

## Quotes: 'This Boy's Life'

this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to tell a truthful story. (opening page)

'The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is, no one has yet to discover.' (Quote - Oscar Wilde)

'He who fears corruption fears life' (Quote - Saul Alinsky)

### **FORTUNE**

- It was 1955 and we were driving from Florida to Utah to get away from a man my mother was afraid of and to get rich on uranium. We were going to change our luck. (3)
- I was caught up in my mother's freedom, her delight in her freedom, her dream of transformation. (4)
- Everything was going to change when we got out West. (4)
- Something like that was supposed to happen to us. (5)
- I didn't come to Utah to be the same boy I'd been before. (7)
- I had my own dreams of transformation, Western Dreams, dreams of freedom and dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency. (7)
- I wanted to call myself Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent in my idea of him. (7)
- He sent us nothing, not even the pittance the judge had prescribed for my support. We were barely making it, and making it in spite of him. My shedding the name he'd given me would put him in mind of that fact. (8)
- A few of the boys came to their senses and dropped out but the rest of us carried on...the real object was to bring somebody down. (9)
- I was subject to fits of feeling myself unworthy, somehow deeply at fault. (9)
- I imagined being adopted by different people I saw on the street. Sometimes, seeing a man in a suit come towards me from a distance that blurred his features, I would prepare myself to recognise my father and to be recognised by him. (10)
- I represented myself to her as the owner of A Palomino Horse. (11)
- I believed that she must be in awe of me. (11)
- Sometimes, not very often, I felt lonely. Then I would go home to Roy. (11)
- Roy had tracked us down to Salt Lake a few weeks after we arrived...making it clear that he would hold no grudges as long as my mother walked the line. (11)
- Only now and then there came a night when she couldn't do anything but sit and cry, and then I comforted her, but I never knew who reasons. When these nights were over I put them from my mind. (12)
- I thought Roy was what a man should be. (12)
- I lay there, hugging the stuffed bear I was too old for and had promised to give up. (14)

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- I could not break my sense of being at fault down to its components. Trying to get a sin out was like fishing in a swamp. (14)
- '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.' (16)
- 'a life without friends is no life at all' (18)
- I had my heart set on that rifle. A weapon was the first condition of self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and all acceptable employment – trapping, riding herd, soldiering, law-enforcement and outlawry. I needed that rifle, for itself and for the way it completed me when I held it. (19)
- As they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them. (20)
- Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognized and feared. Fearlessness in those without power is maddening to those who have it. (21)
- I blubbered the whole time (21-on burying the squirrel)
- 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)
- This much I understand. But the man can give no help to the boy...The boy moves always out of reach.(22)
- Being so close to so much robust identity made me feel the poverty of my own. (23)
- I was glad to be once more on the run and glad that I would have her to myself again. (25)

### UNCOOL

- She knew I didn't like her and I was not the young gentleman I pretended to be. (32)
- My friends were Terry Taylor and Terry Silver. All three of us lived with our mothers. (32)
- These shows instructed us further in the faith we were already beginning to hold: that victims were contemptible, no matter how much people pretend otherwise; that it is more fun to be inside than outside, to be arrogant than to be kind, to be with a crowd than to be alone. (35)
- He looked up people with Jewish-sounding names and screamed at them in pig German. (35)
- The three of us would press together in front of Mrs Silver's full-length mirror to comb our hair and practice looking cool. (35)
- My mother detested this hairdo and forbade me to wear it, which meant that I wore it everywhere but at home. (36)
- We had been claimed by uncoolness. (36)
- I had certain ideas of the greater world that Annette belonged to, and I wanted a place in this world. (36)
- We softened. We surrendered. We joined the club. (36)
- We held no conference. One look was enough to see that he was everything we were not, his life a progress of satisfactions we had no hope of attaining in any future we could seriously propose for ourselves. (38)
- I rocked her and murmured to her. I was practiced at this and happy doing it, not because she was unhappy but because she needed me, and to be needed made me feel capable. Soothing her soothed me. (46)
- The price was right, next to nothing, and she believed in its possibilities, a word used often by the man who showed it to her. (47)

