This Boy’s Life
By Tobias Wolff
Teaching notes prepared by Warren Whitney
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INTRODUCTION

As a memoir of growing up in the United States in the fifties, This Boy’s Life provides a necessary correction to the nostalgia and sentimental idealisation that had come to define the popular image of the fifties in film and television representations. An almost systematic reconstruction of the fifties began to happen after the seventies. This can be readily explained on one level as the antidote to the sixties, that permissive and tumultuous decade which had just ended, and the legitimation crisis that it had come to express. A return to the simpler, more innocent values of the earlier period became increasingly both a political mantra or wish fulfilment fantasy among politicians and a potent seam of popular narratives ranging from films such as American Graffiti and Grease, to TV shows such as Happy Days. For the seventies and eighties, decades of economic and political decline in the United States following the cataclysm of the Vietnam War, the fifties came to represent a time of perennial American values and dreams of an unlimited future, a future that had yet to face the reality of how American power was actually exercised in the world and the responses of Americans themselves to this newly discovered reality.

Published in 1989 This Boy’s Life was very quickly recognised as a ground-breaking text. Presented as a memoir, it reads like a novel, with all the imaginative richness of a fully realised piece of narrative fiction. While the two texts may appear to have very little in common, This Boy’s Life and Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood both enjoy the distinction of being works of non-fiction that have successfully incorporated the techniques of fictional narration into their modes of story-telling, enhancing the truth of the real experiences they seek to describe. Wolff was already a highly accomplished writer of short stories; his work was often compared to the stories of Raymond Carver and Richard Ford, a group who famously became known as ‘dirty realists’. This group represented what was claimed to be a particularly modern form of realist fiction, focused on describing the contemporary world in all its minute yet revealing details. All three writers were seen to possess a special interest in the lives of ordinary individuals who commonly experienced disappointment, regret and the failure of their dreams. The dirty realists were regarded among some critics as a refreshing corrective to the excesses of literary postmodernism and the retreat of fiction to the arcane interests of academic style. This Boy’s Life arrived as confirmation that realist writing was still a vibrant tradition and capable of staking its own claim to literary relevance.

Wolff’s memoir certainly struck an immediately responsive chord with readers. In some ways it resembles other classic works that reconstruct the childhood of the author such as Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Joyce’s text is a novel, however autobiographical we may know it to be, and Stephen Daedalus is a character created to serve the purposes of the fictional story, with all its mythic and epic intentions. While it may often beguile the reader with its literary style, lyrical imagery and richly developed point of view, Wolff’s text remains a work of non-fiction; the events it recounts are real not invented, as the author himself has stressed. The language and tone of the narrative express a distinctly fictional quality in the depth of feeling that Wolff is able to generate as he recalls the story of his childhood and the series of emblematic experiences that appear to unfold with the gravity and inevitability of fate. Perhaps the area in which Wolff’s memoir comes closest to resembling a work of realist fiction is in its intense examination of the
feelings of the narrator as a child. There is a quality of honesty, even in moments of his most explicit self-deception and the deception of those around him, when Jack describes his frequently confused self-awareness of trying to appear as one thing while all the while feeling something very different, a gap between the projected fantasy and the all too uncomfortable reality of knowing that this was a lie, a fabrication, an attempt to deceive. This memoir crosses into the time-honoured territory of the novel, with its sustained investigation of the processes of creating a self, of inventing a personality, a subjectivity, an identity that appears desirable and sustainable, an identity that will enable the protagonist to survive the uncertainties of experience.

Wolff’s memories of his childhood, unlike much popular culture that reconstructs the recent past, resist the temptation to succumb to what Frederic Jameson terms a ‘nostalgia for the present’. This nostalgia is a condition that attempts to project the past as in fact our own present, thereby evoking the present as perpetually continuous, legitimating the present as the only possible history and therefore ruling out any possibility of social change. This Boy’s Life is an extremely effective antidote to such a condition not merely because it avoids nostalgia of the type mentioned but because Wolff reminds his readers of the strangeness and difference of the past, particularly one’s own past. He reminds us, too, that while we may return to the past through acts of remembrance, even such attempts as those described in this text are destined to retrieve the past as something distant, capable of being re-discovered only through the prodigious exercise of memory and the investigation of a nascent self who has ceased to exist and who can only ever be summoned back to the present through the resuscitated feelings of the narrator, who attempts to describe them but never in the hope of fully explaining their origins or sense. The ‘truth’ that Wolff’s language is most commonly concerned with is the truth of an accurate retrieval, even when that appears unflattering or damning of his own earlier self, revealing the very purpose or function of the memoir—to locate and situate his feelings and experiences in the life of the child the narrator once was.

This Boy’s Life recounts the story of a boy and his mother adrift in America in the mid-fifties, seeking a better life and responding to the climate of optimism and confidence prevailing at the time. Sharing a deeply felt sense of loyalty, protectiveness and dependence, mother and son are also united in their common sensitivity to the collective social messages of hopefulness, opportunity and the dream of re-invention that defined the fifties, as these messages still define American culture today. The opening episode that describes their flight to Utah to get in on the ‘uranium rush’ is characteristic of this seemingly innocent belief in the possibility of re-inventing yourself if you simply chase your dreams and refuse to be deterred. Wolff captures this hypnotic American dream of re-invention that mother and son both openly and secretly share. In the face of cruelty, abuse, abandonment and betrayal they search for the change of luck that will usher in a new life, a new set of possibilities. Rosemary and Toby/Jack are conjoined in this belief in the power of personal transformation and change. In this they are deeply sympathetic characters who remind us of the necessity of such hopes, but also of how differently such hopes are ultimately experienced by children and the adult selves they become.
WAYS INTO THE TEXT

A Fifties childhood

Novels such as Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and J.D. Salinger’s *A Catcher in the Rye* explore a particular social mood of the fifties, an oppressive atmosphere of rigid expectations, a need to conform to specific gender roles, an intolerance of difference or perceived non-conformity and the inevitable personal cost of suppressing one’s true identity. Both novels, famously, examine the ‘breakdowns’ of their adolescent protagonists and see in these episodes of vulnerability the refusal of young people to accept the ‘one dimensional’ reality of their parents. These are narratives written in close proximity to the social pressures they describe and are therefore written in a style of greater immediacy than Wolff’s far more retrospective memoir. Students could read extracts from these novels as an exercise in comparing the different techniques of fictional narration and a memoir, including the way Wolff treats his child protagonist in contrast with the ways a novelist might describe the experiences of a fictional character.

Students could read Edmund White’s novel *A Boy’s Own Story*. Published prior to Wolff’s memoir, this novel examines the childhood and adolescence of a gay character and the complex ways in which he must negotiate his identity in a social milieu that considers his sexuality to be a form of mental illness. On the other hand, Australian writer Robert Dessaix’s autobiographical text *My Mother’s Disgrace* provides a completely different view of a childhood in the fifties. ‘Australia in the 1950s’ was said to be ‘a stuffy, sexist, repressed, puritanical society’ but ‘I didn’t experience it as such’, Dessaix says. (p. 87).

Students could also read extracts from Australian autobiographical texts such as *Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung, *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* Ruby Langford Ginibi, or Raimond Gaita’s work, to discuss different approaches to the writing of memoirs, including differences according to gender, ethnic or sexual identities.

Social attitudes and dominant values

After having read some extracts from other texts from and about the fifties, students may be in a better position to begin discussing the specific values that defined the period and looking at how these are described and viewed in Wolff’s narrative. The fifties are at risk of appearing as an extremely monolithic decade, whether viewed in either affirmative or negative terms. That is to say, viewed according to one set of ideological values the fifties may be presented as a golden age of social stability, prosperity, opportunity, security and compliance with authority and prevailing social attitudes. This is clearly the ‘affirmative’ view. The other perspective might describe the era as one of generalised social intolerance, a time when racial bigotry, intense social repression and violent segregation defined life in the United States; when sexuality was policed and medicalised according to narrow definitions of normality and when governments could confidently assume the consent of their constituents in any matter of foreign intervention. This is the negative critique of the fifties as a period about to be swept away by the revolutionary energies of the next decade.

Wolff’s narrative is not a general survey of fifties social history, its key events or turning points, yet history does keep lurching into view quite unexpectedly, as when
Rosemary goes to work for the Kennedy campaign in 1960 or when, in the text’s most dramatic portent of the future, Jack decides to enlist on the eve of expansion of the Vietnam War, a subject which will form the basis of Wolff’s next memoir, In Pharaoh’s Army. So, while the larger events of contemporary history are dimly viewed on the horizon of the narrative, Wolff still examines in quite forensic detail the ideological texture of the times. Just one example suffices to illustrate this: the text is full of references to guns and gun culture. The two men that Rosemary becomes involved with are both hunters and war veterans, and both are fascinated with guns and projecting their own lethal prowess with these weapons. Rosemary herself is a crack shot, boasts that she is a dues paying member of the National Rifle Association and advocates for something like an equal opportunity approach to women competing in shooting competitions. Jack’s most treasured possession is a Winchester rifle, which Dwight sells in one of his ritual acts of sadistic cruelty, thus robbing him of this talismanic object. The narrative is constantly exploring the close connection between guns and masculinity or ‘manliness’ as the idea would have been termed in the fifties. Yet the text makes no overt criticism of this culture and certainly cannot be read as expressing any explicit view that this culture of widespread gun ownership can be seen to explain any particular negative traits of the era or of the individuals themselves. Rosemary is a highly proficient user of firearms and is not seen to suffer any particular character defects because of this. Wolff does present this ‘culture’ as one of the defining aspects of Jack’s experience and a possible explanation for later decisions that he makes, such as enlisting in the military, though there are clearly other reasons provided. However the values attached to this seemingly innocent worship of guns stand in direct contrast to the way gun ownership is viewed by some Americans today, amidst the now common phenomena of mass civilian shootings.

Students might discuss other examples of social values, in Australia and in the United States, that were different in the fifties from contemporary views of similar matters. This may help them appreciate how Wolff maps out the social terrain of his own childhood as different from the present time.

**Paris Review interview with Tobias Wolff**

Students will benefit greatly from reading this wonderfully suggestive interview in the famous Paris Review series. Wolff speaks with candour and intelligence about his writing career, personal experience, and *This Boy’s Life*, his most ‘successful’ book. Wolff explains in more detail how the period of his childhood described in *This Boy’s Life* formed a part of a much longer search for purpose, fulfilment and the sense of self. The interview provides readers with a highly useful account of what followed the events of the book and how the young character of Toby/Jack eventually found his identity as a highly respected author of fiction and memoir.

**The stories of Tobias Wolff**

Without wanting to suggest that Wolff’s memoir of his troubled childhood explains all of his later concerns as a writer, or that the memoir itself can be read as some master key to understanding his fictional work, there is no doubt that students will benefit from some familiarity with his broader career as a writer of short fiction. If for no other reason, reading some of Wolff’s short stories will immediately make clear the familiar narrative pattern he employs in *This Boy’s Life* which is constructed like a
series of short stories, each episode forming an almost complete short narrative in its own right. Wolff’s stories not only express a familiar voice to that of the memoir, they are clearly concerned with similar experiences of personal failure, the desire for self-fulfilment and the almost inevitable disappointment that concludes most of the stories. Wolff’s stories also reveal him to be fascinated with characters who bear more than a passing resemblance to many of the individuals who appear in his own memoir, usually characters chasing some ill-defined dream or hope for change. Wolff’s stories, like those of his celebrated contemporaries Carver and Ford, seek to capture the tensions, conflicts and struggles that occur just beneath the surface of everyday life in the United States, a world of emotional drama, suffering and loss that can be detected in any shopping mall, suburban street, doctor’s waiting room or bus depot. His concern with the ‘typical’ is also to reveal the hidden depths beneath the typical façade of ordinary experience. Reading Wolff’s stories will demonstrate to students how consistent have been his preoccupations as a writer.

