The Night in Question Short Guide

The Night in Question by Tobias Wolff

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Overview

The Night in Question, published in 1996, is a collection of short stories which Tobias Wolff placed in magazines like The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Granta and Antaeus, and in anthologies like Best American Short Stories during the first half of the 1990s. The volume includes fifteen stories which were not designed specifically for any definable group of readers. They have an appeal for mature, young adult readers because in many cases, the protagonist is a boy in his teens, and the narrative perspective combines the perceptions of the protagonist with the reflective intelligence of the author recreating the mood and moment at the origin of the experience. In several cases, they cover some of the same ground that Wolff negotiated in This Boy's Life, although he has been able here to explore the imaginative possibilities of events and incidents that required a closer connection to "actuality" in the memoir.

About the Author

Tobias Wolff was born as Jonathan Ansell Wolff on June 19, 1945, in Birmingham, Alabama. His father, Arthur Wolff, was an aeronautical engineer, and his mother, Rosemary Loftus, the daughter of a career navy man, was working as a secretary at the time of his birth. Wolff's childhood was chaotic, as his father (called "The Duke of Deception" by Wolff's brother Geoffrey in a memoir of that title) was a master of prevarication who constructed an elaborate false history—bogus degrees; a manufactured military record—which enabled him to secure an executive position in the aerospace industry in Connecticut. His family described him as a con-man, forger, car thief scrounger, dandy and drunkard, but also as a charming, charismatic, endlessly inventive man whose lies had a compelling quality which affected Tobias to the degree that he told Jean Ross in an interview: "I was a liar myself when I was a kid. I'm still a liar, really.... I wouldn't ever want to be held to a literal version of the facts when I tell a story."

The elder Wolff's instability led Rosemary to leave him when Tobias (then called Toby) was five years old. Wolff's older brother Geoffrey stayed with his father, while Toby went with his mother to live in Florida. When the man they were living with became abusive (repeating the harsh behavior of Rosemary's own father), they moved to Utah, and then to Seattle, where Toby began to call himself "Jack" (for the novelist Jack London) and had already begun to write stories. "My father and mother were great raconteurs," he recalls, "and my brother is also a wonderful storyteller. It's always been the most natural kind of thing for me to do." Continuing a pattern of impulsive action, Rosemary married a mechanic with three children and moved to Chinook, Washington. Tobias had been a mediocre student, frequently chastised for misbehavior in school, but he decided to take advantage of a fresh environment to take his studies seriously and act with responsibility. This resolve turned out to be fruitless, as his mother's companion regarded Wolff as a rival, berating and demeaning Tobias with trivial tasks, unreasonable demands and frequent interference in his activities.

At the age of sixteen, Wolff wrote to his brother Geoffrey who had been unaware of their mother's present location. This led to a brief reunion with their father in La Jolla, California, and when Arthur Wolff was hospitalized with a nervous breakdown, the brothers became reacquainted. Wolff describes his brother as "the first person I'd ever met for whom books were the only way in which you could in good conscience spend your life. I already had the notion that I wanted to be a writer, but I'd never been with people to whom books mattered."

Since Geoffrey was enrolled at Princeton University, Wolff saw an opportunity to follow a similar course and, in accordance with the strategies he had developed as a means of psychic survival, he invented an "outstanding" academic record, including bogus letters of recommendation—written on local school stationery—which described a boy who his teachers would have appreciated "if they had known me as I knew myself." Wolff remembers that in these letters, "it seems to me, I saw, at last, my own face."

Wolff's deception succeeded in winning admission to a prestigious prep school, but his latent abilities had not been sufficiently developed to enable him to handle the rigorous program the school offered. When he was expelled, he joined the army and became a member of the Special Forces, where he learned Vietnamese and was sent to Vietnam as an advisor, an experience he drew on when he wrote In Pharaoh's Army.

Upon his discharge, he traveled to England, and using the skills he had developed, passed the entrance exam at Oxford University. Wolff graduated with honors in 1972, then stayed on to get an M. A. in 1975.

By this time, he was totally committed to living as a writer, and succeeded in winning a Wallace Stegner Fellowship to Stanford, where he earned another master's degree. "I honestly remember writing stories when I was about six years old," he told Ross. "I don't know exactly at what time the idea hardened in me to become a writer, but I certainly never wanted to be anything else."

