



ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES

“This Boy’s Life”

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AUTHOR NOTES

About the author

Tobias Jonathan Wolff was born on the 19th of June, 1945 in Birmingham, Alabama to Rosemary Loftus and Arthur Wolff. A renowned American writer, Wolff is best known for his short stories and his memoir 'This Boy's Life.' After a troubled childhood and adolescence, Wolff joined the Army and served in Vietnam where he became an advisor for the South Vietnamese military. Upon his discharge, he moved to England and attended Oxford University where he graduated with first class honours in 1972 and began his writing career. This was followed by an M.A from Stanford. Wolff has received many commendations and awards for his work, most notably the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. He is currently a Professor of creative writing at Stanford University.

Childhood and adolescence

Wolff's memoir traces his experiences of a nomadic childhood and difficult adolescence living with his stepfather in Chinook, Washington. Wolff's parents divorced when he was young and Wolff and his mother travelled from state to state trying their luck as his mother desperately tried to build a better life for them. In an attempt to transform himself, Tobias changed his name to Jack. Growing up, he was involved in a string of incidents at school, told lies, stole, and drank. He was accepted to, and expelled from Hill, a preparatory boarding school. In 'This Boy's Life' Wolff reflects on his life from 1955 to 1965 and the many facades he assumed along the way.

GENRE

Memoir

Wolff's account of growing up in post-war America is a memoir. Whilst similar to an auto-biography, a memoir differs in that it is a detailed account of a specific aspect of a person's life, which in Wolff's case chronicles his years on the road with his mother and the circumstances that led to them living in Chinook with his aggressive Step-father. Wolff's recreation of the events of the past in this memoir gives readers an insight into his motivations as a troubled teenager.

The main characteristics of a memoir that can be found in 'This Boy's Life' include:

Relevant themes

The success of memoirs is dependent on the ability of the reader to connect with the themes explored by the author. Hope, the search for freedom, personal loss, and the longing for the meaning of life are few of the many universal themes in the text that readers can find relevant in their own lives. Wolff's reflection on his years in Chinook examine the frustrations and cruelties of adolescence.

Sincerity

A great storyteller, Wolff writes in an honest and sincere tone. His ability to admit, in hindsight, that he knew exactly what he was doing at times and still failed to feel remorse, along with his revelations about his constant lies conveys a sense of vulnerability and authenticity to his words.

Reflection

The ability to reflect on one's past is crucial to a memoir. Not only is the ability to give a detailed description of the past important, but as Wolff demonstrates, there must be a sense of self-reflection on one's actions and motivations.

STRUCTURE

The memoir is separated into seven sections named: Fortune, Uncool, A Whole New Deal, Citizenship in the Home, Citizenship in the School, The Amen Corner and Amen. Each section is titled appropriately for the specific events outlined in the chapters within it. The titles represent the different phases in the author's life. For instance, the story begins with 'Fortune' and these chapters outline the fruitless pursuits by Jack and his mother to find fortune and his mother's optimism, and at times denial, in the face of failure. The shortest section of the text, 'A Whole New Deal', is one of the most important parts of his life, which he separates from the others. In 'A Whole New Deal', Jack is sent away to live with Dwight where everything changes, and his problems increase.

Except for a few instances where Wolff employs hindsight to explore a connection to a later event in his life, most of the narrative is in chronological order, in other words the events are in the sequence in which they occurred. However, this changes in the final section, 'Amen' where Jack fills the reader in on his time with his father and the time he spent at Hill before ultimately being asked to leave. In his final paragraphs, he returns to the moment in time where things were 'burning bright' as he and Chuck left Seattle, feeling good. The text ends with a sense of optimism for what lies ahead for Jack, even though we have just read that things did not work out at Hill.

STYLE

The memoir is written in the first person and in the past tense. All recollection of events are from Jack's point of view. While this enables readers to have a clearer understanding of his character, it is important to note that all observations made about other characters in the story are from Jack's point of view which prevents readers from being able to form unbiased opinions about them.

Wolff's contemplative style is enhanced by the fact that he is able to evaluate and analyse past events as though he was an outsider. Not only does shedding his original name of Tobias Wolff allow him to create a new identity for himself in Jack Wolff, it also allows him to write in a more reflective way about Jack Wolff's past.

Wolff's engaging storytelling is enhanced by his simple, authentic dialogue.

SETTING

The story begins with the narrator and his mother crossing the Continental Divide as they drive from Florida to Utah. They try their luck at finding uranium in Salt Lake City before they are once again on the move. This time their destination is Seattle. Jack and his mother live in a boarding-house in Seattle before moving into their own house shared with two other ladies. It is here where their nomadic lifestyle ends and Jack is sent to live with Dwight in Chinook, a tiny village three hours north of Seattle, in the Cascade Mountains.

Chinook is a company village where a couple of hundred people live in 'neat rows of houses and converted barracks' (56). The residents live here in 'the camp.' The village is surrounded by deep mountains and the slopes were 'heavily forested' (56). While Dwight tries to highlight the advantages of life in Chinook, his children understand that it is isolated. Chinook does not have a high school, and the children travel to Concrete, 40 miles down the river to Concrete High. Once Jack moves to Chinook, he spends much of his adolescence yearning to escape.

Historical Context

The memoir covers the time period spanning from 1955 - 1965 but makes references to events outside of this time frame. Wolff reflects on 1950s post-war America. Jack and his mother dream of a better life and head to Utah to find Uranium like so many others who 'were getting up poor in the morning and going to bed rich at night' (5). They find they are 'months too late' and the mining towns had been 'overrun' (5).

Jack refers to the days before 'the Crash', referring to the Stock Market Crash of 1929 where his mother's 'Daddy' lost all of his money. He refers to both World War II (1939-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953) when he discusses men he knows who have served, and he also refers to his own service in the Vietnam War which the USA were involved in from 1961-1973.

PLOT SUMMARY

Part 1: Fortune

Chapter 1

Part 1 begins with Toby and his mother crossing the Continental Divide as they leave their past in Sarasota, Florida in a bid to change their luck. They are running from her abusive ex-boyfriend. Their car, a Nash Rambler, continuously overheats on this journey and while waiting for it to cool they witness a truck going over a cliff presumably because he 'lost his breaks.' It is here that we see Toby take advantage of his mother's emotions after witnessing this accident. He understands that her guard is down, and that the time is right to ask for souvenirs.

We learn about his mother's past including her father's loss after the Crash, her life of hard work that had yet to lead anywhere, her divorce from Toby's father, and her long relationship with Roy, a violent man.

