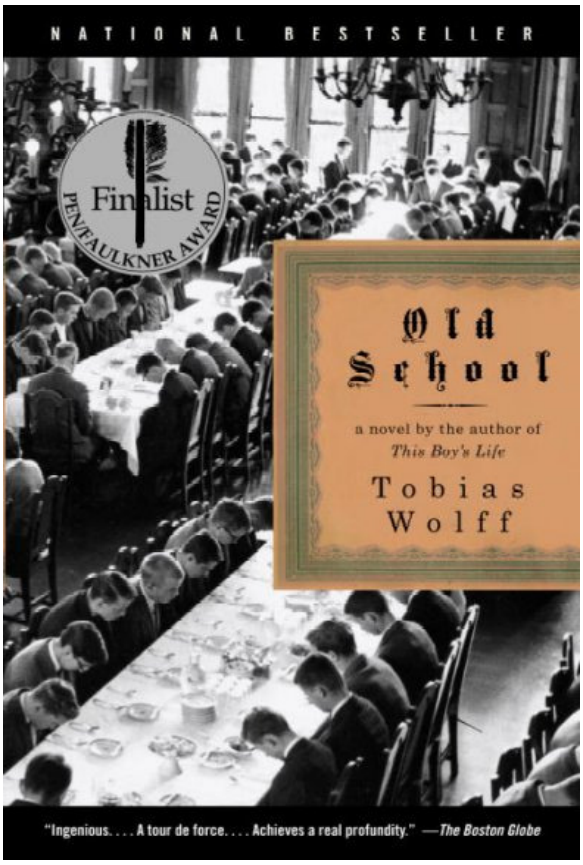


Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on “catalog”
- In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested 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?

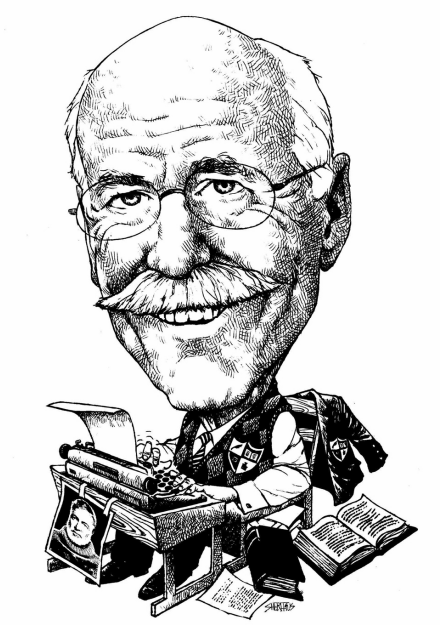
11. Over the course of the novel, the narrator writes two letters to girls. The circumstances differ, but he has the same reaction after sending each letter. What does this pattern of behavior reveal about his personality?

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"?

(Questions from the NEA The Big Read website)



Historical Context for *Old School* (www.neabigread.org)

1940s
Robert Frost wins Pulitzer Prize for poetry and Ayn Rand publishes *The Fountainhead*, 1943.
Tobias Wolff is born on June 19, 1945, in Birmingham, Alabama.
World War II ends, August 1945.
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 stepfather live in Washington State.
Ernest Hemingway wins the Nobel Prize in Literature, 1954.
The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; 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, 1961. Robert Frost dies, 1963.

1970s
The last U.S. combat troops withdraw from Vietnam, 1973.
Wolff earns master's degree, marries, publishes his first book, 1975.
Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese, 1975.

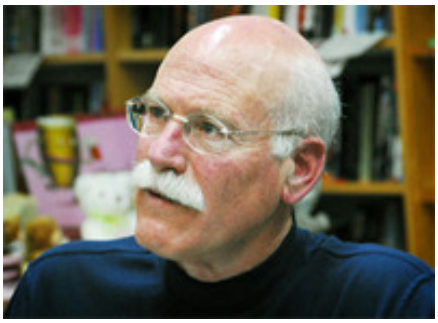
1980s
Wolff teaches at Syracuse University; he publishes a novella, two collections of stories, and his memoir *This Boy's Life*.
Ground is broken for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, 1982.
Ayn Rand dies, 1982.