Wolff began to publish stories in various journals while at Stanford, and his first collection of short fiction, In the Garden of the North American Martyrs (1981), won the St.

Lawrence Award for Fiction in 1982. The Barracks Thief (1984), a novella, was given the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1985, and in 1989, Wolff published his memoir, This Boy's Life, which covered the hectic and unstable years of his youth. Wolff was working on another collection of short fiction at the time, but felt This Boy's Life was "a book that needed to be written.... Whenever I started to invent around this autobiographical material, it would go flat, conventional," he explained.

"Whenever I'd go back and deal with the genuine experience, track it very closely, then it would come to life again." His memoir of his experiences in Vietnam followed from the same principle.

After completing his studies at Stanford, Wolff took a teaching position at Goddard College in Vermont, then one at Arizona State University from 1978 to 1980, before joining the faculty of Syracuse University where he remained until he returned to Stanford to direct the Stegner Fellows Writing Program in 1997. Wolff says that he considers himself "a Westerner" since he spent much of his boyhood in Washington state—"the West is my mythologized place, I suppose," he has commented—and he has stressed the importance of teaching in terms of its coordination with his writing. "Teaching allowed me the time to do my own writing in a way that nothing I'd ever done before had," he has observed, and credits his contact with young writers as beneficial for "the intellectual heat I experience." He has found the university setting particularly congenial since "here I am surrounded by people who love writing, who devote their lives to literature and teaching literature," and has explained his commitment to his craft by saying: "There is a need in us for exactly what literature can give, which is a sense of who we are, beyond what data can tell us, beyond what simple information can tell us; a sense of the workings of what we used to call the soul."

Setting

Most of Tobias Wolff's stories do not depend on a detailed description of a particular location for their effectiveness. Wolff tends to provide some general suggestions which place the story within a recognizable region, but beyond the necessity for sufficient detail to support the realistic mode which Wolff employs, the stories are not anchored to their settings. In one of the most powerful stories in the collection, "Firelight," a woman and her teenage son are searching for an apartment in an unnamed city. Eventually, the boy mentions that they have been in Seattle for several years, but the story does not require any knowledge of the demography or geography of that city. References to Husky Stadium indicate that it is the University of Washington whose campus they pass through, but any large university would be equally appropriate when they look at an apartment that belongs to an idealistic and disappointed professor. When the story shifts toward the more recent present at its conclusion, the reflective narrator could be in any state where "the winters are long and cold." The effect of Wolff's utilization of a generalized locale is to give the story a kind of inclusiveness, a more universalized applicability that makes it relevant to human experience beyond ethnicity or narrow cultural definitions.

Similarly, the title story of the collection might have occurred in any of the middle decades of the twentieth century, in any part of the United States, although even these very broad marking points are not demonstrable, so the reader must determine the setting by styles of speech and attitudes. It is as if Wolff is more interested in the psychology of the characters, the inner landscape of their lives, than in where an event or incident has happened. When a story depends on a familiar historical situation, as in "Casualty" which takes place in Vietnam during the war, Wolff does not fill the narrative with an evocation of the climate or terrain, but almost casually builds a feeling of authenticity by references to "cold C-rats," new guys "sandbagging the interior walls of a bunker," the company moving "silently through the perimeter weaving a loopy path between mines and trip flares," and a generic description of "the chugging of generators, crumple and thud of distant artillery, the uproarious din of insects." Toward the conclusion of the story, the range of action widens and becomes more specific as Wolff follows a wounded soldier from Qui Nhon to Yokota to Zama in a helicopter crossing the East China Sea.

The impression that remains is of a series of actions not uncommon for soldiers serving in the war which took place in a part of the world unfamiliar to most Americans.

