

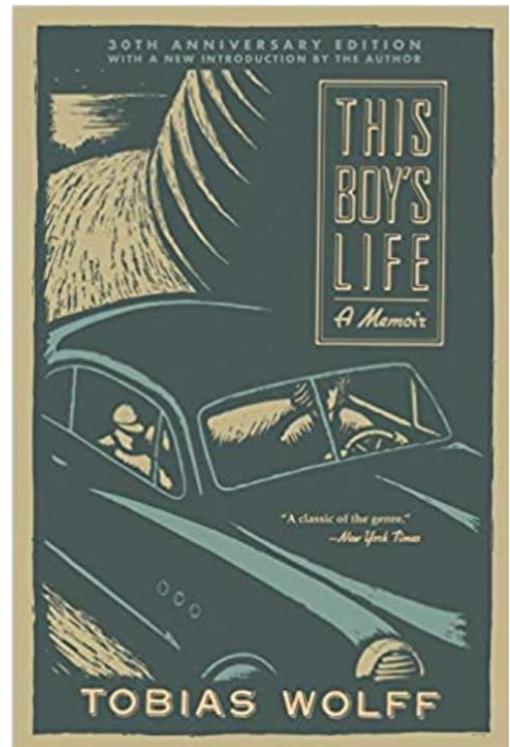
Senior Writers' Seminar Level 4 (W235434)

This Boy's Life: A Memoir, Tobias Wolff

ISBN-13: 9780802149077

Please read and enjoy the following memoir before the first day of class. Allow yourselves ample time to complete the reading.

Winner of a 2014 National Medal of Arts, Tobias Wolff is a novelist, memoirist, short story writer, Vietnam veteran, Stanford professor, family man and a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellow. His memoir, *This Boy's Life* (Grove Press, 1989), tells the story of his early days in the 1950s—moving with his mother from Florida to Utah to Washington state—and his rough years as a young adult at the hands of an abusive stepfather in a small town north of Seattle. "So absolutely clear and hypnotic," says *The New York Times*, "that a reader wants to take it apart and find some simple way to describe why it works so beautifully." – **NEA Big Read**



One of our goals in SWS is to observe a great writer (Tobias Wolff) at work so we can learn from him and eventually try some of the techniques in our writing that he successfully employs in his book. As you read, notice the following elements of memoir and creative non-fiction writing:

- **Scenes rooted in conflict:** a conflict or problem that creates tension or shows the writer's vulnerability. Notice how Wolff construct scenes rooted in conflict and how he makes this conflict apparent to the reader.
- **Verbs:** good writing is rooted in powerful verb choice. Action verbs grab a reader's attention more effectively than the lame and lazy, "is/are/was/were" verbs.

- **Showing:** passages where the writer reconstructs a memory or describes a moment using imagery and sensory detail
- **Telling:** “telling” sections are reflections on a complex idea or universal truth.
- **Potent final image:** the last words or images given to in a chapter provide resolution, suggest meaning, and sometimes pose further questions. We may see recurring patterns repeated with a difference, pointing to progress or transformation. Other times, we are left with abrupt endings, startling contrasts or shocks.
- **Character development:** Look for techniques and details Wolff uses to make characters interesting and believable.
- **Dialogue:** Identify dialogue that strikes you as being well written. Look for realistic lines of dialogue from characters, dialogue that reveals character traits, and dialogue that’s rooted in conflict. Notice how Wolff handles the tags (i.e. “he said/she said”).
- **Sentence Structure:** Identify sentences that convey greater meaning because of the way they’re structured. Where does Wolff end with a cascading sentence structure? (Think “row, row, row your boat . . .”). Where does Wolff use short, terse, “punch-in-the-gut” sentences to deliver a quick hitter – a succinct idea? Where does Wolff use one-sentence paragraphs? Why does he make these various sentence structure choices? Why are they useful?