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- She helped us picture the house after we had made these repairs. (48)
- My mother had faith in me. She didn't have faith in discipline. Her father, Daddy, had given her plenty and she had yet to see the profit from it. Daddy was a great believer in the rod.(48)
- But Daddy left some marks on her. One of them was a strange docility, almost paralysis, with men of the tyrant breed...She'd never been able to spank me. (49)
- "She couldn't even raise her voice convincingly. (49)
- We broke windows. We broke streetlights. We opened the doors of cars parked on hills and released the emergency brakes so they smashed into cars below. (50)
- I was a thief. By my own estimation, a master thief. (51)
- We hadn't come all the way out here to end up with him. (52)
- I was a good mimic...and Dwight was an easy target. (53)
- "You show me a bored kid and I'll show you a lazy kid." (57)
- I could tell he was lying – that he'd known all along. (59)
- Dwight couldn't figure out how the rifle fit together, so I did it for him while he looked on. 'That', he said, 'is the most stupidly constructed firearm I have ever seen, bar none.' (59)
- "Oh boy, now we're really in for it. He thinks he's some kind of big hunter." (61)
- They had come all the way from the ocean to spawn here, and then they would die. The change from salt to fresh water had turned their flesh rotten. (62)
- With the tail of the comb I scratched 'Fuck you' into the soft paint. (63)
- I couldn't bear for her to think that I was the kind of person who took advantage of other people's kindness, or wrote filth on bathroom walls. (64)
- I'd become completely convinced of my own innocence. (65)
- "If he says he didn't do it, he didn't ", my mother said. "He doesn't lie." (66)

### A WHOLE NEW DEAL

- He pulled the car hard to the left and hit a beaver that was crossing the road. (73)
- I was fiercely conventional. I was tempted by the idea of belonging to a conventional family...and in my heart I despised the life I led in Seattle. (74)
- Away from people who had already made up their minds about me, I could be different. (74)
- I could introduce myself as a scholar-athlete, a boy of dignity and consequence...people would believe I was that boy, and thus allow me to be that boy. (74)
- I recognised no obstacle to miraculous change but the incredulity of others. This was an idea that died hard, if it ever died at all. (74)
- "Performer, too. That right? You a performer?" (75)
- "If there's one thing I can't stomach, it's a liar." (75)
- "You're in for a change, mister. You got that? You're in for a whole nother ball game." (76)

### CITIZENSHIP IN THE HOME

- The trouble with me was, I thought I was smarter than everyone else. (79)
- Some of the chores were reasonable, some unreasonable, some bizarre. (79)
- The route paid between fifty and sixty dollars a month, money that Dwight took from me as soon as I collected it. (81)
- I lived in perpetual dusk. (82)
- The absence of light became oppressive to me. It took on the weight of other absences...I felt sharply on my own in this new place. (82)

