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About the book

In brief

Escaping a difficult home life, a bright scholarship boy becomes immersed in the heady literary atmosphere of his private school to the extent that he no longer knows quite who he is. Entertaining such luminaries as Robert Frost, the school encourages its aspiring writers to compete for an audience with their heroes, but when Ernest Hemingway is invited to the school the boy becomes gripped by writer's block. A startling sense of recognition when reading a story in the sister school's magazine leads him to make a disastrous error of judgement resulting in his own dishonour. Many years later, now a successful writer, he learns of that day's other dishonour, the price that has been paid for it and the redemption earned. In Old School Tobias Wolff explores the ideal of honour, the possibility of redemption, the ways in which literature can illuminate life and the resonance of school days throughout our lives.

In detail

Although perhaps best known for his two memoirs This Boy's Life (made into a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Ellen Barkin and Robert de Niro), and In Pharaoh's Army which recounts his experience as a soldier in Vietnam, Tobias Wolff has received a good deal of critical acclaim for his short stories which have won him the respect of writers such as Raymond Carver. Despite his protestation to Joan Smith in his www.salon.com interview that writing cannot be taught, Wolff was a revered teacher of creative writing at Syracuse University for many years and now teaches the Wallace Stegner Fellowship as part of Stanford University's Creative Writing Programme of which he is an alumni. He insists that his role is to 'help people to become the best possible editors of their own work'. His passion for the short story has led him not only to write in that form, but also to edit several anthologies including a collection of his most admired writer, Chekhov.

Old School is fiction but it almost reads like a continuation of This Boy's Life, Wolff's memoir of his chaotic life with his peripatetic mother after her divorce and subsequent marriage to a man who verbally and physically abused him. Like Old School's unnamed narrator, the young Tobias Wolff sought escape through a scholarship to a prestigious prep school where literature was held in passionate esteem (in Wolff's case the Hill School in Pennsylvania), practised a deception (Wolff wrote his own references claiming that they were from his teachers), was expelled and became a successful writer. Wolff's novel is as unflinchingly honest in its depiction of honour, deception and disgrace as his memoir, yet his narrator retains an affectionate respect for his old school just as, given its dedication 'For My Teachers', Wolff seems to for his own school.

About Tobias Wolff

Tobias Wolff was born in Alabama in 1945. He spent four years as a paratrooper and served in Vietnam after which he read English at Oxford, graduating in 1972 with a first class degree. His literary prizes include the 1985 PEN/Faulkner Award, three O. Henry Prizes and the Esquire/Volvo/Waterstone's Prize for Non-Fiction. He is an acclaimed short story writer and has published fiction in Esquire, Atlantic Monthly, Granta, the Literary Review, the New Yorker and Vanity Fair.
Reviews

Good Reading (five star review)

I love reading books about books. The thrill of discovering a new voice, the excitement of recognition when the author seems to have read your mind. I have a theory that we look for images of ourselves in books; who we are, who we want to be, who we once were. And when we find them, we fall in love.

Old School is set in an exclusive American boys' boarding school in 1960. The students' literary aspirations are encouraged by periodic visits by great writers. They compete for the chance of a private audience by writing short stories. The upcoming visit of Ernest Hemingway becomes a source of intense rivalry for the young narrator and his fellows, but as the deadline approaches and inspiration eludes him, he resorts to desperate measures to ensure his victory.

As much as it is about books and writing, Old School is an exploration of the codes of honour, loyalty and friendship that tie us to our past. Though we might wish to disagree, our schooling influences the adults we become. Wolff's evocation of the world is flawless, and his insight into the teenage mind is uncanny. A book to remind you why you love reading. Absolutely brilliant.

The Sydney Morning Herald

"There are writers of fat books and fat sentences: Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates and William T. Vollman; and then there are writers like Tobias Wolff. Wolff's output since he started writing in the late '70s has not been large: three volumes of short stories, a novella and the books for which he is most admired, the memoirs This Boy's Life and In the Pharaoh's Army. His first full-length novel, Old School, displays the scrupulous style and preoccupation with honour and honesty – or their opposites – that mark his previous work.

The rhythms of his memoirs are so fluid and exact that they attain a novelistic power, and the voice in this book is so similar that it is like a genre-bending sequel. In some ways Old School is reminiscent of Edmund White's autobiographical novels, A Boy's Own Story and The Beautiful Room is Empty, though without White's rapturousness, and without the homosexuality. But there is the same keen sense of self-interrogation, and a sharpness of perception which perhaps derives ultimately from the French moralistic tradition as much as from American models. These qualities make the book a pleasure to read.