Other stories offer a few pertinent details which tend to ground them in a mid-twentieth-century sensibility. "Mortals" places its protagonist in "Tad's Steakhouse over by the cable car turnaround" where he had seen "Richard Brautigan, the writer" on occasion. That might be sufficient to indicate that the setting is San Francisco, but it could just as well be any urban locale where "you could get a six-ounce sirloin, salad, and baked potato for a buck twenty-nine" since "This was 1974." "Powder" could be located anywhere in the United States where there are ski slopes, the reference to a "Mount Baker" suggesting an English inheritance but little else. The evocation of the

mountainous terrain and the snow is crucial—"A few sparse, feathery flakes drifted into our slipstream and were swept away. We left the trees and entered a broad field of snow that ran level for awhile and then tilted sharply downward"—since the protagonist, a teenage boy joining his father for an exciting outing, is energized and awed by the natural world in winter. The particular mountain range where this takes place is not important, nor is the exact date, although the father's automobile, an AustinHealey sports car, was an uncommon and exotic vehicle throughout its relatively brief existence in the United States. This selective brand identification is sufficient to indicate that the father is an unconventional, styleconscious person, one of his most appealing and more problematical attributes, as the story reveals.

"Smorgasbord" has the most elaborately detailed setting in the collection. It begins in "a prep school in March," informs the reader almost immediately that the narrator plans to join the Peace Corps, and pinpoints the location when the narrator is invited to join a fellow student whose stepmother "is in New York for a fashion show" and has driven up to take her stepson and a few friends to dinner. The woman is wealthy, Hispanic, young and beautiful. A severe contrast in cultures is set up when one of the boys suggests they go to a smorgasbord—"Swenson's, or Hansen's, some such honest Swede of a name." The combination of a mundane, even plebeian establishment, the stylishly Latina woman, her sulking, spoiled stepson, and the slightly dazed and bemused narrator produces a series of incidents enveloped in comic confusion, which Wolff maintains by mixing Spanish words with basic English slang. When the story shifts away from the dinner and towards the sublimated desires of the narrator and one of his friends, the course of action that they choose to follow is inspired by the brief touch of the exotic and unusual that they have experienced. Even with the particular details that Wolff provides, however, the setting is not as important as the psychological structure of the characters, the inner landscape which is Wolff's most serious concern.

Social Sensitivity

Aside from his memoir of the time he spent in the Special Forces in Vietnam, which one critic described as Wolff's record "of his sense of futility and growing disillusionment with the war," Wolff's writing does not focus on specific social issues. In accordance with his primary interest in the dimensions of a particular character, he tends to show how a person is affected by the demands of the world in which he or she lives. While operating from a definite moral base which becomes more apparent within the context of a group of stories, Wolff tends toward a sympathetic understanding of his character's deficiencies and is more intrigued than irritated by the failures of a social system. In discussing John Cheever, Wolff says "he was one of my masters" because of his "rejection of that easy cynicism that so many writers display as a sign of their sophistication." This is the key to "Bullet in the Brain" in which a hyper-educated intellectual cannot contain his contempt for the crude speech of bank robbers who are threatening his life. The exceptional power of the story derives from the second part of the narrative in which Wolff traces Anders's life back toward the unspoiled enthusiasm of youth, a tour-deforce of illumination which casts Anders's fatal cynicism and incarcerating commitment to a complete ironic stance in contrast with its polar opposite in his earlier years.

Wolff is insistent that there is judgment in his work, but "that there's little condemnation." His experiences with his wayward parents may have given him an uncommon understanding of how a mixture of motives may lead a person toward behavior that is socially undesirable and personally repugnant without being evil. "I believe in the possibility of evil, and sometimes it appears in my work, but I wouldn't find it interesting to write completely evil people," he explains. Consequently, the one story touch ing on the war in Vietnam, "Casualty," is tinged with sorrow more than outrage. The almost pathetic semi-drunkard Wiley in "The Life of the Body" is seen with some sadness but he can regard his foolishness with a degree of comic absurdity that elevates his fumbling beyond self-contempt.

The disheveled dwelling of the workingclass family in "Flyboys" does not diminish their ingenuity and friendliness. The scheming of Miller in "The Other Miller" is delineated in such detail that his machinations, while obviously self-serving, do not seem entirely unreasonable. Two stories which deal with adolescent romance and unruly passion, "Smorgasbord" and "Two Boys and a Girl," recognize the uncertainty and occasional selfishness of their young protagonists without dismissing them as merely coarse or vulgar. All of the characters in "Firelight" have been disappointed by the world they inhabit, but Wolff's compassion for them extends beyond individuals to the society that is partially responsible for their unhappiness. This is a kind of social sensitivity that is more subtle and sometimes more penetrating than a direct attack on social ills, and it is in tune with Wolff's philosophical perspectives.