This Boy’s Life: the film adaptation

As teachers we are all familiar with the conversation in which we attempt to convince a very small number of students that watching the film version of a written text is not a substitute for reading the original. This should never be simply on the basis of the ‘superiority’ of the original (even when this is clearly apparent) but more plausibly, on the basis of their respective differences and the fact that an adaptation is a completely separate text however much fidelity it attempts to show towards the literary text. In the case of the adaptation of Wolff’s memoir there are a number of distinctive differences. Primarily these focus on the question of the treatment of the narrative’s central character Jack and the ways in which a film narrative will present its protagonist differently to a literary narrative. This difference in presentation and more specifically in narrative point of view might be a useful way to focus discussion of the two texts. Discussion might also explore the ways in which Wolff’s written narrative is less inclined to present the past in an alternately sentimental or critical light, a dichotomy that may be evident to viewers of the film. Where the film appears to require some critical perspective in alignment with current tastes, this can be seen as a distinct departure from the point of view Wolff develops in his account. Conversely, the past, even the recent past, is frequently presented in sentimental or even valorising terms, conferring on an earlier era the status of a lost age of innocence or purity that has since been tainted by the cynicism of more recent social manners and attitudes.

Invite students to consider the ways in which the central meanings of the memoir have changed due to the change in form from a written to a filmic narrative. How has the cinematic medium, with its capacity for representing period detail visually and condensing character development more dramatically, altered some of Wolff’s central concerns in the memoir? Performance aspects might also prompt discussion: how do the three principal performers interpret their roles? This will be just as interesting to pursue with De Niro’s version of Dwight as it will in considering De Caprio’s interpretation of Jack. The ways in which the film also becomes a ‘period piece’ stands in direct contrast with Wolff’s text which shows little interest in furnishing readers with a view of the era that confirms their already established notions of some mythical fifties setting.
RUNNING SHEET AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

In 1955 ten-year-old Toby and his mother Rosemary are driving from Florida to Utah, ‘to get away from a man my mother was afraid of and to get rich on uranium’ (p. 3). In this first section of the memoir entitled ‘Fortune’ the reader is introduced to Toby and Rosemary as a mother and son who have embarked on an adventure in search of their fortune, but the text leaves unmistakable signs of the dangers and threats that surround them. On the first page of the memoir Toby recalls watching a truck go over a cliff: ‘It had smashed through the guardrails and fallen hundreds of feet through empty space to the river below, where it lay on its back among the boulders’ (p. 3). This image of catastrophe is described in a matter of fact manner but expresses clearly the intimation of danger that follows Toby and his mother on their voyage to discover their fortune. The almost throwaway reference to a man Rosemary is afraid of becomes a prophetic sign of subsequent bad choices that she will make throughout the narrative.

In Utah, a uranium mining boom has just finished and Toby and Rosemary arrive with high expectations but absolutely no practical knowledge of what prospecting might entail. Rosemary eventually finds secretarial work and we learn of Toby’s own dreams of transformation and the invention of a new identity: ‘I didn’t come to Utah to be the same boy I’d been before’ (p. 7). We also learn that Toby’s father lives in Connecticut with his older brother Geoff and is not the man Rosemary was fleeing in Florida. That man is Roy and he eventually tracks them down in Salt Lake City. As a child Toby has little understanding of the relationship between his mother and Roy but it quickly becomes apparent that Rosemary has good reasons to be afraid of Roy. Roy is war veteran with an ominous fascination with guns. He is silent, taciturn and pathologically jealous of Rosemary, whom he keeps under surveillance, often accompanied on these covert operations by Toby. Roy is the first of the men Toby meets who present him with the riddle of what constitutes a real man—‘I thought Roy was what a man should be’—someone who carries guns, has a tattoo, is silent and threatening, someone to be afraid of. Her relationship with Roy makes it clear that Rosemary makes poor choices with men, but that she is at least partly motivated by the hope of finding someone to be a father for Toby.

Toby, who has now changed his name to Jack, after the great adventure writer Jack London, undergoes religious instruction in the Catholic faith and makes his first confession which proves a difficult and revealing experience. Jack is unable to think of any particular sins to confess: ‘I thought about what to confess, but I could not break my sense of being at fault down to its components. Trying to get a particular sin out of it was like fishing a swamp…’ (p. 14). This metaphor of hidden depths of weakness that can be sensed but not clearly seen or understood introduces a consistent theme of Jack’s narration, which comprises a comprehensive confession of his faults, yet he is paralysed by the inability to identify the particulars of this overriding sense of being at fault. Jack proves to be acutely aware throughout the story of his flaws and weaknesses, his propensity for dishonesty, his cheating and ignoring of rules or expectations; yet as demonstrated in this episode he is unable to make a formal confession, equally unable to understand where these tendencies originate in his character, and even less able to form a view about what to do about
them. This character disjuncture, between being sensitive to his flaws and yet being unable to address them, forms the central dramatic tension in the narrative. Tellingly, Jack eventually makes his confession by appropriating the ‘sins’ of Sister James and recounting these to the priest who tells Sister James ‘You have a fine boy here…’

Roy gives Jack his first gun, a Winchester .22 rifle, over the objections of his mother who eventually submits. Jack reveals: ‘All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed’ (p. 22). Roy’s gift of the rifle leads to a chilling episode in which Jack, alone in the apartment, begins to train the unloaded gun on unsuspecting people passing by, mimicking the actions of a sniper. Jack is fascinated and yet appalled at their unsuspecting innocence and makes the admission ‘over time the innocence I laughed at began to irritate me. It was a peculiar kind of irritation. I saw it years later in men I served with, and felt it myself, when unarmed Vietnamese civilians talked back to us while we were herding them around. Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognised and feared’ (p. 20–22). Whether it is her fear of Roy’s growing influence on Jack or his stated intention that he and Rosemary have a child together, Rosemary makes the decision to flee once again. Acting solely on instinct rather than on any more informed consideration, they narrow their choices of destination to Phoenix and Seattle, choosing the latter because ‘there was a bus leaving for Portland in a couple of hours and from there we could make an easy connection to Seattle’ (p. 27).

In the section ‘Uncool’ Jack describes their life in a boarding house in Seattle, living among others who are similarly down on their luck. Rosemary makes friends with two other single women, Kathy and Marian, the latter forming an instant dislike of Jack: ‘She knew that I didn’t like her and that I was not the young gentleman I pretended to be’ (p. 32). It is Marian who later informs Dwight of Jack’s cruel impersonations of him, thereby setting alight Dwight’s extreme paranoia, distrust and cruelty towards Jack. Wolff examines Jack’s growing sense that the adult world is divided into two categories: those adults, like his mother, whom he can deceive by pretending to be the perfect boy, an image he secretly aspires to; and those who are not taken in by this pretense to goodness and decency and who see ‘the real boy’, a dishonest, amoral child with evident criminal tendencies. This Manichean view of the self that Jack develops hardens over time and with experience, most of his experiences in fact coming to confirm this sense of himself as someone who projects a false or inauthentic persona that only masks his true self, an almost ‘Dorian Gray-like’ self that remains hidden from all but the most penetrating gazes.

Jack takes up with the two Terrys, other boys who enjoy the freedom to commit petty acts of delinquency, such as the memorable episode when they bombard a young man driving a beautiful Thunderbird. This target is not accidental, as both driver and vehicle represent the epitome of fifties ‘cool’ and success. The three boys are ecstatic as they rain eggs down on the helpless driver who is reduced to a howling victim of their resentment and childish sadism. Rosemary encounters men who desire her but she is left alone when obviously declining their purely sexual interest, as with the wealthy man she meets one day at a fair and who promises Jack an English racing bike. The dreams of both mother and son are bitterly disappointed.

Rosemary, Kathy and Marian move into a derelict house together at the urging of Rosemary, who sees the potential of this decrepit property. It is a brief moment in which the three women seem to be establishing a secure existence that is not dependent on the presence of men. Kathy, who is pregnant, and Marian eventually
get engaged and encourage Rosemary to entertain a ‘parade of suitors’. The arrangement of three women living independently of men is presented as only a temporary situation in mid-fifties America, awaiting the remedy of husbands and marriage. Jack meanwhile has embarked more seriously on his career of petty crime, shoplifting, damaging cars and breaking the windows in the school cafeteria. While the other boys treat these escapades as merely part of ‘our general hoodlum routine’ Jack sees their importance as character defining: ‘But for me the stealing was serious business, so much so that I dissembled its seriousness…I was a thief’ (p. 51). Wolff avoids making any obvious connection between the actions of a fatherless boy running around with such apparent freedom and the lack of what could appear as any direct oversight on the part of his mother. Rosemary never suspects Jack of any potential or actual wrong doing and is unswervingly loyal to him. The narrative thereby consistently refuses judgement on Rosemary as a parent and deals sympathetically with the real challenges of a single parent having to support her family by working long hours and also seeking to find a suitable partner and father for her increasingly wayward son.

The partner and father figure Rosemary eventually settles on is Dwight, who at first appears as a merely comical distraction for her but whose indefatigable persistence ultimately wears her down. Jack’s initial estimation proves to be wildly inaccurate, although obviously correct in its surface description: ‘I didn’t worry about him. He was short. He was a mechanic. His clothes were wrong. I didn’t know why they were wrong, but they were. We hadn’t come all the way out here to end up with him’ (p. 52). But that is exactly what happens, and in ways that the young boy can scarcely anticipate. Rosemary has chosen another Roy, perhaps an even more dangerous example of the type of man who demonstrates an underlying violence typical of a generalised misogyny that views women as the ‘property’ of men and therefore to be treated like any other piece of ‘property’, to be used as the man sees fit.

Dwight and his three children live in an isolated company village named Chinook, high in the mountains, hours from Seattle. Rosemary’s decision to marry Dwight is at least explainable in terms of his massive deception, masking his real character while attempting to win her over, and also of the influence his family. Skipper, Norma and Pearl appear to Rosemary as likeable, normal and potentially ideal siblings for her son. She constantly appears in the memoir as a woman determined to cast the best possible light on situations, and although Dwight clearly lacks most traits desirable in a potential husband his children at least cast a favourable verdict on him as a father. It is only after Rosemary and Jack are living in Chinook with their new family that it becomes apparent that Dwight’s children are not so much a testament to his gifts as a parent as silent products of his unyielding discipline and severity, both older children merely waiting until they can start their own lives somewhere else. Wolff does not portray Skipper, Norma or Pearl as harbouring any direct hatred for their father, yet their automatic compliance with his authority and silent submission to his power reveal a resignation symbolising their awareness of their own powerlessness.

