A decorative laurel wreath border surrounds the text. At the top, there is a small crest with a downward-pointing arrow. At the bottom, the wreath is tied with a ribbon.

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THESE BOYS' LIVES

by

WARREN C. HASKIN

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by

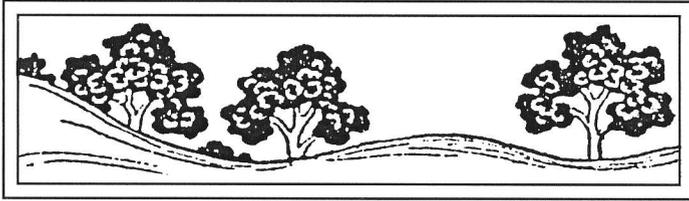
WARREN C. HASKIN



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

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## These Boys' Lives

A few years ago, while on a ski trip with a group of men, I got into a discussion of a memoir by a writer named Wolff. We seemed to be talking about two different books, and then we realized that we were. There are two memoirs, by two brothers, Geoffrey Wolff and Tobias Wolff, each of which describes the childhood of the author, but it is not the same childhood, and in fact during most of their childhood the two brothers lived a continent apart and rarely saw each other. These boys' lives were separate lives, the common threads being that they had the same mother and the same father and had inherited from one or both of them the literary gene. I had read about one life but was not aware that the other life had been told in a book, an oversight I promptly corrected.

Geoffrey Wolff, the older of the two brothers, was born in 1937. His brother, Tobias, was born eight years later. They are the sons of Arthur and Rosemary Wolff. Arthur Wolff, known to everyone as Duke, is a bullshit artist and a confidence man. His life is told in the memoir by Geoffrey, *The Duke of Deception*, subtitled *Memories of My Father*. Geoffrey's memoir, then, is not only a memoir of his childhood and adolescence but a biography of his father. Duke is

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born into comfortable circumstances and given every advantage, but throws them all away. His first boarding school is Deerfield Academy, which expels him after one semester. A succession of boarding schools follows, all of them unable to put up with Duke. His college experience is limited to one year at the University of Miami, from which he is likewise expelled. All of his life, though, Duke implies, without actually saying so, that he a Yale man, and, indeed, a member of Skull and Bones, or simply Bones. His most important deception is this, as told by Geoffrey: "My father was a Jew. This did not seem to him a good idea, and so it was his notion to disassemble his history, begin at zero, and re-create himself."<sup>1</sup>

Duke marries Rosemary Loftus when he is twenty-nine. She is nineteen and marries him not for love but to escape her abusive and tyrannical father. Duke gets a job as an aeronautical engineer by inventing his credentials. When his supervisor discovers that Yale had neglected to teach Duke the rudiments of engineering, he is fired, but is then rehired when the company's engineers go out on strike. He is promoted to a position in which he doesn't have to create engineering drawings but merely hire people who do. And he is good at the job, his son says, being fired countless times because of his penchant for running up and not paying debts, or for arrogance, or for insubordination, but never for incompetence.

After several moves, several hirings and as many firings, the second son, Tobias, is born in 1945. The family relocates to Old Lyme, Connecticut, their longest place of residence, where they live for three years, Geoffrey going from age eight to age eleven. Finally forced to leave, "all credit exhausted,"<sup>2</sup> the family decamps for Sarasota. Duke finds a job in Turkey. After nine months he wears out his welcome and is fired. After Duke reunites with the rest of the family, he sends out two hundred resumes and is finally

hired by Boeing, necessitating his move to Seattle. Rosemary declines to accompany him and shortly announces to Geoff and Toby that the marriage is over. Presently Geoffrey announces he would like to join the Duke and his mother consents. The Wolff family now becomes two families: Duke and Geoffrey in Seattle, Rosemary and Toby in Sarasota. Geoff is now twelve and Toby four. Geoff sees his mother only three times during the next three years, and not at all between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six. Toby, age four at the time of the separation, does not see his father or his brother until he is sixteen.

