

A sense of unease: Tobias Wolff's recent fiction collected in *Our Story Begins*

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Our Story Begins by Tobias Wolff, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, 379 pp.

Over the past thirty years, Tobias Wolff has produced several collections of short stories, novels, including *Old School*, and popular memoirs, especially *This Boy's Life*, made into a film by Michael Caton-Jones in 1993, featuring Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio, as well as *In Pharaoh's Army*, about his service during the Vietnam War.

Wolff himself has had his share of difficult experiences. He came from a poor family and moved around a good deal as a child. His father was a pathological liar and con man, a figure he has detailed in *This Boy's Life*. Tobias himself lied his way into a prestigious boarding school as a teenager. Lying is a motif that appears in many of his stories, particularly the more recent ones.

This element is not simply rooted in personal experience. The lying and the violence of the American establishment that Wolff encountered as a young Army Special Forces officer in Vietnam has had an enduring impact on his outlook on life.

Wolff is sometimes associated with a variety of early 1980s' American fiction come to be called "dirty realism," along with novelist Richard Ford and fellow short-story writer Raymond Carver. Although they had a personal bond, Wolff himself downplays the literary affinity with Carver and Ford.

Other writers sometimes grouped together in this category include Bobbie Ann Mason, Annie Proulx (who wrote the short story on which the film *Brokeback Mountain* was based), Larry Brown and Jayne Anne Phillips.

The exact contours of "dirty realism" always remained indistinct, but there is little doubt that after a spell of extravagant, self-conscious "postmodern" fiction in the 1960s and 1970s (John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes), a trend in American literature emerged that looked more closely at the lives of working-class and middle-class families, often when they were the most vulnerable or dysfunctional.

This 'school' of fiction generally treated its subject matter in an unornamented style and was clearly influenced by Ernest Hemingway and the dark vision of Richard Yates (*Revolutionary Road*, 1961).

This neo-realism was the product of and made possible by the postwar boom, when a far broader social range had access to higher education in the United States than ever before, including many people from humble backgrounds who came to write fiction. Writers found that they could support themselves by teaching in

burgeoning creative writing programs. The careful (and sometimes, in its own way, self-conscious) focus in this fiction, especially Wolff's and Carver's, on literary suggestion and irony occasionally has an academic cast to it.

In addition, the traumas generated by Cold War anti-communism in the 1950s, resulting in the purging or marginalization of left-wing figures and conceptions, helped to shift fiction away from associating everyday life, especially the life of ordinary people, with politics and history. This characteristic, which is notable in most of the dirty realists, has been reinforced in subsequent decades by the general trend of arts criticism, especially postmodernism, for whom only the microcosmic, the individual and the subjective exist.

Such social and artistic tendencies help explain Wolff's work and to some extent define it—however, he is anything but a typical representative of the trend. He tends to be the exception rather than the rule in recent American fiction.

This is because Wolff's stories often tell us something about the deep-seated social, emotional and moral crisis that has developed in the US since the 1980s. One of the things that can make Wolff's work powerful is his ability to take on historical issues as they rise up with immediacy in people's lives.

Wolff's *Our Story Begins* is a selection of 21 older stories and ten recent ones. All of the work is technically accomplished, often shifting from characters' immediate surroundings to their fantasies and memories and then back to reality. Wolff seems not only to have absorbed the masterly technique of Anton Chekhov, the great 19th century Russian writer, but also the latter's deep sensitivity to human suffering.

Of the older stories included here, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," in my opinion, is among the most praiseworthy. A middle-aged professor, who has become quite settled in academic routine, loses her job when her institution goes under ("It seemed that ... the financial manager had speculated in futures and lost everything."). She applies for various positions, and one day an old friend invites her to interview for a job and give a talk to showcase her work.

She discovers that she has been invited to apply for the job not because she has any chance of getting hired—that decision has already been made—but to only fill a quota of female applicants. The situation is sad—and vividly recognizable—but Wolff fixes this experience in history, and implies much more than he says.

In an incident that the author barely touches on, we learn that

this woman, as a student, had remained silent during an anti-Communist witch-hunt, partly because she was developing a career as “an interpreter of history.” She kept her head down and went on to become an academic.