In search for a better life, they are both caught up in a delight for freedom and transformation and although his mother had been warned there was no work in Salt Lake, she had come anyway because his letter 'was so friendly!' (6). They drive through the desert, singing, and chasing their dreams.

Chapter 2

It is in Chapter 2 that Toby leaves his past and name behind to transform into Jack Wolff. He sheds the name his father has given him and chooses Jack, after Jack London, a name that he believed would give him the same strength and competence that the original bearer of the name had.

Roy has tracked them down and is spending most of his time at their apartment. We quickly see exactly why they ran from him in the first place, as he is continually checking up on Rosemary and is obviously possessive and aggressive.

In this chapter we see Jack's insecurities. Even though he thought he had left this all behind in Florida, he feels feelings of unworthiness. His pen pal letters to Alice in Phoenix highlight the lengths Jack goes to present himself in a superior way, as he adopts the facade of a boy who lives on a ranch and is impressively athletic, believing that she would be in awe of him. Jack also cannot be truthful during his first confession and adopts Sister James' confessions as his own, rather than confessing his own sins. He is praised by both the priest and the sister afterwards.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Jack is given a Winchester .22 rifle from Roy. Although he has promised his mother never to take the rifle out and play with it without her or Roy around, it is not long before he breaks this promise as he cannot resist the power that he feels when holding the weapon. He poses with the weapon and wears Roy's old Army uniform to disguise himself as a sniper. He moves deeper into the sniper fantasy as he begins to turn the apartment into a fort and pretends to shoot people travelling down his street, finally shooting a squirrel. He feels badly about this and cries that night after burying the squirrel with his mother.

He avoids the apartment when he knows he will be alone with the rifle, but soon takes up his afternoon habit again. It is only when he is almost caught by Sister James and hides, dressed in camouflage with the rifle, that he realises the absurdity of the situation. She leaves a note for his mother, which he reads and burns. The note simply asks his mother to call her. Jack tells us that this is the last time he was to see Sister James.

This chapter explores Jack's lack of identity as he grasps onto any image of himself he can create.

"All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me" (22). He also notes that being so close to the 'robust identity' of Sister James made him realise the 'poverty' of his own.

Chapter 4

In this short chapter, Jack and his mother pack up once again to leave Roy behind and make their way to Seattle. When he arrives home from school and hears his mother singing and moving quickly 'everything about

her flushed with gaiety' (25) he knows they are leaving. He, too, quickly gets caught up in the rush of dreaming about new adventures as they ponder what opportunities await for them.

Part 2: Uncool

Chapter 1

Jack and his mother live in a boarding-house in Seattle. They spend their evenings not just fantasising about buying a house, but pretending they are actually considering these houses for future purchase. In their delusions, they turn their noses down at anything that they think is beneath them, though the duplex's they 'sneered' at would have been better than their current living arrangements. While living in the boarding-house he encounters Marian whom he knows, she realises that he pretends to be someone else and sees through him.

Jack and his friends Terry Taylor and Terry Silver spend their afternoons watching Annette on the *Mickey Mouse Club*. The boys know they are uncool but keep trying regardless. Jack reflects on the fact that they were 'claimed by 'uncoolness'. When they watch the show the boys begin by make sexually explicit comments about Annette before they sit back and enjoy the show, experiencing some form of a normal childhood through the show. They even let Taylor get away with sucking his thumb while watching the show. Jack has stopped writing letters to Alice and has begun writing to Annette. These letters, however, are deemed inappropriate and he is taken off of the mailing list. Jack lets his imagination run away with him when he pictures suffering a tragic accident outside Annette's house, which would lead her to care for him, sympathise and love him.

Chapter 2

Jack and his mother spend their day in the park watching mock navy battles when two men begin talking to them. Jack is not interested at first, but the men realise that to spend time with Rosemary, they need to pay attention to him, which leaves him satisfied. They make promises of a brand new bike for him, but nothing comes of this.

Gil asks Rosemary out, but only honks when he picks her up, which Marian is not impressed with. Later that night Rosemary returns, crying, and Jack puts his arms around her and soothes her, as he is used to doing. This chapter highlights the dependency that exists between Jack and his mother.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Jack and Rosemary move into a share house with Marian and Kathy. The house is in a state of disrepair, but Rosemary's optimistic nature helps them to picture the better house it may come to be after repairs. These repairs do not happen. It is in this chapter that we begin to see more of Jack's troublesome actions. Jack tells lies, which Marian can see right through. Jack and his friends break windows in the school cafeteria, and after getting away with it they begin to feel more self-importance and arrogant and begin to break more windows, street lights, vandalising property and stealing. Jack thinks of himself as a master thief but in hindsight Wolff can see that he was a 'transparent klepto' but it was probably too much bother to the ladies he was stealing from to report him. Jack takes stealing more seriously than the other two boys, but curiously, once the items have been stolen they no longer interest him. Jack also explains that his mother is unable to discipline him properly because of how she was treated by her own father.

This chapter also outlines some of the relationships that Rosemary enters into which do not lead anywhere. Jack's initial introduction of Dwight after discussing the others - 'And then came Dwight' - signifies to the reader the importance that Dwight will have on their lives. Jack initially does not believe that the relationship will work out. Just as Marian can see through Jack's persona, Jack can tell that Dwight is trying too hard and makes fun of him, mimicking his ways.

Chapter 4

They spend Thanksgiving in Chinook with Dwight's family. Dwight lives in a converted army barracks and upon seeing Rosemary's reaction to the small, dark place, he declares he will renovate. Jack does not like Dwight's daughter Pearl but is enamoured by Pearl's older sister Norma whom he describes as 'ripe and lovely' (54).

In this chapter we get our first glimpse of the real Dwight. After telling Jack that he would be able to participate in the Turkey shoot, he reneges on this promise, claiming he didn't realise the rules didn't allow for children to participate. Jack can tell that he is lying, but is unable to do anything about it. Rosemary decides to participate and ends up winning the tournament. Dwight blames his bad score on the gun and makes excuses for why he did not shoot better. He sulks when Rosemary wins but eventually perks up. It is clear in this chapter that Dwight is not the easy going, friendly man that he makes himself out to be.

When Dwight drives them back to Seattle the next morning he points out the salmon that have come from the ocean to spawn there, but are dying because of the change from salt to fresh water.

Chapter 5

After telling Silver and Taylor tales about his Thanksgiving where they see through his lies, Jack becomes angry and defaces the bathroom wall, writing 'F**k You' with his knife. This time Jack is caught and finds himself in the Vice Principal's office pleading his innocence. After arguing for half an hour, Jack even comes to believe his own innocence. When his mother arrives he lies to her and insists that he is not to blame for what is written in the bathroom and that the witnesses must be lying. His mother demands to speak to the Principal, where she gets him out of his suspension.

