

Teacher Text Guides & Worksheets

This Boy's Life

Tobias Wolff



Angie Barillaro

Radiant Heart Publishing

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Introduction

This Boy's Life is written by Tobias Wolff and it tells us a story about what happens when children do not receive the attention and love they need from their parents. Tobias is a child who had to grow up on his own virtually because his mother was quite unable to take care of his needs. He also has never been surrounded by decent father figures. His real father was wealthy but had chosen to live with his brother on the East Coast and had no relationship with Toby. We see in the novel that Toby is left to look after himself, which often results in negative consequences and a sense of guilt and burden towards his mother. He and his mother moved from city to city and this made it virtually impossible for Toby to make good friendships and learn to trust other people. As a result he turned out to be a bit of a troublemaker however, he did make good in the end.

About the Author

Tobias Wolff is normally known for his short stories however in 1989 he wrote *This Boy's Life*, which is his memoir about his life growing up in the 1950's with his divorced mother, who was always on the run to escape her problems. Tobias Jonathan Ansell Wolff was born on the 19th June, 1945 in Birmingham, Alabama, U.S.A. He attended Concrete High School in Washington and then was accepted into The Hill School although was later expelled. He fought in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. Wolff has an Honours degree in English from Hertford College, Oxford plus a Master of Arts from Stanford University. Over the years he has taught various Creative Writing classes at universities.

Wolff works mostly within the genres of the short story and the memoir. His writing is greatly admired and his books have won many awards. *This Boy's Life* was adapted into a film starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Robert De Niro.

Tobias Wolff is married and has three children.



1956 Nash Rambler car

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter One: Fortune 1

It is 1955; Toby and his mother are driving across the country to escape their life in Sarasota, Florida to start a new life in Utah. In particular they are trying to get away from Toby's mother's abusive boyfriend Roy. On the way they find that the car they are driving overheats and is not worth fixing so they decide to give it away to someone. Coincidentally whilst they are stopped at a store at a cafeteria they see a truck speeding past them and it drives right over a cliff because the brakes are out and this shocks both Toby and his Mother. Toby at this stage is ten years old and his mother is always hoping for a new start and Toby is also excited to be starting fresh again in Utah. His mother believes she will get a job in the uranium fields and make a lot of money. However when Toby and his mother arrive in Utah, the mining boom has already been exhausted and they are shocked to see that is a very run down place. Toby and his mother buy a Geiger counter and move to Salt Lake City where Toby's mother looks for a job but there is no luck in her search. We see from this that Toby's mother is an idealist and a dreamer and has a limited connection with reality.

Questions

1. Describe Toby's mother from this introductory chapter.
2. Describe Toby.
3. What is Toby's mother's background?
4. To what extent do Toby and his mother fit in with the world around them?



Map of U.S.A with regions

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter One - Fortune 2

Toby decides that he wants to change his name to Jack after his favourite author Jack London, and also because there is a girl in Toby's class called Toby as well. Toby thinks girls are scary and he wants to try and become tougher. However his mother doesn't allow him to change his name to Jack but she does let him change it to Jonathan as long as he goes to religion classes. Once he has been baptized as Jonathan, she says he can change it to Jack. Toby has very little connection with his father back in Connecticut who lives with his older brother Geoffrey. Although he is a millionaire he does not give any money to Toby or his mother. Toby begins taking catechism classes taught by Sister James and he also joins the archery club but then some of the boys start aiming at cats in the church yard and then each other until they are caught out by Sister James. Toby begins to skip archery and catechism classes and just hangs around watching people and wonders what it would be like to be a part of their family. At this stage he also writes to his pen pal Alice but mostly he tells her lies such as he has a beautiful horse named Smiley and his father owns a ranch. Toby's mother's boyfriend Roy finds them and comes back to move in with them again. Roy is abusive. He has tattoos, smokes, lives off disability and likes going shooting. Toby enjoys going shooting with Roy however; he does not like how Roy treats his mother. Roy is obsessive about Toby's mother and they even follow her home after work. Toby knows this is not normal but he wants to have a normal father and son relationship. One night it is around Christmas time and Toby's mother doesn't show up so Roy starts becoming very agitated and drives around. When he comes home he finds Toby's mother cooking and Roy acts very angry and suspicious towards her. Toby can always hear Roy abusing his mother and he tries to comfort himself by writing a letter to Abbey and cuddling his teddy bear, which he feels guilty about. He hopes everything will get better when he changes his name to Jack. By Easter Toby is ready to get baptized and he needs to go to confession, which causes him some difficulty. Sister James helps him come out in the open with his confessions. In the end when Toby goes to confession he uses Sister James' sins. In a way Sister James and the priest are being parental figures to Toby.

Questions

1. What is the significance of the name Jack to Toby?
2. Find out about Jack London and what he represented to many boys of that era.
3. What is the relation between Toby and his brother Geoffrey, as well as his father?
4. How does Toby spend his time when he is not at school?
5. With hindsight as an adult how would you describe Roy's behavior?
6. What type of person does Toby's mother want to be?



A handwritten signature of Jack London in cursive script, written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter One – Fortune 3

After Easter Toby is given a Winchester point .22 rifle that used to belong to Roy as a child, only after he has worked a long time to get it. Roy is very tight with money. Toby is excited about the gun; he believes it will make him more mature and manly. However Toby's mother does not like having the gun around the house but the boys are united against her. They both play her against the other to get what they want. Toby mistakenly believes that ganging up against his mother with Roy means that he has a good relationship with Roy however this is not the case. Toby promises his mother that he will never touch the gun while he is alone but Toby breaks the promise because he is always free after school and there is never anyone around and Toby likes to play with it. When he plays with the gun it is the only time he feels powerful, all the other times he feels powerless. Toby enjoys aiming at innocent pigeons and thinks it's a great game; it is the only time that he is not a victim in life. One day when Toby accidentally hits a squirrel, he lies to his mother about the dead squirrel saying he doesn't know how it died. Toby feels guilty about the squirrel and he actually cries and hopes he will become a better person so he tries to avoid the gun. He goes back to playing with his friends after school. However Toby is drawn back to the gun and enjoys the power that it gives him. A few days later Sister James drives up to his house and Roy hides, not answering the door. Sister James drives off again and when he reads the note Toby is distressed because it says that she is leaving. Toby burns the letter.

Questions

1. Given that Toby is only ten years old what is the importance of the games he plays with his gun?
2. What are the dynamics in the relationship between Roy, Toby and Toby's mother?
3. When Toby finds the letter under the door by Sister James how does he respond? Why?



Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter One – Fortune 4

Roy asks Toby if he would like to have a little brother, which doesn't really impress Toby. The next day Roy goes on a camping trip and when Toby gets home from school he finds his mother packing everything up including their clothes. Toby knows that this means that they are moving again. Toby tells his mother that the archery club has been cancelled but secretly he has been missing classes for months. His mother has not even noticed. His mother asks where he would like to live and he says Phoenix so they decide that they will go to either Phoenix or Seattle because they would both be great places to live. When asked about how he feels about leaving Roy Toby knows he will miss Roy but does not want to upset his mother. He wants to take the gun however his mother does not want him to as it will not fit in the suitcase. Toby breaks the gun and puts it in the suitcase. On the way to the bus station we notice that the mother is flirting with the cab driver and there seems to be something strange going on with Toby's mother and the cab driver. As the bus to Phoenix has already left, Toby and his mother decide to move to Seattle. Toby would have liked to move to Phoenix and out of guilt his mother gives him money to play video games and buy junk food. Whenever she feels guilty about how she has treated Toby or disappointed him she gives him money. Finally they get on the bus and head for Portland so that they can catch another bus to Seattle.

