territory -- a rare and wonderful thing.

"Old School" is only partly about the trauma of not fitting in: Its real subject is the overwhelming power that the *desire* to be an artist can have over us -- much different from the trauma of actually being one, which is a whole different subject. The book's narrator -- we never learn his name -- is a student at a prestigious prep school, circa the early 1960s, one with a particularly fine reputation for literary pursuits. The school is able to attract visiting writers of high (or at least presumably high) caliber, like Robert Frost and Ayn Rand. Each of the boys has a chance to "win" a private audience with the vaunted guest by entering a contest, presumably to be judged by the honored visitor him- or herself.

The boys struggle to craft their poems and stories, and no one works harder than the narrator. Still, he stands by and sees the other boys win time after time: The winner of the Frost contest, for example, has submitted a poem with the shameless title "First Frost," whose significant feature is a milkmaid who tackles her job like this: "With swift hard strokes of her soft white hands/ She pulls the foaming cream into the pail between her legs." (It's revealed that Frost thinks the poem is a parody, a notion that crushes its earnest young author.)

The narrator ultimately deals with his desire to win in his own desperate way, but in between the nuts and bolts of the plot, Wolff explores the way young people who care about reading (and writing) flex the muscles that ultimately may, or may not, turn them into bright critical thinkers: The boys argue about literature, inflating their own sense of self-importance as they fall into and (in Rand's case, thankfully) out of love with the ideas of the writers they're reading. Wolff pokes fun at that self-importance, but he also understands, humanely, that you can't become an intelligent, astute reader and thinker without going through every single one of the embarrassing stages.

"Old School" is a delicately forceful book for its prose alone: It's pure pleasure to read. Look at the way the narrator explains, late in the book (after he's become somewhat disenchanted with his well-bred schoolmates), his decision to attend Columbia University: "Things that mattered at Princeton or Yale couldn't possibly withstand this battering of raw, unironic life. You didn't go to eating clubs at Columbia, you went to jazz clubs. You had a girlfriend -- no, a lover -- with psychiatric problems, and friends with foreign accents. You read newspapers on the subway and looked at tourists with a cool, anthropological gaze. You said *crossstown express*. You said *the Village*. You ate weird food. No other boy in my class would be going there."

I don't know quite how Wolff takes a perhaps too-familiar theme -- the search for individual authenticity -- and makes it seem like a notion that's never been explored before. Funny and moving and smart, "Old School" is a novel that has the intimacy and immediacy of a memoir. Even though it's a work of fiction, it's a true story down to its very bones. -- Stephanie Zacharek

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Old School, by Tobias Wolff; Bloomsbury, 2004, \$27.95

THERE ARE BOOKS you regret will end, even as you begin them. Tobias Wolff's Old School is one such work. English novelist Sybil Bedford (who also wrote a biography of Aldous Huxley in 1973) might have had Wolff in mind when she said: "As for the writer, there must always be a clash of intentions between literal truth and a more essential truth which is the prerogative of fiction writers." In Old School Wolff returns, as he has in earlier short stories and novels, to mine the raw material of his own life, extract the valuable ore, and forge it into a poignant and memorable story for our own times.

At the beginning of the 1960s a scholarship boy attends a rarefied private school obsessed with literature. Each term a famous writer is invited to speak, and one lucky boy, as a reward for producing the term's best short story, is chosen to have an audience with the writer. This sets the boys into a frenzy of competitiveness carefully concealed behind the private school ethic of nonchalance.

The narrator, who has won an audience with Ernest Hemingway, is expelled from the school before the longed-for meeting takes place because he has plagiarised someone else's work. Years later when he meets the girl whose story he made his own (which in a true sense it was--as his identification with it was absolute and unmasked him to himself) she congratulates him on his prank. She too, had suffered the subtle but insistent snobberies of the "ivy-covered stud farm". This meeting released him and he became, after the usual hardships and iron discipline, a successful writer.

In the novel he distils the self-conscious writing efforts of his classmates in the admonitions of the headmaster to one student: "Purcell, you're not altogether a dull boy, perhaps you can explain what is meant by peyote solidities, or sexless

hydrogen ... I am trying to understand these words and I am failing, Purcell, I am failing." Indeed the craft of shaping words into some sort of transcendent reality is examined, almost in passing, with great precision, when Wolff says that the life that produces writing is essentially a subterranean business, "in deep unlit shafts where phantom messengers struggle towards us, killing one another along the way; and when a few survivors break through to our attention they are received as blandly as waiters bringing more coffee".

The book deals with some forlorn issues, even as it tells a perfectly paced story. One is generated by the lengthening years, and the empathy that can attach to experience which may pave the way for the negligent or embarrassed offspring of unloved parents to make amends to them.

It examines the conflict between our real selves and our constructed selves; and how the former, no matter how submerged, will find its way to the surface because, eventually, all subterfuges become intolerable. In tandem to this notion, Wolff explores the way in which the seed of a false impression, planted inadvertently, grows into a dense hedge of deception which needs constant care and attention.

But perhaps the most compelling component of the novel is the author's freedom, which he revels in, to place unpalatable--or unpopular--views into the mouths of fictional protagonists. Of the three literary heroes woven into the text--Robert Frost, Ayn Rand and Ernest Hemingway--only Frost emerges unscathed. Deft incisions, couched in the disillusionment of young students, are made in the public personas of Hemingway and Rand, while Frost becomes the mouthpiece for a masterly stab at the incoherence and maddening relativity of the postmodern whippersnappers.

When one hapless English master suggests that a "formal arrangement of language" may not be adequate to express "the modern consciousness" and that such language might make way for more "spontaneous modes of expression, even at the cost of a certain disorder", Frost snaps: "Modern consciousness, What's that? ... Form is everything. Without it you've got nothing but a stubbed-toe cry ... with no depth or carry." Wolff's novel, elegiac in tone and replete with verities, is a triumph of both form and modern consciousness.

Patricia Anderson wrote on Isaiah Berlin in the Soviet Union in the April issue.

