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Monday, March 14, 2016

**Wolf Mouth Book Event with author John Smolens**

The Historical Society of Greater Lansing and Everybody Reads Books is hosting a discussion and book signing with Upper Peninsula author John Smolens for his new book *Wolf's Mouth* at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday, March 17 at Everybody Reads Books, 2019 Michigan Ave.

Smolens, who is the author of nine works of fiction, has written an epic historical novel revolving around the escape of a German Prisoner of War from one of Michigan's many POW camps during WWII.

The prisoner, with the help of a local woman, escapes to Detroit where many years later his past comes back with a vengeance as the former camp commandant tracks him with a sentence of death.

During World War II there were several prisoner of war camps in Michigan, including five in the Upper Peninsula and four in the Lower Peninsular, including nearby Owosso. There were multiple escapees, including one upon which Smolen has built his book.

Smolens will provide a history of the camps and the work that prisoners did there.

Smolens, who was for years a professor of English at Northern Michigan University, lives in Marquette, MI. His books include *Cold*, *Quarantine*, and *The Schoolmaster's Daughter*.

Smolens is Professor Emeritus and former director of the MFA program in creative writing at Northern Michigan University. During the past three decades he has taught at Michigan State University, Western Michigan University, as well as NMU, where he has been the recipient of the Distinguished Faculty Award.

In 2010 he received the Michigan Author of the Year Award from the Michigan Library Association.

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## Wolf's Mouth

**John Smolens**

Michigan State University Press (Feb 1, 2016)

Hardcover \$26.95 (267pp)

978-1-61186-197-6

*This breathlessly paced, plot-driven action novel covers a wide range of historical, geographical, and emotional ground.*

With *Wolf's Mouth*, John Smolens offers suspense, intricate plotting, sweeping historical subjects, violence, love, and war. This impressive array of action, introspection, and international settings has something for everyone.

Captain Francesco Verdi is an officer in the Italian army who, at the start of the book, has just been captured by the Allies. It is 1944, and he is getting accustomed to chopping down trees on Michigan's Upper Peninsula in a prisoner-of-war camp with surprisingly comfortable lodging and good food. He even captains the camp's soccer team. But the Nazis are still in charge; fellow prisoner Kommandant Vogel is in perfect control, and ruthless. Verdi is one of few non-German POWs; when Vogel threatens his life, Verdi knows he is in real danger. Happily, two Italian women in the local town sympathize. By 1956, the protagonist is known as Frank Green, happily married to Claire and apparently doing well, with his own business in Detroit. But certain figures from his past are still at large, and an INS agent has been following him. Several vicious murders of other European immigrants nearby seem to be sending a message to Frank, and he realizes the past is not behind him.

From the Upper Peninsula to Detroit, from Italy to Berlin, Smolens offers evocative settings, both urban and natural. Frank, Claire, and the many supporting characters are likable, if not terribly deeply developed. Dialogue and characters are credible but not a central feature; *Wolf's Mouth* is very much a plot-driven novel, and in this area, excels. The action winds and weaves, covering an astonishing range of historical, geographical, and emotional ground. Romance and violence are well represented; other themes include the experiences of immigrants, survivors, and soldiers in peacetime; the role of an individual's past in determining his future; and the necessity of revenge. Deceptively breathless pacing begs for a single-session read.

*Wolf's Mouth* achieves all-around success as suspense, action, love story, and drama combined with an international storyline for dynamic entertainment and historical relevance.

JULIA JENKINS (Spring 2016)

*Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The author of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the author for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.*

Fiction

Michigan State University Press (<http://msupress.org>), February 2016

ISBN-13: 978-61186-197-6

Hardcover: 267pp; \$26.95

Review by Olive Mullet

John Smolens, a Marquette, Michigan writer, has written three novels set in the UP. The first, *Cold*, was about an escaped convict and his latest, *Wolf's Mouth*, has to do with an Italian prisoner who escapes from a POW camp in Au Train, near Munising. Prisoners of war numbered 400,000 in camps across the U.S., and more than one camp existed in the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan. This well-written novel offers fascinating information about the camps and especially how they were run, but is also a thriller with insights into human nature. *Professor of English at Northern MI for years*

The human nature insights start with Smolens's first person narration through the successful creation of a young Italian officer's view of America and the camp. His name Francesco Guiseppe Verdi comes from being a distant relative of the famous opera composer, though he has no musical talent himself. Au Train camp, unlike other camps doing farm labor, produced lumber, the prisoners: "driven by hunger, thirst, physical exertion, weariness. Time moved forward but remained stationary . . . ."

The camp prisoners are naïve about America. Frank, as he comes to call himself, knows where Boston is, because that's where he disembarked in 1944 after being captured by the Allies, and having traveled farther than he ever had in Italy, has some sense of the vastness of the United States. The Au Train camp Kommandant, however, is sure that New York has been destroyed, and some prisoners think San Francisco is in Florida.