1990s
Wolff begins teaching at Stanford; publishes his Vietnam memoir and his third volume of short stories.

The film version of *This Boy's Life*, starring Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Ellen Barkin, is released in 1993.
The U.S. restores diplomatic ties with Vietnam, 1995.

2000s
April 5, 2005, marks the 30th anniversary of Vietnam War end.
Wolff publishes *Old School* (2003) and *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories* (2008).

Author Bio: Tobias Wolff



Source: *www.neabigread.org*.

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.

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, PA. 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 education 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.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

★ Wolff, Tobias. Old School. New York: Knopf, 2003.

A scholarship boy at a New England prep school grapples with literary ambition and insecurity in this lucid, deceptively sedate novel, set in the early 1960s and narrated by the unnamed protagonist from the vantage point of adulthood. Each year, the school hosts a number of visiting writers, and the boys in the top form are allowed to compete for a private audience by composing a poem or story. The narrator

judges the skills of his competitors, avidly exposing his classmates' weaknesses and calculating their potential ("I knew better than to write George off.... He could win.... Bill was a contender"). His own chances are hurt by his inability to be honest with himself and examine his ambivalent feelings about his Jewish roots. After failing to win audiences with Robert Frost and Ayn Rand, he is determined to be chosen by the last and best guest, legendary Ernest Hemingway. The anxiety of influence afflicts all the boys, but in crafting his final literary offering, the narrator discovers inspiration in imitation, finding his voice in someone else's. The novel's candid, retrospective narration ruefully depicts its protagonist's retreat further and further behind his public facade ("I'd been absorbed so far into my performance that nothing else came naturally"). Beneath its staid trappings, this is a sharply ironic novel, in which love of literature is counterbalanced by bitter disappointment (as one character bluntly puts it, "[Writing] just cuts you off and makes you selfish and doesn't really do any good"). Wolff, an acclaimed short story writer (*The Night in Question*, etc.) and author of the memoir *This Boy's Life*, here offers a delicate, pointed meditation on the treacherous charms of art.

"Not a word is wasted in this spare, brilliant novel about the way that reading changes and forms our lives, and about how one learns to become a writer--and a conscious human being." (**Francine Prose, People***)*

"A compact marvel of a book, with its tale of a paradise gained and lost, its study of a young man's emerging character and mind, and its look at the subtlest workings of class-consciousness and prejudice in an idyllic, ideal-driven setting. [*Old School*] takes as its subject the slippery nature of truth and fiction, honesty and dishonesty, sound judgment and seductive delusion. As such, it couldn't be bettered." (**Michael Upchurch, Seattle Times***)*

Suggested Related Reading

The Passion of Ayn Rand, by Barbara Branden.

Ayn Rand, by Jeff Britting.

Ernest Hemingway and His World, by Anthony Burgess.

Looking for Alaska, by John Green.

A Separate Peace, by John Knowles.

Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism, by Thomas Mallon.

Robert Frost: A Life, by Jay Parini.

Testimony: a novel, by Anita Shreve.

Prep: a novel, by Curtis Sittenfeld.

The Duke of Deception: Memories of my Father, by Geoffrey Wolff.

In the Garden of the North American Martyrs: A Collection of Short Stories, by Tobias Wolff.

Web Resources

NEA Big Read website: http://www.neabigread.org/books/oldschool/readers02.php

Interview with Wolff: http://nadineoregan.wordpress.com/2008/07/06/tobias-wolff-interview-sbp/

NPR interview about *Old School*: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1498273 (audio)

The Atlantic interview about *Old School*: http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200311u/int2003-11-12

Random House website (includes educational materials): http://tinyurl.com/mu2v64