**Named Works:** Old School (Book) Book reviews

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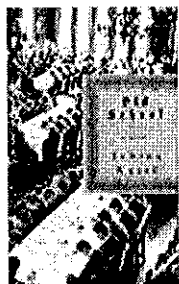
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## December 2003

### Melissa Roy

#### fiction

#### Old School by Tobias Wolff



I approached Tobias Wolff's *Old School* with a sense of anticipation. I'd never read any of Wolff's other books, but had heard and read a great deal about him in recent years. *Old School* is the fictional story of a young boy attending a prestigious New England prep school and, more importantly, his struggle for identity within the world around him. Skilled as a writer and popular with his schoolmates, the narrator struggles with himself for many reasons: he compulsively hides his Jewish heritage from his friends (even his roommate, who is also Jewish; even from his headmaster, when it would have benefited him to reveal it); he feels that he has not lived up to his creative potential as a writer, which he later realizes is because he hasn't found the "truth" of his own life; he can't quite fit in with his wealthy schoolmates and take pains to conceal the fact that he is on scholarship to the school; he wrestles with belief in the ideas and truths imparted to him by the writers whom he admires and how he might apply those to his own writing, to his own life.

The story itself, in fact, is structured largely around those writers. The prep school that the narrator attends has a program through which prestigious and influential writers visit the campus and give a lecture or reading to the students, one of whom is chosen through a writing competition to have a private audience with the writer. Robert Frost is the first writer to visit after the start of the book and, while the narrator admires him greatly and submits a piece for consideration in the competition, he loses to a rather spineless, ingratiating friend who was selected by the poet because his poem seemed to be sending a "barb" to Mr. Frost in the form of a parody but was, in fact, intended by the boy just to pay homage to him. The second author to come to the school, amidst a great deal of controversy, is Ayn Rand. The narrator had never read Rand's work before the announcement that she would be visiting, but on a break from school he purchases *The Fountainhead* and reads it on the train to visit his grandfather and his new wife at their embarrassingly humble and boring home. He becomes obsessed with the book, with Howard and Dominique, and with Rand herself. He reads the book over and over, eventually fancying himself to be like Howard -- destined for greatness, refusing to compromise -- and delays his entry for the competition until the last minute, supposing that the greatest piece of work ever to emerge from him with spontaneously create itself. He imagines that his selection as the winner and his meeting with Rand are inevitable. Unfortunately, he falls severely ill (the haze was not one of creativity, but one of illness) and is unable to submit an entry or attend Rand's reading. He does, however, escape the infirmary in time to attend the coffee clutch which follows the reading, during which Rand and her black-clad posse are predictably (although not to the narrator) haughty, disdainful, and generally obnoxious. He is devastated, his opinions of Howard



and Rand deflated and his hopes for a future of creative integrity dashed, and he returns to his previous worship of greats such as Hemingway.

Hemingway himself is then selected to be the next visiting writer and the narrator is, as could be expected, beside himself. In his desire to prove himself to his idol, to express himself in a way that more agrees with the infirmities and inconsistencies of the lives of Hemingway's characters rather than the uncompromising rigidity of Rand's, the narrator places himself in a situation that the reader can see coming for a country mile. His own integrity is compromised and he is removed from the school, destined to take a path in life more suited to his own background, one where he has to face the truths he's tried to hide and make himself a better, more honest person. That situation, of course, is one in which he plagiarizes another's work and uses it to enter the competition for Hemingway's private audience. The passages in which he discovers the work he plagiarizes, though, are some of the book's most powerful: the story written by a Jewish girl who had graduated years before from a sister school rings so true to him that he begins to believe it is his own, to the point that when his lie is discovered he can't imagine that he didn't actually write it himself.

The story is essentially one about lies, about what the desire to impress will do to a person, even a person of integrity, and thus rings quite true in light of some of the recent breaches of journalistic integrity that have occurred. Even without that element, though, the book about character -- having it, finding it, needing it -- which is something common to all of us as humans. I believe that this is a quality piece of literature with a well-developed plot and characters that is worthy of a recommendation.

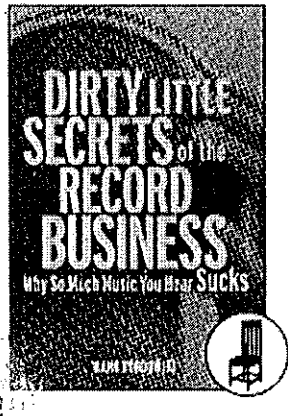
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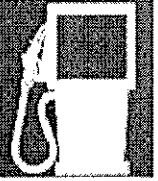
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## Of artifice and authenticity The Boston Globe

### The shaping of identity, at a '60s prep school

By Chris Bohjalian | January 4, 2004

Old School

By Tobias Wolff

*Knopf*, 199 pp., \$22

Given the myriad demands on our time these days and our diminished, MTV-shortened attention spans, one would think that readers would positively crave well-written short stories: tales with punch and authenticity, tales that don't tack on endings that are either gratuitously happy or needlessly spiteful. A short story doesn't offer precisely the same satisfactions as a novel -- nor is it designed to -- but a good one can leave you breathless, inspired, and moved.

Alas, the short story remains, as editor Ted Solotaroff once called it, "the sun-dried tomato of the literary world." His point? Readers like them, but only so much and only on occasion.

"Old School" is a novel in stories by one of the absolute masters of the short form, Tobias Wolff. (Even Wolff's two immensely powerful memoirs, "This Boy's Life" and "In Pharaoh's Army," have always felt to me more like short story collections than autobiographies.)

It is 1960, and the setting is one of those upper-class New England boys' boarding schools we love to hate. The narrator is a scholarship student, though he is careful to hide this reality from his fellow students, as well as the fact that his father is Jewish. There's no overt anti-Semitism at the school, but "the Jewish boys, even the popular ones, even the athletes, had a subtly charged field around them, an air of apartness." Heaven forbid that anyone should know he is not among the WASP elite who compose most of the student body.

Though the school offers athletics and coed dances with equally elitist girls' schools, the real passion on the campus is for literature. (It is a testimony to Wolff's estimable talents that he actually makes the idea of a school full of male teenagers more obsessed with writing than with women not merely plausible but believable.) The nation's most talented writers visit the place periodically and give an evening lecture, and the seniors (sixth-formers, in this tony world) write short stories or poems to compete for the honor of meeting the

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writer face to face -- a contest they take very seriously:

"Robert Frost made his visit in November of 1960, just a week after the general election. It tells you something about our school that the prospect of his arrival cooked up more interest than the contest between Nixon and Kennedy, which for most of us was no contest at all. Nixon was a straight arrow and a scold. If he'd been one of us we would have glued his shoes to the floor. Kennedy, though -- here was a warrior, an ironist, terse and unhysterical. He had his clothes under control."