Literary Qualities

Since he does not have the novelist's space to gradually develop character, Wolff feels that it is very important for him to have a substantial understanding of what the characters' lives and histories are so that he will be able to present a consistent, convincing portrayal from the inception of the story. "I spend months on each story I write," Wolff states, "and through many, many drafts I discover who my characters are .. . I have to spend a lot of time with my characters, trying things out." One of the features of a character's personality which Wolff regards as important is his or her name. "When you name someone, that's a holy act," he says. "You call some essence into existence by the very name." The eponymous protagonist of "The Other Miller" might have been quite different if, as Wolff notes, he was called "Billy Lee," since "There are certain things that a Billy Lee is that a Miller isn't, and vice versa." Readers will bring their own associations to any name, but the Frank/Frances resonance illuminates their relationship; the character named Benjamin Delano Sears, or B. D., but called Biddy in "Casualty," has an entire history in his name transformation; the contrast between Crosley (British) and Garcia (Latino) and Hansen (Nordic) sets up immediate shifts in focus in "Smorgasbord," while the nameless narrator (with his nameless girlfriend) is more ambiguously interesting due to a lack of a defining label. Similarly, the young narrator and his mother are never named, while the important but secondary characters in "Firelight" are identified as Dr. and Mrs. Avery, and in the coda, the narrator mentions "my children" and "my wife" without saying their names. This is one of Wolff's methods for controlling the distance from the characters, utilizing direct, first-person-present narrations in many stories which bring the reader into close contact with the narrative consciousness of the protagonist, and then using various methods to suggest that there are depths, layers, facets, complexities and mysteries supporting and sustaining the vivid clarity of their voice in the story.

In discussing the form of the short story, Wolff contends that since a "story is so short it must be sustained by some quality in the language," and maintains that the action of a story "is interior; it's held together by the thoughts and perceptions of the main character." When utilizing a firstperson narration, Wolff establishes a singular style of expression immediately. The narrator in "Flyboys" is confident and assured when he declares, "My friend Clark and I decided to build a jet plane." The prep school student in "Smorgasbord" wants to sound worldly, dismissing a history master's attempt at wit by saying, "We were supposed to get the impression that when we weren't around he turned into someone interesting, someone witty and profound."

The young man in "Firelight" reveals his anxiety when he admits that "My mother swore we'd never live in a boarding house again, but circumstances did not allow her to keep this promise." The son of estranged parents in "Powder" registers the stress he feels when he says about his father, "He'd had to fight for the privilege of my company, because my mother was still angry with him ...."

In those stories where the narration verges between an omniscient author's informative comments and the protagonist's responses to events, Wolff makes the character's

reactions vivid and personal. In "Casualty," B. D. accepts the sergeant's estimate that he "didn't have what it took" since "he knew even better than Sergeant Holmes how scared he was." In "The Chain," Brian Gold rushes into action when a dog attacks his daughter: "Gold's mouth was next to the dog's ear. He said, 'Let go, damn you,' and then he took the ear between his teeth and bit down with everything he had." In "The Night in Question," Frank and Frances are engaged in an avid conversation from the onset. And in "Bullet in the Brain," where Wolff has created a particularly distasteful character, the action essentially unfolds within a physiological/psychological matrix that is the seat of thought for the man named Anders.

By integrating a character's responses to the environment with pointed descriptions of the milieu where an incident occurs, Wolff makes the region of action almost a component of the character. Passages of description are generally brief but vivid, augmenting the interior landscape of the characters. Wolff's approach is generally spare, with short bursts of lyric fire that heighten the pitch and tone of the passage.

A plane carrying wounded men in Vietnam "spiraled upward until they gained the thin, cold, untroubled heights" ("Casualty"); a truck struggles to pull out of a mud hole, "it gathered speed on the track we'd made and hit the mud again and somehow slithered on, languidly, noisily, rear end sashaying, two great plumes of mud arcing off the back wheels" ("Flyboys"); the engine room of a drawbridge exudes ominous power, "Massive machinery. Gigantic screws turning everywhere, gears with teeth like file cabinets" ("The Night in Question"); rug merchants in Seattle "have to work like dogs, dragging them down from these tall teetering piles and then humping them over to you, sweating and gasping, staggering under the weight, their faces woolly with lint" ("Firelight"); the dim recollections of a childhood long past are remembered as "Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game." ("A Bullet in the Brain").