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- She made the world seem friendly. (82)
- He stuck close by and acted jovial...And I played along. Watching myself with revulsion. (82)
- He would tell me some more things that were wrong with me...But it went on and on. It never ended, and before long it lost its power to hurt me. (83)
- We always left the meetings together, like father and son, smiling and waving good-bye, then walked home in silence. (84)
- My uniform...made me feel like a soldier. (84)
- The main purpose of scouting...was to accumulate symbols that would compel respect. (84)
- I read the Handbook every night almost every night, cruising for easy merit badges. (85)
- I liked all these numbers and lists, because they offered the clear possibility of mastery. (85)
- Boy's Life, the official scout magazine worked on me. (86)
- I began "to believe that I was really no different from the boys whose hustle and pluck it celebrated." (86)
- I began to feel that all of this was fated...to take as my father a man who was offended by my existence and would never stop questioning my right to it. (87)
- After making a few sour chords he slammed it shut and pronounced it out of tune. (87)
- (it wasn't too late) Those words still sound to me less like a hope than an epitaph, the last lie we tell before hurling ourselves over the brink (87)
- We painted the bench, the pedestal...we carefully painted the keys, all except the black ones, of course. (88)
- I liked his acid wit and the wild stories he told and his apparent indifference to what other people thought of him. (89)
- Then I called him a sissy. (90)
- That night Dwight sat up drinking and went to sleep on the sofa. He did this often, sometimes three or four nights in a row. (92)
- Our failure was ordained, because the real family we set out to imitate does not exist in nature. (93)
- I had never seen my mother give up...It made me feel for a little while the truth that everything good in my life could be lost, that it was all drawn...from someone else's store of hope and will. (93)
- With people like that, you've got to hurt them...It's the only thing they understand (94)
- Then he showed me how to dry-gulch somebody. (95)
- I saw myself riding shotgun next to Skipper in this fast, beautiful red car, the two of us having adventures along the way and helping people out of situations too tough for them to handle by themselves. (99)
- I also missed my father. (101)
- He had had the advantage always enjoyed by the inconstant parent, of not being there to be found imperfect. (101)
- I could imagine good reasons...why he had taken no interest why he had never written to me, why he seemed to have forgotten I existed. (101)
- When I finally got my hands on him I felt as if I had snatched him from a pack of wolves, and as I held him something hard broke in me, and I knew I was more alive than I had ever been before (101)
- It was about my father, ten years dead by then. It was grief and rage, mostly rage, and for days I shook with it when I wasn't shaking with joy for my son.(102)
- As a boy, I found no fault with my father. I made him out of dreams and memories (102)
- I thought of what it would be like to own a car, to be able to just get in and go. (102)

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- The crowd was on my side now. (107)
- When the buzzer went off, their coach ran onto the court and had them give us three cheers. (107)
- I never thought she would do this to me...I took away the blue convertible I was going to give her, the furs, the filmy clothes. I threw her out of the mansion. (108)
- I often found myself looking down the barrel of Dwight's latest piece...which he held on me until I moved out of the way. (109)
- He railed at her for refusing to appreciate the sacrifice in taking on a divorced woman with a kid, let alone a kid like me, a liar, a thief, a sissy. (110)
- Only one of his charges had stinging power - that I was a sissy (111)
- I was a liar. (110)
- I was also a thief. (110)
- My idea was to steal enough to run away. I was ready to do anything to get clear of Dwight. I even thought of killing him. (110)
- She didn't respect him. She looked down on him. (111)
- I defined myself in opposition to him. (111)
- "Please Dwight," he mimicked.
- The more we begged him the faster he went, only slowing down for a breath after the really close calls, and then laughing to show he wasn't afraid. (113)
- the answer was already there. I was my mother's son. I could not be anyone else's...to call someone else my mother was impossible (118)
- I don't want to change my name. (119)
- She may also have dreamed of flight and freedom...even from me. Like everyone else, she must have wanted different things at the same time. The human heart is a dark forest. (119)
- He sprayed the whole thing – trunk and all. (123)
- The next day...the needles had already begun to drop off. (123)
- Kenneth pulled up the next afternoon and by dinner-time we all hated him. (124)
- We could all see that Norma didn't love Kenneth. (126)
- She acted happy and never complained about anything. (126)
- The beaver had been left to cure...This too was covered in mold. (128)
- The mold...somehow suggested the shape of the beaver it had consumed. (128)
- I planned...to run away to Alaska. (129)
- But we did not feel as if anything we said was a lie. We both believed that the real lie was being told by our present unworthy circumstances. (132)
- One night he kissed me, or I kissed him, or we kissed each other. (132)
- He didn't look like a serious Scout. I did. (133)
- To look at my merit badges you would have thought I could be dropped anywhere...and in no time improvise a shelter and kindle a fire and snare an animal for dinner. (133)
- Arthur, who despised him, smirked at Dwight, and wriggled and pranced every step of the way. (140)
- "Champ's your dog! Jesus! I trade some old piece of crap for a valuable hunting dog and what do you do? Piss and moan, piss and moan." (142)
- Dwight would shoot at anything. He was a poor hunter, restless and unobservant and loud, and he never got the animals he went after. (142)
- He thought his equipment was to blame. (143)
- Champion snarled and I hit him...I could forgive myself for most things, but not cruelty. (144)
- I took the car to a stretch of road...where I could get it up to a hundred miles an hour. (145)