Dwight convinces Rosemary that Jack should move to Chinook to start over and she should follow if it worked out. Rosemary asks Jack, and thinking that he has no choice, he agrees.

Part 3: A Whole New Deal

There is only one chapter in Part 3. In 'A Whole New Deal' Jack moves to Chinook and his drive up the mountains with an aggressive and drunk Dwight is a prelude to the things to come. Dwight goes out of his way to kill a Beaver on the side of the road and after attempting to make Jack pick it up, he gets it into the trunk for them to skin later. Dwight stops at the Tavern to get drink as Jack waits in the car. He thinks about why he agreed to move to Chinook.

“I had agreed to move to Chinook partly because I thought I had no choice. But there was more to it than that. Unlike my mother, I was fiercely conventional. I was tempted by the idea of belonging to a conventional family. . . And in my heart I despised my life in Seattle” (74).

This passage highlights Jack’s longing to belong to a family, to have stability and to be cared for. Unfortunately this is not what he gets when he moves to Chinook.

Jack also admits to wanting to escape his identity again and leave the people who had already made up their minds about him. He considers how he could be different and present himself as a boy of dignity. If people believed him, he could then actually be that boy.

He listens to the radio softly as he waits for Dwight who returns drunk and drives dangerously up the mountains. The chapter ends with Jack bracing himself for the next curve, and everything that is sure to come.

Part 4: Citizenship in the Home

Chapter 1

To keep Jack busy so that he does not have time to cause trouble, Dwight gives him many things to do. He signs him up for Boy Scouts, a newspaper route and has him husking horse chestnuts each night which gives Jack cuts and bruises all over his now orange stained hands. Norma and Skipper sympathise with Jack’s situation but do not do much to help it. When Jack visits his mother with Dwight, he lies and says that everything is fine and is revolted by the roles he and Dwight play in front of her, however he feels powerless to stop it. While he delivers his papers at night, he dawdles, wanting to be anywhere else and imagines himself as someone else, doing brave and selfless deeds. Jack also reads Skipper’s old Scouts Handbook every night, scouring for easy merit badges to obtain. When he reads *Boy’s life*, the official Scout magazine, he pretends that he is the same as all the other boys that they celebrate.

Rosemary accepts Dwight's proposal. She tells Jack that it is still not too late to pull out of this situation if he is not happy. Jack thinks that it is too late and that he was fated to live a miserable existence.

Dwight and Jack paint the entire house white, including all of the furniture until everything is a stark white and the house smells of oil. They even carefully paint every part of the piano (except for the black keys) because it stands out too much. Dwight is attempting to freshen the place up for Rosemary's arrival but is really just covering up imperfections with this severe, industrial strength layer of white paint.

Chapter 2

Jack gets into a fight with Arthur Gayle and after some back and forth name calling, Jack calls him a sissy. It is when he sees Arthur's reaction to this that he realises he has never seen anyone call him a sissy to his face. They fight and Arthur gets the better of him in the end and insists that he takes it back. Jack must say 'You're not a sissy.' Rather than being mad as they had expected him to be, Dwight is pleased to hear about this fight and shows Jack some dirty techniques to get the better of an opponent in a fight. Upon their next confrontation, rather than fight, Arthur and Jack begin to become friends.

Chapter 3

Jack describes Skipper's car that Skipper has been working on so that he could take a road trip to Tijuana. Jack mistakenly believes that Skipper will consider taking Jack with him on this trip and imagine himself leaving Chinook and riding shotgun with Skipper. When he realises that this isn't going to happen, and when Skipper leaves, he begins to feel more cramped and confined in the house and Chinook. He begins hitchhiking, going farther down the valley. When he gets off, he hangs around for a few moments and hitchhikes back, making it home before his mother and Dwight.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4 Jack begins playing basketball. He must play in street shoes as he has outgrown his sneakers and Dwight refuses to buy him new ones until he 'decides' what size his feet are going to be. Bobby and Norma

drop Jack off to these games. Jack finds it difficult to play in his street shoes and is constantly slipping or falling down. A woman who has been making shrieking sounds in the crowd that distress Jack and make him clumsier continues to shriek and bark and is escorted out by her embarrassed companion. After this, Jack feels like the atmosphere in the crowd has changed and that they are actually on his side.

They lose the game and on the way home Jack comes to a realisation about Norma and Bobby's relationship. He feels angered and betrayed, obviously having believed in his fantasy of being with Norma. He mentally takes back all of the gifts he was going to give her before deciding to forgive her.

Chapter 5

Dwight, Pearl, Rosemary and Jack are on their way back from another successful visit to a rifle club match for Rosemary, and an unsuccessful one for Dwight. He berates Rosemary on the drive back before stopping at the Tavern. Pearl and Jack wait in the car and when he gets bored, Jack wanders around and pretends that he is someone else for a while. He longs to talk to Pearl for some company, but because their 'official position' is that they hate each other, he does not do this. They do, however, turn on the radio to sing together to pass the time. They sing together smiling and passing the time before Dwight and Rosemary return to the car and Dwight drives dangerously, scaring everyone in the car.

In this chapter Jack admits that he is lying and stealing again. Even though he knows that Dwight isn't wrong when he calls him a liar and a thief these accusations don't hurt him because he doesn't actually see himself like this. He does, however, get into fights to make sure that he isn't seen as a sissy and he learns how to act for people to treat him in different ways. This chapter also reveals more about the changing nature of Dwight and Rosemary's once pleasant relationship. Dwight constantly barrages Rosemary with insults about Jack and herself and, overhearing these, Jack imagines killing him with his Winchester.

Chapter 6

Jack snoops through his mother's belongings and finds an address for an uncle who lives in Paris. Jack writes about their life in Chinook and asks for help to give them a new start in Paris. While Jack certainly isn't living a

good life in Chinook, he paints a nightmarish picture of events to his uncle and once again he gets carried away. When his Uncle Stephen writes back, Rosemary intercepts the letter and questions Jack about what he wrote. The letter explains that it would be difficult to get them both started in Paris, but suggests that Jack come on his own for a year or so while his mother leaves Dwight and sets up a new life for them. Dwight, of course, is enthusiastic about Jack's move to Paris. Jack prepares for his trip by imagining the Paris he sees in American movies and buys a harmonica.