Before their final move to Chinook another significant episode in the annals of Jack’s record of ‘delinquency’ occurs; he writes an obscenity on a toilet wall at school and subsequently denies responsibility when confronted with his crime, even in the presence of witnesses. Rosemary is brought up to the school to defend her son in the face of these charges and sees off two school principals in a determined campaign of maternal loyalty. What is remarkable about this episode is not
Rosemary’s blind faith in her son (never suspecting for a moment that he might be guilty of the charges made against him) but Jack’s own steadfast denials even when confronted by the eye-witnesses themselves. This repression of the truth will become an important feature of the remainder of the memoir, signifying a personal descent which Jack himself is unable to arrest and which even intensifies as he comes to view deception and denial as the only means of his personal salvation.

The next section of the memoir, ‘Citizenship in the Home’ chronicles life with Dwight in the isolated surroundings of the mountain camp, initially alone with the family prior to Rosemary making her final decision to join them and marry Dwight. The concept of citizenship has a range of ironies in this part of the narrative. Firstly, Dwight sees Jack as a deviant or delinquent character whom it is his responsibility to correct. Ever since being informed by Marian that the child had performed impersonations of him, Dwight keeps Jack under strict surveillance and subject to often pointless chores such as the shucking of the chestnuts, an arduous labour the true meaning of which is revealed years later when they are discovered in the attic rotten and covered in mould. Jack is made to do a paper route, with Dwight claiming to be putting his earnings away safely in a bank account for him to draw on in the future. Years later these savings never materialise. Jack believes that Dwight has seen into the rotten core of his true self, the delinquent identity that the boy has come to accept as his real identity, despite his aspirations to escape such a condemned fate. It soon becomes apparent to the reader that Dwight is a petty sadist and sees Jack as an inconvenience that he must tolerate, if barely, to ensnare Jack’s mother. Dwight masks his cruel treatment of the child, ironically, as a process of instruction in the values of good citizenship.

The memoir becomes closely focused on the central conflict between the psychologically, and occasionally physically, abusive stepfather and the increasingly indifferent but no less recalcitrant stepson. Wolff describes the efforts of the boy to live under the harsh dictates of a petty, resentful and violent man while pursuing the entirely normal dreams of any young boy approaching adolescence. A brief respite comes in the form of the Scouts, to which Dwight introduces Jack as part of re-education in the values of masculine duty and responsibility. Dwight’s involvement goes no further than the pleasure he takes in the system of rank and clearly marked hierarchy and the elaborate grading process through which boys attain merit badges and move up through the ranks towards the ultimate achievement of Eagle Scout. Jack himself is not immune to the attractions of this group identity when he admits, ‘I liked being a Scout. I was stirred by the elevated diction in which we swore our fealty to the chaste chivalric fantasies of Lord Baden-Powell. My uniform, baggy and barren though it was, made me feel like a soldier’ (p. 84) The culture of the Scouts is seen to be indelibly associated with the culture of the military that is everywhere apparent in mid-fifties America. Most of the men Jack meets are veterans of recent wars, proud of their military service and still attached, as we see with Dwight, to a confused ethic of military discipline and the worship of guns. Dwight is an example of this type of extreme militarism despite his utter lack of proficiency with firearms or hunting.

Rosemary eventually relents and agrees to marry Dwight, inquiring of Jack whether he thinks this a good idea. But the child is unable to articulate what he really feels, beyond a certain feeling that it was ‘fated’. The adult Jack, the writer the child would become, is far more capable of describing his feelings at the time: ‘…that I was
bound to accept as my home a place I did not feel at home in, and to take as my father a man who was offended by my existence and would never stop questioning my right to it’ (p. 87). The only moments when Jack enjoys some lapse in Dwight’s relentlessly harsh judgement of him is when he is involved in a fight and Dwight is thrilled at the idea of two boys pounding each other into the dirt. Jack’s nemesis in this encounter proves eventually to be his closest friend in Chinook, Arthur Gayle who has a reputation for being the town sissy, but who Jack recognises as a kindred spirit and soul mate as both are perceived as outsiders in the town. Arthur and Jack make their peace as children usually do, in a low-key manner, saying hello when they meet on the street. This is despite Dwight attempting to educate Jack in the finer points of self-defence, which in Dwight’s version actually entails learning to surprise an opponent and ‘dry gulch’ him. The innocent approach of children is contrasted with the sadism of men like Dwight, who want to intensify even a childish fight into something like a life-long grudge and preparedness for violent confrontation. Wolff shows how vulnerable is a boy like Jack to the toxic yet normative values of a man such as Dwight, a man who teaches that masculinity or ‘manliness’ is expressed as pleasure gained from inflicting pain on others.

Jack’s childhood is not without some sustaining relationships and these are seen in his fond recollections of Dwight’s two older children Skipper and Norma. Skipper is a young man who seems to embody the values of citizenship that Dwight claims to honour, though there is little sense that Dwight can take credit for this with his own son. Skipper is a hard-working, honest and respectful young man and Norma is a sweet young woman who is in love with Bobby, a Native American. Both Skipper and Bobby are far more preferable male role models and Jack appears to absorb something of value from each of them, whether it is Skipper’s love of restoring old cars and the dedication this represents, or Bobby’s legendary athletic reputation and aura of physical grace and poise. Tellingly, both Skipper and Bobby are remembered as admirable but ultimately disappointed individuals; Skipper’s beautifully restored Ford is destroyed in a Mexican sandstorm and Bobby loses Norma to another man due to what appears to be her uncertainty about the suitability of their relationship. Both young men represent the disappointment of individual dreams and the frustration of desire, even in an individual seen as worthy and deserving. They are both offered in the narrative as something resembling cautionary tales to instruct the young Jack that life will inevitably disappoint even the most deserving individuals, so therefore imagine how much worse will the undeserving be treated.

Jack’s dreams of escaping his life with Dwight prompt him to write to his uncle in Paris describing the harsh circumstances both he and Rosemary are forced to endure. This results in an invitation for Jack to join his uncle and his family in Paris, with the proviso that he allows himself to be adopted and take his uncle’s name. This requirement occasions a moment of true insight: ‘I was my mother’s son. I could not be anyone else’s’ (p. 118). But this episode only serves to establish a pattern: Jack dreams of escaping the escalating and increasingly undisguised brutality he endures at the hands of Dwight, whose own souring marriage to Rosemary has made him indifferent to hiding his treatment of Jack from her. Another dream of escape centres on Jack planning to flee to Alaska with the money he has stolen from his newspaper customers. In a memorable scene Jack squanders all his money on a cheap carnival game, gullibly enticed by the two sideshow touts. Jack, who is supposed to be with Arthur, instead takes up with a group of scouts from another town, ignores Arthur completely and loses their entire ‘stake’ in humiliating fashion.
The next section, ‘Citizenship in the School’ concentrates on Jack’s equally troubled education and his friendships with a group of other boys who all seemed doomed to live out an already preordained destiny of failure, disappointment and eventual bitterness. While these friendships continue Jack’s earlier association with the two Terry’s, they also acquire a darker sense of social exclusion, of living outside of the bright promise of the American Dream in a netherworld where success or prosperity or even self-fulfilment appear as impossible ambitions to be enjoyed only by the lucky few. School, and education generally, appears an unrealistic way to pursue ambitions and Jack quickly adopts a more cynical approach, erasing his real grades and pencilling in more impressive results: ‘I wanted distinction, and the respectable forms of it seemed to be eluding me. If I couldn’t have it as a citizen I would have it as an outlaw’ (p. 155). Jack’s desire to transform into an outlaw reaches its apex when he attempts to pass a bad cheque in another town while visiting with his Scout group. This plan horribly misfires and he only narrowly escapes arrest. He does not entirely escape—he is seen later by his victim, a mild mannered woman who attends the Scout gala he is helping to host and sees him in his uniform greeting guests as they enter the function. While the entire episode is comic and pathetic it also expresses the depths of Jack’s hunger for sensation, for a departure from the boredom and routine of his life in Chinook and at the memorably named Concrete High.

These thwarted dreams of escape, outlaw glamour, and Dwight’s increasing violence, combine to inspire Jack to apply to a prestigious prep school far from the scene of his daily humiliations and the evidence of his ‘criminal’ personality. By reconnecting with his older brother Geoffrey, who has already graduated from a prep school like their father, Jack determines upon this as the only possible course of action left to him. His personal desperation, however, leaves him with little confidence of achieving this dream by conventional methods, such as good grades or evidence of community service. Acting entirely from what is now a well-established set of character traits, Jack decides to forge his academic records and references to support his various applications, with assistance from Arthur who has access to the school’s blank forms and transcripts. In the process of authoring these forged transcripts and applications Jack shows intimations of the writer of fiction he will eventually become: ‘Now the words came as easily as if someone was breathing them into my ear. I felt full of things that had to be said, full of stifled truth. That was what I thought I was writing—the truth’ (p. 180). This act of forgery becomes an act in which Jack feels that he is discovering his true self, his ‘own face’. It is clearly a significant moment in his development, the consequences of which might lie many years in the future.

Armed with his newly invented record of academic and civic achievements, Jack must still convince a potential sponsor who visits him with the intention of providing a reference to one of the schools. Mr Howard is described as a man who venerates his own days at Hill school and seeks to discover those special boys who will benefit equally from the experience. While impressed with Jack, Mr Howard appears to harbour some reservations and warns Jack about the challenges and difficulties of leaving a small, provincial location such as Chinook for a prestigious prep school such as Hill with its expectations of academic performance and equally challenging perceptions of class distinction, which it seems Mr Howard doubts Jack will be prepared for. By the end of their meeting Jack appears to have overcome most of Mr
Howard’s doubts but the older man attempts to prepare Jack for the real possibility of disappointment.

After a final incident in which Dwight pushes Jack over onto an injured hand, Jack decides to leave. He is taken in by the family of one of his friends, Chuck Bolger, as an interim measure while he awaits the outcome of his school applications. Jack’s feelings as he leaves Dwight’s house are clear: ‘We hated each other. We hated each other so much that other feelings didn’t get enough light. It disfigured me. When I think of Chinook I have to search for the faces of my friends, their voices, the rooms where I was made welcome. But I can always see Dwight’s face and hear his voice. I hear his voice in my own when I speak to my children in anger.’ (p. 196). The sense of Dwight’s lasting legacy is clearly evoked here as an unwanted inheritance of aggression and anger that still has the capacity to frighten and confuse the sensitivity of children. While staying with the Bolgers, Jack commits another thoughtless crime, this time stealing gasoline from an extremely impoverished farming family, the Welshes. The brazen nature of the theft soon comes to light, as does the sheer cruelty of the act committed against a family barely hanging onto their miserable piece of land. The scene where Jack refuses, or is unable, to apologise to the Welshes for what he has done is one of the most powerful in the memoir, capturing Jack’s genuinely inarticulate sense of himself, his intimation of a truly unreachable character that cannot be reasoned with, that remains beyond the normal appeals to decency or what is so clearly the right thing to do. The episode which torments Jack perhaps more than any other recounted in the narrative is final, damning evidence of this hidden self with whom others cannot communicate, who leaves them baffled and frustrated. Jack’s inability/refusal to apologise is also a powerful metaphor of the clash of values in Jack’s life, and perhaps even more widely, the disparity between the values of adults and children that this incident evokes.