Also scheduled to visit the school that year, besides Frost, are Ayn Rand and -- much to everyone's jubilation -- Ernest Hemingway. The students type late into the night, hoping to have their work chosen by one of the luminaries. Their inadvertent parodies of the work of each visiting writer are a howl, such as this passage from the tale crafted by one young scholar, a Hemingway devotee:

" 'Have to take my hat off to you,' said Montague. 'Tricky bit of tradecraft, given the circumstances. Storm blowing the damned tent down, and the beaters into the liquor. I shan't forget it.'

" 'Not at all, not at all,' said Dr. Coates. 'The merest intern could have done as well -- probably better.'

" 'I shan't forget it,' Montague repeated. 'I'm forever in your debt,' he added coldly.

" 'Aren't we all,' said Ashley, pouring herself another scotch. . . .

" 'You bitch,' said Montague. 'You perfectly beautiful bitch.' "

Virtually every chapter in the novel could stand alone as a short story: the Frost visit, the Rand appearance, waiting for Hemingway himself.

What propels the narrative as a novel, however, is what the narrator learns about himself as the writers arrive. It's not what they teach him, it's what he discovers about himself -- and, eventually, what he decides to reveal -- as he prepares for their visits. Then, later in life, he uncovers a skeleton in the closet of the venerated Dean Makepeace, a teacher who, the students believe, was actually a friend of Papa Hemingway's.

Unfortunately, that skeleton lacks the clout that marks most of Wolff's short fiction. Likewise, the manner in which the narrator chooses to unmask himself to his classmates is both so ill advised and uncharacteristic that it feels inauthentic. The result is that the stories that compose the first half of "Old School" are considerably more potent than the tales that fill out the novel.

Nevertheless, Wolff is so gifted that even his less successful stories have wonderful moments of irony and character illumination. Were I 17, I'd certainly want him visiting my school to lecture for an evening, and without question I would enter the fray with my fellow sixth-formers to try to write a story good enough to merit that single brief meeting with him.

*Chris Bohjalian is the author of eight novels. A collection of his magazine essays and newspaper columns, "Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town," has just been published. ■*

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Wolff, Tobias

Wolff, Tobias Jonathan Ansell

See "Wolff, Tobias"

**The New York Times**

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OLD SCHOOL

By **Tobias Wolff**

195 pages. Alfred. A. Knopf. \$22.

**Tobias Wolff's** first novel reads like a very long short story, with another short short story tacked on as a coda. It also reads like one of those British memoirs about the trials and tribulations of public (meaning private) school, gussied up with some amusing asides about famous writers and the young would-be writers who idolize them.

It's not that "Old School" isn't perfectly readable -- and at times highly entertaining -- but it lacks the emotional chiaroscuro and effortless pacing of this author's best short stories and his classic 1989 memoir "This Boy's Life" (which itself read like a series of short stories). The main problem is that Mr. Wolff seems thoroughly ill at ease with the long-distance form of the novel: his book feels overstuffed and undernourished at the same time.

While he chronicles his narrator's failings, deceptions and uncharitable acts in minute detail, he appears to have forgotten to give this boy much in the way of a family background or emotional history; as a result he ends up with a decidedly unlikable and one-dimensional hero, depicted with undisguised condescension.

The bulk of the novel is set in the early 1960's at a posh New England boarding school, to which Mr. Wolff's hero has won a scholarship. This was an era when literature enjoyed a central place in the culture -- in the 1950's T. S. Eliot could fill a football stadium with poetry fans -- and this narrator and many of his schoolmates are obsessed with becoming writers.

There is a tradition at the school by which students compete for the honor of meeting privately with the eminent poets and novelists who come to visit the campus. The student whose story or poem is selected not only gets a private audience with the visiting eminence but also gets his writing published in the school newspaper.

Acutely mindful of everyone's standing on campus, the narrator quickly decides that his real competition consists of three other boys: George Kellogg, the kindly editor of the school's literary magazine and a well-schooled, proficient writer; Bill White, the narrator's courtly roommate, who is writing a potboiler about a three people isolated in a hunting lodge during a blizzard; and Jeff Purcell, the belligerent scion of a wealthy family and a writer who prides himself on his exacting moral, political and aesthetic standards.

Mr. Wolff does a nimble and sometimes very funny job of delineating these students' work, and he also does a sly job of describing the campus visits of two famous writers: Robert Frost, who delivers a calculatedly folksy yet Olympian performance, and Ayn Rand, who arrives with an entourage of rabid supporters and who launches into a Nietzschean screed about the winners and losers, heroes and sheep. He captures the hermetic, competitive atmosphere of this all-male school, and he also persuasively conjures up the heady mood of literary zeal that permeates the campus, especially when it is announced that Ernest Hemingway, who is supposedly a friend of the headmaster, is going to be the next visiting writer.

When it comes to creating a portrait of his self-deluding narrator, however, Mr. Wolff is decidedly less convincing. Like so many of his heroes, this narrator is a gifted liar, a skill that he uses to obscure his modest background and that results in his writing phony, posturing stories. But while there are glancing references to the narrator's familial background -- which bears a passing resemblance to the author's own childhood as laid out in "This Boy's Life" -- this background is never fleshed out in convincing detail. Instead it is simply alluded to in highly generic terms as chaotic and humble and somehow embarrassing.

What Mr. Wolff does spend a lot of time and energy on is the narrator's missteps: his pretensions, his self-delusions, his crass maneuvering. We see the narrator scheming to take a friend's place at a private audience with Frost. We see him passionately embracing Rand's most obnoxious and narcissistic theories.

And we see him embarking on a venal scheme to win a visit with Hemingway, a scheme that will have unexpected consequences for him and one of the school's teachers.

There is something distinctly patronizing about Mr. Wolff's rendering of these anecdotes: disdain for his hero, it seems, has replaced the generosity and sympathy he's lavished on so many of his hapless characters in the past, and in the end it makes for a brittle and unsatisfying story.

**Source Citation:** Kakutani, Michiko. "This Other Boy's Life: Schemes of a Scholarship Student. (Leisure/Weekend Desk)." *The New York Times* (Dec 12, 2003 pE49(L) col 01 (18 col): E49(L). *New York Times*. Thomson Gale. Farmington Community Library. 27 Jan. 2007  
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## Famous Writers School

 By A. O. SCOTT  
 Published: November 23, 2003

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### OLD SCHOOL

By Tobias Wolff.

195 pp. New York:

Alfred A. Knopf. \$22.