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- He kept hitting me in a fast convulsing rhythm. (148)
- He grabbed my hair and forced my face down hard against the mattress. Then he hit me in the back of the neck. (148)
- I learned a couple of lessons...that a punch in the throat does not always stop the other fellow...that it's a bad idea to curse when you're in trouble, but a good idea to sing, if you can. (149)
- I knew he hadn't buried Champion, because he came back so soon and because we didn't own a shovel. (149)

### CITIZENSHIP IN THE SCHOOL

- The boys of Concrete High tended not to see themselves as college material. (153)
- Mr Mitchell would crouch behind his desk, peer over the top, then roll into the middle of the room and spring to his feet yelling *da-da-da-da-da*. (154)
- For this impertinence she failed not only the question but the whole test (154)
- The report cards were made out in pencil and I owned some pencils myself. (155)
- I wanted distinction, and the respectable forms of it seemed to be eluding me. If I couldn't have it as a citizen I would have it as an outlaw. (155)
- (Psycho) was big and stupid. (156)
- He (Jerry Huff) was a bully. He made fun of other boys' dicks...and held them over toilet bowls by their ankles. (156)
- Arch...was a simpleton. (157)
- Chuck knew a lot of women...When they found a new one they shared her. (157)
- I didn't want to be like that...I wanted to be with the girl I loved. (157)
- I wrote her (Rhea) long, grandiloquent letters, which I then destroyed. (158)
- I only ever wanted what I couldn't have (159)
- I was happy that night, listening to them search for me, listening to them call my name... I lay there smiling in my perfect place(162)
- I hated being alone with him. (162)
- Dwight refused to send in my papers. He wouldn't explain why, except to say I didn't deserve to be an Eagle. (167)
- My brother sent me a story...the young man was so alienated from his father that he wouldn't say sorry. (169)
- I carried the letters around with me and read them with elation. (170)
- I made it sound worse than it had been (172)
- He grabbed me by the hair and shoved my face back down towards the jar. (170)
- He leaned across the table and slapped my face. (171)
- I told him I was getting straight A's. (172)
- I told him I was a swimmer. (173)
- I play in the school band. (173)
- He just sat there, drinking from his bottle of whiskey. When it was empty he pulled his hunting knife out from under the seat and held it to her throat. He kept her there for hours like that, making her beg for her life, making her promise that she would never leave him. If she left him, he said, he would find her and kill her. (174)
- She had no money and no place to go. (174)
- I went to the library and looked up... *The Status Seekers*. (175)
- To seek status seemed the most natural thing in the world to me. (175)

## Quotes: 'This Boy's Life'

- I understood that the brilliant life...depended on leaving most people out (175)
- Now that I had the possibility of this life, any other life would be an oppression. (176)
- Being realistic made me feel bitter. (177)
- We would be a family again. (178)
- "We're starting from scratch." (178)
- Now the words came as easily as if someone were breathing them into my ear. I felt full of things that had to be said, full of stifled truth. That was what I thought I was writing - the truth. (180)
- It was the truth known only to me, but I believed it more than the facts arrayed against it. I believed that in some sense not factually verifiable I was a straight – A student. (180)
- I wrote without heat or hyperbole in the words my teachers would have used if they had known me as I knew myself. 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. (181)
- He...wrote our names down and congratulated us on volunteering for the smoker. (182)
- I saw all this respectability as a performance. (184)
- He gripped Beth's hand as they walked from class to class...he stared testily into the faces he passed as if looking for signs of scepticism or amusement. (184)
- I knew he was no citizen and he knew I was no outlaw. (184)
- He knew I was not the person I tried so hard to seem. (184)
- I could see him smiling down at me with recognition, and pleasure, and something like love. (187)
- "You're a fine boy and I'd be happy to give you a good report." (192)
- I watched the Thunderbird... watched it as a man might watch a woman he'd just met leave his life, taking with her some hope of change that she had made him feel. (192)
- "I'm not the drinker in this house." (194)
- Knowing that everything comes to an end is a gift of experience, a consolation gift for knowing that we ourselves are coming to an end. Before we get it we live in a continuous present, and imagine the future as more of that present. Happiness is endless happiness, innocent of its own sure passing. Pain is endless pain.
- It was all over, she said. This was it, this was the last time. We were getting out of here. (195)
- We hated each other. We hated each other so much that other feelings didn't get enough light. It disfigured me. (196)
- But I can always see Dwight's face and hear his voice. I hear his voice in my own when I speak to my children in anger. My youngest once said, "Don't you love me any more?" (196)