As Geoff grows into adolescence we see him beginning to take on some of the characteristics of Duke. He is lazy, obnoxious and unpleasant, and a know-it-all. He denies that he is Jewish, although by now he knows that his father has lied about his ethnicity. He explains to his classmates at Choate, where he is able to enroll because the Duke has married Alice, a woman of some wealth, that Wolff is a German name, Prussian in fact. They give him the nickname "Kraut."

By now Duke is unable to find work of any kind and lives on the money provided by his second wife. Geoff spends a year after graduation from Choate at a preparatory school in England. When the year is over he leaves with unpaid debts. He enters Princeton, where he does poorly in his academic subjects. He runs up bills and leaves with unpaid debts. He leaves the university with the understanding that he can return if he can pay his debts to the institution and to area merchants. He joins his father, now permanently unemployed, who is living in Connecticut. The second wife is in residence intermittently, but all the household expenses are paid by Geoff, who takes a job as a mail boy in a company at \$270 a month. The two are harassed by Duke's creditors. Geoffrey writes: "I wearied of telling people on our stoop or through the phone that they had the wrong Arthur Wolff,

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that my father had just left for the hospital. . . . I hated it, wanted to flee . . . find the twenty-five hundred dollars to buy my way back into Princeton.”<sup>3</sup>

Geoff does buy his way back into Princeton. Duke sells Alice’s silver to a pawnbroker, drives Geoff to the university (in a car not paid for, of course) and gives him three thousand dollars. Geoff is back in school and the Duke is on his way to California because, as he explains, “I always had luck in California.”<sup>4</sup>

Tobias Wolff’s story is told in *This Boy’s Life*. The book has been turned into a movie starring the young Leonardo DiCaprio as Toby. The story begins six years after the family has broken apart with the departure of Duke and Geoffrey to Seattle. Rosemary and Toby are leaving Sarasota to escape Rosemary’s abusive boyfriend, Roy. They make their way to Utah where Rosemary, in common with thousands of other credulous adventurers, hopes to make a fortune by finding uranium. This is a pipe dream, of course, and to make things worse, Roy tracks them down and joins them. Eventually Rosemary and Toby escape once again, riding a bus to Seattle, the city in which Duke and Geoffrey had lived for several years earlier. The abusive Roy is now out of the picture but Rosemary takes up with a man named Dwight. We are never told his last name. Toby, in the meantime, has begun a life of vandalism and petty thievery. Rosemary sends Toby to live with Dwight and his family in Chinook, a small town three hours south of Seattle, her idea being that if Toby fits in with Dwight and his family, she will accept Dwight’s proposal of marriage and come to live with Dwight, Toby, and Dwight’s three children. The mother of these children is nowhere mentioned.

Toby and Dwight are at daggers drawn from the beginning. Dwight belittles and bullies Toby mercilessly. But when Rosemary asks how Toby is getting along, his feelings are complicated.

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My mother told me she could still change her mind. She could keep her job and find another place to live. I understood, didn't I, that it wasn't too late?

I said I did, but I didn't. I had come to feel that all of this was fated, that I was bound to accept as my home a place I did not feel at home in, and to take as my father a man who was offended by my existence and would never stop questioning my right to it. I did not believe my mother when she told me it wasn't too late. I knew she meant what she said, but it seemed to me that she was deceiving herself. Things had gone too far. And somehow it was her telling me it wasn't too late that made me believe, past all doubt, that it was. Those words still sound to me less like a hope than an epitaph, the last lie we tell before hurling ourselves over the brink.<sup>5</sup>