When the next letter arrives suggesting it would actually be better for them to adopt Jack as his own son, Jack and his mother have a lot to consider. Readers can tell that Rosemary's brother and his wife think that Jack would be better off with them than with his flighty sister. In the end, while Rosemary leaves the decision entirely up to Jack, the reason he does not go is because he does not want to change his last name. What little identity that he has, he holds onto and he knows he is his mother's son and nobody else's. None of his friends pay much attention to his move to Paris falling through because they think it was just another one of his stories.

Chapter 7

After graduating Concrete High and moving to Seattle, Norma returns home for Christmas and brings her fiancé Kenneth with her. She has decided to marry Kenneth instead of Bobby and does not explain her decision to anyone. Dwight gets into the holiday spirit and cuts down a tree with Jack, which he then spray paints with white paint. Instead of lightly spraying it to imply snow, Dwight covers the entire tree with three coats. The paint kills the tree and makes it difficult to hang decorations on.

No one likes Kenneth. He deliberately insults the family and their beliefs. Even Dwight is appalled by Kenneth's holier-than-thou demeanour and he tries to convince Norma not to marry Kenneth. Readers understand why she felt she had to marry quickly because she gives birth soon after.

That Christmas Dwight and Jack go up to the attic to find the chestnuts that he shucked two years ago. They find the boxes covered with mould. They also find the beaver that Dwight had run over covered with a white and transparent, almost cotton candy, type of mould. There is only pulp left and the mould is shaped like the beaver it has consumed. In this chapter, Wolff shows how dramatically things have changed, using the mould

over the chestnuts to highlight how much time has passed and as the mould covers and destroys the chestnuts, so has time changed the once vibrant Norma and happy Bobby.

Chapter 8

By the time Jack starts at Concrete High, he has successfully stolen and saved \$80 which he plans to use to run away from Chinook. He plans to run away during the Scout's trip to Seattle and though initially he tells Arthur that he cannot come with him, he relents because he is afraid to be alone.

Unlike his fantasies of adopting new personalities and leaving Chinook, Jack had real intentions and a plan to leave. He competes in his swim heats and loses after a couple of rounds which surprises him. Jack gets caught up with Ballard boys who he tries to impress. He deliberately stays away from Arthur, fearing that he will be compared to him. In trying to impress the boys from Ballard, Jack loses his money at the carnival when he is targeted by Smoke and Rusty who convince him to continue to play their game. He continues to hand over bills until his wallet is empty. While the Ballard boys have been cheering him on during the game, Jack loses them shortly after.

While Arthur and Jack wait to be picked up, knowing they are no longer leaving, Jack asks Arthur to drive back with him and Dwight so that he will not be alone. This chapter marks the change in Jack and Arthur's relationship. He describes how the two of them become close, making up stories, watching old movies, and singing. They even kiss once. While there is nothing sexual about this, when they begin to feel like they are getting too close they start to turn on each other.

Chapter 9

Dwight sells Jack's Winchester and buys a dog. He tells Jack the dog is his, but Dwight tries to use Champion to help him hunt. At first Jack does not like the dog, but it becomes attached to him. Jack can no longer sneak out at night to take the car for a joy ride because of the dog's barking, so he begins to take Champion with him.

He drives further each night and thinks that one day he will just keep going. One morning he backs the car into a ditch and is unable to get it out. Luckily, he and Champion are helped by a truck driver who winches the car back onto the road. He makes it home before anybody realises. Jack fakes being sick so he can stay home from school and sleep. Dwight, finds out about his night time escapade and comes home to confront him. They fight and while Jack is able to fight back using one of the moves that Dwight taught him, Dwight gets the better of him.

After he has been killing cats around the camp, Dwight is told by the director that Champion needs to go. Dwight takes him on a drive and shoots him. Jack knows that Champion was not buried because of how quickly Dwight returns.

Part 5: Citizenship in the School

Chapter 1

At Concrete High most of the students do not value education and drop out. Those who graduate do not think of going to college. Jack discusses some of his teachers specifically Mr Mitchell who taught Civics, fought in World War II, and acted as an unofficial recruiter for the Army. Mr Mitchell tells his class that they were on the wrong side during the war and that if Hitler had not killed the Jews, they would have made the atomic bomb before America. Jack brings home good grades at first but they were obtained largely from copying the work off others. Jack soon grows tired of this approach and he begins to bring home Cs. This does not bother him as he just changes the grades before anyone sees them.

He falls in with a bad crowd once again; older boys who are curious about the fact that he is still a virgin and has not gotten drunk. Although they can arrange a girl for him to be with, Jack wants his first time to be with someone that he loves; someone like Rhea Clark who he idolises. Jack and his new friends Chuck, Psycho, Jerry and Arch all regularly pile into Chuck's car, skip school and visit Arch's sister Veronica. They get Jack drunk on Hawaiian punch and vodka. Jack walks along a tree branch and when the branch breaks he falls, but cannot feel anything and stays quiet even though he can hear them calling to see if he is all right. He does not move and spends the night there. When he gets home he tells Dwight the truth, which amuses him.

Chapter 2

After six years, Jack and his brother get back in touch and Geoffrey sends him a Princeton sweatshirt. He wears the sweatshirt everywhere, cuts his hair in the 'Princeton' style. He even tries to use some of the 'impressive phrases' in the letters such as - 'In a world where contraception and the hydrogen bomb usurp each other as negative values...' (162) - in his own conversations with others. He plans to hitchhike to Princeton to meet up with his brother but needs money for the trip so decides to take advantage of the 'innocence' of banks and forges some cheques. Knowing that he cannot do this in Chinook as too many people know him, Jack plans to do it on his next Scouts trip. He gets a fake library card, choosing the name Thomas Findon. He is not successful in his bluffs about his forgotten wallet as he attempts to pass on a fake cheque. When he realises he has been caught out he runs and escapes. He changes into his Scouts uniform and while he is at the function he realizes the lady who he had just tried to steal from is also there. While she seems suspicious of him at first, he is confident in the disguise of his Scouts uniform and doesn't give her any reason to suspect it is him.

Chapter 3

Geoffrey and Jack continue to keep in contact. Geoffrey's letters fill Jack in about how things are at Princeton, his career prospects and updates about their father who is now separated from his ex-wife. Geoffrey expresses his wishes to see Jack. Jack is pleased that they seem to feel the same way.

Jack calls Geoffrey one afternoon after another aggressive interaction with Dwight. Dwight has come home to find a mustard jar in the bin that he believes is not quite completely empty. He holds the jar up to Jack's eye and when Jack insists it was actually empty, he is slapped across the face. He calls Geoffrey and tells him that Dwight hit him. Although this is true, Jack does not know how to explain the absurdity of the situation involving the mustard jar and ends up making the situation sound worse than it was. Geoffrey encourages him to apply for scholarships at some top schools. He asks Jack how his schooling is going and Jack, of course, lies about his top grades and about his athletic and musical abilities.

