

The New Criterion

Books

June 2008

What Wolff knows

by [Stefan Beck](#)

On *Our Story Begins* by Tobias Wolff.

Tobias Wolff *Our Story Begins*.
Knopf, 400 pages, \$26.95

Deep in the climate-controlled recesses of the Stanford University library is a book so rare that not a single Ivy League school has a copy. “Felton Collection,” says the card catalogue, followed by a vaguely threatening word: “Non-circulating.” It’s nothing too scandalous—just *Ugly Rumours*, a novel by Tobias Wolff published once in Britain, in 1975, and then disowned for all time. It’s never been listed under ALSO BY TOBIAS WOLFF, and it never will be.

I live at Stanford, like the book and its author, so I’ve had ample opportunity to peek into the foxed, brittle, and probably embarrassing juvenilia of a literary giant. But I don’t need to peek. I’m just glad it’s there, proof that it isn’t necessary to write a masterpiece on the first try, that literature favors experience and patience more than youth and hype. Indeed, Wolff’s work is never done; as he writes in the introduction to *Our Story Begins*, “I have never regarded my stories as sacred texts... . If I see a clumsy or superfluous passage, so will you, and why should I throw you out of the story with an irritation I could have prevented?”

From this we learn that Wolff writes primarily for his audience and not for his own gratification or therapy. This is no small point, because Wolff is particularly famous as a memoirist. *This Boy’s Life* (1989), the faultless tale of his nomadic upbringing with his mother, herself one of the great characters of American literature, is eighty-sixth in the Modern Library’s hundred best works of nonfiction. *In Pharaoh’s Army* (1994), an account of Wolff’s service in Vietnam, is a subtle and thoughtful example of the genre, a far cry from the rock ’n’ roll shooting gallery depicted by most filmmakers and writers. But today’s memoirists, even those not yet outed as frauds, seem to have learned nothing from his example. They want to be coddled and congratulated for making it through hard times. Wolff seems grateful even for his worst moments.

Wolff plays down the role of “life experience” in his success as a writer. He is more concerned with receptivity; he recently told a *Washington Post* interviewer that “Flannery O’Connor spent most of her life on a farm ... yet through being alert she found a whole world around her, made it new every time out. Anyone who survives adolescence has enough to write about for the rest of their lives.”

Easy for you to say, a young writer might reply, for few childhoods are as singular and memorable as Wolff’s. But there’s nothing outlandish about the stories herein; with a few exceptions it isn’t what happens but how it’s told that matters. Many have the quality not of reported experiences but of anecdotes heard, half-remembered, and then fleshed out by a preternaturally sensitive

imagination. “Hunters in the Snow,” a classic story, could have been inspired by a four-sentence newspaper account of a hunting accident, but I know of no better portrayal of the threatening tensions that lurk in an odd-man-out scenario. In “The Chain,” a dog attacks a child—an event that is both frightening and so mundane that it happens to almost every family—and sets off a revenge scheme with a chain of unintended consequences:

“What was their excuse?” Rourke wanted to know. “What reason did the cops give for their complete and utter worthlessness?”

“The chain,” Gold said. “They said—this is the really beautiful part—they said that since the dog was chained up, no law was broken.”

“But the dog *wasn't* chained up, right?”

“He was, but the chain reaches into the park. I mean *way* in—a good thirty, forty feet.”

“By that logic, he could be on a chain ten miles long and legally chew up the whole fucking town.”

If, as you can guess from this excerpt, the title’s resonance is a bit too pat, the story is anything but. There is the familiar but potent pairing of psychological opposites: Gold, with his “disposition toward passivity, even surrender, in the face of bullying people and oppressive circumstances” and his cousin Rourke, whose “exacting, irritable sense of justice” leads the way to tragedy. But this isn’t a lecture about the “cycle of violence.” It’s an examination of how people live at the mercy not only of each other’s actions but also of each other’s personalities, psychological pull, even *words*.

Perhaps especially words. The dialogue above is characteristic of Wolff in that it does much of the work of illuminating his characters. We can hear Rourke’s mounting self-righteous anger as clearly as Gold’s nervous evasiveness, but Wolff’s hand in this is nowhere to be seen. One of the great pleasures of his stories is the sensation that one is eavesdropping on real people, often people who have no idea how absurd they sound—a pompous professor in “Firelight,” or a young woman’s self-absorbed stepmother in “Sanity,” or a misanthropic book critic in “Bullet in the Brain.”

“Bullet in the Brain” is one of Wolff’s finest and most famous stories, and it amply demonstrates what he means about being alert. The plot is simple. The critic, Anders, goes to the bank; the bank is held up; Anders can’t help ridiculing what he calls the “stern, brass-knuckled poetry” of the thieves, one of whom rewards him with a shot to the head. This is about as action-packed as a Wolff story gets, and champions of “life experience” will allow that the author has probably never experienced anything like it firsthand. What he probably has experienced, recalled, and embellished is Anders, the nuisance who compulsively belittles everything and everyone in his path.

But wait. If Wolff merely had dropped his natural predator, the critic, into a lion’s den and left it at that, “Bullet in the Brain” would be less a story than a gag. What it’s really about is what happens after the bullet hits, “scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex. . . . Once in the brain . . . the bullet came under the mediation of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have abhorred, ‘passed before his eyes.’” Wolff tells us what Anders does not see, and finally what he does: a single long-forgotten scene and phrase that tell us everything about what Anders was before he let life reduce him to a set of empty fortifications.

Among the ten new stories in this volume there are three—“That Room,” “The Deposition,” and “Nightingale”—that belong in the company of Wolff’s best. The slightness of their action shows how little one needs to make a great story: a boy gets a summer job; a lawyer follows a girl and is questioned by a policeman; a man leaves his son at a military academy about which he knows

absolutely nothing. They sound simple, and yet each one shows self-knowledge and self-deception unspooling in painstaking and painful slow motion:

And what about all the reasons he'd given himself? Time for the boy to wake up and get out of the house, show some pluck, some drive, some willpower—that was always the closing argument, the clincher. But why? Owen did well in school. He was quiet and liked to read and wasn't much of an athlete, but he wasn't lazy or lacking in courage; he and his friends routinely rode their bikes up and down hills that verged on the perpendicular. . . .

He had wanted Owen out of the house. That was the truth, and it made no sense to him now. The impatience he'd felt when coming upon his son reading or playing with his dog, doing nothing, or dreaming—why? What was the crime?

Some say write what you know, and others say you'd better know something worth the reader's trouble. Wolff's approach reduces both injunctions to pedantry by turning things everyone knows into things that no one else writes about. Few writers can inhabit a moment as he can. But if good writing is down to being alert, the question is: How does one *learn* to be alert? Perhaps Flannery O'Connor had to make do with the few scraps of experience available to her, but one suspects that Wolff had the opposite problem, and learned that big events—the traumatic, college-essay fixations of lesser writers—aren't necessarily the most significant.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 June 2008, on page 87

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