So Rosemary and Dwight marry, she moves to Chinook, and Toby's nightmare continues. Whereas the Duke, Toby's father, despite his many flaws, inspired love, Dwight inspires hatred and contempt. He is mean-spirited, incompetent, ignorant and cruel. But the portrait Toby paints of him is at times droll. When Toby is considering whether to accept an offer to live with an uncle in Paris, a plan Dwight endorses but Toby ultimately declines, Dwight

counseled me to be broad-minded when confronted with [Frenchmen's] effeminate customs. I heard a lot about the French people's appetite for frogs, and learned that this was how they came to be known as Frogs by the people of other nations. From a set of pre-World War I English encyclopedias he had bought at a yard sale, Dwight read me long passages on French history (tumultuous, despotic, distinguished by the Gallic taste for conspiracy and betrayal), French culture (full of Gallic wit and high spirits, but generally derivative, superficial, arid and atheistic), and the French national character (endowed with a certain Gallic warmth and charm, but excitable, sensual, and, on the whole, unreliable).<sup>6</sup>

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Dwight and Toby cut down a Christmas tree, which Dwight decides to spray-paint white. After three coats the tree is stark white and a day later the needles begin to fall off; by Christmas day the tree has branches but no needles.

Toby's home life is rotten and his life outside the home does not prosper. He does poorly in school and continues the habits of vandalism and petty thievery that developed when he lived in Salt Lake City. After a particularly unpleasant incident with Dwight involving physical violence, Toby telephones Geoff, now a student in good standing at Princeton. The brothers have not talked in six years. After listening to Toby's complaints about the mistreatment he is receiving at home, Geoff asks Toby about his courses and his grades. Toby, by now an accomplished liar, tells Geoff he is getting straight As. In fact Toby's academic performance is well below mediocre. Toby makes up a few other attributes and Geoff suggests to Toby that he apply to various top-drawer prep schools. Given his sterling academic record and his impressive extracurricular activities, Geoff says, Toby might be awarded a scholarship.

Toby decides to strive for the best. He obtains applications from Choate, St. Paul's, Deerfield Academy, Andover, Exeter, and the Hill School. In an act of self-invention reminiscent of the antics of the Duke, Toby obtains his high school's blank transcript forms, stationery and envelopes, falsifies his grades, and forges letters of recommendation.

I declined to say I was a football star, but I did invent a swimming team [for the high school]. The coach wrote a fine letter for me, and so did my teachers and the principal. They didn't gush. They wrote plainly about a gifted, upright boy who had already in his own quiet way exhausted the resources of his school and community. They had done what they could for him. Now they hoped that others would carry on the good work.<sup>7</sup>

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The fraud works and Toby is accepted by the Hill School and awarded a scholarship.

The final parts of both memoirs deal briefly with a reunion of the two boys and Duke. Duke is living in Southern California. Toby has finished his sophomore year in high school; Geoff has just graduated from Princeton. Toby arrives and the next day Duke leaves him alone in the apartment and goes to Las Vegas with his girlfriend. Geoff arrives a few days later. When Duke returns from Las Vegas he has a mental breakdown and is committed to a sanitarium. Geoff takes a job to support himself and Toby and the two of them visit Duke on Sundays. At the end of the summer, Toby goes East to the Hill School and Geoff goes to Turkey, where he has taken a job teaching English. Essentially, both memoirs end here, except for brief notes at the end of each in which we learn that Geoff teaches for two years in Turkey and is awarded a Fulbright to study in England for a year; that Toby does not do well at Hill and eventually is asked to leave, whereupon he joins the army; that Rosemary divorces Dwight and moves to Washington, D.C.; and that the Duke continues to live in California, much of the time in jail, and dies in 1970 at the age of sixty-two.

These are memoirs of childhood and young manhood. They are not autobiographies. They end in 1961, when Geoff is twenty-four and Toby sixteen. But these boys did have and do have lives after 1961. Geoffrey becomes the book critic for the *Washington Post*, writes several novels and two biographies, and teaches creative writing at several colleges. He is now professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Irvine, where he directed the university's creative writing program until 2006.