Jack also explains that this is a hard time for his mother who, after being involved in the Kennedy campaign, had now lost that excitement in her life. When Dwight gets wind of her getting a new job and leaving, he takes her for a drive and holds his hunting knife to her throat for hours forcing her to beg for her life and promise to never leave him. Jack, however, doesn't know this at the time.

When Jack receives the names of the schools that Geoffrey has suggested he apply to, he looks these names up in *'The Status Seekers,'* which is meant to attack the social snobbery of the upper class. Jack, however, finds it more of a guide to this lifestyle that he now feels he cannot live without. In applying for these schools, Jack realises the kind of boy he will need to present himself as, but doesn't know how he will manage to get letters from teachers verifying these lies. He eventually becomes 'realistic' and does not send them. He does sit the entry tests and while in Seattle pays careful attention to the other boys that are there, including how they look and speak to each other.

Through working in the school office, Arthur is able to provide Jack with blank stationary and transcript papers for him to forge his letters on. Jack writes letters of support from his teachers and fills out the application forms with ease. He does not think he is lying. Instead, he sees that he is writing some form of the truth about who he believes himself to be; a truth that only he knows. In writing these forms he is able to give this truth and version of himself a voice. Jack, understanding the art of imitation, knows not to include hyperboles in the letters. Instead, he uses words he believes the teachers would use to describe this person he was presenting himself as.

Chapter 4

After being separated from another fight by Mr Mitchell, Arthur and Jack are signed for a smoker - boxing fights. They boys have grown apart, and Dwight takes an interest in Jack once again because he has been chosen to fight. He shows him some new moves so he can beat Arthur.

The crowd is on Jack's side but he comes second to Arthur. He gets knocked to the ground a couple of times before throwing a couple of uppercuts that shake Arthur. Jack realizes that Dwight is proud of him. He feels pride in this connection that feels, for a moment, something like love. Arthur technically wins the fight, but Dwight is still proud of him. Rosemary on the other hand, is appalled.

Chapter 5

Although he has done well on the tests in Seattle, Jack begins to receive rejection letters from the schools he has applied to. While he did not expect to get in to many of them, he had been counting on Deerfield. This particular rejection letter hits him hard. Jack gets a call from a Hill School alumnus who shows interest in his application and wants to meet him. Rosemary encourages Jack to just be himself. He meets Mr Howard, a lively man, at the drugstore hoping he can impress people by being seen with the man who owns a Thunderbird. He tells Jack about himself and life at Hill and asks Jack questions about his own family. Huff enters, carrying on as he usually does, and Jack is petrified he will see him and blow his cover. Jack and Mr Howard leave before this happens. Before Mr Howard leaves Chinook he warns Jack that life is different in a boys' school. Jack tells him he has not led a sheltered life and is prepared for this.

Chapter 6

While Jack is using the table saw at school he gets distracted and saws off the tip of his ring finger. He is sent to hospital for surgery and stays for a week. In that time he becomes addicted to how he feels when he is on morphine and able to dream benevolent dreams. He turns to alcohol when he gets home in an attempt to make himself feel better and when Dwight notices his whiskey has been watered down, he pushes Jack. Jack stumbles and breaks his fall with his hands which, of course, is extremely painful. This is the last straw for Rosemary.

Jack leaves first, to live with Chuck in Van Horn. Chuck's parents are not too happy about Jack living with them but his dad feels sorry for Jack and his mother. As he leaves Chinook and says goodbye to Dwight, Wolff tells readers how much Dwight's actions affected him and that he sees his face when he thinks of Chinook, and hears his voice when he gets angry at his own children.

Part 6: The Amen Corner

Chapter 1

Jack explains how life is at the Bolgers. Mr Bolger, a preacher, takes Jack with his family to church. At church, Jack is always tempted by the music to join everyone else as they sing and sway to the Amen corner but holds

back for fear that he would be ridiculed by Chuck who stood 'silent as stone' during the hymns. Afterwards he is glad that he didn't because he thinks that Mr Bolger would see right through him and be disgusted.

Chuck, Psycho, Huff and Jack want to go for a drive one night but have no gas. They decide to sneak over to the Welch farm and syphon gas. Because it had rained heavily that day, the walk there is muddy and difficult. By the time they return they are tired so Chuck takes Psycho and Huff home. In the morning they are woken by Mr Bolger who, knowing what they have done, makes them return the gas and apologise to the Welch family. Upon seeing the farm in daylight, Jack knows instantly that the farm is not doing well as nothing is growing or moving. Chuck apologises, but Jack cannot. He feels disgust over what he has done, but cannot bring himself to move or speak. Later, Jack cannot explain his actions to Mr Bolger. He simply knows that he wanted to apologise but couldn't. Jack sees Mr Bolger's interest in him leave his eyes and he tells Jack there is no more reason for him to stay there.

Rosemary drives there the next day and begs the Bolger's to keep Jack for a bit longer. They agree, as long as Jack works on the Welch's farm to make it up to them. Jack notices that his mother seemed very far away and not especially interested in what he had to say. Jack agrees to whatever the Bolger's want him to do, but the Welches do not want his help.

In this chapter Jack speaks to Father Karl down at the riverbank. He tells Jack to straighten up and find out who he is and what he wants. Father Karl points out that Jack's actions are upsetting his mother. Jack tells him he will try to do better, but knows that Father Karl can tell he has not reached him. Jack knows that he cannot be reached as he is in hiding.

Chapter 2

The Sheriff comes to the Bolger house to tell them that Chuck will be charged with the statutory rape of Tina Flood. Huff and Psycho would also be named in the complaint that Tina's parents were filing if Chuck did not do the right thing by their now pregnant daughter and marry her. Chuck refuses to do this, saying he would rather go to jail. While Jack is losing faith in his good life he thought he was destined to have, Chuck still believes in his.

Jack learns that he has been awarded a scholarship to Hill. He reads the bulletin enclosed and studies the pictures, names and notes. When he writes his name on the admissions form as he would like it to appear in the school catalogue he writes 'Tobias Jonathon Von Ansell-Wolff III.' Jack learns that none of his money that Dwight was 'saving' for him from his paper route is there anymore, and that Dwight has spent it. He thinks about the hard work that he did for the money that he will now never see. Rosemary is leaving Dwight, and Jack can tell she is becoming more like her old self again. As they make plans and consider the possibilities for the future they become themselves again 'poised and ready for flight' (221).