Questions

1. Why do you think Roy asks Toby about having a little brother?
2. Describe Toby's feelings about leaving Roy.
3. Toby is now used to moving around with his mother and he knows how to treat her. What does this suggest about his childhood?
4. In what ways does Toby's mother compensate for her lack of responsibility towards her son?

Chapter Two – Uncool 1

Now Toby and his mother have moved into an attic apartment of a small boarding house in West Seattle. The house is very run down but they dream about how beautiful it would be to buy one of the other houses in the area. The boarding house where they live is owned by Phil who doesn't like children; however Toby's mother promises that other children will not be brought to the house. Phil is a victim from a house fire and he is very strange towards Toby. Every time Toby passes him he touches him. There are three women in the house including Toby's mother. Cathy who is shy, pregnant and works as a secretary. Marian is the housekeeper who is dating a Marine Sergeant and she doesn't like Toby. Toby is fascinated with the Marine Sergeant and his life in the military. At this stage Toby has befriended two other boys who both have absent fathers. Terry Taylor lives with his mother and sisters and his father has not returned home from the Korean War which ended two years ago. Terry often gets into trouble for graffiti, vandalism and stealing cigarettes. His other friend is Terry Silver, they like going to Terry Silver's apartment because there are no parents around as Terry Silver's dad lives in Tacoma with his new family and Terry's mother works all day. Terry Silver wears a homemade Nazi armband and the boys are really interested with anything to do with Nazis. After school they like to annoy girls, steal bikes, smash the bikes and look at guns in pawn shops. Silver is the leader of the group and he helps them all get into trouble. At this stage the boys are trying to look cool by smoking cigarettes and greasing their hair back. The boys are just trying to be accepted so they keep trying. In reality they love watching the Mickey Mouse Club and they tell themselves the only reason they like watching it is because of mouseketeer Annette but actually they love the show. Toby starts writing letters to the Mickey Mouse Club but they become offensive and they stop accepting his letters. Another pleasure the boys have is going on top on the roof and throwing things at people.

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Two – Uncool 1 Questions

1. What activities do the boys engage in to try and make themselves look cool and feel grown up?
2. To what extent is it acceptable for preteens and children to be left unsupervised for hours on end in this day and age as Toby was? Look up the term 'latch key kids'.
3. Terry Silver is the leader of the gang but what suggests that he is perhaps the most disturbed?
4. Find out about the Mickey Mouse Club.
5. On the roof, why do the boys throw eggs at the successful businessman in the Thunderbird?

Chapter Two – Uncool 2

Toby and his mother go to Alkai Point which is a park overlooking the harbor to watch a mock naval battle. Two men notice Toby and his mother and they walk over to start chatting with them. One of the men shows interest in Toby and offers him a hamburger but is really asking questions about his mother. The man's name is Judd. We learn that Toby's mother's name is Rosemary. The other man Gil offers to buy Toby a bike so Rosemary reluctantly agrees. When Toby and his mother arrive home she asks him if it would be okay if she leaves him at home that night as she prepares to get ready to go out to dinner with Gil. He arrives at the house and honks his horn for Rosemary to come down to the car. Toby does not sleep well that night and when he sees his mother come home he sees that she is crying and he comforts her; he holds her like a child and we see that this is something that he is used to doing.

Questions

1. Describe Judd and Gil and their relationship with Rosemary and Toby.
2. Why Toby was promised a bike by Gil?
3. What do Cathy and Marian feel about Rosemary going on a date with Gil?
4. Why would Rosemary be crying when she comes back from Gil's house?

Chapter Two – Uncool 3

Rosemary, Toby, Cathy and Marian move into a new house that Rosemary found, it is very run down, the worst on the block and ready for demolition. Despite the poor conditions and how other people see the house, Rosemary believes that the house has a great deal of potential. Cathy gives birth to a boy named Willy. Cathy and Rosemary continue to work whilst Marian keeps the house and tries to look after Toby. Toby never comes home after school; he always lies about where he goes and what he does. When Marian tries to speak to Toby or tell Rosemary about him, she emphasizes that she does not believe in discipline. On Halloween Toby and his friends break the windows at the school however the boys do not get caught. They continue stealing things, getting into trouble, vandalizing. Toby does not steal for the things he takes but rather for the satisfaction. When Cathy and Marian get engaged, Marian tries to set her up with various men that Toby does not like. Dwight is one of these men and Toby makes fun of him. Toby hopes that his mother will not fall for him as he is divorced, has three children and sees him as a loser.

Questions

1. Describe the house that Rosemary finds for everyone to move in.
2. What does Marian, Cathy's partner feel about Toby?
3. What do we learn about Rosemary's childhood and life especially with her father?
4. Why do you think Toby finds stealing satisfactory?
5. Why does Toby resent Dwight?



Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Two – Uncool 4

It is thanksgiving and Rosemary and Toby visit Dwight in Chinook. Toby does not like Pearl and the other children. He does not like Pearl but he falls in love with Norma who is seventeen. Things are becoming more serious between Rosemary and Dwight and she even confesses to Toby about her feelings. The next day everyone goes on a road trip around Chinook. Rosemary enjoys taking pictures of everyone. They go to a Rifle Club where they are having a turkey shoot, however Dwight has lied to Toby telling him that he could shoot but in reality he could not as he is a child. Rosemary joins a competition and she enjoys the attention when she wins. Dwight reacts in a very jealous manner because he didn't win. Then Dwight returns Toby and Rosemary home the next day.

Questions

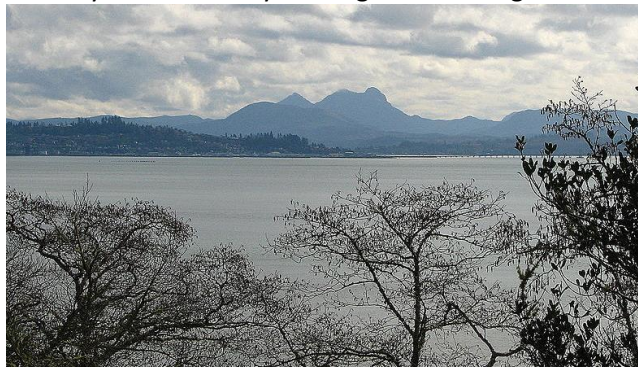
1. Describe Chinook and Dwight's family.
2. How do his children Pearl, Skipper and Norma relate with their father?
3. What happens when parents like Rosemary confide in their children as though they are adults?
4. What does Dwight say about Chinook?
5. Why are the children uncomfortable when Dwight talks about his musical abilities?
6. Describe the outing at the Turkish Shoot, what do we learn about Rosemary and Dwight?
7. When Dwight drives Toby and Rosemary home he stops at a place where salmon are spawning. He tells her that the salmon are so desperate to get to Chinook that they even risk their lives to get there just to spawn and die. What is the significance of this?