The unnamed narrator is a lower-middle class boy at a posh Eastern-states American private school in 1960. He is a faker: by imitation and omission he has given the impression that he is from the same background as the boys around him, just as he has also been careful not to let people know that he is Jewish. But it is not class that leads his astray in the end:

If the school had a snobbery it would confess to, this was its pride in being a literary place – quite aside from the glamorous writers who visited three times a year. The headmaster had studied with Robert Frost at Amherst and once published a collection of poetry, Sonnets Against the Storm, which it now pained him to be reminded of; Dean Makepeace had been a friend of Hemingway's during World War I and was said to have
served as the model for Jake's fishing buddy Bill in *The Sun Also Rises*. The other English masters carried themselves as if they too were intimates of Hemingway, and also of Shakespeare and Hawthorne and Donne.

Whenever one of these glamorous writers comes to visit, there is a literary competition whose prize is a private audience with the great man or woman. *Old School* tells the story of the three competitions in the narrator's final year, whose winners get to meet Robert Frost, Ayn Rand and, finally, Hemingway himself. Having seen one of the editors of the school literary magazine win a meeting with Frost by submitting an obsequious pastiche of his poetry, and a non-literary type win an audience with Rand with a science fiction story about talking cows from outer space, the narrator decides he must meet Hemingway at all costs. He has been typing Hemingway’s stories out as if he were writing them himself, so it is a natural step for him to hand in a story cribbed from the literary magazine of his school's sister institution, Miss Cobb’s. The inevitable exposure sees the boy expelled from school.

Wolff is good at these comedies of competitiveness and deceit and the buffetings suffered by the unformed personality; there is a funny sequence where his hero spends some weeks fancying himself as an Ayn Rand superhero until he gets sick and is looked after by his grandparents, and all of a sudden their niceness doesn’t seem so mediocre after all. (When he attends a soiree thrown for the great personality cultist herself, his disillusion is complete).

*Old School* is a work of considerable distinction by one of America's superior prose writers.

**The Sun Herald**

Part novel, part memoir, this is a wonderfully elegiac picture of life in an expensive boys’ school in America. Each term a famous writer comes to visit: first Robert Frost, then Ayn Rand, then— most thrillingly — Hemingway himself. The boys compete to meet each writer and the book is a brilliant evocation of what literature can mean to a young boy in an environment where communication is perilous and selves are hidden. It is a remarkable examination of what makes someone become a writer.
Some suggested points for discussion

Old School’s narrative is written in the first person. How appropriate is this to the novel? How would you describe the tone of the narrative? How good is Wolff at capturing the voice of an adolescent schoolboy of the period?

Great emphasis is placed on literature at the school but Susan Friedman asserts that writing ‘cuts you off and makes you selfish and doesn’t really do any good’ (p. 165). To what extent does writing and literature prepare students for life outside the school? How important do you think literature is in helping us to understand life? Is there any truth in Friedman’s statement?

‘Ours was not a snobbish school, or so it believed, and we made this as true as we could’ (p. 3). How accurate is this description? What is the narrator’s background and how do we learn about it? How well does he fit into the school?

What does the incident with Gershon and its repercussions tell us about the narrator?

What part does Jewishness play in the novel?

What effect does Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead have on the narrator? How does the reality of Ayn Rand and her views compare with the narrator’s perceptions gained through reading the novel? What effect does her visit to the school have on him?

“Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration … In this way he lost everything.” I knew just how Krebs felt (p. 110). What ‘untruths and exaggeration’ has the narrator indulged in? What has led him to regret this and become sick of its results? Have other characters behaved similarly?

On page 149 Ramsay says he is disgusted at the way that the word ‘honour’ is thrown about at the school. Why do you think he feels this? What is the school’s ‘Honour Code’ and how does it effect both teachers and students? What do you think of it?

Both the narrator and the Dean break the school’s ‘Honour Code’. Would you judge both to be equally culpable? What are your reasons for your answer? To what extent can either of them be justified?

What part does humour play in the novel? How would you describe that humour?

If you have read Wolff’s autobiographical This Boy’s Life, what parallels can you draw between the two books? What differences are there? To what extent do you think that the genres of autobiography and fiction overlap?
Further reading

Fiction

For Kings and Planets by Ethan Canin
The Cornish Trilogy by Robertson Davies
The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald
In Our Time by Ernest Hemingway
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce
Dead Poets Society by N H Kleinbaum
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by Muriel Spark

Non fiction

Goodbye Mr Chips by James Hilton

OTHER BOOKS BY TOBIAS WOLFF

Fiction

The Night in Question
The Barracks Thief
Back in the World
In the Garden of the North American Martyrs

Non fiction

This Boy's Life
In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of a Lost War