Chuck stands his ground and refuses to marry Tina. He prepares himself to go to jail but Huff, whose fate is tied with Chuck's, has decided that he will marry her and this is enough to satisfy Mr Flood.

Chapter 3

Jack knows Dwight and Pearl will be away and the house is going to be empty, so he and Chuck drive to Chinook. Chuck waits nervously in the car as Jack goes into the house and steals Dwight's rifles and hunting gear. They drive to Seattle feeling free and happy.

Chapter 4

In Seattle, Jack meets Mr Howard to get fitted for clothes. While at lunch, Mr Howard makes sure that Jack knows that it will not be easy at Hill, that he might not even like it, and that it will be hard on his mother. He then asks Jack again if he is sure he wants to do this, and is relieved to know that he is set on going.

Jack is dressed in expensive clothes and ponders the reflection in the mirror. The stranger in the glass is one who had finally been brought into existence. His smile is friendly and hopeful.

Chapter 5

Jack attempts to sell the rifles, shotguns, and other items that he stole from Dwight. Knowing that they are probably stolen and that Jack doesn't have many other option, the lady at the pawn shop says that she will only pawn them off of him, giving him only sixty dollars. He agrees, and throws the pawn ticket in the gutter as he leaves.

Part 7: Amen

In 'Amen' Jack explains what happened to him after arriving in California. His father leaves him for two weeks to spend time in Las Vegas with his new girlfriend. When Geoffrey returns home, their father drops them off at home and doesn't return. His girlfriend calls to tell them that he has had a breakdown, and he is committed to Buena Vista Sanatorium for the rest of the summer.

Rosemary takes a job in Washington D.C. One night during the Christmas holidays when Jack is home, he hears cries coming from the lobby. Because it is a rough neighbourhood, he has taken to ignoring the cries, pretending they belong to animals. When he realises that Dwight had found Rosemary and has tried to strangle her, he rushes out to find him. When he returns Dwight has already been arrested. He calls Dwight a bastard, but is conscious that he had known someone was in trouble but had done nothing to stop it.

Jack does not do well at Hill. He is overwhelmed by his lack of knowledge and although he is tutored by an English teacher, he takes to the bad boy image again to cover up his fear. While the school is patient with him, he is asked to leave in his final year.

He joins the army with a sense of relief and homecoming, finding solace in the clear life of uniforms.

The story returns to where it left at the end of Part 6. Chuck and Jack leave Seattle feeling good. Jack knows he will go to a noble school where he will earn good marks in a world where nothing is impossible. Chuck had escaped prison and Tina Flood. They know they are not friends, but rejoice together regardless. The chapter ends as they sing with hope and optimism on the way home.

CHARACTER PROFILES

Major Characters

Jack/Toby

Even when fully aware of the lies that he is telling himself and others, it is difficult not to be sympathetic towards our narrator. In renaming himself Jack, then Tobias, Toby is constantly searching for his identity. He creates new personas for himself when writing letters to Alice and Annette and daydreams about leading a more exciting life.

In naming himself Jack, he feels as if he can move on from his past. However, he continues to feel the same feelings of inadequacy and loss that plagued him as Toby. When he moves to Chinook he sees an opportunity to be different and introduce himself as a better person to those who don't know him. But he is not able to do this and reverts to stealing and lying. What was meant to be a fresh start with a conventional family turns out to be disastrous for Jack and he is not able to become the good boy that he wants to be.

Jack is conscious of how he is perceived by others. He knows that Marian can see through him, and that Dwight considers him to be a performer. When he looks in the mirror before going to Hill, he finally sees the boy he believes he has always been.

Jack's lack of stable male role models has hindered his development into a stable boy. His father and mother divorced when he was young, and Rosemary went from one bad relationship to another. Both Roy and Dwight were aggressive, controlling and abusive. While Rosemary's decision to send Jack to live with Dwight was, in the end, the wrong one, she knows that it is finally time to get him away from Dwight. Although Jack hates Dwight, he enjoys the praise he receives from him.

Jack struggles to find himself and this memoir charts his experiences growing up and trying to find his true identity.

Rosemary

Rosemary lives optimistically and, at times, she is delusional. Her dreams of transformation, new starts, finding freedom and striking it rich overtake her sensibilities and she drives across the country searching for new opportunities.

Rosemary has not had a good history with men. She gets into relationships with men who want to exert control over her. Her own father was abusive and used to spank her every night because he was sure she must have done something wrong that day. Her relationship with her father 'left marks' on her. At times she presents herself as an intelligent and self-sufficient woman. She joins the rifle club and recruits other women, she also works for the Kennedy campaign. However she always ends up finding herself being submissive under a dominant partner.

Rosemary is a dreamer and she can get lost in these dreams and optimisms and take others with her. She sees the best in each situation, which can at times cause her to live in denial. She leans on Jack when she is having a hard time and cannot bring herself to discipline him because of her own childhood.

It is not until Part 2 that readers actually learn Rosemary's name. We see her through Jack's eyes and therefore only know her as his mother. It is when she is getting picked up Gill that she is called Rosemary and we see her as a young woman trying to find some stability for herself and her son.

Dwight

At first Dwight comes across as compliant and eager to please those around him, however Jack can tell immediately that he is trying too hard. Jack mimics what he sees as an easy target, ridiculing some of Dwight's habits in front of his mother, Marian and Kathy. When they visit Chinook for the holidays, readers can see some of Dwight's true colours shine through when he does not take well to Rosemary winning the Turkey Shoot and he makes excuses about his own failure.

Dwight shows his true nature as soon as Jack is sent to live with him. Their drive to Chinook includes a stop at the Tavern where Dwight drinks heavily before driving dangerously on the curvy roads. Dwight confronts Jack about his 'performing' nature and tells him that he is onto him.

He constantly berates Jack and forces him to spend hours shucking horse chestnuts. He is deliberately cruel, delighting in killing animals and making those around him suffer. After working hard to get Rosemary, once he finally has her he criticises and reprimands her, accusing her of making his life harder.

Once Rosemary gains her confidence back and Dwight knows she is going to leave him, he reverts back to his pleasant behaviour. Jack's last sighting of Dwight is as a confused and broken man when he is sent back to Seattle by the police.

Minor Characters

Norma

Dwight's oldest daughter is seventeen when Toby first meets her. She spends her free time with her high school boyfriend Bobby. When she leaves for University she gets involved with Kenneth whom nobody likes. She knows this, but thinks that he might be a better option for her than Bobby who seems to be going nowhere. She becomes pregnant and marries Kenneth. They move into a duplex in Seattle and have their baby. Whenever Norma visits she acts happy and pretends everything is fine but she has taken up smoking and Jack can see that all of the lushness is gone from her face, as has the energy from her eyes.