Chapter Two – Uncool 5

Toby and his friends are smoking cigarettes in the toilets at lunchtime telling tall tails and vandalizing the bathroom. As they have written 'F U' on the wall the vice principle goes on a mission to find out who wrote it and accuses Toby of the crime. Toby denies the accusation so his mother is called to come to his office. In the end they go to speak to the principal who is not as tough as the vice principal. When Toby and his mother get home instead of being lectured she takes a bath, reads a book and goes to bed. At the end of another weekend with Dwight, Rosemary tells Toby that he has proposed marriage to her and that Toby will move up to Chinook to see if he likes living with him. Toby feels that he cannot refuse.

Questions

1. How is humor used by the Author in the school scene?
2. What do you think of Rosemary's idea of Toby moving in with Dwight after Christmas? Discuss.



Chinook Point, Washington

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Three – A Whole New Deal

Dwight and Toby drive to Chinook, he claims to accidentally run over a beaver but Toby knows he meant to do it. They get out of the car to look at the beaver and Dwight starts picking on Toby saying that he is too scared to pick it up but Toby picks it up and puts it in the trunk. Nearby Toby has a hamburger in the car while Dwight stays in the tavern in Marblemount for a long time. Toby is on his best behavior because he wants to start anew in Chinook. Driving home, Toby can see that Dwight is really drunk and can barely manage the drive making Toby feel sick. Dwight becomes abusive and calls him a hotshot. Dwight becomes threatening and says Toby is in for a change. We realize Dwight does not like Toby and it looks like Toby's new happy beginning is not going to materialize.

Questions

1. Discuss your reaction to running over the beaver.
2. What was Dwight doing in the tavern?
3. Dwight has appeared to be a people pleaser yet now he is using his power to dominate Toby. Discuss.

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 1

Dwight continues to verbally abuse Toby, putting him down, reminding him of his flaws. He gives him lots of work to do and forces him to take a school paper route. He forces Toby to husk chestnuts until his fingers turn orange and stink. Dwight uses every opportunity to humiliate Toby. Dwight also takes the \$50-\$60 a month that Toby makes with his paper route and says he will save it for when Toby is older. Toby resents his new home, he has no one that cares about him and he tries to avoid going home. Rosemary only sees her son when Dwight is there visiting. It is already March and there is still no response to the marriage proposal. Now Dwight signs up to be the assistant scoutmaster and forces Toby to go to scouts. He enjoys humiliating Toby after each meeting. Toby likes scouts because it makes him feel like a man and hopes that one day he will be a hero. Finally Rosemary accepts Dwight's offer of marriage and to spruce up the house Dwight buys white paint and paints everything white.

Questions

1. Imagine what the impact of all the verbal abuse is having on Toby.
2. What is exciting about being in scouts?
3. To what extent is Rosemary a good mother to Toby?



Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 2

Toby becomes friends with Arthur Gayle who is very unpopular but Toby enjoys his wit. However Toby is afraid to be seen with Arthur because everyone will make fun of him and see him as uncool. After school when Arthur makes a comment about Toby's orange hands, they have a fight and Pearl tells everyone at home. Toby's mum dresses his wounds and does not tell him off. We learn that Rosemary and Dwight have not been getting along since their honeymoon. Dwight is an alcoholic and sleeps on the couch, Rosemary stays in her room. Toby sees a change in his mother as if she has already given up. Rosemary works part time and joins the PTA in the raffle club to keep busy. When Dwight finds out about Toby and Arthur's fight he feels very proud of him but does not realize that he did not win the fight. This is the first time that Dwight speaks to Toby in a respectful manner and even gives him further advice about fighting.

Questions

1. How does peer group pressure affect Toby's friendship with Arthur?
2. Are we surprised that Rosemary and Dwight's marriage is troubled?
3. What happens to Arthur and Toby's friendship after the fight?
4. How can we explain Dwight's happiness about Toby being in a fight?

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 3

Skipper has been given a 1949 Ford by his father Dwight. Toby likes to talk to Skipper. The car is finally put together and painted cherry red. Skipper decides that he's going to go to Tijuana Mexico to get white leather interiors and Toby wants to go. However he is devastated once he realizes he will not be going. Skipper and Toby share a bedroom as though they are real brothers. Living with Skipper and the family reminds him of his brother and father. Toby begins to learn about cars and starts hitchhiking just for the sake of it. Toby hopes that one day a hitchhiker will pick him up and drive him to Connecticut where his father and brother live. When Skipper comes back from Tijuana the car is destroyed due to a sand storm.

Questions

1. Describe Skipper and his importance in Toby's life.
2. What feelings are we learning that Toby has about his father and brother?
3. How do you explain that Toby is spending his time hitchhiking?

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 4

We learn that Toby's in year seven and he has to buy new shoes because he is growing, however Dwight refuses to buy him new shoes even with his own paper money. He forces Toby to wear brown loafers to everything, including basketball. Of course this means that the people from the other team are making fun of him. The shoes look terrible and they are not suitable footwear for a basketball game. At one particular match at Vanhorn the crowd laughs hysterically at his shoes.

Questions

1. How does Toby feel about Norma and how are his hopes dashed?
2. What happened at the basketball match to further crush Toby's ego?

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 5

Rosemary finds other women and couples to join the rifle club and they have couples nights at the shooting range, which highlights that Dwight is a terrible shooter. Dwight is unable to cope with Rosemary's excellent skills, so he is extra cruel to Rosemary. Toby continues to lie and steal; he steals money from people on his paper route. He wants to steal enough money to run away from home and he wants to kill Dwight.

Questions

1. What is the significance of the shooting competitions in the relationship between Rosemary and Dwight?
2. How damaged is Dwight? Discuss.
3. Describe the relationship between Toby and Pearl.

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 6

One day whilst the house is empty Toby snoops around and finds a letter from Rosemary's brother Stephen who lives in Paris. So Toby writes a long letter to Steven about how harsh his life is and that he needs to get away from Dwight. Steven sends a letter back to Rosemary and there is a possibility that Toby might be going to France. Dwight is absolutely thrilled; he can't wait to see the back of Toby. Everything is supposed to be arranged and it makes Toby feel unwanted because his mother wants him to go for five years. Toby decides that he will not be moving to Paris because of the conditions that Stephen has created. Dwight is angry and accuses him of being selfish.

Questions

1. What are the different reasons that Rosemary, Toby and Dwight wanted Toby to go to Paris? Discuss.

Chapter Four – Citizenship in the Home 7

Dwight is interested in music and thinks that he is a musician when clearly he is not. He forces the family to watch orchestras on the television. Norma is thinking about marrying Kenneth even though she loves Bobby Crow who is an Indian. Norma brings Kenneth home for Christmas and everyone is excited – until they meet him. Kenneth comes for Christmas lunch and everyone despises him as he is rude, arrogant and tries to pick fights with everyone. Despite family protestations, Norma still marries Kenneth and has a baby.