Jack’s story begins to reach its conclusion with his acceptance into Hill school with a scholarship of $2,300 a year. Jack has finally succeeded in making his escape from Chinook, but even more importantly, from the boy he had always been perceived to be, the boy who was irresponsible, dishonest, self-absorbed and predisposed to criminal behaviour. However, for Jack the fact that he has fraudulently gained entry to the rarefied world of prep schools on the basis of forged academic transcripts does not detract from the momentousness of his achievement. As readers, we are almost inclined to agree. In completing an information sheet that asks for his full name he writes ‘Tobias Jonathan von Ansell-Wolff III.’ The identity borrowed from Jack London, the creator of adventure stories for boys, has been cast aside for the more suitably exotic texture of his ‘real’ patrimony. Before leaving for a stay with his real father before commencing school, Toby shares a moment with his mother: ‘She looked young and pretty. The day was warm, the air hazy with cement dust…As we walked we made plans. Considered different possibilities. We were ourselves again—restless, scheming, poised for flight’ (p. 221).

The story ends with Toby stealing all of Dwight’s guns and pawning them for next to nothing. The episode is motivated by Dwight’s theft of years of Toby’s earnings from his paper round but has the added significance of revealing the worthlessness of Dwight’s most prized possessions, his collection of guns, which he had assumed were a guarantee of his true manliness but amount to nothing more than a paltry amount of contraband goods illegally sold in a pawnshop. Toby visits his father who
has already taken off with another girlfriend, thus confirming his status as a man who is incapable of being a father to Toby. The account of Toby’s time at Hill is suitably brief given the circumstances of his acceptance: ‘I did not do well at Hill. How could I? I knew nothing’ (p. 240). He is asked to leave after two years and decides to enlist in the army, a destiny that had seemed a long time in the making: ‘Then I went into the army. I did so with a sense of relief and homecoming…It seemed to me when I got there that this was where I had been going all along, and where I might redeem myself. All I needed was a war. Careful what you pray for’ (p. 241). This is in 1964, just prior to the United States committing ground troops to Vietnam in early 1965. The narrative ends with an account of Toby and Chuck returning after dumping Dwight’s collection of guns. The two young men sing as they drive: ‘Our voices were strong. It was a night to sing and we sang for all we were worth, as if we’d been saved’.
In his *Paris Review* interview Tobias Wolff discusses the extraordinary impact of the stories of his friend Raymond Carver; in an attempt to explain why Carver’s stories attracted so much critical attention and were regarded as initiating a new style of short fiction, Wolff conjectures that Carver’s writing appeared around the same time as the election of Ronald Reagan, when there was a significant shift in the political discourse in the United States towards a more aggressive promotion of individual ambition and the private needs of the self. Carver’s stories, according to Wolff, challenged the new political consensus that was replacing the previous period’s emphasis on social change and democratic inclusion, not in any overt or directly ideological fashion, but by quietly and steadily depicting the lives of those who were patently excluded from the Reagan-era dispensation of wealth, privilege and opportunity. The critical formulation that came to be applied to the writing of Carver and of Wolff himself was the vague term ‘Dirty Realism’, a modish label yet one that reveals how the period itself perceived the common concerns of such writers and the experiences of the people they were describing, themselves a significant proportion of society.

Published in 1989 *This Boy’s Life* might be understood as serving a similar purpose to the one Wolff outlined for the stories of Carver: to challenge a prevailing consensus, in this instance, the consensus that had formed around a view of the fifties as some type of lost golden age of American identity and prosperity, a view that was reinforced consistently throughout the seventies and eighties in popular culture and political discourse alike. The fifties era that Wolff describes has nothing in common with versions that attempted to celebrate the era for its unique achievement in social harmony and political stability. At the start of the narrative readers are introduced to a time of great uncertainty in the lives of Rosemary and Toby who have fled a threatening relationship to seek their fortune in a uranium boom in Utah. This unlikely dream is never described as such, simply recounted as the first momentous episode in a journey that would take mother and son across the country in an epic odyssey that would ultimately culminate in a remote town in the Pacific Northwest. The tone of Wolff’s memoir from the outset is balanced, moderate, and careful not to exaggerate or overstate the drama of an event. The writing is more concerned with recording the feeling of an experience, particularly the feelings and thoughts of Wolff’s own younger self, a boy attempting to make sense of himself at a time of profound uncertainty in his family.

*This Boy’s Life* is an exercise in the recovery of feelings, emotions and sensations that are long past and are challenging for the writer to retrieve and to represent truthfully and scrupulously. This might be described as the dual challenge that the writer sets himself in this memoir, one that is simultaneously a formal challenge and a deeply personal one. The childhood self that Wolff attempts to recover and understand is not an entirely admirable one, to say the least. Toby is a child who is always secretly scheming, is drawn to the company of other boys with similar habits, and feels little hesitation in embarking on destructive or illegal enterprises, whether egging a passing motorist, passing a bad cheque, training a loaded gun on unsuspecting pedestrians or taking his stepfather’s car out on midnight jaunts. All of these incidents are apparently petty and, even in the case of the ‘sniper’ incident which results in Toby shooting a squirrel, lack any violent or malevolent streak. They
are almost uniformly a reflection of Toby’s own confused sense of who and what he is, constantly intrigued by the potential for inventing a persona that will allow him to escape the narrow definitions that have arisen for him as a boy from a broken marriage forced to live in the home of a man who is affronted by the very fact of his existence.

On the surface, Wolff’s memoir can be read as the chronicle of a fairly unremarkable delinquent childhood, but this would be to ignore what elevates the narrative into a far more interesting category of literary expression. Wolff’s memoir might be more suitably described as a (non-fiction) ‘portrait of the artist as a young man’. There are no obvious signs that Toby/Jack will one day become a successful writer of fiction, although his sensitivity, distinctive imagination and sense of the malleability of character clearly point to this destiny. He experiences these aspects of himself as both a problem—the need to invent a convincing self—and a possible means of escape and liberation. Jack is highly sensitive to the need to project a strong self-image and he scrutinises the different versions of masculine identity that surround him. In Wolff’s investigation of these identities, of Rosemary’s partners, Roy, the wealthy man she meets in a park who promises Jack a racing bike, her various suitors, or ultimately of Dwight, Jack witnesses the contemporary parade of masculinity fifties-style. This masculinity with its emphasis on a particular set of manly virtues that usually centre on guns, military service, competitiveness, macho confidence and the overarching value of ‘manliness’ itself, has connotations which suggest a type of outdoors, frontier, Western persona derived largely from the popular mythologies of genre cinema, the Western and the War film.

*This Boy’s Life* then can be read as a highly personal investigation into the cultural forces that shape the subjectivity of an individual and ‘permit’ or censor certain traits; this is clear in the episode where Jack describes to Dwight how he got into a fight with Arthur, a well-known ‘sissy’. Dwight is openly delighted that Jack would be drawn into a violent clash with such a boy and attempts to educate him in the various ways he can successfully defeat an opponent in future, including methods that are clearly underhanded and dishonest. This shared moment of fraternal intimacy is the only example in the narrative where Jack enjoys his stepfather’s approval or encouragement. That it is prompted by Jack’s fight with a notorious ‘sissy’ makes clear what type of masculine values Dwight seeks to inculcate in Jack. In incidents such as this Wolff dismantles any idea that the fifties were a time of more solid, traditional values that have somehow been lost due to the excessive permissiveness of the period that was to follow.

Wolff’s implicit critique of dominant notions of masculinity is effective in the memoir because of the way his unsparing language shows (rather than tells) how attractive and ultimately seductive are these notions and images to young boys like Jack. The promise of adventure, admiration, respect and, in some essentially abstract sense that Jack constantly meditates on, the reward for being a man, all combine to present a picture of individual identity that is difficult to resist. When the reader learns at the end of the memoir that Jack has enlisted in the army and believes that all he needs is a war, there is a sense of inevitability about his decision. While Jack proved to lack the necessary skills to succeed at Hill School, as his sponsor Mr Howard cautioned him to consider carefully, he no doubt possessed all the necessary traits to enter the military. *This Boy’s Life* is not a narrative of lost innocence which can be interpreted, like so many other narratives seeking to reclaim the fifties, as the
nation’s last prelapsarian, golden age. But it is, as the memoir’s coda makes clear, about how we lose our dreams of innocence, how fleeting they really are, and how necessary it is to travel into the past in order to understand the self that was formed there.
CHARACTERS

Toby/Jack

Toby is ten years old when the memoir begins; he and his mother have taken to the road, fleeing one of her bad relationships after the previous breakdown of her marriage to Toby’s father. Toby is presented to the reader through the mature perceptions of the adult Wolff, who himself makes no attempt to soften the self-portrait developed in the memoir. As a small child Toby is alive to the adventure that he and his mother seem to have embarked on, seeking their fortune in the Utah uranium boom, a venture they are absurdly ill-equipped to pursue. Yet the relationship between Toby and Rosemary is one of such closeness and shared optimism that despite their lack of ability they both encourage each other to pursue these unlikely endeavours in search of their fortune.

It is initially the circumstances defining Toby’s life that are exceptional rather than any obvious traits in Toby himself. He appears essentially to be a fairly typical boy, although perhaps with a rather exceptional imagination and highly acute sense of the potential for changing his identity and re-inventing himself in his travels across the country. There is no mistaking, however, that his situation, and the protective closeness that has arisen between Toby and his mother, has contributed to the development of quite acute sensitivities in the child and to his growing awareness of the uncertainties in, and unpredictable nature of, the adult world: ‘I rocked her and murmured to her. I was practiced at this and happy doing it, not because she was unhappy but because she needed me, and to be needed made me feel capable. Soothing her soothed me’ (p. 46).

A dream of change is the one constant in Toby’s life and character, a dream of becoming the boy he feels he really is rather than the more questionable character others perceive him to be: ‘…away from people who had already made up their minds about me, I could be different. I could introduce myself as a scholar-athlete, a boy of dignity and consequence, and without any reason to doubt me people would believe I was that boy, and thus allow me to be that boy. I recognised no obstacle to miraculous change but the incredulity of others’ (p. 74). But even changing his name to Jack does not result in people seeing a different boy, and especially in his relationship with Dwight the narrator describes his step-father’s absolute refusal to believe that he can ‘be that boy’. From early in the memoir Jack describes many incidents of petty delinquency that he commits—damaging property, shop-lifting, deceitfulness and theft—although he is not a violent or aggressive child; his ‘crimes’ appear to be the result of his glamorisation of being a ‘master-thief, an essentially childish fantasy which leads to generally minor offences. However, Wolff makes it abundantly clear to the reader that Jack is not content to merely daydream about such transgressive identities, he is prepared to actively adopt them.

The central tension that runs through the entire memoir is Jack’s conflict with authority, especially when various forms of authority appear to him to limit or suppress the fantasy of self-realisation that he so ardently pursues. Through the character of Jack, Wolff portrays the lack of power or effective agency that essentially defines childhood. Jack attempts to act, though frequently in ways that are seen as defiantly anti-social, while always feeling that the weight of adult authority is constantly poised to crush or deny his aspirations. Yet he remains
sufficiently self-aware to see that his actions are inherently unjustifiable and ultimately self-defeating. However, as a child he appears to also know that he lacks the necessary maturity or experience to properly understand this aspect of his character even as he persists in committing the acts that seem to confirm his ‘bad’ character and to forestall the moment when his transformation can be achieved.