"Old School" is a novel -- the first, surprisingly enough, that Tobias Wolff has written -- but readers of "This Boy's Life" and "In Pharaoh's Army" might be forgiven if they occasionally mistake it for the middle volume in a trilogy of memoirs. The unnamed narrator, looking back on his years at an all-male East Coast prep school at the dawn of the 1960's, bears an unmistakable biographical resemblance to his author. "Old School" seems to catch the hero of those earlier books in the years between his difficult childhood, mostly in the Pacific Northwest, and his service in Vietnam. "The life that produces writing can't be written about," this old boy warns toward the end, having grown up, at last, into a serious and well-respected writer. But nearly every other sentence in "Old School," like so much of Wolff's previous writing, fictional and not, tugs against that categorical assertion without exactly contradicting it. The book is about nothing if not the making of a writer -- though it is also, just as plainly, about a writer's failure.

Wolff has long been intrigued by this kind of ethical paradox. Many of his stories turn on noble acts undertaken for base reasons, or on ignoble deeds that accomplish worthy ends. His characters -- the present narrator is no exception -- routinely lie, mislead or pretend to be what they are not. Their dishonesty, however, is more often than not a shortcut to the truth, or at least to some kind of earnest self-discovery. Near the end of "This Boy's Life," Wolff confessed to a spectacular fraud that was also a heroic act of self-invention: as a teenager chafing under his stepfather's lunatic discipline, he applied to several exclusive prep schools, using purloined stationery to forge transcripts and letters of recommendation. He was accepted to one on the basis of this imposture. The narrator of "Old School" does not explicitly owe his presence on campus to such dramatically false pretenses, but he is nonetheless adept at dissembling and disguising his background, which is lower middle class, partly Jewish and decidedly provincial.

The school's ethos, a precisely observed blend of aristocratic modesty and meritocratic striving, creates an environment perfectly suited to a young man who wants at once to lose and to find himself: "Ours was not a snobbish school, or so it believed, and we made this as true as we could. Everyone did chores. Scholarship students could declare themselves or not, as they wished; the school itself gave no sign. It was understood that some of the boys might get a leg up from their famous names or great wealth, but if privilege immediately gave them a place, the rest of us liked to think it was a perilous place. You could never advance in it, you could only try not to lose it by talking too much about the debutante parties you went to or the Jaguar you earned by turning 16. And meanwhile, absent other distinctions, you were steadily giving ground to a system of honors that valued nothing you hadn't done for yourself. . . . The other part of the idea was that whatever you did do for yourself, the school would accept as proof of worth beyond any other consideration."

As it happens, the school places a special value on literary achievement, and the novel, unfolding over the course of a single academic year, is built around three episodes of intense writerly competition and hero worship. Every few months, a famous author is invited to address the students, and the guest's arrival is preceded by a contest whose winner receives a private audience with his idol.

The three luminaries whose visits are announced (only two of them actually show up) are, in order, Robert Frost, Ayn Rand and Ernest Hemingway, and they serve as panels in an allegorical triptych on the varieties of literary self-regard and the follies of literary hero worship. Each writer -- Frost with his carefully composed faux-folksy persona; Rand with her entourage of unsmiling, chain-smoking acolytes; Hemingway with his muscular sentimentality -- is an icon of honesty and authenticity, and also something of a phony.

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*A. O. Scott is a film critic at The Times.*

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## Tobias (Jonathan Ansell) Wolff

1945-

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### "Sidelights"

Tobias Wolff, a short story writer, novelist, memoirist, editor, and journalist, has received critical acclaim since the publication of his first collection of short stories in 1981. Both *Los Angeles Times* book reviewer James Kaufman and *New Statesman* contributor Bill Greenwell labeled the stories of *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* "impressive," and *Tribune Books* writer Bruce Allen deemed Wolff's work "one of the most acclaimed short-story collections within memory." In the twelve tales that comprise *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, according to *Nation* reviewer Brina Caplan, Wolff "scrutinizes the disorders of daily living to find significant order; in the best of [these] stories . . . he informs us not only of what happened but of why it had to happen as it did. . . Distant in age, class and geography, [his characters] have in common lives crowded with the results of previous choices." *Best Sellers* reviewer James C. Dolan advised readers to "relax and enter into the sometimes comic, always compassionate world of ordinary people who suffer twentieth-century martyrdoms of growing up, growing old, loving and lacking love, living with parents and lovers and wives and their own weaknesses."

Among the characters of *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*--all of whom, claimed Alane Rollings in Chicago's *Tribune Books*, readers can "care for"--are a teenage



boy who tells morbid lies about his home life, a timid professor who, in the first genuine outburst of her life, pours out her opinions in spite of a protesting audience, a prudish loner who gives an obnoxious hitchhiker a ride, and an elderly couple on a golden anniversary cruise who endure the offensive conviviality of the ship's social director. Rollings concluded that Wolff's "ironic dialog, misfit heroes, and haphazard events play beautifully off the undercurrent drift of the searching inner mood which wins over in the end." *New York Times Book Review* critic Le Ann Schreiber admired Wolff's avoidance of "the emotional and stylistic monotone that constricts so many collections of contemporary short stories," pointing out that "his range, sometimes within the same story, extends from fastidious realism to the grotesque and the lyrical. . . . He allows [his] characters scenes of flamboyant madness as well as quiet desperation, moments of slap-happiness as well as muted contentment." In addition, observing that the time covered by the collection's stories varies from a few hours to two decades, Schreiber declared Wolff's vision "so acute" and his talent "so refined" that "none of them seems sketchy" and that, in fact, they evoke our "amazed appreciation."

Wolff's novella *The Barracks Thief* won the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award as the best work of fiction of 1984. Linda Taylor wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "*The Barracks Thief* is a book to be taken in all at once: the ingenuousness of the narration and the vulnerability of the characters are disarmingly seductive." Narrated retrospectively by one of three paratroopers stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, during the Vietnam years, the story focuses on an event that leaves a lasting impression on the trio. Assigned to guard a nearby ammunition dump on a steamy Fourth of July evening in 1967, they face the threat of an approaching forest fire. The temptation to allow the dump to ignite and explode proves exhilarating and unites them in a bond of friendship. "The world of *The Barracks Thief* contains no answers," observed *New York Times* reviewer Walter Kendrick. "We are left to make up our own minds whether it is better to die spectacularly or to dribble on for decades in safe conventionality." Kendrick also hailed Wolff's "boundless tolerance for the stupid sorrow of ordinary human entanglements" and his "command of eloquent detail." *America* critic Andre Dubus concluded, "If words on paper could make sounds, you would hear me shouting now, urging you to read this book."