Questions

1. Why does Norma fall for such an unsuitable person?
2. Norma asks Rosemary's advice about marrying Kenneth yet the reader is not told what Rosemary's replied. What do you think she said and why?
3. Yet another disastrous marriage between Norma and Kenneth - what does the novel say about marriage?
4. We discover that all the chestnuts that Toby was forced to peel have rotted and moulded. What does this suggest?



Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Four – Citizenship at the Home 8

Toby starts at Concrete High School and he has already saved \$80 in stolen cash and tips. Toby begins to plan his escape: to runaway to Alaska. Toby and Arthur become good friends.

Questions

1. Describe Concrete High School.
2. Why would Toby want to run away to Alaska? What does this represent to him?
3. What do we learn about Toby in this section?
4. What is the significance if anything of a kiss between Arthur and Toby?
5. What happens to the \$80 that was supposed to be his running away money?

Chapter Four – Citizenship at Home 9

When Toby comes home he discovers Champion, a dog that Dwight has brought home for Toby, in exchange for Toby's gun, which makes Toby angry because he wants his gun back. His mother Rosemary has been busy involved in a Democratic Political conference, however Toby never gets his gun back. They take Champion hunting. The truth about Dwight buying Champion is actually it was for himself so he can have a helper while he hunts. Toby likes to take the car out for joy rides at night with Champion but one night the car gets stuck in a ditch so he and Champion have to walk home until a man brings them home. This is how Dwight finds out, and he attacks Toby and beats him. Dwight shoots the dog Champion and this terrifies Toby and he never wants to go for a ride with Dwight again.

Questions

1. How would you feel if your most loved possession was traded in by someone else without your permission?
2. Why did Dwight really buy Champion the dog?
3. How is Toby dealing with all the setbacks in his life?
4. Describe Dwight's abusive behavior? What do you think causes it?

Chapter Five – Citizenship in the School 1

Toby becomes interested in joining the Army because of his Civics teacher Mr. Mitchell. Toby does a lot of copying of other students work, he smokes cigarettes with older boys and they want him to lose his virginity. Toby wants to find a real girlfriend to have sex with, not just anyone. The boys have been trying to get Toby drunk for ages and finally one night they do so with Hawaiian punch and vodka. This causes him to walk on a tree branch and he falls down as his friends look for him.

Questions

1. Describe life at Concrete High School. Why is it called Concrete High School?
2. Mr. Mitchell and Miss Houlahan are two of toby's teachers, what are they like?
3. Who does Toby hang around with? Describe them.
4. What happens when Toby gets drunk?
5. When Toby falls, why does he not cry for help?
6. How does Dwight react to hearing about Toby getting drunk?

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Five – Citizenship in the School 2

Out of the blue, Toby's brother writes him a letter from Princeton and sends him a Princeton sweatshirt, which Toby is passionate about wearing. His mother has become a serious campaigner for Senator Jackson and J.F Kennedy and Dwight hates both politicians and that his wife is always absent so he is more abusive to Toby. Toby is planning an escape to Princeton, however his scheme does not work.

Questions

1. We don't really hear much about Rosemary when she is gone on her political campaigns, what does it suggest about her? Has created a new aspect to her life?
2. What was Toby's plan on stealing cheques from the bank to run away to Princeton? How did it turn out?
3. In all his wrong doings what qualities do we see in Toby?

Chapter Five – Citizenship in the School 3

Toby is excited about the possibility of meeting his brother Geoffrey. Dwight finds a jar of mustard in the bin and takes it out of the rubbish bin to show it to Toby. He tells him that there is still a bit of mustard in the bottle and makes him eat out the last bits and then he slaps Toby. Pearl yells at Dwight and Toby leaves. Toby tells his stories of abuse to Geoffrey. Now that the election is over Rosemary is spending more time at home and life is difficult as usual. Toby begins to seriously consider the possibility of a better life and goes for a Prep School test after he is put in contact with the master of Deerfield.

Questions

1. How do we know that the dynamics between Pearl and Toby have improved?
2. What does Geoffrey and being in touch with him represent to Toby?
3. Describe what Dwight does to Rosemary when he takes her out for a drive.
4. Why is Toby all of a sudden excited?

Chapter Five – Citizenship in the School 4

Arthur is becoming jealous that Toby might leave and they start arguing all the time. Mr. Mitchell organizes for them to be in a boxing fight. Now that Toby is preparing for a fight, Dwight shows interest in Toby and gives him tips. At the fight Toby comes second but it was a good fight and he enjoyed the attention.

Questions

1. Describe the relationship between Arthur and Toby in your opinion?
2. What does Dwight try and teach Toby about fighting?
3. How does Rosemary feel about Toby fighting?



Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter Five – Citizenship in the School 5

Toby felt he performed well on his preschool entrance exam but he received rejection letters from three schools and he is upset especially when he is rejected by Deerfield. Out of the blue a member of Hill School, Mr. Howard organises to meet with Toby school and discuss a possible scholarship to Hill, a prestigious school.

Questions

1. Are you surprised when Toby starts applying for better schools? Discuss
2. What has motivated Mr. Howard to meet with Toby?
3. Why does Toby have Mr. Howard pick him up from outside a crowded drugstore?
4. According to Mr. Howard, what challenges may he face if he wins the scholarship?
5. How does Toby handle his meeting with Mr. Howard?
6. In what way does Toby react to Huff's typically crude behavior?
7. How does the meeting between the two end?

Chapter 5 – Citizenship in the School 6

While in woodwork class, Toby cuts his finger and two teachers take him to the doctor. Mr. Greeley is terrified he will be sued, but Toby assures him that is not the case. After surgery, Toby stays in hospital for a week and enjoys the way the morphine makes his physical and especially his emotional pain disappear. At home Toby begins to express his opinions to Dwight and others and gets into a fight with Dwight who suspects some of his alcohol is missing. After he shoves Toby, Rosemary decides she and Toby are leaving. Toby leaves to live with Chuck Bolger until Rosemary finds a new job so she can send for him. Dwight tries to make amends with Toby but it is half hearted.

Questions

1. How is this chapter humorous?
2. Why is Toby suddenly able to express his anger openly when he returns home?

Chapter 6 – The Amen Corner 1

Mr. Bolger blames Toby for all of Chuck's wrongdoing, however Chuck drinks all the time and then engages in self-destructive behaviour. Toby cannot keep up with Chuck's level of drinking. One night Toby and his friends Psycho, Chuck and Huff steal gas from the Welsh family farm so they can go for a wild drive. In the end they get caught and Toby works on the Welsh farm to make things right. Seeing how poor the Welsh family is and the conditions they live under disturbs Toby but he is unable to apologise to Mr. Welsh, and Mr. Bolger has had enough. When he summons Rosemary he makes it clear that if Toby wants to stay on he must obey his rules. Rosemary organises for Toby to meet with Father Karl for a chat. Toby finds it hard to express himself clearly that he really does have ambitions. He wants to make his mother proud and happy; he wants money, success and acceptance like everyone else. Toby is ashamed of himself especially when the Welsh's refuse any further help from him.

