# This Boy’s Life by Tobias Wolff

## Synopsis

Short-story writer Tobias Wolff amazed readers with his 1989 memoir, as notable for its finely wrought prose as for the events depicted. The story introduces us to the young Toby (aka Jack) Wolff, who in the 1950s moves with his divorced mother from Florida to Utah to Washington to escape her violent boyfriend.  Separated from his father and brother, Toby struggles for identity and self-respect.  When his mother remarries, Wolff finds himself in a battle of wills with a hostile stepfather, a contest in which the two prove to be exceedingly stubborn.  Deception and false impression are the weapons the young author-to-be learns to use to his advantage and, sometimes, disadvantage.

Though this tale of family trouble is grim, it is also humorous.  Wolff's masterful job of reexamining the frustrations and cruelties of adolescence evokes all-embracing emotions.  His various schemes—running away to Alaska, forging checks, and stealing cars—lead to an act of self-invention that releases him into a new world of possibility.

## Discussion questions

1. Jack's tongue becomes so tied at his first confession (pp. 17-22) that he finds his voice only by borrowing the sins of Sister James.  Why is Jack unable to confess his real sins?
2. When Rosemary asks if Dwight and Jack are getting along, Jack lies: "I said we were.  He was in the living room with me, painting some chairs, but I probably would have given the same answer if I'd been alone" (p. 105).  Why can't he tell his mother about Dwight?
3. Alienation defined much of Jack's childhood, in part because of his fractured family.  Once settled in Chinook, his mother, Rosemary, attempts to re-create a "real" family.  Jack writes, "But our failure was ordained, because the real family we set out to imitate does not exist in nature" (p. 112).  Do you agree with this?  Do you think the perfect family is a myth?
4. Jack's botched attempt to run away to Alaska (pp. 160-68) may be one of the more heart-wrenching episodes in the narrative.  Why does Jack disregard the urging of his friend Arthur at the Gathering of the Tribes?  Why do you think Jack is unable to carry out his plan?  Discuss the conflict between Jack's desire for freedom and his desire to belong.
5. When applying to prep schools, Jack writes all of his own letters of recommendation and transcripts.  He justifies this by suggesting that only he knows the truth about himself. Do you think this assertion applies to everyone?  When accepted at Hill, did you consider this a turning point in Jack's life?
6. As a young child Jack plays a game in which he is an imaginary sniper firing at people who held an "absurd and innocent belief that they were safe" (p. 25).  As a teenager Jack goes to the Welches after his theft: "It had to make them feel small and alone, knowing this—that was the harm we had done.  I understood some of this and felt the rest" (p. 246).  Discuss the significance of these two disclosures by the author.

*Discussion questions from https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/this-boys-life-a-memoir/guide*