Pearl

Pearl is Dwight's youngest daughter who is pinch faced and scrawny with a bald spot on the back of her head. Pearl likes Rosemary and the attention she receives from her. Pearl also likes to sing, although Jack notes that she isn't very good at it. While Pearl and Jack don't like each other, Pearl seeks comfort and support from Jack when Dwight is driving dangerously.

Skipper

Skipper is the middle child. He is not overly friendly towards Jack, but does not want to hurt his feelings. He shares a room with Jack and works on his car so that he can take a road trip and leave Chinook. He moves away from his family once he is able to.

Arthur

Arthur Gayle is called a sissy by the other boys at school. After a fight, Jack and Arthur become friends. Although they grow apart from each other Arthur still comes through for Jack when he needs it. Arthur knows what people think of him and takes joy in prancing like a 'sissy' while carrying a stuffed pink pig before getting into Dwight's car. Arthur gets a girlfriend, who he ignores. Arthur and Jack fight each other at the smokers and Arthur wins.

Roy

Roy is a Vietnam veteran who follows Rosemary and Jack to Utah and spends most of his time either at their place, or fishing and hunting. He gives Jack a Winchester .22 rifle. Roy is possessive and violent. He follows Rosemary home from work to make sure she is not doing anything he does not know about. One afternoon she is not there, this angers Roy and he subsequently confronts her. Roy begins talking to Jack about the possibility of him having a little brother and this is the last time Jack sees Roy. They pack up and leave him again.

Geoffrey

Geoffrey is Jack's older brother who stayed with their father after the divorce. They lose contact with each other for years. Geoffrey contacts Jack writing from Princeton. He is a writer and sends Jack a short story to read. Geoffrey has many job prospects waiting for him after he graduates, but ends up having to work to support everyone when their father has a breakdown. He is the one who encourages Jack to seek a better education for himself.

Mr Howard

Mr Howard is a Hill School Alumni who takes an interest in Jack. He helps to get him the scholarship to Hill. Jack takes note of how Mr Howard dresses and acts, and he longs to be like him. He mentors Toby and buys him new clothes to prepare him for Hill.

Relationships between Characters

Jack/Toby and Rosemary

Jack takes advantage of Rosemary's nature. He knows when Rosemary's defences are down and this allows him to get souvenirs even when he knows that they can't afford it. He understands that his mother does not know how to deal with him properly and that she cannot bring herself to spank him because of her own relationship with her father. The few times she has tried to scold him, he came away laughing. Optimistic in nature, Rosemary believes that Jack is really going to change. Although he knows his actions have been hurting Rosemary, he doesn't know how to stop. He refuses to move to Paris because he doesn't want to have to call anyone else 'mother.'

Jack and Dwight

Jack and Dwight hate each other. The relationship between Dwight and Jack affects him for the rest of his life. Whenever he thinks of Chinook, he can only vividly remember Dwight, and whenever he yells at his children, he can hear Dwight's voice in his own. Although Jack hates Dwight, his lack of a male role model and father figure makes him to want to seek Dwight's approval. He is pleased when he is able to make Dwight proud, even if it is when fighting his friend.

Rosemary and Dwight

Rosemary is not won over by Dwight when he tries to court her. She tells him she does not want to rush into a relationship. She feels bound to consider his proposal for Jack's sake. As soon as they are married tensions arise and they return from their honeymoon in a bad mood. Dwight constantly insults and demeans Rosemary, even holding a knife to her throat when he thinks she is going to leave. When Rosemary does end up leaving, Dwight begins to court her again. But Jack has left now and there is no longer a reason to stay. Rosemary does not understand why he is trying so hard because she knows that he doesn't even like her.

THEMES AND ISSUES

Identity

The memoir deals with Toby's search for his identity. Constantly adopting false personas and presenting himself in fabricated ways, Toby tries to develop an identity for himself that he can grab hold of. He sees their move to Utah as a fresh start, where he can shed his former life and start anew. In naming himself Jack, after Jack London, he thinks he can be a different person, but he finds himself being a boy that he does not like. He knows that he does not like who he is, but is not sure how to change.

Jack creates multiple identities. He presents himself to Alice as a boy who lives on a ranch, owns a horse, and is very athletic. He does not see that most people do not believe these versions of himself. He thinks that Alice must be in awe of him.

Jack is unsure of who he is, and the strong personalities around him just remind him how feeble his own identity is. He again thinks he will be able to make a fresh start at Chinook where no one knows him for the naughty boy he currently is, but he is unable to do so.

He creates the image of the boy he thought he has always been when he writes his fake transcript and letters of support from his teachers. The words he uses are not exaggerated. He has learnt over the years what is believable. He simply writes what he thinks the teachers would write about him had they known the boy he thought he was. The friendly and hopeful final image of himself in the mirror, dressed in clothes suitable for Hill, is a physical representation of this boy. However even with these clothes on he cannot keep this image up as he is too far out of his depth. Even his new name Tobias Jonathan Wolff-Ansel does not help. Although Toby is constantly changing his name, his one definition of himself that stays is in his last name Wolff, which ties him to his mother.

Rosemary and Jack lose part of their identity during their time in Chinook. Rosemary loses her passion and optimism. Jack can see this coming back slowly when Rosemary decides to leave and becomes caught up in new possibilities. Jack loses his chance for a fresh start with a conventional family. This is foreshadowed by the symbolism of the dead salmon that Dwight shows them as they leave Chinook for the first time. The salmon have come to Chinook for a fresh start, to breed. But the change from salt to freshwater slowly kills them and strips the flesh away from their bodies.

Family

The role of family is a recurrent theme throughout the memoir. We see the consequences of Jack's lack of stability in his family life. His mother and father divorce when he is young and he travels with his mother who is in a string of unstable relationships and continues to chase the dream of a better life. Although his mother is not conventional, Jack longs for a conventional family, with a brother and sister, in a conventional house.

The memoir shows us the affect that lack of stability and family circumstances can have on everyone. Norma graduates high school but finds herself in a similar relationship to that of Dwight and Rosemary. By getting involved with Kenneth, she enters into an unhappy marriage and loses her colour, becoming pale and angular. They create their own unhappy family.

Rosemary, too, carries baggage from her childhood. Her violent father 'left some marks' on her (49) and Jack knows that one of them is her inability to properly discipline and hence she cannot bring herself to spank Jack. The other, which is obvious to readers, is her attraction to aggressive men and her 'strange docility, almost paralysis, with men of the tyrant breed' (49).