### THE AMEN CORNER

- It wasn't an act. So when the other Chuck, the bad Chuck, did something, it always caught the Bolgers on their blind side and knocked them flat. (201)
- Mrs Bolger did not get up. I could see that she was still feeling the wrong of what we have done, though I did not feel it myself. (204)
- I didn't need to see tears in Mr Welch's eyes to know that I had brought shame on myself. (206)
- These people weren't making it. They were near the edge, and I had nudged them that much farther along. (206)
- I had no way of explaining my feelings to him, or even myself. (207)
- He despised me for not apologising. (207)

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- I believed that there was no difference between explanations and excuses, and that excuses were unmanly. (207)
- If I had robbed a bank she would have stuck by me, but not for this. (209)
- I could not imagine Father Karl wanting money, a certain array of merchandise, wanting, at any price, the world's esteem. (210)
- to accept Father Karl's hope of redemption I would have to give up my own. He believed in God, and I believed in the world. (210)
- I was not available to be reached. I was in hiding. (211)
- Her name was Tina Flood, but everyone just called her The Flood. She was 15 years old. (213)
- He had a clear picture of her, and when he finally met her he was going to marry her and stay married forever. The wife for whom Chuck was saving himself was a television wife, cute, sassy, and pious. (215)
- I wrote 'Tobias Jonathan von Ansell-Wolff III.' (218)
- "I don't get it", she said. "He doesn't even like me. He just wants to hang on. It's so strange." (220)
- Dwight hadn't really been saving it. It wasn't there. Not a penny of it. (220)
- When she was worried she wore a pale tight-lipped mask. Lately it has started to become her own face. Now the mask was gone. She looked young and pretty. (221)
- We were ourselves again - restless, scheming, poised for flight. (221)
- I was shaking with relief and joy and cruel pleasure, for the truth was I didn't like Huff and felt no pity for Tina. (223)
- If Dwight wouldn't promote me to Eagle, I'd just have to promote myself. (225)
- I understood that I was being outfitted not for pleasure but for survival (230)
- The elegant stranger in the glass regarded me with a doubtful, almost haunted expression. Now that he had been called into existence, he seemed to be looking for some sign of what lay in store for him. (231)

### AMEN

- My father took off for Las Vegas with his girlfriend the day after I arrived in California. (239)
- One morning I woke up to find this man embracing me and making declarations of love. (239)
- His girlfriend called to say that he had gone crazy and was now in the custody of the police. (239)
- My mother took a job in Washington D.C. (240)
- During the Christmas holidays Dwight trailed her there and tried to strangle her in the lobby of our apartment building. (240)
- I had known someone was in trouble and had done nothing (240)
- My ignorance was so profound that entire class periods would pass without my understanding anything that was said. (240)
- To cover my fear I became one of the school wildmen - a drinker, a smoker. (241)
- In my last year...I was asked to leave. (241)
- 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. It seemed to me when I got there that this had been where I had been going all along, and where I might redeem myself. All I needed was a way.(241)
- Be careful what you pray for. (241)



## *Quotes:* 'This Boy's Life'

- When we are green, still half-created, we believe that our dreams are rights, 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 people ever born, have a special arrangement whereby we will be allowed to stay green forever. (241)