Wolff's 1985 short story collection, *Back in the World*, derives its title from the expression used by servicemen during the Vietnam War to refer to post-war life at home in the United States. The experience of returning home, however, proves more disillusioning than hopeful to the veterans in Wolff's stories. Feeling alienated from society and powerless to change their circumstances, his characters capitulate to whatever life deals them, only briefly--if at all--challenging fate. They seek relief from their cheerless, detached existence in drugs, casual sex, and, as *Tribune Books* contributor Allen saw it, "contriving falsely romantic or interesting versions of themselves and their experiences." *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani noted that Wolff suggests for these people "the power of some kind of redemption in their fumbling efforts to connect with one another, and even in their sad attempts to shore up their dignity with their pipe dreams and clumsy fictions." This "power of . . . redemption," according to Kakutani, "enables these characters to go on, and it is also what invests these stories with the burnished glow of compassion."

Wolff's next work, *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*, "is about growing up, as inevitably any such memoir must be," commented Jonathan Yardley in the *Washington Post Book World*. The book addresses Wolff's teenage years, when he and his mother moved from Florida to Utah to Washington State to escape her abusive boyfriend. Wolff had lost contact with his father and brother (writer Geoffrey Wolff, author of *The Duke of Deception: Memories of My Father*, an autobiography about his youth spent with their father) following his parents' divorce. In Washington his mother remarried, and Wolff experienced difficulties with his new stepfather. Yardley remarked that, in part, *This Boy's Life* "is the story of what happens to a child when the peculiarities of a mother's romance place him at the mercy of a man who is neither his father nor his protector, but it is not a self-pitying lament and it is not really a tale of abuse and neglect."

*New York Times Book Review* critic Joel Conarroe praised the literary quality of the book: "*This Boy's Life* is apparently straight autobiography--the facts, attired in their exotic garments. The book, however, reads very much like a collection of short stories, each with its own beginning, middle and end. Lifted from their context, the individual chapters would be at home in the fiction pages of any good magazine." Francine Prose made a

similar observation in the *New York Times Magazine*: "*This Boy's Life* reads like the work of a writer who has long understood himself to be 'surrounded by stories.' Its strategy is novelistic; details have been altered, events ordered and edited, to give Wolff's memoir the shape of fiction." Prose added that Wolff "admits to having omitted things from *This Boy's Life*--real events he chose to leave out lest the true account of his life seem too markedly patterned and shaped. 'It would have seemed too contrived,' he says. 'Too much like a novel.'"

Some critics considered Wolff's acclaimed memoir *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* to be a logical continuation of *This Boy's Life*. However, the author told Nicholas A. Basbanes in a *Publishers Weekly* interview that the book is not a sequel. "I'm a really different person in the new book," Wolff said. "I see it as a story about a young man going off to war, and the kind of moral transformations that take place." The book, which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1994 and received England's Esquire-Volvo-Waterstone's Prize for Nonfiction, recounts the author's one-year Vietnam tour of duty in the Mekong Delta village of My Tho in thirteen chapters or "episodes." Paul Gray commented in *Time* that each of the thirteen chapters "reads like a rigorously boiled-down short story, but the effects never seem artificial or contrived." Gray called the book a "terse, mesmerizing memoir."

*In Pharaoh's Army* focuses on events that took place during the Vietnam War. But as Basbanes noted in *Publishers Weekly*, readers who are "in search of riveting battle scenes will have to look elsewhere; of far greater moment is the maturation of Tobias Wolff. The immature lieutenant who arrives in the war zone returns home as a man ready to spend four years at Oxford University (1968-72) and to begin his life as a writer." Judith Coburn observed in the *Washington Post Book World*, "Mostly [Wolff] tells stories, awful, hilarious stories, often at his own expense, of what it was like day-to-day, trying to get by." An *American Heritage* reviewer described the writing as "relaxed, utterly lucid prose" and characterized the book as "melancholy and hilarious by turns." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* called the book an "intense, precisely observed memoir," while *New York Times Book Review* correspondent Bruce Bawer declared that the book "in style and tone has much in common with the low-key domestic minimalism of Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie."

The memoir treats aspects of the Vietnam War through the use of spare, uncomplicated prose. Although Wolff does not write specifically of atrocity and carnage, critics infer abominations from the very simplicity of his stories. Richard Eder suggested in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that "because there was no actual horror, we see more clearly what underlay the horror." Coburn commented in the *Washington Post Book World* that Wolff's strategy "is to tell his story in an elegantly simple style and with a deceptively casual voice. The tension between this form and the horror of the war's content made this reader, anyway, feel by the book's end as if somehow I had gone out of my mind without noticing." While Bawer, in the *New York Times Book Review*, questioned the "limitations" of Wolff's literary style applied to the horrors and intensity of war, he nonetheless stated: "There is a great deal of precise, evocative writing here." Gray commented in *Time* that the war taught Wolff "how to portray life as both desperately serious and perfectly absurd."

Wolff's *The Night in Question* collects fourteen short stories in which the characters search for the essence of life that lies hidden beneath quotidian surfaces. To quote Jay Parini in the *New York Times Book Review*, Wolff's characters want to find "something authentic, something they can unmistakably call their own." Moral judgment is sometimes compromised in these tales, as in "The Chain," where an attack by a vicious dog precipitates an act of revenge that backfires. "Storytellers appear everywhere in the collection," wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in the *New York Times*. "Often they are troublemakers, the enemies of the prevailing moral order. . . . One might even say that the most significant conflict in these stories is that between the moralists and the ironists." Lehmann-Haupt saw the stories as "the sleep of moral satisfaction, invaded by the voice of the storyteller, commenting ironically on the dream." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor likewise noted, "Understatement, irony, and surprising juxtapositions are the key ingredients of these generally accomplished and resonant fictions--the best of which are certainly among the most accomplished being written in our time." Parini concluded that readers of *The Night in Question* "will be stirred by Mr. Wolff's marvelous stories, by their

pure unexpectedness and--perhaps most of all--by their music."