Wolff's evocative descriptive passages enhance his facility with the speech and thought of his characters, often expanding and solidifying the impression that has been initiated by their distinctive voices. In an affectionate tribute to Raymond Carver, one of Wolff's close friends as well as one of the most admired writers of short fiction in the twentieth century, Wolff praises Carver's work for giving "a new picture of America in a voice never heard before." Carver's stories, he continues, provide "the music found in ordinary speech," and the elements of Carver's stories that Wolff highlights—"their humanity and exactitude and elusive humor"—are prominent features of his work as well.

Themes and Characters

Each one of the stories in The Night in Question is meant to stand as an individual work of fiction, and there are no specific, identifiable marks of linkage to connect them. Nonetheless, Wolff returns again and again to two primary themes. The protagonist of many of the stories is a young man in his mid-to-late teens, whose life is directed towards the discovery or recovery of points of connection in a fractured family. And as a means of maintaining a measure of personal balance in a chaotic world, the protagonist is instinctively drawn toward the powers of the creative imagination to find or make some sense of the confusion and uncertainty of his life. In story after story, an individual is intrigued by the mysteries of an often harsh but also fascinating universe.

The young journalist in "Mortals" is challenged by an adversary, "Your problem is, you think everything has to mean something," which he readily acknowledges as accurate: "That was one of my problems, I couldn't deny it." The narrator's buddy in Vietnam in "Casualty" cannot resist accurate observations even at a high personal cost. "You can keep you mouth shut," the narrator cautions, but Ryan answers, "The thing is, I can't. I try to but I can't." This compulsion to speak the truth is an admirable but highly risky proposition, which can become lethal when it is driven by a cynical and soured disposition, as in "Bullet in the Brain." The estimable quality of most of Wolff's protagonists is their capacity for honest observation joined to a desire for personal growth. They are involved in a process of increasing self-awareness, in which moments of illumination contribute to a transformation and expansion of the protagonist's realm of experience.

Except for the young journalist in "Mortals" and the middle-aged teacher in "The Life of the Body," Wolff's central characters are not professionally trained to use their creative capacity. Wolff's operating idea in many of the stories is that human beings have a latent ability to see the world through the lens of artistic possibility, an instrument to widen and open their field of vision. In "Flyboys," an ailing youngster is cheered by friends who have acquired an apparently useless object but one which is the basis for their flights of fancy. The projection of their imagination through this contraption leads to scenarios which lift all of them beyond the wreckage produced by adult failures. The narrator exults that he has been filled "with a conviction of my own powers that verged on madness." In "Smorgasbord," contact with unfamiliar cul tural patterns inspires two boys to contemplate activity in the forbidden zone of adult life, the somewhat sordid nature of their plans balanced by the excitement of the unknown. In "Powder," the pleasures afforded in traversing a winter landscape blend with a heroic depiction of the narrator's roguish father to evoke a mood of psychic bliss. A troubled relationship is momentarily redeemed as the narrator observes, "I actually trusted him."

The title story, "The Night in Question," is focused on an extended narrative which Frank wants to relate to his older sister Frances. He is initially described as in "an exalted state over a sermon he'd heard that afternoon," and wants to recreate his responses and share them with Frances. The crux of the story is the sibling alliance forged in their youth when their wildly dysfunctional parents failed almost every aspect of their

upbringing. Now somewhat damaged survivors, they depend on each other for support in many areas. Because this reciprocal trust is so crucial, they cannot resist examining its structural design, even at the cost of weakening it. It is as if they need reinforcement and validation of what matters most, and in his allegorical parallel to their relationship in which difficult choices must be made, Frank is showing Frances how much he is willing to expose his needs. His invitation to enter their private zone is accepted, and Frances, while almost goading Frank to shape his narrative in an acceptable direction, echoes his story with her own inner narrative, her recollections like a chorus of support: Frances did not mind a fight, and she especially did not mind fighting for her brother. For her brother she had fought neighborhood punks, snotty teachers and unappreciative coaches, loan sharks, landlords, bouncers. The culmination of her imaginative reconstruction of their childhood—"She remembered it all" she realizes, especially the proximate cause of their anguish whenever "Frank senior worked himself into a rage"—is that she finds a deep satisfaction in the partnership with her brother. Now, as adults, their narrative recall is the stimulation they need to reaffirm their union, an act which, for Frances, leads to a feeling of "ferocity and unaccountable joy" as she triumphantly concludes: "It's okay, Franky, I'm here."