Tobias's life post-memoir is stunning. After leaving the Hill School without a diploma he joins the army. After serving in Vietnam (this phase of his life is chronicled in his book *In Pharaoh's*

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*Army*), he manages to continue his education at Oxford University, where he earns a first-class honours degree in English. He is admitted to Oxford after taking its entrance exam, on which he does well because he has hired tutors and studied furiously to prepare himself in Latin, French, English history and literature. He becomes an acclaimed short story writer, teaches creative writing for many years at Syracuse University, and is now a professor at Stanford. His recent novel, *Old School*, draws on his experience at an elite prep school.

Childhood memoirs, or more accurately memoirs of childhood, are a recognized genre. They are not autobiographies as such because they describe only a part of the author's life, not the part that displays the success or fame of the writer, but the part that prepared the person to be successful and/or famous, and in many instances the reader marvels at how seemingly poor that preparation seemed to be. Not in the case of Geoffrey Wolff, probably. We should not be surprised that a graduate of Choate and Princeton is able to make his way in life. But Tobias Wolff? Surely the odds must be long indeed against a young man who enters the army without a high school diploma achieving great success in a literary field. There are others like him, as I shall mention.

The earliest memoir on my list is also one of the best known. Mary McCarthy's memoir, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, appeared in several installments over a period of time in the *New Yorker* and were collected in book form in 1946. McCarthy was orphaned at the age of six when both parents died in the flu epidemic of 1918. The family had traveled from Seattle, where Mary was born in 1912, to Minneapolis. She was raised as a Catholic, by her father's parents, and placed under the care of an uncle and aunt who treated her harshly and cruelly. When she wins a school prize, the uncle beats her to make sure she doesn't become stuck up.

McCarthy is more candid, perhaps more honest, than most memorists, about the accuracy of her memories. "Many a time," she writes in the preface, "I have wished that I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent has been very strong, particularly where recollection is hazy and I remember the substance of an event but not the details. . . . My memory is good, but obviously I cannot recall whole passages of dialog that took place years ago."<sup>8</sup>

When her maternal grandfather learns of the abuse she is suffering, McCarthy is returned to Seattle and raised by her maternal grandfather, a Protestant, and her grandmother, a Jew. Mary is the only Catholic in the "family." She attends a Catholic boarding school where she strives to become popular. Wanting to be noticed, she pretends to lose her faith, and then, miraculously, regains it. "I had achieved prominence," she writes, "by publicly losing my faith and regaining it at the end of a retreat."<sup>9</sup> In fact, she writes, she has lost it, now permanently.

She transfers to a public high school, where her grades suffer. Her grandparents then send her to an Episcopalian boarding school so that she will be "away from the distractions offered by the opposite sex."<sup>10</sup>

The memoir ends when McCarthy is a senior in high school.

McCarthy, who died in 1989, has, or at one time had, a large literary reputation. Her 1963 novel, *The Group*, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost two years. This was in an age when bestseller lists were dominated by works of literature, as is not the case today. She is also famous for a feud with fellow writer Lillian Hellman that grew out of ideological differences, both writers having once been Communists or fellow travelers. Hellman was provoked into filing a lawsuit against McCarthy when the latter said on the Dick Cavett show that every word Hellman wrote "was a lie, including 'and' and 'the.'" The suit ended without a trial when Hellman died.

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“My father stopped living with us when I was three or four.” So begins Frank Conroy’s memoir *Stop-Time*.<sup>11</sup> Conroy, who is not related to the novelist Pat Conroy, is raised by his none-to-bright mother and her second husband, a man allergic to steady work. The mother, stepfather, sister, and Conroy live mostly on the support checks drawn against a trust for the benefit of Conroy and his sister. Regarding his stepfather, Conroy writes:

[O]ur fates, his and mine, began to affect one another. . . . He dropped from nowhere to become my father. I emerged from behind my mother’s skirts looking, to his eyes, something like a son. We had in common that we were male inhabitants of the U.S.A., and my mother, and nothing more. Life had placed us together. We faced each other like two strangers trapped in an elevator.<sup>12</sup>