Rosemary

Of all the portraits that Wolff provides in his memoir, the one of his mother remains the most moving. At the start of the memoir Rosemary is a young woman who is fleeing across the United States with her ten-year-old son to ‘get away from a man my mother was afraid of’. This chilling explanation establishes the tone of the entire narrative, expressing the dangerous threat posed by the men in Rosemary’s life, whether Roy or Dwight, the threats of the latter leading to attempts to kill her. Rosemary is a highly memorable character because despite the extreme uncertainty of her life she is an optimist and a self-reliant individual. In this way she is a product of any era in the United States, but especially of the Great Depression when people were determined to strive to make their lives better despite the prevailing economic situation. With the break-up of her marriage Rosemary suffers separation from her older son Geoffrey; while never fully explained, this appears to have been the result of her son’s choice, as he attends a prestigious prep school. A single mother would struggle moving around the country with two sons even more than with one. Wolff remembers his mother in the fondest of terms—she is unfailingly loyal, always believing in him when it may have been more advisable to question his versions of the truth. The reader may question how she could have overlooked or ignored the aggression directed at her son by Dwight. Wolff neither explains nor justifies this apparent blindness on Rosemary’s part yet he allows the reader to gradually perceive Rosemary’s own desperation, victimisation and well-founded fear of her husband. There is also the no small matter of her marriage to Dwight being explicable only in terms of her deep-seated desire to provide a home and a family for her son, however imperfect that pre-existing family might be.

Dwight

Whether it is deliberately driving over a beaver, slapping Jack because he threw out an empty mustard jar, brutally assaulting Jack because he lied or simply the numerous acts of petty bragging and self-aggrandisement, the portrait of Dwight is memorably repugnant. Wolff is careful in his narration not to overstate Dwight’s cruelty or sadistic nature; he simply describes in an almost matter-of-fact manner the ways in which Dwight imposes his largely illegitimate authority, thus showing the type of man Dwight is. He is a truly pathetic individual, enamoured of power, especially that which is represented by guns and violence against animals, women and children. He personifies the worst excesses of a society that has enshrined masculinity as the prerogative of an individual to exercise power over weaker individuals. Without wishing to confer any larger significance on his character that it is capable of sustaining, it does seem possible to view Dwight as a highly accurate embodiment of the social values of the era, when the United States itself exercised unchallenged power around the world and frequently did so with little regard for the victims of its power. What is most repulsive about Dwight is the evident fear and self-loathing at the centre of his personality, a basic shame that he experiences knowing
he fails to measure up to even the loathsome profile of manliness that he claims to respect.

Roy

The man from whom Rosemary originally flees may eventually be replaced by an even more repulsive character, yet it is clear why she sought to escape this individual. Roy, like so many of the other male characters in the narrative, is a war veteran and appears not to have re-adjusted to civilian life. He is obsessed with guns, buys Jack his first rifle, over Rosemary’s objections, and is prone to equally obsessive bouts of jealousy and paranoia, waiting outside Rosemary’s workplace and following her from a distance with Jack seated alongside him. While describing both Roy and Dwight as misogynistic is certainly not an over-statement—it is clear that they both fear that women might possess an identity or desires that are independent of them—their pathological personalities appear to be the product of a general culture of violence, not simply their war-time service, but a celebration of militarism far exceeding the necessity of military service. The toxic infiltration of such values into the general culture is what appears most disturbing about each of these men. This is not to claim that Wolff presents either of them as ‘typical’ American males of their time, but each is far from seeming exceptional either; both Roy and Dwight are mundane, unexceptional, ordinary men whose social habits place them clearly in the social mainstream. The threat each poses to women is explicit and while they each appear undeniably pathetic they are equally representative of the type of patriarchal values that existed in the period before social movements such as ‘women’s liberation’ in the next decade openly challenged and disputed the ‘normative’ status of their values.

Skipper, Norma and Pearl

Dwight’s three children are remembered by Wolff with fondness and not a little sympathy for their lives with a father whose casual brutality was not only visited upon Jack himself. Skipper appears to be quite a remarkable young man largely because he appears to have escaped any formative influence from his father. He is responsible, hard-working and quietly modest. The effect on him of the destruction of his lovingly restored Ford is movingly rendered and is expressed as a disappointment that carries more far-reaching implications about what he can expect from life.

Norma is also a character who must confront the disappointments that life holds for some individuals. Her doomed romance with Bobby Rowe and engagement to the vile Kenneth seem to confirm that the lives of women are constrained and suppressed by certain kinds of men. Prevented from marrying Bobby by a combination of her own doubts and the bigoted perceptions of her community, Norma is destined to experience the romantic disappointment that seems typical for the women of the time.

Pearl is remembered as a young girl who welcomes a new mother into her family but is less welcoming of a new brother such as Jack. Their initially feisty relationship eventually grows into something fonder and more understanding as each recognises what living under a father such as Dwight represents. Pearl witnesses some of the worst excesses of Dwight’s mistreatment of Jack and in this she too becomes a victim of her father’s violence.
Arthur Gayle

The object of ridicule for his evident lack of ‘manliness’ Arthur is the boy Jack engages in a memorable fight by accusing him of being a ‘sissy’. Almost inevitably they become close friends, discovering a shared nostalgia for an imagined past: ‘Looking backward we became mired in nostalgia. We both liked old movies...whose fatuous obsession with aristocracy fed our own’ (p. 132). Jack’s friendship with Arthur is noteworthy because it differs from most of his other male friendships which are based on a more delinquent set of habits such as stealing and drinking and chasing after girls. There is a child-like purity, even innocence in their friendship which Jack, again inevitably, betrays when he squanders his money they have planned to use on their escape to Alaska. The touching aspect of his friendship with Arthur is unmistakably Jack’s recognition of a kindred spirit in the boy others consider to be a ‘sissy’, an outsider, an ‘other’. Jack sees someone who shares his fascination with an imaginary idea of social distinction and prestige that is more personal than anything he can express through his involvement in the Scouts. Arthur is what used to be called an ‘artistic’ personality, which was essentially a euphemism for anyone who appeared to defy standard classifications of male identity. In this, Jack and Arthur have more in common than any of Jack’s other male friendships.

Chuck Bolger

Chuck is the most significant of Jack’s gang of friends, who represents Jack’s possible trajectory into serious felonies and inevitable punishment. The theft of gasoline from impoverished neighbours, the Welshes, while Jack is living with Chuck’s family after finally leaving Dwight’s home, seems a relatively minor offence, but once discovered has major ethical ramifications. The theft appears dramatically magnified by the circumstances of the victims, who are living in dire poverty with the very real prospect of losing their farm. Chuck himself seems genuinely horrified by what they have done and apologies sincerely to Mr Welsh. He is appalled by Jack’s apparent indifference in uttering his own apology. Chuck is described as young man with a wild streak, but also with a darkly religious sense of fate or predestination, a trait that is sorely tested when he is accused of sexually assaulting an underage girl and offered the option of marrying her or going to jail. Chuck’s steadfast refusal—because he has his own vision of the girl he believes he will one day marry, another instance of his belief in personal fate—results in a tense standoff between him and the authorities.

Geoffrey and Mr Wolff Snr

While they appear only fleetingly in the memoir, due to the fact that Jack is separated from them both for almost the entirety of the memoir, his father and brother still exercise a significant hold on Jack’s affections and attention. Of his father the narrator observes: ‘He had the advantage always enjoyed by the inconstant parent, of not being there to be found imperfect. I could see him as I wanted to see him. I could give him sterling qualities and imagine good reasons, even romantic reasons, why he had taken no interest, why he had never written to me, why he seemed to have forgotten I existed’ (p. 101). While there is a distinct absence of judgement on the part of the narrator towards his father, there is sufficient evidence of his unpredictable behaviour—taking off suddenly when Toby visits him in California, and Rosemary’s repeated assertions that she wants nothing to do with her former husband—to establish that Wolff Snr was not a particularly
reliable father to both his sons. Toby eventually reconnects with his older brother Geoffrey who suggests the idea of Toby applying to prep school as he himself has done in order to escape the life he has endured in Chinook with Dwight. Geoffrey also instigates his younger brother’s interest in writing, through their developing correspondence and shared love of language. That Geoffrey has his own aspirations to be a novelist provides Toby with at least some example of a possible career path that he might one day be able to follow.
ISSUES AND THEMES

‘Growing Up Absurd’: youth culture, authenticity, teenage rebellion and the ‘generation gap’.

Paul Goodman’s theoretical text Growing Up Absurd attempts to explain the larger social issues of the fifties in terms of a ‘generation gap’. Goodman suggests that the ‘absurdity’ confronting American youth as they search for meaning is the social system itself, which projects onto youth a crisis that is actually the failure of the values of adults. As Goodman saw it, American society, despite its unparalleled wealth and prosperity, lacked authentic social values or meaning.

The issue of authenticity is central to the memoir. Toby becomes Jack because he seeks a more authentic version of himself that he believes is dormant within him. Borrowing his new name from Jack London, author of such timeless classics of genre literature as White Fang and The Iron Heel, texts that extol and celebrate masculine courage and sacrifice, Jack attempts to jettison his earlier doubts and fears: ‘I was subject to fits of feeling myself unworthy, somehow deeply at fault. It didn’t take much to bring this sensation to life, along with the certainty that everybody but my mother saw through me and did not like what they saw’ (pp. 9–10). Toby’s early feelings of a lack of self-worth are unfortunately not met with more positive assertions of his talents and abilities; instead, he encounters men who see him as a hindrance to their designs on his mother and as the unwanted legacy of another man. As a child, Jack almost instinctively believes that there is a truer self that resides beneath the natural fears of a boy who has fled across the country with his young mother in search of a better life. In the absence of any more affirmative experiences Jack becomes seduced by the image of himself as a thief, an anti-social rebel who refuses to conform to expectations of proper conduct. All the while these rebellious feelings are in conflict with his equally deep-seated need to project an image of himself as a noble, courageous boy who typifies an ‘aristocracy of the spirit’. This is another generic fantasy akin to such popular tales as The Prince and the Pauper, in which the true prince goes unrecognised while his identical twin takes his place on the throne.

• ‘The Scout Spirit was traced to King Arthur’s Round Table, and from there to the explorers and pioneers and warriors whose conquests had been achieved through fair play and clean living…I yielded easily to this comradely tone, forgetting while I did so that I was not the boy it supposed I was.’ (pp. 85–86). In what ways does Jack find a sense of authenticity in the Scouts that is clearly missing in his everyday life?

• The fifties is not yet a time when there is open defiance of adult or parental authority. How do the young people in the memoir express their discontent or dissatisfaction? What evidence is there in the memoir to suggest that the generation gap of the sixties is already on the horizon?

• What exactly comprises the idea of ‘youth culture’ in the period described by Wolff? What is seen as a genuine expression of this growing culture and its attitudes? How does this nascent youth culture differ from subsequent versions that would explode in the decades to come?
Abuse of power and authority: gender, masculinity, militarism and violence.