Being in an unfamiliar place inevitably brings feelings of homesickness: Frank finds the UP buildings uglier than Mussolini's and is sure that "though the Allies were going to win the war, America could not last because it was built out of wood." Though the Au Train camp is more comfortable than some across the States, Frank dislikes the 3.2% beer for its weakness and yearns for pasta over the constant diet of venison. Mostly he doesn't understand why people stay in this forbidding country unless they have to.

"Wolf's Mouth," the novel's title, derives from an Italian saying, the equivalent of our odd expression "break a leg" for wishing good luck on the stage. The wolf, however, also suggests vulnerability confronting the Nazi Kommandant Vogel—head of the camp—and the wilderness, which is all the prisoners know of America. It comes to mean a talisman of luck in the face of danger.

The danger and thriller part of this story begins when Frank runs away from the camp and his own planned execution by Vogel who devises the most horrific deaths for non-Nazis. He defines his fearful situation in a more universal perspective:

A weekday morning—everything was business as usual, but something about it reminded me of the deaf mutes. Body language spoke volumes. Nobody quite looked at anybody else . . . But we are all strange. No matter what life—or lives—we lead, we're all strangers.

The odyssey he takes is fraught with danger. Frank knows he's hunted also by the American INS; even when he settles he cannot relax. Freedom is not freedom, nor can he be himself. But in his terrors he is always insightful. The end of the story comes full circle to the woods of northern Michigan and to Frank's beginning struggles. We see his vulnerability and fear in the extreme conditions of his life and escape.

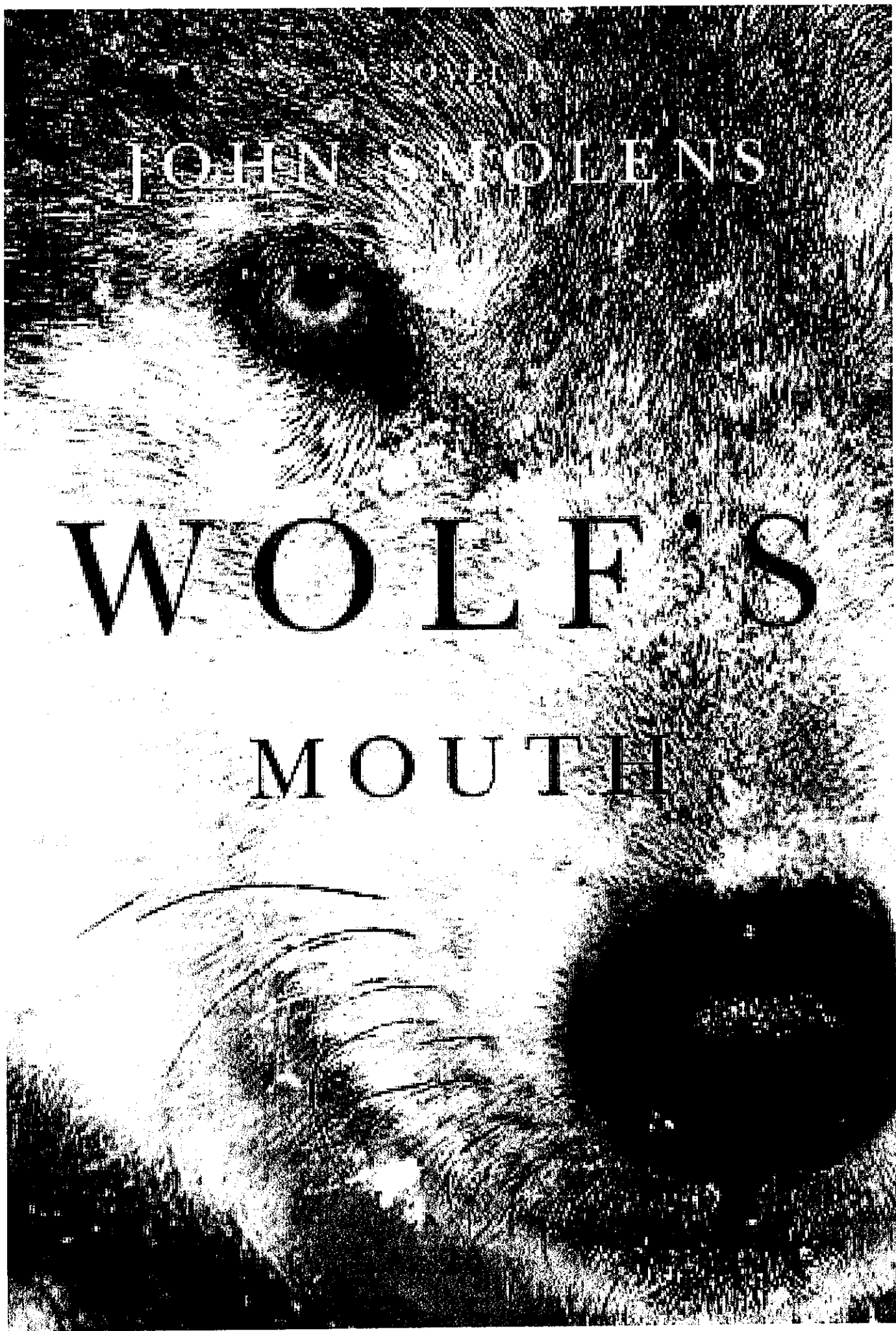
In *Wolf's Mouth*, Smolen gives a stock Nazi villain more basis in reality than usual, and the end of Vogel and his plans go beyond the stereotype. With a fresh setting to the Nazi story, this page-turner certainly offers much about Michigan. A good option for next year's Michigan Read.

