

Rough First Draft

On the trail of Tobias Wolff's debut novel

by Graham Hillard

In the spring of 2011, I ditched the academic conference that had brought me to Washington, D.C., and took the Metro south to the Library of Congress. With apologies to the Lincoln Memorial, the Library's Thomas Jefferson Building is surely the most beautiful structure in that great city: a marvel of Italianate brilliance rising out of the First Street bustle. As part of their tour, visitors may climb to an upper floor and gaze through windows into the Main Reading Room, a space whose gilded extravagance brings to mind some of the less democratic moments in European history. Scholars—or those who can pass themselves off as such to the minor officials charged with keeping the riffraff out—may enter that lovely place, having preselected their reading material from among the Library's thirty-six million volumes. Those whose requests are made in a timely manner arrive to find their choices waiting for them. Were the rest of the federal government half so efficient, so aesthetically sound, so user-friendly, it's a safe bet that no conservative would ever again gain office.

I had returned to the Library of Congress after a tourist visit six months earlier for two reasons. First, to look into the Reading Room but not to enter it is the functional equivalent of Michael Collins keeping the command module warm while Armstrong and Aldrin walked the moon. Second, I had discovered among the Library's holdings a book that had eluded me for years: the out-of-print and disavowed first novel of Tobias Wolff, the American memoirist and fiction writer.

I had been reading Wolff for years by that point. Reading and rereading. Casual fans had made bestsellers of his genre-defining memoirs *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*, narratives of Wolff's troubled childhood and Vietnam service, respectively. I had moved on to lesser-known (though by no means lesser) works: *The Barracks Thief*, a Pen/Faulkner Award-winning novella of military unease; *Old School*, a chronicle of boyhood rivalries that ranks among the best novels produced in this century; and, of course, Wolff's stories, which had appeared for the better part of three decades in *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, and a quartet of near-perfect collections.

Like any enthusiast, I had my favorites. Chief among these was "Firelight," the penultimate entry in Wolff's third (and best) collection, *The Night in Question*. The story of a downtrodden mother and son's hopeful apartment hunting, "Firelight" was vintage Wolff: ambitious but readable, political yet fair. So, for that matter, was "Smokers," Wolff's first published story and a highlight of another volume, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*. A narrative of prep school betrayal, "Smokers" asked its readers to consider the almost Calvinistic irresistibility of material wealth, particularly for those, like Wolff, who have known its absence.

Other stories stood out, as well. "Two Boys and a Girl" (*The Night in Question*) took as its subject the tension between ethics and desire—our tendency to sacrifice the former when the latter beckons. "The Rich Brother" (*Back in the World*) considered the humanizing effect—unintuitive, perhaps, but no less true as a result—of surrendering to one's obligations.

Though it's hard to say why an author seizes us, I had a fairly good idea in this case. No American wrote more honestly, more tenderly, about class. No one understood better the

difficulties of applied morality: how easily principle can give way upon the discovery “of what you had to have,” as the protagonist of “Two Boys and a Girl” confesses.

There was another reason, too, for my devotion. Though I had noted with approval Wolff’s *moral* imagination—the subtlety with which he goaded his characters toward what the scholar James Hannah has called their “constant and often contradictory obstacles”—I had nevertheless seen in Wolff’s *plots* close approximations of the author himself, as revealed in his memoirs: The fraud who lies his way from an abusive home to a prestigious prep school. The wastrel who embraces the absurdities of war. The striver determined to gain “the great world,” as Wolff writes in *This Boy’s Life*, “that was my desire and my right.” As a consequence of this line-blurring, so obviously intentional, I tended to read Wolff’s fiction as yet more autobiography, as narratives designed in part to fill the holes left by the true stories. Wolff had discouraged this very misreading in an interview with *The Paris Review* (“Those things didn’t happen. I made them up”), but I couldn’t help myself. Rather than putting me off, his literary gamesmanship thrilled me. Wolff’s was a fascinating life. I wanted more of it.

Hence my trip to the Library. *Ugly Rumours*, the novel I had come to read, was obscure. The product of a British publisher, it had never seen an American printing. Wolff himself had long ceased to mention it (“Within two or three years of having written it, I couldn’t read a word of it without cringing,” he once told *The Los Angeles Times*). Yet to neglect it would have been to miss an epoch of a compelling history. I wanted to know how far short of Wolff’s standards *Ugly Rumours* fell—how badly it missed the “values of exactitude, clarity, and velocity” that the author had identified as his goals. I wanted to read what few other fans had read. Mostly, I wanted what all plot-literalists want: to know *what happened*.

What happened is this: A man in his twenties wrote a very bad novel. *Ugly Rumours* tells the story of Christopher Woermer, a soldier who spends his tour, as Wolff himself did, as an advisor to a Vietnamese Army division. As loosely autobiographical as I had hoped, the novel explores much of the same material that Wolff would later mine to greater effect in his memoir of that time, *In Pharaoh's Army*, from the specific—a helicopter's slipstream flattens a Vietnamese village—to the general—Woermer frets about his relative uselessness. Despite these similarities, however, *Ugly Rumours* feels like a deflated balloon beside *In Pharaoh's Army*, as if its animating element has drained away. Though Wolff's potential is evident enough, the novel itself is a mess. The shifting third-person narration consistently violates the principles of limited omniscience. One African-American soldier speaks in an affected jive (“‘Taint bad fo’ you, mebbe”) that is frankly excruciating. Dialogue throughout the novel is artlessly direct, as if every character has been sentenced to a lifetime of saying (and knowing) precisely what he means.

Perhaps most intriguingly, the physical book itself appears to have been assembled and edited with utter disregard for professional standards. Page margins vary wildly, and a number of sentences neglect proper capitalization. That Wolff's London publisher, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., has since been sold (and effectively subsumed into an Australian cousin) should surprise exactly no one. So distracting were these errors, finally, that I often found myself looking up from the page to the Reading Room's ceiling, happy to gaze again at the marble angels above me, the golden florets tucked inside squares of the palest blue. What a great place to read a bad book!

Ugly Rumours turns forty years old this spring. Who could have anticipated the career that would follow it?