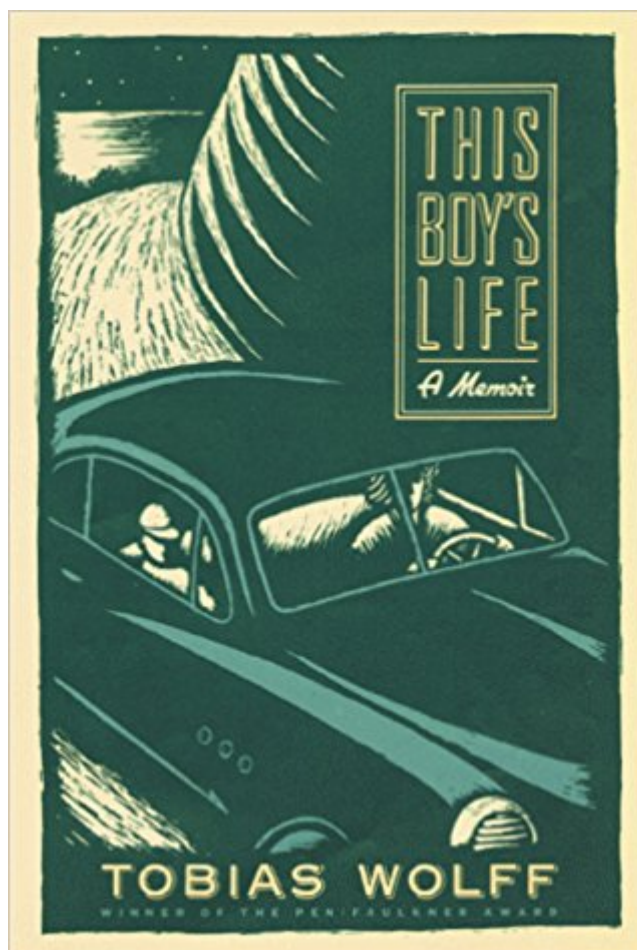


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This Boy's Life: A Memoir



Synopsis

This unforgettable memoir, by one of our most gifted writers, introduces us to the young Toby Wolff, by turns tough and vulnerable, crafty and bumbling, and ultimately winning. Separated by divorce from his father and brother, Toby and his mother are constantly on the move, yet they develop an extraordinarily close, almost telepathic relationship. As Toby fights for identity and self-respect against the unrelenting hostility of a new stepfather, his experiences are at once poignant and comical, and Wolff does a masterful job of re-creating the frustrations and cruelties of adolescence. His various schemes - running away to Alaska, forging checks, and stealing cars - lead eventually to an act of outrageous self-invention that releases him into a new world of possibility.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Leaving Sarasota, Florida, in a run-down Nash Rambler in 1955, Toby Wolff, then ten, and his mother are looking forward to a new life in Utah. Not long after arriving, however, the two make a sudden, night-time departure for newer pastures in Seattle--the mother's abusive relationship in Utah having become intolerable. Later Toby and his mother gravitate to Chinook, a remote village in the Cascades. His mother marries a tough man who cruelly punishes Toby (who has changed his name to Jack in honor of Jack London) for infractions, sells some of Toby's belongings, and tries to enforce military discipline on him. Wolff's story of his grim life from age ten through high school is a breath-taking recreation, filled with the sorts of longings that motivate sensitive young boys everywhere, but also filled with an a self-awareness that is rare in such autobiographies. Jack (Toby) is a rebel--a sometime kleptomaniac, thief, cheater, liar, and schoolboy miscreant who loves

his mother, hates his stepfather (and generally tries to avoid him), and hangs out with similarly alienated, hell-raising schoolmates, who often "escape" through alcohol. When he is a sophomore in high school, he talks with his older brother for the first time in six years. His brother, now a student at Princeton, remained with his father when his parents split, and he encourages Jack to apply as a scholarship student to an eastern boarding school, thereby escaping his step-father and starting yet another new life. Jack's only academic interest to date has been in writing, thanks to the inspiration of his English teacher, but he is intrigued with the idea of escape. The story of how Wolff lies and cheats his way into a prep school is a classic.

In the opening scene of *THIS BOY'S LIFE*, young Toby Wolff and his mother are parked on the descent of a mountain road, waiting for the overheated engine of their cheap car to cool. An 18-wheeler suddenly blows past them, swerving wildly - his brakes are gone. Later, as they descend the mountain, Toby sees the semi has driven off a cliff, falling several hundred feet into a river below. This incident, obviously intended as a metaphor for the boy's life we are about to read, presumably signals bad things to come. Nevertheless, Tobias Wolff's boyhood memoir is a charming story of growing up in the 1950s in just this side of a trailer park culture, a story about creating adolescent identities as freely as trying on shoes until the right fit is found. Not surprisingly, the main identity seeker in *THIS BOY'S LIFE* is "this boy." Toby lives with his divorced mother and her man friend, the physically abusive Roy. As the book opens, Toby and his mother are fleeing Florida and Roy for Utah, where they believe they can get rich by prospecting for uranium (this is the early 1950's, and atomic bombs were all the rage). Roy follows them to Utah where they settle for a while, but Roy's insistence on having children prompts Toby's mother to take him on the road again. By the luck of the bus schedule draw, they end up in Seattle. Over time, Toby's mother meets another man, Dwight, eventually decides to marry him (to give Toby a father figure), and moves into Dwight's home in the small town of Concrete. Along the way, Toby has changed his name to Jack because a girl in his class was named Toby, and because he likes Jack London stories. Roy has introduced Toby/Jack to rifles, and Dwight introduces him to the Boy Scouts. Toby is not alone in seeking an identity.

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