In addition to his writing, Wolff serves as a professor of English and creative writing at Stanford University. In an interview with *Stanford Today Online*, he commented upon the role teaching plays in his working life. "The greater world doesn't really care whether you write or not," he said. "It doesn't care about the things that I care most about, and here I am surrounded by people who love writing, who devote their lives to literature and teaching literature and to seeing it as a way of understanding the world and understanding oneself that no other thing can quite afford. That's a very privileged position to be in. Teaching allowed me the time to do my own writing in a way that nothing I'd ever done before had. At a certain point I probably could have lived on my writing and stopped teaching. But I think my life would feel a little empty without it because of the intellectual heat I experience with brilliant young writers and the unexpectedness of what goes on in workshops." He concluded, "I've learned at least as much from my students as they've learned from me. I know that's a cliché, but it happens in my case to be absolutely true."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born June 19, 1945, in Birmingham, AL; son of Arthur Saunders (an aeronautical engineer) and Rosemary (Loftus) Wolff; married Catherine Dolores Spohn (a clinical social worker), 1975; children: Michael, Patrick, Mary Elizabeth. Education: Oxford University, B.A. (with first class honors), 1972, M.A., 1975; Stanford University, M.A., 1978. Memberships: PEN, Associated Writing Programs. Addresses: Office: Department of English, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2087. Agent: Amanda Urban, International Creative Management, 40 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

## AWARDS

Wallace Stegner fellowship in creative writing, 1975-76; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in creative writing, 1978 and 1985; Mary Roberts Rinehart grant, 1979; Arizona Council on the Arts and Humanities fellowship in creative writing, 1980; Guggenheim fellowship, 1982; St. Lawrence Award for Fiction, 1982, for *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*; PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, 1985, for *The Barracks Thief*; Rea Award for short story, 1989;

- *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for biography, and National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, both 1989, and Ambassador Book Award of the English-speaking Union, all for *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*; Whiting Foundation Award, 1990; Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award, 1993; Lyndhurst Foundation Award, 1994; National Book Award finalist, and Esquire-Volvo-Waterstone's Prize for Nonfiction (England), both 1994, and *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for biography finalist, 1995, all for *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War*; nominated for National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, 2003, and nominated for Los Angeles Times Book Award, 2003, and nominated for PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, 2004, all for *Old School*.

## CAREER

Stanford University, Stanford, CA, Jones Lecturer in Creative Writing, 1975-78; Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, Peck Professor of English, 1980-97; Stanford University, Stanford, CA, professor of English and Creative Writing, 1997--. Member of faculty at Goddard College, Plainfield, VT, and Arizona State University, Tempe. Former reporter for *Washington Post*. Military service: U.S. Army, 1964-68 (Special Forces, 1965-67); served in Vietnam; became first lieutenant.

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *Ugly Rumours*, Allen & Unwin (London), 1975.

- *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (short stories), Ecco Press (New York, NY), 1981, published as *Hunters in the Snow* (also see below), J. Cape (London), 1982.
- (Editor) *Matters of Life and Death: New American Stories*, Wampeter (Green Harbor, ME), 1982.
- *The Barracks Thief* (novella; also see below), Ecco Press, 1984, published as *The Barracks Thief and Other Stories*, Bantam (New York, NY), 1984.
- *Back in the World* (short stories; also see below), Houghton (Boston), 1985.
- (Editor) *A Doctor's Visit: The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov*, Bantam, 1987.
- *The Stories of Tobias Wolff* (contains *Hunters in the Snow*, *Back in the World*, and *The Barracks Thief*), Picador (London), 1988.
- *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*, Atlantic Monthly Press (New York, NY), 1989.
- (Editor) *The Picador Book of Contemporary American Stories*, Picador, 1993.
- (Editor and author of introduction) *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories*, Random House (New York, NY), 1994.
- *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (memoir), Knopf (New York, NY), 1994.
- (Editor) *Best American Short Stories*, Houghton, 1994.
- *The Night in Question: Stories*, Knopf, 1996.
- (Editor and author of introduction) *Writers Harvest 3*, Dell (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Old School* (novel), Knopf, 2003.

Contributor to periodicals, including the *Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Story*, *Esquire*, and *Antaeus*.

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

*This Boy's Life: A Memoir* was made into the movie *This Boy's Life*, 1993, produced by Art Linson, directed by Michael Caton-Jones, starring Robert De Niro as Wolff's stepfather, Ellen Barkin as Wolff's mother, and Leonardo DiCaprio playing Wolff as a teenager.

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- *Life*, September, 1990, p. 95.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, January 3, 1982; November 17, 1985; January 8, 1989, p. 3; November 5, 1989, p. 12; June 6, 1993, p. 15; October 16, 1994, pp. 3, 10.
- *Nation*, February 6, 1982, Brina Caplan, review of *In the Garden of North American Martyrs*, p. 152.
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- *New York*, April 12, 1993, p. 58.
- *New York Times*, November 25, 1981; October 2, 1985, p. 27; October 28, 1985; October 30, 1985; January 12, 1989; October 3, 1996, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Seizing the Imagination with Moral Questions."
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- *Salon.com*, <http://www.salon.com/> (December, 1996), Joan Smith, "Tobias Wolff: The Salon Interview."
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OLD SCHOOL Tobias Wolff

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2. Brief synopsis ( If there are enough people who did not read book)

QUESTIONS:

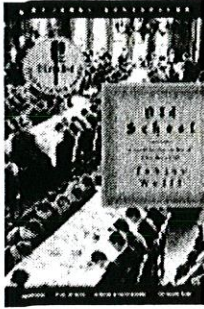
1. This retrospective novel is presented through the eyes of the speaker. He has no name and we don't know what he looks like.  
*IS THE STYLE APPROPRIATE FOR THE STORY? DOES IT DENY THE READER INFORMATION?*  
How do you respond to the author's technique?  
  
Is the main character a prototype for the way students and faculty coexist in schools and colleges today?  
  
(Author appears to give them words but no breath.)
2. What are some of the themes of the novel ? (Plagiarism, Jewish heritage). How thoroughly does the author develop these themes?  
  
(Mentioned a few times - seem unfinished - glossed over - go nowhere>)
3. What is the significance of the time(1960) in which the novel takes place?  
  
(A time of relative calm before Vietnam, Kennedy assassination, and the Civil Rights Revolution.)
4. Why is writing the most important activity in this prestigious East coast prep school? Would this be true in prep schools today?
5. Hemingway tells the boys that honesty and selfawareness are required to write important literature. In what ways did the protagonist have difficulty in being honest with himself?
6. Each of the three writers {Robert Frost, Ayn Rand and Ernest Hemingway} was able to create something authentic in their writing. Yet, each is also somewhat of a phony. Did they help the students to become better writers with their advice?
7. How well does the author develop the characters? Are they credible? Real? Connected with each other? From what you know about them, is their behavior predictable?
8. Does the plot hold your interest? Is it dramatic? Does it excite emotion?