One of the most compelling aspects of Wolff’s memoir is the forensic examination of what constituted masculine culture in fifties America: the almost uniform preoccupation with guns, hunting and outdoor sports generally; the Scouts organisation with its insistence on the importance of rank, hierarchy, promotion through individual merit, and the conspicuous display of insignias of achievement; a pervasive celebration of male violence through blood sports such as boxing, arranged bouts between children and ‘grudge fights’ as entertainment, instilling a desire for lethal fighting skills; wartime service and the persistence of the military ethos into civilian life, whereby military duty is seen as the highest social good or responsibility; and finally, a generalised suspicion and hostility towards women, enhanced in the post-war period by the knowledge that while men were away fighting in foreign wars, women had taken up their jobs back home and had performed equally well in previously male-dominated occupations.

Without ever seeming to exaggerate or manipulate these elements to suit his narrative, Wolff captures the oppressive ‘machismo’ that dominated much of the post-war period in America, elevating the values and standards of manliness and denigrating the perceived weakness of its opposite, taken ‘logically’ to be the values of femininity. The absorption of these values in boys is seen when Jack wishes to provoke Arthur with the worst possible insult he can think of and naturally settles on the term ‘sissy’. These masculine values have their obvious dark side in the behaviour and attitudes of men such as Roy and Dwight, for whom women are almost literally ‘chattels’ to be acquired and kept. In both instances when Rosemary decides she wants to end the relationship she fears the response that is most likely and which does eventuate—being stalked and followed like prey, and in the case of Dwight threatened with death and then nearly killed. The extreme cultural imbalance that Wolff is able to convey, between one set of gender values as the dominant and unquestioned source of authority and power, and the other, as clearly subservient and powerless, is one of the memoir’s exceptional achievements; much of the narrative power derives from Wolff’s portrait of his mother as a woman seeking to assert her independence in a male dominated world that is far from ready to cede its privileges and recognise the ‘other’ gender as anything more than a ‘second sex’.

- In what episodes in the memoir does the reader become aware that male values are regarded as unquestioned and dominant?
- To what extent does Wolff show the damaging effects of male attitudes on family life and on the next generation of boys who are effectively ‘schooled’ in the ethos of violence and aggression that these values openly celebrate?
- Where in the memoir does Jack demonstrate that the prevailing attitudes towards manliness are not entirely suitable to his character? How is his escape from Dwight also a rejection of the values that Dwight seeks to instil in him?
- What are the clear examples in the memoir of an abuse of power?
- In what ways does Rosemary challenge the dominant attitudes of the period towards women and mothers?
Remembering the recent past, refusing nostalgia: questioning the idealisation of the fifties

As previously observed, the fifties have probably been subject to a more intensive idealisation than perhaps any other decade in recent history. The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of these brief comments; however it is apparent that Wolff’s memoir openly questions this type of nostalgia for the recent past and the ‘cloaking’ of its social realities in a language of fond and sentimental reminiscence. The reconstruction of the fifties as a modern ‘golden age’ gained traction after the sixties, a telling sign that the earlier decade was to be regarded as a time of stability before the upheaval and cynicism that was to immediately follow. Noam Chomsky has memorably described this negative view of the sixties as stemming from what is felt to have been a ‘crisis of democracy’, but what is really meant is that what critics of the era identify as a crisis is really an ‘excess’ of democracy, when ordinary people and social groups began to assert their civil rights—blacks, women, homosexuals, formerly colonised peoples, students and many other traditionally disenfranchised groups.

The fifties that the reader of Wolff’s memoir encounters is not the more recognisable Hollywood version, familiar to viewers from countless movies and TV shows in which the era is depicted as the apex moment of the happy, nuclear family and the unrivalled prestige of ‘white’ social institutions. Wolff instead chooses to describe a much more unstable period in which family breakdown is not uncommon, domestic violence is a reality for many women, unemployment and financial uncertainty are also real problems, and there is a distinct division between those who are lucky enough to be living the ‘American Dream’ and the many who are struggling from day to day such as Rosemary and Jack. The reality of this gap is examined in many sections of the memoir, from the experiences of Rosemary and Jack when they first arrive in Salt Lake City to find the uranium boom has ended and employment is scarce, to their time spent living in meagre circumstances in Seattle in the boarding house and then in the rundown rental property they share with Kathy and Marian. These episodes comprise an undeniable picture of financial uncertainty, family instability and fracture, and the perilous situation of a young single mother who wishes to re-establish a family life for her son but must endure various predatory experiences before she settles on what, mistakenly as it turns out, is the best alternative at the time.

• If it’s not nostalgic, how would you describe the tone of the narrative in evoking the personal past of the narrator and his family?

• The narrative shows that many people in the post-war period faced uncertainty and struggle in their everyday lives. How does the narrative develop a convincing depiction of the tensions and conflicts of the period, rather than a comforting version of the recent past?

  ➔ Do you agree that Wolff’s version of the fifties challenges the reader to think more carefully about how we approach the past? Does the text imply that we should avoid simplistic and false images, knowing they say more about our own fantasies of earlier periods than they reveal about the times themselves?
The invention of a self: discovering one’s own true face

As he composes the many letters of reference that his teachers might have written about him for inclusion in his prep school applications, the narrator observes: ‘I wrote without heat or hyperbole, in the words my teachers would have used if they had known me as I knew myself. These were their letters. And on the boy who lived in their letters, the splendid phantom who carried all my hopes, it seemed to me I saw, at last, my own face’ (pp. 180–81). In the act of forging his school applications Jack, somewhat paradoxically, discovers his true identity, the boy he has always wanted to become, the boy who is hardworking, responsible, steadfast, a good son, honest and noble, with that unmistakable aristocracy of spirit that he and Arthur so enjoyed in watching old movies together. That this face is also a complete invention, a literary fabrication, in no way detracts from the genuine feelings that the boy attaches to its image. Jack has felt that his own life has been a constant denial of the opportunity for this other boy to reveal himself, a thwarting of the genuine desire to bring him into existence. While his fraudulent prep school papers are just further evidence of Jack’s apparently amoral attitude towards the truth, adopting something like a nominalist version of the truth, his comments about discovering ‘my own face’ have a depth of feeling and conviction that is impossible to ignore.

‘I didn’t come to Utah to be the same boy I’d been before. I had my own dreams of transformation, Western dreams, dreams of freedom and dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency’ (p. 7). From the outset of the memoir it is clear that the narrator desires to transform himself into a more ideal self, one who will be capable of meeting the challenges that an itinerant, uncertain existence will surely confront him with. These are not the fantasies of an over indulged imagination; throughout the narrative Toby/Jack is searching for experiences that will validate the more noble, courageous, heroic version of himself that he truly feels lies at the hidden centre of his character. In many ways Wolff explores these fantasies as completely explicable in terms of Jack’s emotional deprivation and insecurity. Jack has a clearly rich and complex inner life, fed by a resourceful imagination; unhappily these traits also issue in many episodes of apparently stubborn, wilful or inexplicable behaviour, culminating in the episode where Jack is unable to apologise for stealing the gasoline from the impoverished Welsh family and unable to explain to Chuck or Mr Bolger why he remained silent in the face of his deplorable crime. The incident only becomes clear to the reader if we factor in the enormous disparity that exists between Jack’s elaborately detailed ideal self and the repugnant reality of his actual actions and decisions. In this scene, Wolff shows the reader the extreme clash between this ideal self, which would be incapable of such a deed, and the silent, speechless self confronted with the bleak reality of his actions. In this disparity, this gap between the ideal and the real, Wolff traces Jack’s deepest psychological conflict and dilemma; how to bridge or close this gap, how to cancel the divide within the self that creates so many instances of aberrant or inexplicable behaviour?

- What are the circumstances in his life that appear to compel these fantasies of a secret self in Jack’s imagination?
- As readers, are we convinced that Jack’s stated aspirations, to become the better self he claims to want to be, are anything more than just further evidence of his dishonest character?
• In what ways is the division between an ideal, imagined self and an everyday, mundane character seen in the memoir to be an almost inevitable result of the tensions and contradictions of the culture Jack inhabits, with its expectations of model citizenship and its abundant examples of contrary behaviour and values?
LANGUAGE AND STYLE

A persistent question about the style of *This Boy’s Life* concerns the extent to which the memoir resembles a novel, with its distinctive first person point of view. It is reminiscent of such novels as *A Catcher in the Rye* or *The Bell Jar*, texts which similarly recount the experiences of troubled young characters in the fifties. To observe this resemblance is not to raise doubts about the accuracy or truthfulness of Wolff’s memoir; he has said that everything he describes in the memoir actually occurred and no incidents have been invented for the purpose of enhancing the narrative or shaping its overall design. The effects of a seemingly novelistic style of language are evident in the text’s complex pattern of imagery, opening the narrative with the dramatic image of the truck careering over the edge of a cliff with all its portents of the disaster and danger; an examination of the feelings of the protagonist that closely approximates the well-established patterns of the novel’s focus on emotional affect rendered through rich, figurative language: ‘I took out my Boy Scout uniform and slowly, carefully, unfolded it and put it on. I ran a damp tissue over my shoes, then straightened up and inspected myself. Everything was as it should be, the set of my scarf, the alignment of my belt buckle, the angle of my cap, the drape of my two sashes. One was the order of the Arrow sash, a red arrow on a brilliant white background. The other was my merit-badge sash. It was thick with proofs of competence’ (p. 166). The imagery here, of a transformation of self through the Scout uniform, centres on the already-established idea of rank and hierarchy which offers some form of consolation for the narrator’s otherwise lowly and disreputable sense of himself and his frequently denigrated position in Dwight’s household. Wolff describes a fabricated character, constructed through words such as ‘alignment’, ‘angle’, ‘drape’ to emphasise the necessary craftsmanship that has gone into Jack’s new identity and his belief that appearance and elaborate decoration or insignias of identity will compensate for his deep-seated feelings of lack throughout the narrative.

A novelistic style of narration derives from its characterisation, patterned symbolism and figurative language. This text focuses on aspects of the protagonist’s problematic identity—the central concern of most novelistic narration—and it richly develops a point of view, that of the younger Jack and also of the mature adult narrator. Ironically, it might be said that the narrative Wolff employs in his memoir, and the ‘creation’ of Jack as the subject of that story, attains the ‘truth’ of fiction rather than the mere reportage of autobiography, making the child in the memoir a fully realised character in the narrative.

The narrator’s voice is unmistakably that of the adult Wolff remembering his ten year old self; this allows the narrator to describe the intense feelings of his protagonist but also, in the best tradition of the realist novel, to carefully examine the boy’s emotional state from a vantage point in which confusions of the moment or incident can now be understood in light of everything that has subsequently followed in the narrator’s life. The style of language that Wolff adopts sustains this quality of revealing a child’s limited understanding, while simultaneously drawing on the considerably enhanced self-awareness of a mature, reflective adult. The language of the memoir is reflective, producing an effect of calm contemplation; Wolff’s tone reveals his forgiveness of the adults, especially the adult men in his life. He repeatedly concedes that Dwight was actually correct in some of his negative views of character flaws. The narrative refuses to exploit those episodes of cruelty or violence that he suffers under Dwight’s petty tyranny. Wolff’s tone in these moments is not so much
one of clinical detachment or a studied downplaying of their seriousness; rather, the language renders Dwight’s cruelty and casual brutality with such controlled literary expression, that it is highly effective in describing the violence of his childhood by contrasting what is being remembered with the achieved clarity and precision of the style now employed to express these memories. It is not so much a triumph of mere style, but a triumph of the boy who can now evoke trauma with insight and a measure of forgiveness.