Even Geoffrey's future is compromised after he must end up taking care of his father who suffers a mental breakdown. Although it may seem like Geoffrey has lived a privileged life in comparison to Jack's, we can see it has not been that easy for him to help keep his father afloat.

Escape

Toby's story begins with him and his mother escaping her ex-boyfriend. They are always longing to escape their current lives for a better one and dream about different possibilities. While they are stuck in their current situation they use their imaginations to escape and dream of a better life. They walk around their neighbourhood looking for houses they might buy in the future, but turning their noses down at anything that is not grand.

There are many details about cars in this memoir. Jack and Rosemary's car, whilst unimpressive, is their means of escape from Roy. Skipper works on his own car so that he can take a road trip and escape Chinook. Jack takes late night joy rides and imagines leaving Chinook forever. He sings loudly and drives further every time

before needing to turn back. To Jack, Mr Howard's car, an impressive Thunderbird, represents the type of lifestyle that Jack wants and believes he should be able to have.

Music is also used as a form of escape. Jack sings loudly to the radio in his car while he imagines driving away. When he is left in the car at the Tavern while waiting for Dwight, the radio soothes him and while Pearl and Jack do not get along, they both find comfort in singing loudly together. At the end of the memoir, while feeling like they have the world in front of them Jack and Chuck are carefree as they sing the entire way home.

Covering up

Jack is always covering up his true self; with lies and with clothing. He finds that he likes the stability of wearing a uniform. The image he sees when he is wearing a uniform of some sort gives him a form of identity he can hang on to. The first time he realises this is when he wears Roy's old camouflage gear which makes him feel like a sniper. He transforms into a sniper with the uniform on. He notes how others look and dress and dons that 'uniform' to make him more like them. As he looks in the mirror when he is dressed in his clothes suitable for Hill, he can finally see the image of the boy he always thought he should be and thinks that the uniform is what will help develop this personality. After things do not work out at Hill, Jack joins the Army and once again finds solace in the uniform and the stability and rules that come with this.

White paint is used to cover up imperfections. When Rosemary agrees to move in with Dwight he paints everything white, including the furniture and the ivory keys on the keyboard. While this is meant as a fresh start, Dwight is trying to cover up the imperfections of his house and life. Rather than covering up imperfections the starkness of the white paint actually makes other things stand out, which is why they then paint the piano. He does this again when he sprays the Christmas tree white before Kenneth and Norma's visit. The white paint on the tree needs multiple coats because the colour keeps seeping through. This symbolises that while faults can be attempted to be covered, they can still be seen underneath. Once the tree is fully covered, it begins to die. This highlights the futile nature of attempting to cover up what is real.

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS

- “We were going to change our luck.” (Pg 3)
- “I didn’t come to Utah to be the same boy I’d been before. I had my own dreams of transformation.” (Pg 7)
- “I believed she must be in awe of me, and imagined someday presenting myself at her door to claim her adoration.” (Pg 11)
- “It probably isn’t as bad as you think it is,” Sister James said. “Whatever it is, someday you’ll look back and you’ll see that it was natural. But you’ve got to bring it to the light. Keeping it in the dark is what makes it feel so bad.” (Pg 16)
- “The camouflage coat made me feel like a sniper, and before long I began to act like one.” (Pg 20)
- “All images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me.” (Pg 22)
- “She was so good at making us see it her way that we began to feel as if everything needful had already been done, and settled in without lifting a finger to save the house from its final decrepitude.” (Pg 48)
- “I was tempted by the idea of belonging to a conventional family.” (Pg 74)
- “And in my heart I despised the life I led in Seattle.” (Pg 74)
- “My mother did not expect to find people dull or mean; she assumed they would be likeable and interesting, and they felt this assurance, and mostly lived up to it.” (Pg 82)
- “*Boy’s Life*, the official Scout Magazine worked on me in the same way. I read it in a trance, accepting without question its narcotic invitation to believe that I was really no different from the boys whose hustle and pluck it celebrated.” (Pg 86)
- “You’re good as far as Seattle. Then you’re on your own.” (Pg 102)
- “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 of me failed to persuade.” (Pg 110)

- “I was a murderer on the run, a drifter about to be swept up into the passion of a lonely woman...”(Pg 112)
- “I was my mother’s son. I could not be anyone else’s.” (Pg 118)
- “I worked my magic on these boys from Ballard....” (Pg 134)
- “I learned a couple of lessons. I learned that a punch in the throat does not always stop the other fellow. And I learned that it’s a bad idea to curse when you’re in trouble, but a good idea to sing, if you can.” (Pg 148)
- “The more I said it the more possible it seemed.” (Pg 171)
- “Being realistic made me feel bitter. It was a new feeling, and one that I didn’t like, but I saw no way out.” (Pg 177)
- “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.” (Pg 181)
- “He asked me who I thought I was. I did not know how to answer this question.” (Pg 210)
- “Then I went into the army. I did so with a sense of relief and homecoming. It was good to find myself back in the clear life of uniforms and ranks and weapons.” (Pg 240)
- “When we are green, still half-created, we believe that our dreams are right, that the world is disposed to act in our best interests, and that falling and dying are for quitters. We live on 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.” (Pg 241 - 242)
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Sample Essay Topics

1. How does Wolff employ the technique of hindsight to create sympathy for Jack?
2. "This Boy's Life" demonstrates the struggle to find an identity in a harsh environment. Discuss.
3. How does the memoir demonstrate the long lasting effects that family can have on a person?
4. "He asked me who I thought I was. I did not know how to answer this question." Jack knows who he is, he just does not like who he is. To what extent do you agree?
5. The memoir ends in an optimistic way so that readers see hope for Jack's future quests to find himself. Do you agree?
6. 'This Boy's Life' is a depressing and pessimistic account of a boy's search for his identity.' Do you agree?
7. Why do readers sympathise with Jack?
8. "This Boy's Life" is a memoir narrated by Wolff and therefore readers do not get an unbiased impression of other characters. Discuss.
9. "I didn't come to Utah to be the same boy I'd been before. I had my own dreams of transformation." Ultimately, the text demonstrates that everyone covers up or transforms in some way. Discuss.
10. It is Jack's lack of a stable, male role model that is to blame for his actions. Discuss.

FINAL EXAMINATION ADVICE

When developing your own set of notes for “This Boy’s Life” focus on:

- The relationship between Jack and his mother
- The lasting affects that past abuse or mistreatment have on the characters
- Wolff’s use of hindsight and reflection to explore his own past
- How Jack perceives himself and what stops him from accepting himself.

When answering an Essay question be sure to develop your own interpretation of the question and present a clear point of view. Make sure that you develop an original understanding and interpretation of the text.

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