Questions

1. To what extent is Mr. Bolger in denial about his own son?
2. Describe the Bolgers.
3. How is Toby changing and growing?

Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter 6: The Amen Corner, 2

The boys are in big trouble again because fifteen year old Tina Flood is seven months pregnant and claims she will charge Chuck with statutory rape if he does not marry her. There is also a possibility that Toby, Huff or Psycho could be the father, but she has decided on Chuck. Toby is secretly relieved that Chuck is in trouble instead of himself for a change, but he wants to be loyal to his friend. Chuck is reluctant to marry Tina and is distressed. Just as Toby is losing faith in a better future, he hears from Mr. Howard that he has found him a \$2,300 scholarship to Hill and all he needs is \$500. He signs the information letter in his new name: Tobias Jonathan von Ansell-Wolff III. Back at home, Dwight is trying to be nice to Rosemary as he does not want her to leave. It is revealed that all of Toby's paper route job money and Rosemary's savings that Dwight was saving for them, has been spent by him and there is no money left. Toby is also told that he will be going to visit his father. Huff decides to marry Tina to avoid jail and Chuck is off the hook.

Questions

1. What further ruin has Dwight brought upon Toby and his mother?
2. How is the future looking for Toby?
3. Why does he use the new name for his upcoming school?

Chapter 6 – The Amen Corner 3

Toby is feeling lonely and abandoned by his mother and spends more time with Pearl. He wants to go with her when she returns to Seattle, claiming he misses Norma, although it is his mother he wants to see. Once Dwight and Pearl leave for Seattle, Toby sneaks into the house and steals Dwight's guns as payback.

Questions

1. Why does Toby feel justified about stealing Dwight's guns?
2. What feelings does he experience back in the house?

Chapter 6 – The Amen Corner 4

Chuck drives Toby to the Howard's residence and there is a sense of tension. Mr. Howard reminds him he can pull out from the scholarship if he is having second thoughts. Toby is determined to continue with his dream. Later the Howard's take him to have clothes made especially for Toby but when he tries them on he realises that the 'old Toby' is still there. Toby admires the Howards and would like to be like Mr. Howard.

Questions

1. Describe the experience at the tailor's.
2. How does Mr. Howard feel towards Toby at the moment?



Comprehension Questions – *This Boy's Life*

Chapter 7 – Amen

Toby arrives in California to his father's house but immediately his father goes off on vacation with his girlfriend. Toby is left with a car and an expense account on his own although his father's friend has promised to check in on Toby but that does not work out. Geoffrey, Toby's older brother returns home and we are told that their father has gone crazy and is with the Police. He is committed to a sanatorium. Geoffrey works and earns money to support the both of them and they get along really well. Meanwhile, Rosemary obtains legal support to keep Dwight away from her after he tried to strangle her and Dwight is arrested. Finally Dwight is out of their lives. Back at Hill, Toby falls behind which causes him to act out so he is expelled. Before he left, Toby did receive encouragement from his English teacher who recognized in him a passion for reading and writing. After a while he joins the Army.

Questions

1. What reason does Toby give for falling behind academically?
2. Discuss what has happened to Rosemary and the future?
3. Why was Toby grateful for his Army experience?

This Boy's Life - Extended Questions

1. What did you think of the novel? Discuss the positives and negatives.
2. Why does Toby lie to his mother about Dwight at first, telling her that they are getting along fine?
3. Does Toby have an ideal or perfect family in his mind? To what extent does this matter to him?
4. We are given insights into Rosemary's abusive past. Are there any glimpses about Dwight? Is there any attempt to explain his corrupt and abusive nature?
5. Why did Dwight paint the whole house white, including nearly every object in it?
6. There are many humorous moments in the novel. List five.
7. How does the environment/ nature work in the novel?
8. What conclusions can be made about the importance of the role of the father in a person's life?
9. Are there any positive male figures in the novel? Discuss.
10. How does Toby survive without his spirit being completely crushed?
11. Toby's hero is Jack London, and he longs to roam the wide open Alaskan wilderness. What has created this passion in him?
12. In what way is alcohol used in the novel by various characters?
13. What do cars represent in the novel for the characters?
14. Guns are a potent symbol and a reality in the novel. Why?
15. Explain the significance of the section titles.
16. What details of his life may have been left out by Wolff in this memoir?

Theme – Identity

Most of the characters in the novel struggle with their sense of identity for a range of reasons. Toby in particular is concerned with understanding who he is and what he stands for. This is not surprising as he has not had a solid foundation in childhood, nor has he had appropriate and effective parenting. He is also constantly directly and indirectly abused, surrounded by adults who are themselves victims of abuse and neglect. Most of the male figures in his life have chipped away at his self-confidence, pride and any real sense of identity. Furthermore, Toby's environment is always questionable and hardly inspiring or encouraging in fulfilling his aspirations.

Toby is clearly intelligent, worldly and self-reflective. He is always trying to interpret his life and hoping for a new start in life – which is incredible for someone so young. In fact he would not be worrying about such issues if he had a normal and safe childhood. Lack of stability is quite debilitating in developing friendships and a sense of home, especially when accompanied by the people in his family and life.

His relationship with his mother is inappropriate and the boundaries are blurred between mother and child. Instead of being nurtured and protected by his mother, Toby feels responsible for her happiness and safety. He places her above all else including himself, even lying about what is really happening. Even when his mother is with him she is not really there for him. We know that Rosemary has had an abusive childhood and upbringing at the hands of her own father, so she is a victim of circumstance as well. Unconsciously she places Toby in abusive and destructive relationships with would-be father figures, and is often absent herself. Whilst the memoir is written from an adult point of view, with hindsight and understanding applied, there is no denying that Toby had a traumatic, lonely and insecure childhood/adolescence. Oppression surrounds Toby everywhere; environmentally, educationally and in relationships. It is no surprise he has a confused and less than satisfactory identity.

Dwight would have to be the most damaging element in Toby's life, as he takes any opportunity to humiliate him and physically abuse him. Worst of all is that Dwight really enjoys the power and control he has over Toby. He is a violent alcoholic and the worst role model a boy could ever have.

As the behaviourist Maslow discovered, human beings need to have their basic and essential needs met first before they can start to personally grow and self-actualise. Toby was bereft of the basics as he did not feel a sense of security. His home environment was ever changing and never safe, especially when his mother was around. Toby was also unable to connect with and trust others which led to him lying, stealing and getting into trouble. He would then feel guilty and chastise himself about how bad he was. Ironically, he was probably the only person in the family who felt guilt and shame and yet he was the youngest, and also a victim.

Still, despite all odds, Toby is lucky to end up on his feet. He may have been initially expelled from school but we can understand that he feels completely out of his depth academically, given his lacklustre educational experiences and home environment. All along we can understand there is a sense of an identity that Toby is trying to develop or allow to live, but there are too many obstacles in his path. We can only imagine what a gift it would have been to be befriended by his English teacher who fed his ravenous appetite for books and reading.