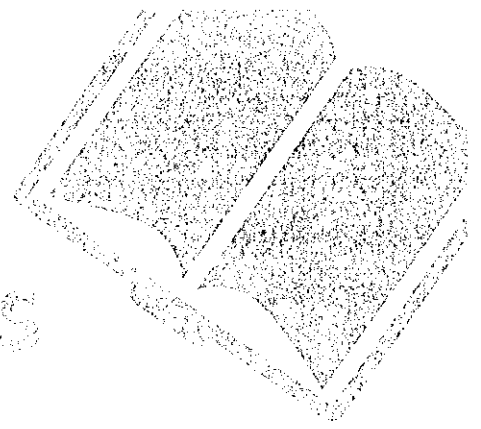
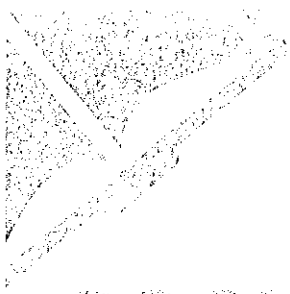
Review Posted on June 02, 2016

JOHN MOLENS

WOLF'S

MOUTH



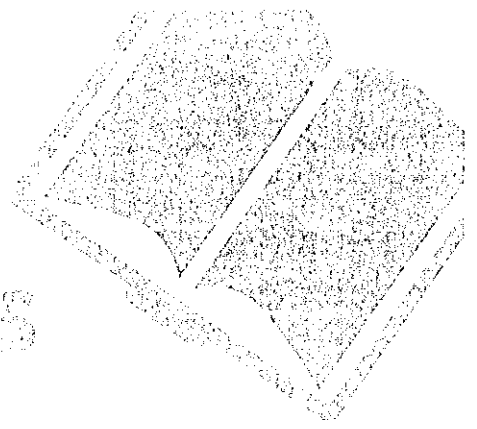
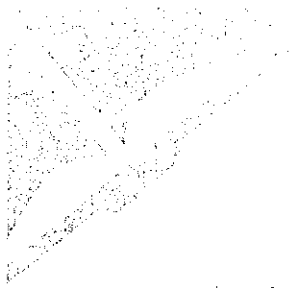


# BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. What did you like best about this book?
2. What did you like least about this book?
3. What other books did this remind you of?
4. Which characters in the book did you like best?
5. Which characters did you like least?
6. If you were making a movie of this book, who would you cast?
7. Share a favorite quote from the book. Why did this quote stand out?
8. What other books by this author have you read? How did they compare to this book?
9. Would you read another book by this author? Why or why not?
10. What feelings did this book evoke for you?
11. What did you think of the book's length? If it's too long, what would you cut? If too short, what would you add?
12. What songs does this book make you think of? Create a book group playlist together!
13. If you got the chance to ask the author of this book one question, what would it be?
14. Which character in the book would you most like to meet?
15. Which places in the book would you most like to visit?
16. What do you think of the book's title? How does it relate to the book's contents? What other title might you choose?
17. What do you think of the book's cover? How well does it convey what the book is about? If the book has been published with different covers, which one do you like best?
18. What do you think the author's purpose was in writing this book? What ideas was he or she trying to get across?
19. How original and unique was this book?
20. If you could hear this same story from another person's point of view, who would you choose?
21. What artist would you choose to illustrate this book? What kinds of illustrations would you include?





# BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

## FOR FICTION

22. Did this book seem realistic?
23. How well do you think the author built the world in the book?
24. Did the characters seem believable to you? Did they remind you of anyone?
25. Did the book's pace seem too fast/too slow/just right?
26. If you were to write fanfic about this book, what kind of story would you want to tell?

## FOR NONFICTION

27. What did you already know about this book's subject before you read this book?
28. What new things did you learn?
29. What questions do you still have?
30. What else have you read on this topic, and would you recommend these books to others?
31. What do you think about the author's research? Was it easy to see where the author got his or her information? Were the sources credible?

## FOR MEMOIR

32. What aspects of the author's story could you most relate to?
33. How honest do you think the author was being?
34. What gaps do you wish the author had filled in? Were there points where you thought he shared too much?
35. Think about the other people in the book besides the author. How would you feel to have been depicted in this way?
36. Why do you think the author chose to tell this story?

## FOR SHORT STORIES/ESSAYS

37. Which short story/essay did you like best?
38. Which short story/essay did you like least?
39. What similarities do these stories share? How do they tie together?
40. Do you think any of the stories could be expanded into a full-length book?