After several years living near Ft. Lauderdale, the family moves to Connecticut, where Conroy’s mother and stepfather work part-time as wardens at a state institution for the feeble-minded. A return to Florida is followed by relocation to New York City. Conroy enters Stuyvesant High School. A stepdaughter is born and Conroy’s mother takes the baby for an extended visit to her native Denmark. His sister had become a permanent house guest at the home of her best friend, so Conroy and his stepfather are alone in the apartment. The stepfather has become a cabdriver. He befriends a woman who has been evicted from her apartment. The woman moves in; the stepfather enjoys her company for a time but as the novelty wears off and the visitor’s behavior becomes more and more eccentric, he becomes desperate to get her out. Conroy decides to run away to Florida. After a few days of hitchhiking and sleeping in the open air, he sheepishly returns to New York.

Back in the city, Conroy lives by his wits. After he is fired from his after-school factory job, for horseplay with a fellow worker, he

regains it by intercepting the boy who has been sent from his high school to interview, telling him the job has already been filled, and then reporting back to the job as though nothing has happened. He gives little attention to his schoolwork and is obliged to go to summer school to make up for his previous failures. He is impatient to finish so he can leave, go to Denmark and meet his grandparents, and visit Paris. "I counted the days until my departure, frustrated by the slowness of time. Life around me was meaningless—my grades, the struggle at home, the fact that I probably wasn't going to college, everything was eclipsed by the fact that soon, soon, in a matter of weeks, I would leave it behind. Finally, at last, I was going to *get out*." <sup>13</sup>

After a stint at an international school, Conroy applies to Harvard and Haverford, with no hope of being accepted. To his surprise, Haverford takes him. "My acceptance into a good college," he writes, "meant I could destroy my past, . . . a past I didn't understand, a past I feared, and a past with which I had expected to be forever encumbered."<sup>14</sup> And, indeed, Conroy leaves his past behind. A novelist, short story writer, jazz pianist and for many years the director of the influential Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, Conroy died in 2005 at the age of sixty-nine.

"I wonder how I survived at all," writes Frank McCourt. He continues: "It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood."<sup>15</sup> The book is *Angela's Ashes*. The McCourt family—father Malachy, mother Angela, brother Malachy, and twins Oliver and Eugene—move from Brooklyn to Ireland, where the parents were born. A sister, Margaret, has died just prior to the move and the twins die within a year. Two brothers are born after the family's arrival in Limerick.

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The family lives in abject and heartbreaking poverty, on a dirt lane, sharing one outdoor toilet with their neighbors. The father loses job after job, often because he fails to report for the half day of work on Saturdays, having gotten drunk on Friday night after receiving the week's wages. Angela's sister and her widowed mother begrudge the family any help because they disapprove of the father, not only because of his drunkenness and fecklessness but because he is from a different county of Ireland and has a strange accent. When World War II begins, the father is able to find work in a defense plant in England but spends his wages on drink and sends money to the family only once. The family lives on charity. The children dress in rags.

. . . the shirt I wore to bed is the shirt I wear to school. I wear it day in and day out. It's the shirt for football, for climbing walls, for robbing orchards. I go to Mass . . . in that shirt and people sniff the air and move away. If Mam gets . . . a new one the old shirt is promoted to towel and hangs damp on the chair for months or Mam might use bits of it to patch other shirts. She might even cut it up and let Alphie wear it a while before it winds up on the floor pushed against the bottom of the door to block the rain from the lane.<sup>16</sup>

Frank is resourceful and determined—determined to return to America. At age fourteen he gets a job delivering telegrams. Later he finds a job delivering newspapers and magazines, then a job writing threatening letters for Mrs. Finucane, a local money lender. He saves his earnings until, finally, now nineteen, he sails for America, not without remorse for leaving the family. The book ends with McCourt's arrival in Poughkeepsie, New York.

It is an interesting coincidence that Frank McCourt became a teacher of English at Stuyvesant High School, the school from which Frank Conroy graduated several years earlier. Despite having been forced to abandon his schooling at thirteen, McCourt

somehow manages to earn a degree from N.Y.U. and a master's degree from Brooklyn College.

Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liar's Club*, describes her childhood in Texas and Colorado, growing up under the care of an artistic but binge-drinking mother and an uneducated, brawling father. Mary's father is her mother's fifth husband. "My mother didn't date," Mary writes, "she married. . . . She racked up seven weddings in all, two to my father."<sup>17</sup> As the story unfolds, Mary gradually discovers more about her mother's past, including the fact that she has two children from one of her previous marriages.

The early years are in Leechfield, Texas, a town that a national magazine had described as one of the ugliest in the world. Mary earns a reputation as a person not to be trifled with. After her older sister is attacked by a neighbor boy, Mary climbs a tree with her BB gun to await the offender's family and fires upon them when they appear. Her mother inherits a substantial sum when her mother dies. The family decamps for Colorado. After the father returns to Texas and the couple divorce, the mother marries a man named Hector and in a matter of months the inheritance is gone. The girls return to Texas to live with their father. Their mother then returns to their father, divorces Hector, and marries the father, this being her seventh, and last, marriage.

The book takes its name from meetings Mary's father and other men had on their days off. The men met in the back room of a store to tell improbable stories; Mary's father was the champion storyteller.

Mary's description of her childhood ends at this point. She is eight. The book's final chapter recounts Mary's visit to her parents seventeen years later, her father in a steep decline and her mother now willing to share some of the secrets of her past.

Mary Karr, now fifty-two, is a professor of literature at Syracuse University. She has published four volumes of poetry. *The Liar's Club* was a *New York Times* bestseller for over a year.

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No memoirist had a more turbulent or bizarre childhood than Augusten Burroughs. His book, *Running With Scissors*, begins with Augusten, nine years old, witnessing a verbal and physical confrontation between his mother, a poet, and his father, a professor at the University of Massachusetts. In short order the parents divorce. The father and Augusten break off all contact, the father resolutely refusing to accept phone calls from the son. Augusten's mother sends him to live with her psychiatrist and his family, which is given the name Finch in the book.

Augusten's life with the Finch family is weird, almost surreal. Patients and family members wander in and out. Fighting is continual. "The most excellent fights," Burroughs writes

involved five or more people. Eventually the fight would be resolved the way all disputes were resolved: by Dr. Finch. He would be called at the office or the arguing group would travel en masse to his office, a hostile collective gang, and oust whatever patient he was seeing at the time. . . . And the patient, whether a potential suicide or somebody suffering from a multiple personality disorder, would be transferred to the waiting room to drink Sanka with Cremora while Finch solved the dispute.<sup>18</sup>

When Augusten complains to his mother she reassures him with bland platitudes. Eventually his mother arranges for his adoption by Dr. Finch. Augusten reproaches his mother: "So basically, you're giving me away to your shrink." "No," his mother answers, "I'm doing what is best for you, best for us."<sup>19</sup>

Many of the anecdotes read like fiction. Indeed, some of them may be. The family, renamed Finch in the book, sued Burroughs, claiming that various members of the family had been defamed by the book's portrayal of them. The complaint alleged that the book falsely portrayed it as "an unhygienic and mentally unstable cult engaged in bizarre, and, at times, criminal, activity," and that

it “may have fabricated events that never happened and manufactured conversations that never occurred.” The suit was settled recently. Burroughs agreed to alter the acknowledgments page in future editions to recognize the family’s conflicting memories of the events described in the book and to express regret for any “unintentional harm” to the family, but maintained that it was an “entirely accurate memoir” and that he “did not embellish or invent elements.”<sup>20</sup>

Burroughs drops out of school after the sixth grade. He obtains a GED at age seventeen and later becomes a successful advertising copywriter, an occupation he lampoons in a later memoir. He now devotes full time to writing.