The language of Wolff’s memoir places it firmly in the tradition of the ‘show don’t tell’ style of literary narration. There is a complete absence of any didactic elements in Wolff’s writing, no ‘message’ concerning the events recounted. For example, as previously argued, the memoir refuses to judge or apportion blame, casting a verdict on men such as Roy, Dwight, or the many other male figures of authority, even Jack’s own father, who regularly abuse, neglect, terrorise or abandon him. There is a disciplined avoidance of blame in a style that aspires to a kind of achieved serenity of remembrance, an acceptance that the events described are now long past, and a recognition that the child who was at the centre of these events no longer exists, except in memory, having been replaced by the man Wolff eventually became. This doesn’t mean that there is any absence of feeling or sympathy in Wolff’s writing, but that he strenuously avoids any tone or pathos that will elicit cheap pity for his character. In place of any cloying sentimentality, which would risk diminishing the force of the remembered events, Wolff writes with an unequivocal focus on the faults and flaws of his younger self, holding them up for scrutiny in a harsher light than any he trains on the actions of the adults themselves. Whether these traits can even be properly understood as faults in a child who has experienced such a fractured upbringing becomes one of the memoir’s central concerns. The child and adolescent narrator judges himself against an elaborate set of values and standards that he consistently fails to meet in his own rigid self-assessments. This makes redundant any retrospective authorial judgement.

One crucial aspect of the narrative style and structure that requires careful discussion is Wolff’s use of an episodic, almost anecdotal style of narration. The memoir is comprised of distinct episodes that come to resemble a collection of short stories all featuring the same protagonist. As an acknowledged contemporary master of the short story form, who has published many collections of short fiction, Wolff’s stylistic format is unsurprising, especially in the form of a memoir, which must avoid appearing contrived or inauthentic. This concern with remaining true to the ‘lived’ quality of the events and refusing to impose a pattern of meaning on these personal events does have direct implications for the larger narrative motivation of the text as a whole and what exactly Wolff is attempting to express or represent. This broader narrative trajectory that begins with the flight of Rosemary and her son to Utah and ends nearly a decade later with Toby enlisting in the army, covers an extremely crucial ten year period in modern American history, the immediate post-war era, the moment when the ‘American Dream’ was at its zenith, and the moment when it began its inevitable decline with the momentous catastrophe of the Vietnam War. It could be said that however much Wolff may want to present his story as his story alone, the period in which it is set has gained such significance with the passing of time that it is now regarded in highly symbolic, even allegorical terms.

Wolff is not attempting to write a social history of this period disguised as a memoir. He refuses to present his experiences as in any way typical or representative of any
larger movements or social trends. However, the use of techniques mastered and employed in so many of his acclaimed short stories lends his memoir a sense of distilling more fundamental truths about the era. One technique visible in many of his short stories and also evident in his memoir is what can be described as a frame narrative in a story to tell another story ingeniously contained within the larger frame. The widest frame in *This Boy's Life* is the story of a boy and his mother whose family misfortunes and specific circumstances force them into an itinerant existence defined by uncertainty, insecurity and danger, yet also including an irrepressible optimism, hopefulness and what appears a quintessentially American type of future-oriented vision or veneration of personal transformation and change. This optimism stems from the belief that, as Americans, they live in a nation of boundless opportunity where one can potentially make a fortune, and it is this sentiment that makes the opening of the memoir so telling. This is the wider frame narrative Wolff employs to encompass the telling of more localised stories of misfortune, poor timing, bad judgement and serial disappointment that afflict almost all the characters in the memoir, from Rosemary to Skipper, Norma, Pearl, Arthur, Chuck, Huff and many others, stories presented by Wolff as the ‘true stories’ of their lives. These true stories are far removed from the idealism and dreams of general American culture.

Wolff’s use of the techniques borrowed from the repertoire perfected in his short fiction enables him to comment on such social forces as contingency, randomness, accident, anomaly, disappointment and sheer bad luck (the allegory of Skipper’s destroyed Ford is a clear exhibit of this) in our everyday experience. Of course, all of these terms generate interesting questions about the ideological role and function of those larger, more affirmative narratives of national ‘exceptionalism’ and triumphalism that are at the heart of the American national imagination and that form the ultimate narrative frame of reference in the memoir.
CLOSE STUDY

Fortune pp.20–21

In this passage the narrator describes the gift Roy has given him, a Winchester .22 rifle, over the objections of Rosemary who ‘didn’t think I could be trusted with it’. Rosemary’s distrust turns out to be well founded as Toby’s fascination with the weapon leads him to spending afternoons alone in the apartment where he takes down the gun and begins enacting some extremely disturbing behaviour. At first his actions are limited to a form of care and maintenance of the rifle, and then a childish form of play: ‘From cleaning the rifle I went to marching around the apartment with it, and then to striking brave poses in front of the mirror. Roy had saved one of his army uniforms and I sometimes dressed up in this…’. In full costume Toby then imagines himself as a sniper, ‘and before long I began to act like one’. This act entails a sinister mimicry of what the child believes is the natural use of such a weapon, training it on pedestrians walking on the streets below his window. The passage goes on to describe the gradual yet inevitable escalation of this pantomime of childish imitation of the gestures and heroic imagery of a military sniper. Toby becomes bored with just aiming his rifle and feels a compulsion to fire the weapon (‘I had to shoot’) and satisfies this urge on an unsuspecting squirrel: ‘The squirrel dropped straight into the road. I pulled back into the shadows and waited for something to happen, sure that someone must have heard the shot or even seen the squirrel fall…The squirrel hadn’t moved. It looked like a scarf someone had dropped.’

This is an emblematic episode in many ways; it describes the consistently furtive nature of Toby’s personality, always conspiring secretly, and retreating ‘back into the shadows’ in the hope of avoiding adult detection. It evokes his emerging sense of the thrill of committing transgressions and the even greater thrill of these going unnoticed and unpunished. The incident, which is chilling in its description of a ‘game’ that might easily have resulted in tragedy, also has a disturbing resonance with contemporary American gun crimes and mass shootings. Wolff includes this episode, as he does so many of the unflattering examples of his unthinking behaviour at the time, to illustrate how the relative freedom Toby enjoyed could be put to such sinister and dangerous purpose. This story also expresses the pervasiveness of a military ethos in the United States. The paraphernalia of war is readily at hand and the worship of guns is seemingly inescapable—even Toby’s mother is a crack shot and enjoys firing guns in competition. The episode concludes with Toby ‘confessing’ his crime to Rosemary in a dissembling way, telling her of the dead squirrel and then crying dramatically during a burial service they enact: ‘We buried it behind our building under a cross made of popsicle sticks, and I blubbered the whole time.’

- Wolff uses a matter of fact tone to describe this chilling incident. How does the apparent neutrality of the narration actually enhance its effect on the reader?
- In what ways is this incident revealing of some emerging traits in Toby’s personality?
- What comment might the narrative be making on the military and gun culture that predominated in America in the fifties?
• How does Wolff suggest through this episode that Toby is adept at finding ways in which he can be both perpetrator and victim?

• Does Toby’s ‘blubbering’ over the death of the squirrel suggest that he is essentially a natural liar and incapable of genuine feeling, even at this early stage?

Citizenship in the home: pp. 110–111

‘I was a liar. Even though I lived in a place where everyone knew who I was, I couldn’t help but try to introduce new versions of myself as my interests changed, and as other versions failed to persuade. I was also a thief.’

There is a stark, direct quality to these statements that reflects the narrator’s considerable distance from the boy he is describing, but also the recognition that anything less honest would be self-defeating in such a narrative. Wolff offers an extremely confessional account of his career as a petty thief who stole from his newspaper customers. However even this criminal behaviour has as its motivation the desire to escape from the cruelty of his home life, fantasies that begin to acquire even more dangerous forms: ‘I was ready to do anything to get clear of Dwight. I even thought of killing him, shooting him down some night.’ The language here is revealing; ‘shooting him down some night’ is evocative of a Western revenge story, the hero finally confronting his nemesis in a public showdown. However, closer examination reveals that any open and public confrontation could not happen ‘while he was picking on my mother’. The revenge fantasy is revealing of the actual lack of power or influence of the young boy who is forced to bear witness to the cruel treatment of his mother as well as himself.

In yet another characteristic confession the narrator reveals that Dwight’s cruelty really only found its target when he called Jack a sissy. This caused Jack to then want to distance himself from his friendship with Arthur, a widely recognised sissy in the town and Jack’s best friend. Jack’s eternal preoccupation with how he is perceived and especially with how ‘manly’ he is seen to be, or at least his potential for later manliness, causes his betrayal of Arthur and his willingness to fight other boys to earn Dwight’s esteem. Yet Dwight’s accusations caused some unintended effects that were to have more serious consequences for the adolescent Jack:

‘All of Dwight’s complaints against me had the aim of giving me a definition of myself. They succeeded, but not in the way he wished. I defined myself by opposition to him. In the past I had been ready, even when innocent, to believe any evil thing of myself. Now that I had grounds for guilt I could no longer feel it.’

• Does Jack’s confession that he could no longer feel guilt foreshadow later incidents in the memoir?

• In this passage how has Jack’s relationship with Dwight affected him (beyond the obvious evidence of Dwight’s physical abuse of the boy)?

• What purpose is served by Wolff providing such explicit denunciations of his protagonist? Does it challenge the reader’s capacity to feel sympathy for Jack and his situation? While he claims that he defined himself in opposition to
Dwight, in what ways has the older man clearly shaped aspects of Jack’s personality or view of himself?

Citizenship in the school: pp180–181

In this passage, prophetic given the writer that Jack would one day become, he describes his efforts to fill out the transcripts and applications for the prep schools he is seeking to attend. This episode is presented in highly symbolic terms, suggesting that a fundamental discovery has been made by the narrator in the process of committing yet another act of dishonesty and forged identity:

‘I wrote the first drafts deliberately, with much crossing out and pencilling in, but with none of the hesitance I’d felt before. Now the words came as easily as if someone were breathing them into my ear. I felt full of things that had to be said, full of stifled truth. That was what I thought I was writing—the truth. It was truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than in the facts arrayed against it...These were ideas about myself that I had held on to for dear life. Now I gave them voice.’

While the reader is never in any doubt that what Jack is doing by forging his applications is highly dishonest and indicative of his inability to cope with the academic demands of such an education, this passage nevertheless completes the portrait that Wolff has been developing throughout the memoir of a boy who believes his true identity is better than the one that circumstances have appeared to confer on him. Jack remains at heart an idealist, refusing to concede that he is essentially a liar, a thief, irresponsible, and capable of betrayal. Through the process of writing his scholarship applications Jack discovers that his idealism can be channelled productively into creating the version of himself that he has always believed to be the truth, a truth that others cannot see but that he knows is greater than mere appearance. Wolff manages to convince his readers, just as Jack obviously managed to convince his readers, just as Jack obviously managed to convince his, that the boy described in the forged transcripts does have a basis in reality, that Jack does contain the traits and talents that he describes with such unshakeable conviction. He manages to convince himself that the forged documents are actually his teacher’s letters: ‘These were their letters. And on the boy who lived in their letters, the splendid phantom who carried all my hopes, it seemed to me I saw, at last, my own face.’