Tasks and Questions:

1. Research Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and apply it to Toby's life.
2. What characteristics seemed strong in Toby?
3. Where did Toby's strength to keep on going and trying come from?
4. What factors create such oppressive realities for the people in the book, including Toby?
5. In your opinion, what do people need in order to become who they were meant to be?
6. Discuss the relationship between Toby's name changes and his identity.

Theme – Men and Masculinity

It is clear that Toby is in desperate need of a healthy, positive masculine role model, which he does not have. The men in his life are broken, destructive, cruel and unreliable people. Those that may have been better for him are absent, or just fleetingly present. Even his mother talks about her abusive father and the legacy he left on her is clearly negative. These men are weak willed, unable to process their emotions and speak their minds. They are overly reliant on alcohol, guns and violence. Dwight is cruel to animals and Toby as well as Rosemary. His only source of power comes from belittling and humiliating others. The only time we see him show enthusiasm towards Toby is when Toby gets into fights, and when there is a possibility that Toby will be going to live with his uncle in Paris; a sickening display. Roy also played a similar role to Dwight in Toby's life, but there was less abuse. Without effective male role models, boys are prone to act out angrily and feel insecure in their own masculinity. Furthermore there is a high chance that someone like Toby could have grown up to repeat the cycle, however there is no doubt that being with Geoffrey was a positive experience for Toby.

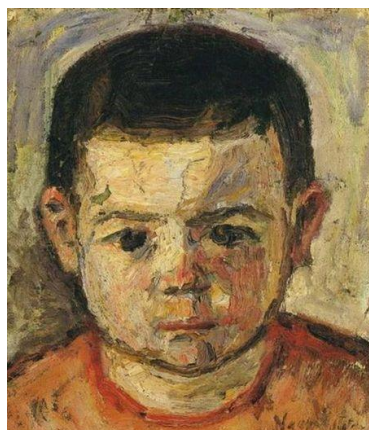
Questions

1. How important is it to have appropriate role models in your life?
2. What are the consequences of males who grow up without fathers and/or with abusive fathers?

Theme – Family and Abuse

Although all families are different, there is no doubt that we all need to feel we belong to a family in some form, even if it is just close friends. Families should be the place where we are able to take risks, learn about ourselves and others – in other words to grow. Not only should our family meet our essential needs but they also play a role in helping us develop our sense of belonging in society. Research shows there is an essential bond that must be created by a newborn baby and at least one caregiver; otherwise there are serious and life-long consequences, especially in developing connectedness with others.

Most of all, the family should be a safe and solid centre of a child's life, which is not the case if there is domestic violence in the home. Toby does not have any stability as his family is divided. His older brother is living a fairly privileged life with his father and he is with his mother who herself has no strong centre. Rosemary has her own issues and she is just not there for her son. Toby clings on to his mother and even as an adult looking back; he does not seem to want to accept the extent of his mother's negligence. She quite frankly looks for excuses to 'dump' Toby whenever she can, and then tries to make up for it by spoiling him in some way. The pattern and relationship between Toby and his mother is dysfunctional.



Theme – Family and Abuse 2

Saddest of all is how Toby really tries hard to find acceptance, even with Dwight, who relishes any opportunity to physically and emotionally abuse him. For this reason, Toby is always longingly looking on at other families and wondering how it would feel to be in *that* family. Another dream of his is to run away and find a family who will really love him. In the end he settles for another type of family – troublemakers in the guise of his friends.

Finally there is ongoing domestic violence in the family which Tobias has to witness, and sometimes become a part of, albeit unwillingly. In such families, life becomes oppressive, stressful and creates insecurity and lack of trust. Although nowadays society is more open to the need to protect abused children and battered wives etc. during the time such things were kept as a shameful secret. If people suspected something was wrong, they turned a blind eye and did not get involved even if they were personally appalled. Protective services were limited and women's support was not available especially as the law was largely patriarchal.

Questions

1. Do you think that Toby would have experienced a more positive beginning in life if he had lived with his father and brother, at least on a part-time basis? Discuss
2. What makes a good family?
3. Find some quotes about families.

Theme – Denial

Dreaming and imagining are wonderful pursuits and we all need them, however we see in the novel that there is a serious lack of connection with reality for most of the characters. They are all in denial, and the reason for this is that denial is a way of coping with a harsh reality and life.

- Rosemary is in denial about her role as a mother, refusing to take responsibility for it. This has a negative effect on herself and Toby. She makes poor decisions based on spur of the moment whims and fantasy dreams. She is not grounded in reality.
- Dwight is in denial about himself and does not care about it. He does not care about others and blames his problems on everyone else. The fact he is an alcoholic who does not work is irrelevant to him. Toby is his scapegoat. Of course we do not see anything from his point of view but he seems to lack any redeeming qualities. His whole life is out of control so he exerts power over others to feel better about himself and more powerful. A man who actually forces a child into labor and then spends his small income is a piece of work.
- Toby stays in denial as he has learned this from his mother. Toby knows his family life is not normal and fantasizes about living a better life than the one he is in now. His constant lying is an attempt for him to make believe he has a better life. Toby needs to escape from his life in order to survive.

Questions

1. What would it take for Rosemary to 'face reality' and learn to be more responsible. Is that possible?
2. Describe how Toby uses his fantasy and imagination to escape reality – find an example.



***This Boy's Life* – Characters**

Toby/ Jack, Tobias Jonathan von Ansell-Wolff III

- Main character who is trying to understand himself and his role in life
- Has little effective adult guidance
- No decent male role models; constantly looking for one
- Experiences abuse at the hands of his step-father
- Changes his first name twice in the hope he can reinvent his life and himself
- Life is a struggle and he hopes to sort himself out in the end by joining the Army

Rosemary/ Mother

- Rosemary is Toby's mother and she has come from an abusive family
- She is out of touch with reality
- Often not available for Toby as she puts herself and the men in her life first
- The men she falls for after her divorce are abusive – Roy is mentally unstable and Dwight who is even worse
- Escaping reality and moving constantly are the ways Rosemary deals with life
- She is a friend to her son rather than behaving as a mother
- Toby is often abandoned whilst she disappears to live her own life

Dwight

- Dwight is crude, aggressive, a heavy drinker and abusive to Toby
- At first he seemed pleasant and kind but that was just until he married Rosemary
- He is cruel to the point of being inhumane and Toby is his favorite scapegoat
- Uses family members to spy on each other and creates divisions between them, so he has control over the family
- He strips Toby of his dignity

Geoffrey

- Toby's older brother who has little to do with him for many years as he lives with his father and new wife on the East Coast
- When he goes to Princeton he befriends Toby again

Chuck Bolger

- Toby's best friend at Concrete High School
- Chuck is kind but he has a destructive drinking problem
- Toby ends up living with Chuck

Mr. Howard

- Mr Howard is Toby's benefactor who finds him a scholarship to Hill
- Toby admires and respects him and would like to be like him
- Mr. Howard helps Toby in many ways

***This Boy's Life* – Characters 2**

Arthur Gayle

- Arthur was Toby's best friend in Chinook but is later dumped by him as he is not cool, but rather fat and considered a nerd.
- He is trying to work out his sexuality
- Arthur probably understands Toby most of all
- Also lives in a fantasy world