"The Night in Question" is a paradigmatic presentation of the situation that is at the heart of Wolff's work. As he told Ross, "All my stories are in one way or another autobiographical," explaining further that the impulse behind an early story, "The Liar," was his "interest in families." A Boy's Life recounts the ways in which Wolff's own family was riven by what Joel Conarroe in a review identified as "humiliation, betrayal and injustice." Many of the stories in The Night in Question concentrate on characters, especially adolescents, whose families have been fractured by stresses and personality clashes, yet families that remain vital in the lives of the protagonists. Wolff has observed that "all of my characters are reflections of myself," and the root of his reflection is a character's quest for something more in his life, for something that is missing in a personal, social or aesthetic context. Frank and Frances have accentuated their mutual needs as a substitute for absent parental support, since they realize that they can successfully fill each other's psychic voids. The equality of emphasis in Wolff's portrayal of these two produces a dual perspective that deepens their response to the rift. Similarly, the boy and his mother in "Firelight" have specific, unmet needs which their semi-partnership addresses, as they collaborate in the fiction that the boy can attend the impressive university they tour, the mother can chose among the attractive but unattainable apartments they visit. The coda—in which the narrator, now matured, finds himself in the idealized home of his desires—is a commentary on the power of dreams to surpass their eventual actualization, a kind of tribute to the comforting power of imaginative possibility, as well as a reminder that the wound of rejection cannot be completely healed.

Among the qualities that Wolff prizes and many characters yearn for is a clear demonstration of loyalty, or at least some sort of genuine commitment. In "Casualty," the protagonist is nicknamed Biddy "because of his fussiness and the hennish way he brooded over" his comrades, but his care and concern is at the core of a fundamental decency that the story endorses. In "Powder," the young narrator accepts that his father is "bankrupt of honor" but appreciates his caution-to-the-winds daring and the way it

indicates an affection for his son whom he hopes will understand his gestures. In "Smorgasbord," the schoolmates are initially suspicious of each other, while moving toward a wary but deepening mutual candor as they realize their fundamental similarities are more important than an instinctive, superficial antipathy. In "Flyboys" the narrator and his friend Clark are generous in their willingness to assist others, but keep some parts of their lives separate for themselves. And in "Firelight," the young man cannot help feeling aggrieved at all that his life lacks, admitting that he blames his mother "for every nameless thing that was not as it should be."

Nonetheless, he knows how much she depends on him, and does his best to help her.

Wolff does not have the space to develop these characters in depth as he would in a novel, but the authenticity of their psychological responses is sufficient to make them plausible, and the particular traits that distinguish them are conveyed with considerable intensity.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why is the protagonist of "Mortals" so driven by a desire to wring an admission of deception from Givens?

2. Are B. D.'s and Ryan's fate (or destiny) in "Casualty" inevitable?

3. What are the virtues and vices of the narrator's father in "Powder"?

4. Is Riley's behavior in "The Life of the Body" redeemed by his commitment to literature and the delights of language?

5. What is the appeal of building a jet plane in "Flyboys"?

6. How does Wolff balance sympathy with critical analysis in "The Other Miller"?

7. How effective is Wolff's use of dialogue to reveal character in "Two Boys and a Girl"? Are the voices of all of the characters equally well developed?

8. Does the connection between events in "The Chain" lead to a plausible philosophical position about randomness and chance in human affairs?

9. Is the human element of appetite a sufficient explanation for the actions of the characters in "Smorgasbord"?

10. What are the elements of similarity and difference between Frank and Frances in "The Night in Question."?

11. Consider the ways in which the characters in "Firelight" support and assist each other in terms of their basic needs and their thwarted desires.