Like several other memoirists, J. R. Moehringer grew up without a father. In his memoir *The Tender Bar* Moehringer describes his childhood and early adulthood in Manhasset, Long Island. He and his mother (she had left her husband when J. R. was an infant) live in her parents’ house together with his mother’s brother, Uncle Charlie. A few steps away is a bar at which Uncle Charlie works as a bartender to supplement his income from gambling. Uncle Charlie and the male patrons of the bar become surrogate fathers to Moehringer, taking him to the beach, to baseball games, and to the racetrack, all the while imparting life-lessons. He moves with his mother to Arizona after a few years but returns to Manhasset each summer, where his saloon-sponsored education continues. In Arizona J. R. works in a bookstore run by two bachelor brothers who introduce him to literature and advise him (he is a high school freshman at this point) that Yale is the college for him. He acquires a small library of paperbacks without covers. The brothers explain that publishers don’t want unsold paperbacks returned; they reimburse booksellers for the cost of a book when the cover is returned.

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Improbably, J. R. is admitted to Yale. During college and after graduation, where he works as a copyboy at the *New York Times*, he returns to the Manhasset bar repeatedly, where his education continues with the always-changing but always-colorful cast of characters. The memoir ends when J. R. is twenty-five, except for a brief epilogue in which J. R., now a correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, returns to Manhasset after the terrorist attack in September 2001. He revisits the bar, which has changed hands and changed its name.

I felt grateful for every minute I'd spent in that bar, even the ones I regretted. I knew this was a contradiction, but it was no less true for being so. The attacks complicated my already contradictory memories of [the bar]. With public places suddenly described as soft targets, I felt only fondness for a bar that had been founded on the antiquated notion that there is safety in numbers. In my black suit, sitting amid the ruins of [the bar], I loved the old gin mill more than ever.<sup>21</sup>

The four children of Rex and Rose Mary Walls become expert at looking after themselves. Jeannette Walls chronicles their survival techniques in her 2005 memoir, *The Glass Castle*. The book takes its title from a pipe dream of the wildly impractical Rex, a competent electrician who could get a job whenever he wanted one but never feels like keeping it for long. "Dad was [always] telling us about the wondrous things he was going to do. Like build the Glass Castle. All of Dad's engineering skills and mathematical genius were coming together in one special project: a great big house he was going to build for us in the desert. . . . All we had to do was find gold, Dad said, and we were on the verge of that."<sup>22</sup> They were on the verge of it because Dad was about to perfect the Prospector, a device that would scoop up dirt and rocks and sift them through wooden slats to separate gold from the

worthless material. Of course the Prospector never is perfected and the Glass Castle is never built. Instead the family is always “doing the skedaddle”<sup>23</sup> as Rex puts it, usually in the middle of the night, leaving behind angry creditors. Dad is on and off the wagon, usually off. The mother is a dreamy artist who sometimes works as a schoolteacher. Her eternal optimism is summed up in her frequent reminders to her children that “what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger.”<sup>24</sup>

After prospecting for gold fails to prove fruitful, the family is forced to remove to a small town in West Virginia where the father’s parents live. They live in a dilapidated house.

We called the kitchen the loose-juice room, because on the rare occasions that we had paid the electricity bill and had power, we’d get a wicked electric shock if we touched any damp or metallic surface in the room. . . . We quickly learned that whenever we ventured into the kitchen, we needed to wrap our hands in the driest socks or rags we could find. If we got a shock, we’d announce it to everyone else, sort of like giving a weather report. “Big jolt from touching the stove today,” we’d say, “wear extra rags.”<sup>25</sup>

Jeannette’s older sister leaves West Virginia for New York City as soon as she graduates from high school. A year later, Jeannette joins her. Eventually, all four children, including the youngest, who is twelve, are in New York. Their escape from their parents is only temporary. The parents come to New York. Jeannette asks her father why. “So we could be a family again” is his answer.<sup>26</sup> The parents are kicked out of every apartment they are able to rent and are forced to learn the ropes of living as homeless people. A few years later, with her father near death, Jeannette writes: “. . . despite all the hell-raising and destruction and chaos he had created in our lives, I could not imagine what my life would be like—what the world would be like—without him in it. As awful

as he could be, I always knew he loved me in a way no one else ever had."<sup>27</sup> Except for a brief epilogue, the memoir ends at this point.