Arthur / Toby's Father

- Arthur left Toby and Rosemary for a wealthy woman, but kept Geoffrey
- Rarely contacted Toby
- When we finally meet him at the end of the novel, it is clear he has his own issues as he is constantly changing girlfriends and has a breakdown, needing to be placed in a Sanitarium
- Geoffrey seems to have taken on the responsibility for his father

Skipper

- Skipper loves cars and shares a room with Toby
- He is Dwight's middle son and very quiet
- Kind to Toby
- Moves away from the family as soon as he can

Pearl

- Dwight's youngest daughter and desperate for attention which she gets from Rosemary when she is around
- Starved of affection
- Often pitted against her siblings by her father

Norma

- Dwight's oldest daughter; Toby secretly loves her
- She chooses an abusive man to marry, dumping her local boyfriend who treated her well
- Stuck in a loveless marriage but in complete denial

Uncle Stephen

- Rosemary's brother, living in Paris with his family
- For a brief moment offers to adopt Toby under strict conditions but it never worked out

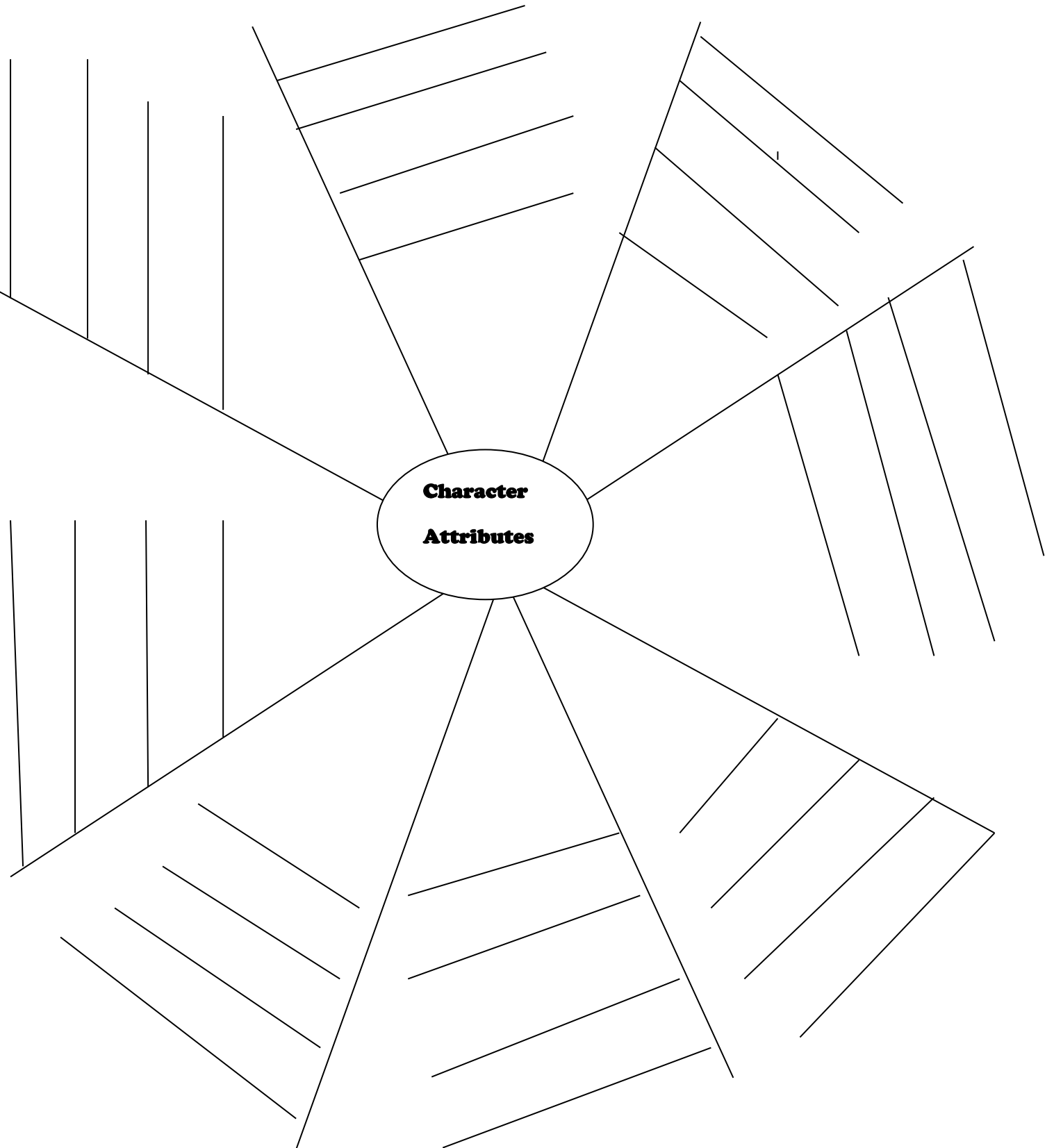
Tasks:

1. Create a visual chart featuring all the characters from the novel and their characteristics.
2. How do the characters interact with one another? Show this in a mind map.
3. In what ways have Geoffrey and Toby's lives been both similar and different?



Characters Worksheet

In pairs, create an 'attributes mind map' or use the one below - for the main characters in the text.



This Boy's Life - Important Quotes

"I was subject to fits of feeling myself unworthy.... It didn't take much to bring this sensation to life, along with the certainty that everybody but my mother saw through me and did not like what they saw."

"It was truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than I believed in the facts arrayed against it. I believed that in some sense not factually verifiable I was a straight-A student. In the same way, I believed I was an Eagle Scout.... And on the boy who lived in their letters, the splendid phantom who carried all my hopes, I saw, at last, my own face."

"Whatever it is that makes closeness possible between two people also puts them in the way of hard feelings if that closeness ends."

"Fearlessness in those without power is maddening to those who have it."

"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."

"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 the people ever born, have a special arrangement whereby we will be allowed to stay green forever"

"I was giving up--*being realistic*, as people liked to say, meaning the same thing. Being realistic made me feel bitter."

"I've allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story."

"And in my heart I despised the life I led in Seattle. I was sick of it and had no idea how to change it. I thought that in Chinook, away from Taylor and Silver, away from Marian, away from people who had already made up their minds about me, I could be different. I could introduce myself as a scholar-athlete, a boy of dignity and consequence, and without any reason to doubt me people would believe I was that boy, and thus allow me to be that boy. I recognized no obstacle to miraculous change but the incredulity of others. This was an idea that died hard, if it ever really died at all."

"Happiness is endless happiness, innocent of its own sure passing. Pain is endless pain."

"Roy's strangeness and the strangeness of our life with him had, over the years, become ordinary to me."

"Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me."

"He tried too hard. No eye is quicker to detect that kind of effort than the eye of a competitor who also happens to be a child."



This Boy's Life-Text Quotes Worksheet

- Find some significant quotes from your novel and comment on their meaning and significance.
- What theme does it explore?
- Try not to use ones on your Quotes sheet

Quote:	Comment:



***This Boy's Life* - Structure and Style**

Perspective

Being a personal memoir, the text is written in a first person narrative which is the most suitable narrative vehicle for this type of book. Writing about his youth from the vantage point of his adult self, Wolff is able to offer insights and measured evaluation. Wolff uses understatement effectively, as though he is stepping back and reflecting about his past. This enables him to offer his adult insights into his childhood past that he did not understand about himself and others at the time. This provides an insightful reflection with added depth.