The professor reacts to the dishonest academic culture, which she has helped to create, with a savage description of torture during the colonial era. It is an affecting story on first reading, but one gains even more by following it through again closely.

In “The Night in Question” a devoted adult brother and sister, children of an abusive father, visit and talk with one another. He tells her about a sermon he heard: a railroad switchman finds himself forced to choose between saving his child or a trainload of passengers. This simple story unleashes a flood of emotions in his sister. She had saved her brother from their father—would he now save her? The present, the destructive past, and the story of a worker’s life are tightly integrated here. There is oppression and there are moral choices to make in life, although here, as in so much of the fiction of the last 30 years, they exist only at a personal level.

“Bullet in the Brain” is one of Wolf’s most anthologized stories, and has all the hallmarks of contemporary fiction, which is not necessarily a good sign. The story plunges quickly into the action and has a quirky, somewhat extreme situation. A bank robber shoots Anders, a literary critic, in the head after he says something snide and sarcastic while he is in line to make a deposit. As the bullet passes through Anders’s brain, we see the images—most of them memories gone from his conscious mind—that occupy the man’s last few seconds.

They form an astonishingly sympathetic account of the man’s life, mostly made up of things he has forgotten: respect at a college classmate’s first publication, the suicide of a woman that he witnessed, and the slow years of disappointment that turned him into the arrogant, sneering person who gets himself shot. The one thing he does remember is a hot summer’s day playing baseball as a boy when he was “strangely roused” and “elated” by the Southern dialect of an acquaintance.

Wolff’s strength lies in his ability to locate optimism and kindness in a generally over-stressed and false America, without dismissing or hiding people’s shortcomings. Often in his stories, one encounters a sense of poverty, deprivation, and estrangement dominating life, but he dives a little deeper and we find that the situation is seldom simply grim. His people often surprise us.

The last decade has seemed to sharpen the critical side of Wolff. There is less of a focus on the self-contained family in his work. A more despairing and disturbed America tends to overshadow his individual characters. Wolff seems to have become less sure of the state of things and more opposed to the given conditions of life.

Among his newer stories that exhibit some of these qualities is “The Chain,” which begins with a breathless scene of a father rescuing his little girl from an attack by a dog.

The protagonist, Gold, tries to hold on to his sense of justice and proportion—but he is pressured by his lack of success, envy, resentment, and the search for emotional support and personal satisfaction. A friend wants to fight back against the injustices of life, but in a vengeful and disturbing way. The story is composed of a chain of accidents, and it feels contrived in that respect.

But the emotional truth-quotient is high. The feelings of anger, helplessness, confusion, and social isolation with which the United States seethes are all there. They don’t strike one as particularly well worked out, but they are powerfully expressed.

“The Deposition” depicts Burke, a lawyer deposing a witness in a malpractice suit in a decaying, former industrial town in upstate New York. He goes for a walk and looks around and is disgusted that the people in America “voted for the robbers instead of the robbed.”

There is a hint of contempt at the population because “nobody is fighting back,” but a large dose of sympathy, too. He admires the sacrifices his client has made to fight back. As he strolls around, he surprises a young woman (and himself) with a lascivious look. Soon the police and the locals are involved, and Wolff lets us sense the built-up popular anger directed at the lawyer, an upper middle-class professional.

One of the most powerful of Wolff’s new pieces here—indeed, one of the best stories yet written about how thoroughly the Iraq war has shaken up American life—is “A Mature Student.”

A career Marine sergeant has retired from the military and enrolled in college. While she is outside a classroom smoking, she meets her art history professor, a somewhat cold European intellectual. The professor asks her if she has ever been under fire, and then proceeds to tell the former soldier about her own betrayal of her friends to the Stalinist police under interrogation—quite realistically depicted—as a student in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s.

In a particularly insightful contrast of historical experiences, brought forth in real people, Wolff shows how the ex-Marine’s attention turns to her son who has enlisted in the Marine Corps and is now serving in Iraq. A fear arises in his mother of what he might become.

Wolff is not alone in trying to grapple humanely with the feelings that the events of the last decade have produced. Mary Gaitskill, in particular, caught a sense of it in her recent book of short fiction, *Don’t Cry*, which also includes attempts to deal with, among other things, the impact of the Iraq war. But Wolff has delivered the most artistically precise expression of the smoldering social anger in the American population so far.



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