- \* 9. When the main character is confronted with the charge of harassing a staff member by whistling the Horst Wessel tune, he could easily have cleared himself of evil intent by disclosing his Jewish background. Why did he not do so?
- \* 10. The main character appears to have identified so strongly with the plagiarized story that he makes it his own.
- Is this plausible?
- Can the power of literature be so great that it can cause a person to act in ways that are uncharacteristic of that person's normal behavior pattern?
- \* 11. Does the author make too little of the main character's plagiarism? Does the betrayal have any real significance?
- \* 12. The protagonist types out Hemingway's stories in the hope that it will stimulate his own creative juices? In the Louvre, I saw young artists copying master pieces. Is this a legitimate teaching technique for a hopeful writer?
- 13.. The author devotes almost the entire last chapter to a relatively minor character in the story, the Dean (Makepeace). In what way are the Dean and the main character interconnected?

What message does the author appear to be telling us in the Dean's story?

CODA





## Old School

Written by Tobias Wolff  
**ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

PEN/Faulkner Award Finalist

National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist

*Times* Notable Book

*New York*

Winner of the Northern California Book Award in Fiction

"Ingenious. . . A tour de force. . . Achieves a real profundity." *The*

*Boston Globe*

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### ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Old School** takes place at a prestigious private school for boys in the academic year of 1960–1961. The narrator, a scholarship boy whose mother has died, is determined to keep his classmates from knowing anything about his family or his background (he has recently discovered that his father is Jewish). He strives to fit in with the prevailing ethos of effortless grace, confidence, and self-possession that the more privileged boys display. For all of his uncertainty about himself, he possesses a true passion for literature and writing that is nurtured by the culture of the school. Frequent writing competitions, in which the winner earns an audience with visiting luminaries like Robert Frost and Ayn Rand, keep the rivalry among aspiring writers at a high pitch. In the final competition of the boy's senior year, his idol Ernest Hemingway is to be the judge and visitor. He will do anything—and risk everything—to win.

In this extraordinary story of a boy's struggle to become a writer, Wolff illuminates the profound uncertainties of adolescence as well as the difficult process of becoming oneself. **Old School** is searing in its examination of the relationship between truth and lies; it is a story the reader won't soon forget.

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the effect of the first-person narrative style Wolff has chosen for this novel? What kinds of information—or perspectives—does the reader have access to? On the other hand, what kinds of information does first-person narration deny the reader? What terms might describe the narrator's voice? Why is this narrative style so appropriate for this story?
2. About his desire to win the competition that would give him an audience with Robert Frost, the narrator says, "My aspirations 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" [p. 7]. Is his aspiration admirable? What does the boy not understand about how one becomes a writer? How seriously does he work at acquiring the skills of his craft?
3. In social interactions between boys at the school, much is left unsaid. Why is this? Consider the relationship between the narrator and his roommate Bill White [pp. 11–13, 139–40]. What problems of interpretation arise when so little talking is done? Why is this relationship so problematic?

4. During his visit to Gershon to explain his mistake in whistling the Nazi marching tune, the boy decides not to confide the fact that his father is Jewish. He thinks, "I'd let Gershon think the worst of me before I would claim any connection to him, or implicate myself in the fate that had beached him in this room. Why would I want to talk my way into his unlucky tribe?" [p. 23]. What does this episod—including his meeting with the headmaster—tell us about the narrator?

5. Very early on, the narrator tells us that the school adhered informally "to a system of honors that valued nothing you hadn't done for yourself." He goes on to say "Dean Makepeace had been a friend of Hemingway's during World War I and was said to have served as the model for Jake's fishing buddy Bill in **The Sun Also Rises**" [p. 4]. What seems here like casual exposition is seen later to be foreshadowing, linking the acts of deception committed by the boy and the headmaster. What other examples do you find of Wolff's careful attention to the structure of the novel?

6. Having related his experience of Frost's poem "After Apple-Picking," the headmaster tells the boys, "Make no mistake . . . a true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life" [p. 47]. Why is writing dangerous in this novel, and for whom?

7. Reading **The Fountainhead**, the narrator says, "I was discovering the force of my will. . . . I understood that nothing stood between me and my greatest desires—nothing between me and greatness itself—but the temptation to doubt my will and bow to counsels of moderation, expedience, and conventional morality, and shrink into the long, slow death of respectability" [p. 68]. Why does Ayn Rand's writing have such a powerful effect on him, and why does his initial excitement fade upon actually meeting the author? The boy also learns an important lesson when he rereads the stories of Hemingway, whom Ayn Rand has attacked as a creator of "weak, defeated people" [p. 84]. What does he realize, and how is this lesson important for what happens later [pp. 95–99]?

8. As he looks toward graduation, the narrator says it was a "dream that produced the school, not merely English-envy but the yearning for a chivalric world apart from the din of scandal and cheap dispute, the hustles and schemes of modernity itself. As I recognized this dream I also sensed its futility, but so what? . . . With still a month to graduation I was already damp with nostalgia" [p. 134]. If literature plays a critical role in both the school's chivalric ideal and in the nostalgia the narrator feels, is literature an alternate world in which the narrator would prefer to exist? What is ironic about the above passage?

9. **Old School** is in large part an examination of the process by which a boy tries to become the person he most desires to be. What does Wolff seem to suggest about the process of self-formation and the fragility of the ego?

10. What is most impressive about the story "Summer Dance" and why does it appeal to the boy so powerfully? Why in typing it does he feel "an intuition of gracious release" [p. 126]? Is this his moment of learning how to "begin to write truly" [p. 126]? Why is it important that he never considers his submission of the story—with slight changes—a deliberate act of plagiarism?

11. The competitors for literary awards are all indebted to other writers: "All of us owed someone, Hemingway or Cummings or Kerouac—or all of them, and more. We wouldn't have admitted to it but the knowledge was surely there, because imitation was the only charge we never brought against the submissions we mocked so cruelly" [p. 14]. Can it sometimes be difficult to draw a line between healthy imitation and plagiarism? Is the school's harsh response to the boy's use of another writer's story unfair?