Language

Wolff's economy of language allows the reader to reach their own conclusions. His sentences are often short and sharp, very direct and understated. Although he is writing about emotionally distressing situations, there is no sense of sentimentality, rather an acceptance which makes the text more believable for the reader. The language is also clear and simple, making it straightforward and all the more shocking and blunt for the reader.

Tone

There is an all pervading tone of hopelessness despite some humorous observations. The working class setting in Chinook, Seattle is uninspiring and depressing and the cast of characters reinforces this sense of hopelessness. In this context, Toby's dreams and desires to change and transform himself and his life are both understandable and impressive. The fact that this unwholesome reality is being described by a child/ adolescent adds a layer of despair, as we watch Toby be let down time and time again. The reader is appalled at the situation and becomes mired in the sense of despair that Wolff would have also felt, because if the adults are not there for him or abusive – what hope is there?

Setting

None of the settings in the novel are positive or even 'normal'. Instead Wolff is part of a dismal and bleak environment adding more challenges to his life. Chinook is the focus of most of the book, it is the focus of the author and with its cast of dysfunctional adults it is a dark backdrop for life. Concrete High School is clearly a lacklustre, drab, mediocre and low quality institution with an odd mix of teaching 'professionals'. Of course Toby and his mother move all around the United States; Florida to Utah, then to Seattle and then Connecticut and Washington, D.C. All the settings are temporary and offer no sense of home.

Structure

The book is divided into seven sections with a title that reflects what is happening in Wolff's life at the time. The sections are short and sharp. The focus never strays from Toby with subplots or other deviations. Everything is from the perspective of Toby and we are left to speculate about what is really going on with some of the other characters such as Rosemary.

Questions

1. What was it like for you reading the text the first time? Discuss.
2. In what ways did the style and structure of the text shape your reading?
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the structure of the novel in creating meaning.
4. What do the following symbols suggest in the text: beaver, white piano; salmon, Skipper's car, scouting, shucking horse chestnuts, the Raleigh bike, the rifle and shucking horse chestnuts?

This Boy's Life – Creative Tasks

1. Compose a series of poems based on the text.
2. Revise a section of the text and turn it into a short story.
3. Invent a game or create a quiz based on the text.
4. Rewrite the ending of the text so that the outcome is different.
5. Plan and create a picture book of the story.
6. Present a talk on an aspect of the text to the class.
7. Who was the author? Research and report a biography of the author.
8. Write a newspaper article based on aspects of the text.
9. Using any art medium (painting, sculpture, inks, pencil etc.), create one or more visual representations of the text.
10. Choose an aspect of the background of the text that interests you and create a PowerPoint/research report for the class.
11. Write a short story based on the novel but this time make the protagonist a female.
12. Write letters or diary entries from the point of view of any three other characters in the novel.
13. Imagine you are going to turn this novel into a film. As the producer what will be your approach?
14. Present a monologue from the play from the perspective of any character.
15. Watch the actual film of 'This Boy's Life'. Review it and write a critique to send to the director.



***This Boy's Life* – Essay Topics**

1. Despite his childlike innocence, Toby eventually sees his mother Rosemary for who she really is. Discuss.

2. Without an appropriate male role model, Toby is left floundering on his own to make sense of life. Discuss.

3. ***This Boy's Life*** starkly expresses the importance of the family unit in a child's life. Discuss.

4. Dwight's emotional abuse towards Toby is unbearable, yet somehow Toby manages to rise above it. Discuss.

5. Fantasy and imagination are Toby's life-savers. Discuss.

6. It is not surprising that Toby changes his name twice during the novel. Discuss.

7. There is no time for childhood and innocence in ***This Boy's Life***. Discuss.

8. Growing up and finding one's place in the world is a challenge regardless of the circumstances. Discuss.

9. We see a subtle transformation in Toby throughout the memoir ***This Boy's Life***, and it is not necessarily a positive one. Discuss.



***This Boy's Life* Reviews - What they Said**

"Love, however, is not a word that leaps to mind when we consider the younger sibling's descriptions of his stepfather. Perhaps through sheer loathsomeness, Dwight is even more memorable than the numerous unsympathetic characters that appear in the author's novella "The Barracks Thief," which won a PEN/Faulkner award, and his two books of disturbing and often brilliant stories, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" and "Back in the World." The memoir as a whole, moreover, is literate and consistently entertaining - and richer, darker, and funnier than anything else Tobias **Wolff** has written."

- **January 15, 1989, Book Review Desk by JOEL CONARROE New York Times.**

"In addition to an effective connection that all readers can relate to, Wolff writes in an equally effective, simple, easy-to-read style. Wolff's authenticity, as a memoirist, is immediately recognized upfront as he states, "I've allowed some of these points [minor corrections on chronology] to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story." Granted, Wolff could just be saying this in order to make the reader less skeptical; however, throughout Wolff's story, he demonstrates a high level of vulnerability that, I believe, says otherwise. For example, to write about alcohol abuse, vandalism, theft, fraud, abusive parents, and a moment where he kisses his friend (who is a guy), are all marks on him. These events could possibly lead to unwanted labels (i.e. alcoholic, homosexual, etc.) from the community of readers. In a genre made powerful by the intimate knowledge and personal observation of the story being told, authenticity in memoir is important, and Wolff is the real-deal. With a clean style, a story everyone can relate to, and an authentic account of memory, it is no wonder why *This Boy's Life* received the Pen Faulkner Award, and is a captivating, must-read, for everyone".

- **Rhett Morici; Rhetorical, December 13th, 2012.**

"In fact, Tobias was living under the iron-fisted rule of his stepfather Dwight - Geoffrey calls him a "troglodyte" - whom their mother had married in 1957. The catalogue of put-downs and punishments inflicted on the young Tobias in *This Boy's Life* would turn the worst Dickensian tyrant queasy. "This Boy's Life began as a collection of memories I was putting down so that my children would know how I grew up," Wolff says, "because they were raised in an academic atmosphere, and my mother by that time was a very proper old lady." Readers of the memoir will recall how Dwight tracked Tobias and his mother to the east coast - "from Washington State to Washington DC" - where Dwight tried to strangle her. "That was the last time I saw him," Wolff says. "Standing in a snowstorm, with policemen holding his arms. My mother had bruises on her throat for weeks afterwards. They found a knife that he'd thrown into the hedge."

When he showed his mother the manuscript of *This Boy's Life*, Rosemary Wolff must have sighed. Geoffrey, who is seven years older than Tobias, had published his own memoir, *The Duke of Deception*, a decade before. Tobias recalls her being "a little apprehensive", and joking: "If I'd known both my sons were going to be writers, I might have behaved differently."

- **James Campbell The Guardian, Saturday 19 July 2008**

Task:

1. **Write your own book review of *This Boy's Life* aimed at a target audience of your choice.**
2. **Comment briefly on the above three reviews.**



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Notes