Jeannette Walls is an honor graduate of Barnard College. She has written for various national magazines and has appeared on several television shows. *The Glass Castle* is being made into a movie by Paramount.

I will mention briefly a few other childhood memoirs that will repay the time anyone might spend on them. Russell Baker's *Growing Up* tells the story of the youth during the Depression of the boy who would become a famous humorist and satirist for the *New York Times*. *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* is Bill Bryson's story of growing up in 1950's Des Moines. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is the extravagant title of the memoir by Dave Eggers. Stephen King's *On Writing* is subtitled *A Memoir of the Craft*, but the first third is a memoir of his (fatherless, naturally) childhood and adolescence. *Naked* is a collection of essays by David Sedaris recalling his childhood in Raleigh, North Carolina. And of course there is the imperishable *My Life and Hard Times* by James Thurber, something that might come to mind besides Ohio State football when Columbus, Ohio, is mentioned.

How trustworthy are childhood memoirs? All contain elements of fiction, some deliberately so. James Frey admitted that his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, described several episodes that he had fabricated. Similar charges were leveled against Augusten Burroughs, who was willing to concede only that the real-life members of the family portrayed in *Running With Scissors* have "conflicting memories of . . . events" described in the book. As for the other memoirs I have discussed, I have no reason to think that they contain any deliberate falsehoods. Nevertheless, no one's memory is perfect and a reader should not insist that a memoirist write nothing that is not literally true. Joel Agee (son of the famous

## THESE BOYS' LIVES

James Agee) published a memoir in 1975 entitled *Twelve Years*, subtitled *An American Boyhood in East Germany*. He reflected on this in an essay in the November 2007 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.<sup>28</sup> The essay is entitled "A Lie That Tells The Truth, Memoir and the art of memory." "[To] remember," he says, "is, at least in part, to imagine, and . . . the act of transposing memory into written words is a creative act that transforms the memory itself."<sup>29</sup> He continues: "Am I making a plea for liars, then? No, only for artists. . . . The liar steals truth; the artist creates it."<sup>30</sup>

The Wolff brothers, Mary McCarthy, Frank Conroy, Frank McCourt, Mary Karr, Augusten Burroughs, J. R. Moehringer, and Jeannette Walls are artists. Their memoirs are more than matter-of-fact chronicles of growing up. They are mixtures of pathos and humor, by turns heartbreaking and hilarious, disturbing and poignant, insightful and inspiring. They are works of art.

## Notes

1. Geoffrey Wolff, *The Duke of Deception: Memories of My Father* (New York: Random House, 1979), 9.
2. Ibid, 112.
3. Ibid, 223.
4. Ibid, 230.
5. Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 105.
6. Ibid., 139-40.
7. Ibid., 214.
8. Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), 3-4.
9. Ibid., 131.
10. Ibid., 139.
11. (New York: The Viking Press; 1967 Penguin Books, 1977), 11. Citations are to the Penguin Books edition.
12. Ibid., 31.
13. Ibid., 231.
14. Ibid., 278.
15. Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 11.
16. Ibid., 272.
17. Mary Karr, *The Liar's Club* (New York: Viking, 1995), 10.
18. Augusten Burroughs, *Running With Scissors* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002; Second Picador Edition, 2006), 98. Citations are to the Picador edition.
19. Ibid., 138.
20. See Augusten Burroughs, Wikipedia (visited July 6, 2010).
21. J. R. Moehringer, *The Tender Bar* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 360.
22. Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (New York: Scribner, 2005; Scribner trade paperback edition, 2006), 25. Citations are to the trade paperback edition.
23. Ibid., 19.
24. Ibid., 179.
25. Ibid., 153.
26. Ibid., 253.
27. Ibid., 279.

*Notes*

28. "A Lie That Tells The Truth," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2007, 53.
29. *Ibid.*, 55.
30. *Ibid.*, 58.

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