12. Speaking of **Old School** in an interview, Tobias Wolff said, "For this novel to work, the reader has to believe in these boys becoming so madly passionate and competitive about this writing business. That can only happen when there is a complete failure of

perspective, which requires a very enclosed world, like an army or a priesthood. Great mistakes can be made because the view becomes so narrow." How does Wolff create this narrowed perspective? How do his choices of what to describe and what not to describe shape the reader's perspective on the novel's events? To what degree does the reader's perspective merge with the narrator's?

13. Tobias Wolff gives his readers an intimate view of his main character's faults. How does your response to the boy change as the novel proceeds? What is the effect, particularly, of the last few chapters?

14. In his review of the novel, Chris Bohjalian noted, "Virtually every chapter in the novel could stand alone as a short story" (*The Boston Globe*, 4 Jan 2004, C7). Discuss Wolff's attention to the dramatic tension and the formal structure of each chapter, and decide whether you agree with Bohjalian's assessment that the novel is informed by Wolff's experience as a master of the short story.

15. The novel's epigraph, from a poem by Mark Strand, end with "the truth lies like nothing else and I love the truth." How does the epigraph relate to the narrator's confusion and his conflicts with himself?

16. How does the narrator's meeting with Susan Friedman emphasize the difference between their characters and their approaches to the meaning and purposes of writing? Who is the more mature person? Each of them embodies certain ideals. What are they and what is their essential difference?

17. The book's final chapter departs from the narrator's story and moves to Mr. Ramsey's story about Dean Makepeace, who had allowed himself to be thought of as a friend of Hemingway. How does this story work as a coda to the novel? What is the effect of the shift in perspective?

18. In what ways is humor expressed in this novel, and what kind of humor is it? What situations and descriptions are comical?

19. If you have read Tobias Wolff's memoir **This Boy's Life**, how would you compare it to **Old School**? What is the difference between memoir and fiction, and how does this question relate to the truth/lies dilemma presented by **Old School**?

## SUGGESTED READING

Raymond Carver, **What We Talk About When We Talk About Love: Stories**; John Cheever, **The Stories of John Cheever**; J. M. Coetzee, **Boyhood: Scenes from a Provincial Life**; F. Scott Fitzgerald, **The Great Gatsby**; Richard Ford, **Rock Springs**; Ernest Hemingway, **In Our Time**; James Hilton, **Goodbye Mister Chips**; James Joyce, **A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**; John Knowles, **A Separate Peace**; Mary McCarthy, **Memories of a Catholic Girlhood**; Anthony Powell, **A Dance to the Music of Time**; Evelyn Waugh, **Brideshead Revisited**, Richard Yates, **A Good School**.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1945, Tobias Wolff grew up in Washington State, attended the Hill School in Pennsylvania, and served in Vietnam. He received a B.A. from Oxford University and an M.A. from Stanford University, where he now teaches. He has edited **The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories**, **Best American Short Stories**, and **A Doctor's Visit: The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov**. He has received the Rea Award for excellence in the short story, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. He lives in northern California.



Born in Alabama in 1945, Tobias Wolff traveled the country with his peripatetic mother, finally coming to ground in Washington State, where he grew up. He attended the Hill School in Pennsylvania until he was expelled for repeated failures in mathematics in his final year, whereupon he joined the Army. He spent four years as a paratrooper, including a tour in Vietnam. Following his discharge he attended Oxford University in England, where he received a First Class Honours degree in English in 1972. Returning to the United States, he worked variously as a reporter, a teacher, a night watchman and a waiter before receiving a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing at Stanford University in 1975. He is currently Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods Professor in the Humanities at Stanford, where he lives with his wife Catherine. They have three children.

Tobias Wolff's books include the memoirs *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*; the short novel *The Barracks Thief*; three collections of stories, *In The Garden of the North American Martyrs*, *Back in the World*, and *The Night in Question*; and, most recently, the novel *Old School*. He has also edited several anthologies, among them *Best American Short Stories*; *A Doctor's Visit: The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov*, and *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Stories*. His work is translated widely and has received numerous awards, including the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the Rea Award for Excellence in the Short Story, and the Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

contemp | world | latin | wild west | history | humorous | mystery | sleuths | thriller | beyond  
reality | nonfiction

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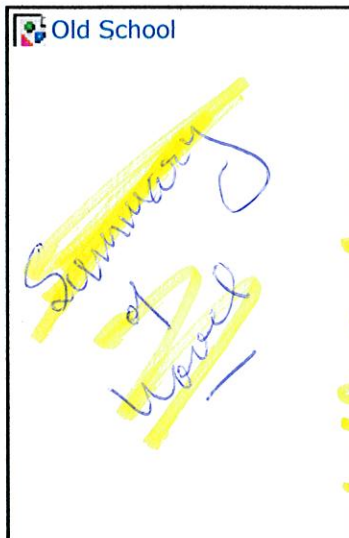
# Tobias Wolff



## "Old School"

(Reviewed by [Mary Whipple](#) NOV 11, 2003)

"The life that produces writing can't be written about. It is a life carried on without the knowledge even of the writer, below the mind's business and noise, in deep unlit shafts where phantom messengers struggle toward us, killing one another along the way; and when a few survivors break through to our attention they are received as blandly as waiters bringing more coffee."



In this homage to literature, the literary life, and the power of literature to influence a reader's life, Tobias Wolff focuses his attention on a small New England prep school in 1962, a school in which students live and breathe "the writing life." An unnamed speaker is the first-person narrator, a student whose background is a bit different from most of his wealthier, East Coast classmates. He is from Seattle, from a broken home, with a Jewish father with whom he lives but to whom he is not close, and a Roman Catholic mother who has

remarried and lives elsewhere. He is not wealthy, but at school he has learned to "walk the walk and talk the talk" as if he were, simply not mentioning enough about his background to raise any questions.

His prep school, for which he has a full scholarship, focuses on liberal arts, with writing and literature consuming most of the attention of the speaker, his friends, and the faculty to whom we are introduced. The headmaster has studied with Robert Frost and has published his own book of poetry. The Dean is thought to have been a friend of Ernest Hemingway during World War I, and school tradition has it that he was the model for Jake's fishing buddy, Bill, in *The Sun Also Rises*. To the boys, the English Department is "a kind of chivalric order," where they practice the "ritual swordplay of their speech." The editorship of the school's literary magazine, *Troubadour*, is a prestigious position, and the best writers in the senior class, including the speaker, serve on its editorial board, evaluating and choosing the writing for the magazine.

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Classic Literature II