The composition of an ideal, fictional self has much in common with what might be called the literary impulse, an urge to explore the human character through idealised characters and situations. Jack creates an almost epic image of himself, though he declines to ‘say I was a football star’. Nevertheless, what is heroic about his fictional self is the depth of personal virtue he attributes to this ‘character’, a ‘gifted, upright boy who had already in his own quiet way exhausted the resources of his school and community.’ The picture of himself that Jack develops in his forged applications is an ideal one, a boy who has not been abandoned, neglected, abused, or traumatised by the experience he has had throughout his childhood; it is a picture of an ideal boy who has lived an ideal existence, a product of Jack’s own imagination, a type of boy he might have been if his situation had been different. The face that Jack claims to see in these letters is the face of a boy he might have been had his family remained together, if his role models were not so consistently negative, and if his real talents and abilities had been recognised earlier and directed more productively.
• Does this latest and most elaborate act of deception finally lose the reader’s remaining sympathy for Jack, or does he emerge with a small measure of sympathy for his desperation to escape a life with Dwight?

• How does Wolff’s portrayal of Jack, a character who so regularly resorts to dishonesty, keep the reader’s sympathy?

• Is Jack just hopelessly self-deceiving in this passage, believing his own lies despite all evidence to the contrary?

• How does Wolff effectively prefigure the writer he would ultimately become?

• Wolff reveals that even as a boy he was a practised deceiver who could invent a personality when needed. Does this confession lead the reader to doubt aspects of his memoir or its adherence to the facts?
FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Wolff’s text is not an isolated example of the literary memoir genre. Contemporary writers such as Mary Karr (The Liar’s Club, Lit), Frederick Exley (A Fan’s Notes), William Styron (A Tidewater Morning and Darkness Visible), Gore Vidal (Palimpsest), Vladimir Nabokov (Speak Memory) and John Updike (Self-Consciousness) have all produced extremely interesting and stylistically varied memoirs that can be looked at in comparison with Wolff. Extracts from any of these, or others, can be used to discuss Wolff’s own particular methods of recounting past experience; do all the writers mentioned here for example employ a similar style of language or use of a detached narrative voice? In looking at a range of extracts from different writers, is it apparent why the literary memoir is such an established genre? Why do imaginative writers seem to feel the need to recount their own past when it may have already entered their creative work? In comparison with other examples, is This Boy’s Life an unconventional type of memoir or can its techniques be identified in the work of others?

2. Consider some examples of Wolff’s short fiction in The Collected Stories of Tobias Wolff. In what ways does Wolff’s memoir develop themes and issues that can be found in his stories? Is there a clear consistency in his literary style of expression in both the fiction and non-fiction that he writes? Select some key features of the memoir, such as the use of a frame narrative, approaches to characterisation, or the exploration of a significant moment and discuss how these techniques appear in his short stories.

3. Ask students to research the controversies surrounding memoirs published by writers such as Norma Kouri, Forbidden Love and James Frey, A Million Little Things. When these memoirs were first published they caused a sensation for their perceived authenticity and honesty. When it was later revealed that they were completely invented, works of fiction as opposed to works of non-fiction, they immediately lost all credibility. Why did their status change so dramatically after they were found to be imaginative rather than ‘lived’? They were still the same pieces of literary writing, but they were now read as entirely different and thereby lesser texts. What issues are raised by these controversies over literary works presented as memoirs? Students could also stage a formal debate addressing the topic: ‘That memoir is just another literary genre, no more real than a novel’.

4. The fifties is the period that is often credited with responsibility for the birth of the teenager and the emergence of a genuinely separate youth culture, rock and roll, and films about and for teenagers, fashion and hair styles, a generational identity aggressively different from adults. A defining aspect of the teenager was the perceived trait of rebelliousness or opposition to a status quo identified as adult, captured iconically in James Dean’s performance in Rebel Without a Cause. Students could explore this emergent trend of the teenager as a social problem; why did teenagers become synonymous with rebellion, conflict, a refusal of their parent’s values and a propensity for delinquency? To what extent does Jack’s adolescence fit this pattern or stereotype of anti-social behaviour? Students can write a short research paper and present their findings to the class.
5. Select extracts from Wolff’s later memoir *In Pharaoh’s Army*, here Wolff recounts his experiences immediately following the period described in *This Boy’s Life*, serving in the US Army in Vietnam. Students can explore the ways in which the young protagonist of the earlier memoir is confronted with far greater challenges to his sense of self during a war, and how his previous notions of ‘manliness’ are fundamentally challenged. How do these challenges redefine the questions he has always tried to answer concerning who and what he is? Does service in the military provide him with the sense of belonging that he has craved since childhood? How do his wartime experiences contribute to his continued development as an individual?

6. Students could be invited to produce their own written memoir (or to write up the ‘memoir’ of an older person whom they know really well and have interviewed). This will enable students to consider the type of choices they need to make in the treatment of a particular incident or episode from their own life, or the ‘real’ life of an imagined memoir’s subject. This exercise should not be an excessively ‘confessional’ text, but should consider the range of technical choices that writers must make in the presentation of highly personal and complex material, without the veneer of fiction to deflect attention away from the writer herself/himself.
KEY QUOTES

‘I rocked her and murmured to her. I was practiced at this and happy doing it, not because she was unhappy but because she needed me, and to be needed made me feel capable. Soothing her soothed me’ (p. 46).

The relationship between mother and son that is described in the early sections of the memoir portrays a closeness and intimacy that has clearly developed as a result of their mutual isolation from any other more communal or supportive relationships. Rosemary and Toby sustain themselves by committing completely to their shared sense of the future as a place where they will make their fortune. In this image, the child soothing his mother has a classical sense of serenity and peace, a brief respite from their otherwise disordered existence.

‘My mother took off a few months after her mother died, when she was still a girl. But Daddy left some marks on her. One of them was a strange docility, almost paralysis, with men of the tyrant breed. Another was a contradictory hatred of coercion. She’d never been able to spank me... She couldn’t even raise her voice convincingly. That wasn’t the way she wanted to be with me, and she didn’t think I needed it anyway’ (p. 49).

The details Wolff provides about his mother’s family background are fascinating as the prehistory to his own story. Rosemary came from a wealthy family, but one that was ruled by a violent and authoritarian father. Wolff resists offering too much of psychological explanation for his mother’s propensity to form relationships with such men as an adult, but the revealing portrait of a woman who attempted to raise her son according to a more progressive philosophy is affecting. Rosemary’s unyielding defence of Jack when he is accused of writing the obscenity on the school wall is typical of this attitude that a parent should demonstrate total loyalty to their child in the face of a judgemental world. Wolff does not neglect to include numerous examples of how he exploited this ‘hatred of coercion’ on his mother’s part, describing a clever child’s understanding that he could manipulate such tolerance for his own purposes, as in the case mentioned at school, to avoid punishment and to deny the accusations that would contradict the self-image Jack tried to maintain of himself as a noble character.

‘Things had gone too far. And somehow it was her telling me it wasn’t too late that made me believe, past all doubt, that it was. Those words still sound to me less like a hope than an epitaph, the last lie we tell before hurling ourselves over the brink’ (p. 87).

Rosemary has asked her son if he still thinks it is a good idea for her to marry Dwight, allowing him to cast something like a final verdict on the marriage. When Rosemary informs Jack that it wasn’t too late to change their plans he doesn’t believe her and lies, telling her that he is getting along with Dwight and is happy to be a part of his family. Jack’s inability to speak truthfully about his feelings is significant here. In many other instances in the memoir he is similarly unable to speak truthfully, for instance when he doesn’t apologise to the Welshes. He doesn’t at any point describe Dwight’s treatment of him to his mother. Jack’s sense that ‘things had gone too far’ and the metaphor of ‘hurling ourselves over the brink’ express the child’s highly developed capacity for dramatisation, for seeing the events
in his life in almost epic or tragic scale. The paralysis that the adult narrator describes his mother feeling in the presence of tyrannical men is not dissimilar to the paralysis Jack feels in this moment, unable to articulate his abject feelings, ‘bound to accept as my home a place I did not feel at home in’, fated to accept a life that was the cause of genuine misery and a damaged sense of self.

‘No, but I was happy that night, listening to them search for me, listening to them call my name. I knew they wouldn’t find me. After they went away I lay there smiling in my perfect place. Through the ferns above me I saw the nimbus of the moon in the dense, dark sky…I listened with godly condescension. I was all alone where no one could find me, only the faint excitement of a game and some voices crying Concrete, Concrete, Concrete’ (p. 161).

After taking a fall off a tree branch and rolling downhill into a dense thicket of ferns, Jack remains hidden while others search for him. The imagery of a lost child is potently evoked here, the feeling of enraptured solitude while at the same time others call his name. This scene is redolent of many of the themes in the memoir: the desire for escape and to be the object of pursuit by others, a sense of separateness that ultimately makes connection impossible, a sensual glorification in the experience of being self-sufficient, independent of others. This moment of blissful isolation conjures up a rare instance of peace and serenity for Jack, briefly punctuating his otherwise harried existence.

‘When we are green, still half-created, we believe that our dreams are rights, that the world is disposed to act in our best interests, and that falling and dying are for quitters. We live in the innocent and monstrous assurance that we alone, of all the people ever born, have a special arrangement whereby we will be allowed to stay green forever’ (pp.242–243).

This final, contemplative meditation distils the melancholy realisation that is the price of experience; there is an unavoidable sadness in the tone of this observation, for the innocent self-regard that is a defining feature of youth, and for the lack of understanding that what the young experience as their unique birth-right, youth itself, can so easily be squandered according to the inescapable passage of time. The memoir concludes on a somewhat sombre note, notwithstanding the final image of Chuck and Jack singing in their car, a note of foreboding—as Toby heads off to the army and the war in Vietnam—anticipating a future with far greater threats and dangers than those already survived in his childhood.
TEXT RESPONSE TOPICS

1. ‘Wolff’s unsparing self-portrait shatters the image of childhood as an innocent time.’
   Discuss.

2. ‘Through numerous adversities the memoir celebrates the relationship between Rosemary and Jack.’
   Discuss.

3. ‘It is difficult for the reader to feel much affection for the protagonist in Wolff’s memoir.’
   Do you agree?

4. ‘The values of a patriarchal society are shown to be stifling and oppressive for both women and children.’
   Discuss.

5. ‘Throughout the memoir Wolff’s childhood self learns nothing of real value from his many errors of judgement.’
   Do you agree?

6. ‘While Jack appears to have escaped largely unscathed from his childhood with Dwight, Rosemary has been permanently scarred.’
   Discuss.

7. ‘The strength of Wolff’s memoir is his readiness to cast himself in the worst possible light.’
   Discuss.

8. ‘This Boy’s Life dispels any lingering nostalgia we might still have for the post-war society of the fifties.’ Discuss.

9. ‘While Jack is an unreliable child, Wolff convinces us that he is a reliable narrator.’
   Do you agree?

10. ‘Wolff’s memoir demonstrates that the ‘generation gap’ exists because of the lack of empathy shown by adults.’
    Do you agree?
VATE 2014 Inside Stories include:

All About Eve
Cloudstreet
Mabo
No Sugar
The Complete Maus
The Thing Around Your Neck
This Boy’s Life