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THIS BOY'S LIFE

A Memoir

By Tobias Wolff

Atlantic Monthly Press, \$18.95, 288 pages.

Despite his 1984 P.E.N./Faulkner Award for *The Barracks Thief* and his continual appearance in the year's best story collections, there are those who complain that Tobias Wolff's fiction is thin, underwritten--even, they say as if naming a vile infection, minimalist.

Most readers, however, view Wolff as among the most masterful tellers of tales in America, and even those who shun writers accused of the M word will likely join them in finding *This Boy's Life* a compelling narrative. The very sparseness they lament in his stories proves a positive force as a vehicle for this memoir tracing Wolff's life from age ten to his departure for tony Hill School as a teenager. Wolff's was a boyhood that in less restrained hands could have become the stuff of self-pity and recrimination. Told here, though, with warmth and generosity, his story sounds more like a mixture of David Copperfield and Huck Finn transposed to the American Northwest.

Wolff is the subject of this book, not its hero. He confesses with candor and no shame to more than his share of pranks and petty crimes. He lies, cheats, steals, copies other students' homework, watches the *Mickey Mouse Show* with outspoken lust for Mouseketeer Annette, falsifies his report card and application to prep school, forges a check and reads his stepsister's diary. When at age ten he must make his first confession to a priest, he takes the first confession a nun has just related to him as her own and plagiarizes it almost verbatim. He saves the role of hero for his mother.

As the book opens in 1955, Rosemary Wolff is driving the ten year-old Toby away from one of the many abusive men in her life and setting off toward Salt Lake City and a dream of prosperity and happiness. They never do reach prosperity, but they snatch moments of happiness because the mother's love and courage shield her son from slings and arrows that might have otherwise wounded him deeply. Roy, the man they'd fled, tracks them down, lives off Rosemary's income, jealously follows her home from work each day, and occasionally brutalizes her until mother and son flee again, this time for Seattle.

Before Roy there had been Tobias's father, Arthur Saunders, whose pride led him to contrive a phony family coat of arms and who, despite his affluence as an aeronautical engineer married to a millionairess, contributed not a cent to the boy's support. And before Arthur there had been Rosemary's father, who beat her every evening after dessert on the theory she must have committed during the day some act to deserve it and then forced her to kiss him and say, "Thank you, Daddy, for earning the delicious meal." Rosemary left home shortly after her mother died, but by then Daddy had left his mark on her, "a strange docility, almost paralysis, with men of the tyrant breed."

That's what she finds waiting for her in Washington in the person of Dwight, the man she is married to during most of the time covered in *This Boy's Life*. Convinced by this single father of three

teenagers from Chinook (three hours north of Seattle) that he can provide her son with stability and a satisfactory male role model, Rosemary marries Dwight and almost immediately regrets it, as they return from their honeymoon two days early and not even looking at each other. He yells at her constantly, sells Tobias's Winchester rifle without permission and steals his newspaper route money, beats and berates the boy, holds a hunting knife to Rosemary's throat and makes her promise to never leave him. After she does leave Dwight and moves to Washington, D.C., he trails her there and tries to strangle her in the lobby of her apartment building.

What seems to keep both mother and son going is the bond they share. They sing together, scheme and laugh together, and defend and comfort each other. When Rosemary, in between Roy and Dwight, comes home from a date with a man a good deal more ulterior than he'd seemed, it gives us the chance to see the mutual nurturance of this mother-son relationship: "She was crying softly. 'Mom?' I said. When she didn't answer I got up and went over to her. 'What's wrong, Mom?' She looked at me, tried to say something, shook her head. I sat beside her and put my arms around her. She was gasping as if someone had held her underwater.

"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."

Wolff's world never grows too dark because his mother seems to carry sunlight with her. "She made the world seem friendly. And somehow, with her, it was. She would talk to anyone, anywhere . . . On the bus ride from Salt Lake to Portland she had everybody talking and laughing until it seemed like some kind of party."

Wolff has said elsewhere that he has written stories since he was six and never wanted to be anything but a writer. In this memoir he credits his mother with the help and inspiration for his writing: "When I was younger and having trouble learning to write, she sat me down at the kitchen table and covered my hand with hers and moved it through the alphabet for several nights running, and then through words and sentences until the motions assumed their own life, partly hers and partly mine. I could not, cannot, put pen to paper without having her with me."

With a portrait of Rosemary this adoringly rendered, with Dwight a near-caricature of the wicked stepparent, with friends and teachers springing quickly to almost Dickensian life, with long ago faces and foliage seen only once and yet described in minute detail, we come at times to question the accuracy of this book's facts. Wolff, it seems, wouldn't have it any other way and freely confesses at the start that while he has tried to be accurate "this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. . . . My first stepfather used to say that what I didn't know would fill a book. Well, here it is."

This invites questions. What is the purpose of autobiography in general and this one in particular? Is it to preserve the record of a long and distinguished life? No doubt sometimes it is, but here the writer has barely passed 40 and tells us in the opening paragraph the account may play fast and loose with facts. Wolff seems to have written his memoir for quite another set of purposes.

As one of my most gifted students once observed, for most of us "the past is what is remembered, not what actually happened." The facts, then, are for biographers; autobiographers are

more concerned with the truth, with the tone and spirit of a life. In part, we even create that tone and spirit as we write. Wolff did exactly that as he forged letters of recommendation and wrote a glowing counterfeit report of his scholarship when applying to Hill School: "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 a truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than I believed in the facts arrayed against it. I believed that in some sense not factually verifiable I was a straight-A student. . . . I made no claims that seemed false to me. I did not say that I was a star quarterback. . . . Ditto school politics. . . . These were not ideas I had of myself, and I did not propose to urge them on anyone else. . . . 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."

In *This Boy's Life*, Wolff recognizes his own face as he creates it. He puts early demons to rest and tries to pay debts he may never feel are paid. He seldom judges but renders his remembered truth with bemused wit and what feels like reportorial objectivity, neither boastful nor bitter, wringing sympathy for his central characters less by slanting than by simply relating the human truth of their actions, a mother and son each looking for love--with characters as unlikely as Dwight and Annette Funicello--always knowing they have found it with each other.

Wolff could have told us many things about himself he chose not to: two degrees from Oxford, one from Stanford; reporter for the Washington Post ; professor at Syracuse University; 1st Lieutenant in the U.S. Army special services; many literary awards. Instead, he tells us how he threw eggs off bridges at passing cars, how he robbed his stepfather and wrote an obscenity on the boys' room wall; mostly, how he survived.

He portrays himself as no less flawed than his fictional characters, who are also often filled with dreams and who create their identity in the stories they tell of themselves, who like Wolff face frustration, disappointment and their own human frailty. But what emerges from this memoir is an absorbing story of a boy we are glad to have met, and a man whose next book we eagerly await.