12. How does the shift in tone in "Bullet in the Brain" accentuate the transition between a world of endless possibility and the constricted realm of a bitter nihilist?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. For Wolff, and for many other men of his generation, the war in Vietnam was one of the defining moments of their lives. Among other writers who have dealt with the demands of combat, Tim O'Brien's collection The Things They Carried contains several stories which are considered classics of their type. How does Wolff's account in "Casualty" compare with O'Brien's work?

2. Most of Wolff's protagonists are young men. When his stories involve women, they are often subsidiary characters or foils for the protagonist. Is Wolff able to make the women characters realistic and affecting? Is his grasp of the psychological basis of these characters convincing?

3. In discussing writers to whom he feels a debt, Wolff has mentioned "Ernest Hemingway, first and last." What stories of Hemingway show parallels to Wolff's work? What are some common themes and concerns?

4. Wolff has commented that in revising his stories, he spends "a lot of time with my characters trying things out. I change their names constantly to see which name is truly their name." Consider the names of the characters in The Night in Question and decide how suitable (or unchangeable) each one is in terms of the psychology of the character.

5. As a teacher of writing as well as an established writer, Wolff has described his method for approaching a story as follows: "I look very closely at language and form. How do writers use the resources of language, voice, atmosphere, all those things to make you feel what they want you to feel, to make you think what they want you to think?

How does it hang together? What's different about it from what other writers do? Why are we reading this? And what has this person done to advance the art in this particular story. What have we seen here that maybe we haven't seen in other work?" Apply these criteria to one of the stories in The Night in Question.

6. When Wolff says that in his work there is "little condemnation," he is not suggesting that he does not make judgments, since he quotes Albert Camus's assertion: "To breathe is to judge." What are the values and virtues that he endorses in the stories in The Night in Question; what vices does he decry?

7. In a declaration of his deepest beliefs as a writer, Wolff has said "storytelling is one of the sustaining arts; it's one of the affirmative arts... . It goes against the grain of cynicism and pessimism." Show how this credo operates in some of the stories in The Night in Question.

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Wolff, Tobias. "Raymond Carver Had His Cake and Ate It Too." Esquire (September, 1989) 240-248. A touching, eloquent tribute to Wolff's close friend, with many informative anecdotes that reveal some of Wolff's ideas and aspirations about his own writing.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Wolff's autobiographical account, This Boy's Life: A Memoir, was filmed in 1994, with Robert DeNiro in the part of Dwight, his stepfather, Ellen Barkin as his mother (called Caroline here) and eighteen-yearold Leonardo DiCaprio as young Toby Wolff. The film was directed competently by Michael Caton-Jones, perhaps best known for Memphis Belle (1990), and very effectively photographed by David Watkins who won an Academy Award for Out of Africa (1985) and who beautifully contrasts the striking landscape of the Pacific Northwest with the bleak lives of the characters. DeNiro and DiCaprio deliver superb performances, and the screenplay by Robert Getchell (nominated for an Academy Award for his screenplay for Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, 1974) is a sensitive adaptation of the book.

The film offers another angle of interpretation for some of the material that appears in stories in The Night in Question. DiCaprio's conception of the character drawn from Wolff's autobiographical recollections sheds some light on Wolff's delineation of the narrators in "Flyboys" and "Firelight." The character of Caroline is set in almost parallel paths to the mother in "Firelight." Frank and Frances in "The Night in Question" form a kind of partnership that is echoed by the relationship between Toby and Caroline in the film. The absence of Toby's father in the film establishes a kind of empty space that is something like the void or gap left by the missing male parent in "Smorgasbord" or "Firelight." The malignant figure of Frank senior in "The Night in Question" is reproduced in somewhat skewed form in DeNiro's unsettling presence in the film.

Related Web Sites

Schreiberg, David. "Interview: Tobias Wolff."

www.stanford.edu/dept/news/stanfordtoday/ed (December, 1996). A revealing discussion with Wolff concerning his writing, teaching and recent experiences.

Smith, Joan. "Spelunking the Unknown."

http://www.salon.com (December, 1996).

A wide-ranging interview with Wolff at the time of the publication of The Night in Question, covering his life, philosophy of composition and the meaning of the title for the collection.

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