

“I forgot who I was. I heard a steady howling all around me as I thrashed on the floor.
- Then I was sitting on the couch, drenched in sweat, and my mother was trying to calm
me. It was all over she said. This was it, this was the last time. We were getting out of
here” (Wolff 231).

The above passage, taken from Tobias Wolff's memoir *This Boy's Life* is a specific memory recalling a time when he was hit by his stepfather. The feelings Toby experiences at this moment, pain, anger, humiliation, and fear are powerful catalysts in the making of this memory. Powerful, emotion memories such as this one are not only material for autobiography, but also, self definition.

Emotions are central to the function of memory, and memories are central to our sense of identity. It therefore stands to reason that emotions, - the feelings that are generated by our interactions with the world around us – have a profound effect on our identity development, in that our feelings shape what and how we remember, and those memories then, effectively comprise that which we believe ourselves to be.

My goal in this paper is to link theories of emotion and autobiographical memory, and then to examine how autobiographical memories are presented in life writing. I am interested specifically in the genealogy of autobiographical memories: i.e. emotions beget memories, memories beget the self, and the self begets memoirs (literary works), and how those memories are manifest in memoir.

I will begin with the writings of Eric Kandel and Antonio Damasio who assert that consciousness itself begins as a feeling of what happens when we see, hear, or touch, and it is out of that "core" consciousness that the autobiographical self (systematized memories of events) arises, which in turn gives rise to identity. I will then move through theories of the autobiographical self in the writings of Singer, Salovey, and McAdams. There is a good deal of similarity and agreement between these theories, although sometimes the terminologies may vary. The basic idea being:

- Our remembrance of experiences tends to vary directly with their emotional significance
- Those memories that remain vivid do so because of the intense emotions they recall
- Such memories, as they relate to our life's goals may constitute self-defining memories
- Identity is a compendium of self-defining memories
- Identity based on self-defining memories is relatively stable, but subject to revision over time

Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, lends itself nicely to this analysis. Wolff uses a combination of remembrances, summarized and specific, to fashion his memoir. His memories are selected and arranged to create a cohesive narrative. Life writing is thus an artistic project which is analogous to, or a manifestation of, the internal process by which we create our 'selves.' The memoir, finely wrought and rendered poignant by design, constitutes a highly aesthetic, literary manifestation of an innate cognitive process in service of identity.

Miriam-Webster's dictionary defines **memory**¹ as:

- I. the power or process of remembering what has been learned**
- II. something that is remembered**

¹ "Memory." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memory>>.

III. the things learned and kept in the mind²

It could be said that memories are everything. They inform our experience at every level, minute by minute. Memory is the means by which we make sense of the world around us, we remember our names, our friends, the places we live the things we do (our jobs) and don't do, (sticking our fingers in a flame). The longer we live, the deeper and more complex our lives become, the more our experience is dictated and mediated by our capacity to remember. But what exactly is memory? How is it that we remember things?

Memory is a function of consciousness, a process that helps an organism adapt to the environment. According to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the process begins with what he calls "the non-conscious proto-self, which is reconstructed live at each instant"(Damasio 173). This *proto-self* mediates the environment and regulates the basic autonomic functions. The *proto-self* gives rise to *core consciousness*, which provides the organism with a sense of self about one moment, here, and about one place, here (Damasio 173). This sense of self, which Damasio terms the *core-self*, is a transient entity, ceaselessly re-created for each and every object with which the brain interacts (Damasio 17).

Core consciousness in turn gives rise to *extended consciousness*; a compendium of the accumulated experiences of *core consciousness*, a reiterant display of personal memories and the objects of your personal past, those that can easily substantiate our identity, moment by moment and our personhood (Damasio 196). This *extended consciousness*, which has many levels and grades, provides an elaborate and enduring sense of self. "Both the past and the anticipated future are sensed along with the here and now in a sweeping vista as far ranging as that of an epic novel"(Damasio 17). The metaphor is apt, and genres notwithstanding, I should think an

biography or memoir would be equally appropriate. Damasio, Kandel and others agree that this elaborate and enduring sense of self, this collection of unique facts and personality traits - the *autobiographical self*, is where we cull our notions of identity. The *autobiographical self* depends on systematized memories of situations in which core consciousness was involved (Damasio 17), and while the *autobiographical self* is relatively stable, it changes continuously as a result of experience; it is mutable and subject to refashioning as one grows older (Damasio 1224). The *autobiographical self* is based on a **concept** in the true cognitive and neurobiological sense of the term (Damasio 117). It is an **idea** that each of us constructs of ourself, an image gradually collected and assembled, of a self, both physically and mentally, of where that self fits socially.

Kandel maintains that “for a memory to persist, the incoming information must be thoroughly and deeply processed. This is accomplished by attending to the information and associating it meaningfully and systematically with knowledge that already well established in memory (Kandel 210). Kandel’s book *In Search of Memory*, perfectly exemplifies this idea. In equal parts memoir, History, and Neuroscience, Kandel conjoins the personal events in his life and the progress of neuroscience in the study of memory, offering his own personal cognitive synthesis as implicit proof of his theory. From the biological perspective Kandel posits that memory, or specifically the conversion of memories from short to long term, is enabled by the generation of new proteins and the growth of new synaptic connections as a result of experience; a process conserved throughout evolution, and is therefore a fundamental building block of human experience (Kandel 276). Both Kandel and Damasio conclude that memory is a process, an ongoing operation of assimilation, association and synthesis.

If an event is profound enough, when it triggers intense emotions, the memory then gains potency, an increased relevance, and if that event is of existential consequence, it will make this transition from short to long term memory and may be filed, as it were, as an autobiographical memory. The key element in this process is emotion. Emotion both heightens consciousness and renders more attention to the events at hand. Further, enhanced awareness and focused attention improve image processing (Damasio 183), which when punctuated with feeling can lead to enhanced encoding (sharper, vivid more detailed memories). Damasio clarifies: “Feelings are inwardly directed and private; emotions are outwardly directed and public” (Damasio36). Hence the emotions are outward manifestations or the symptoms of feelings. Emotion is therefore crucial in the making of memories; feeling informs the remembrance. Thus most autobiographical memories have overarching themes tempered by primary or secondary emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, disgust, embarrassment, jealousy, guilt, pride, etc.

Affectively intense information, regardless of the tone, is better remembered. (Singer and Salovey 48)

When individuals have emotional experiences, they become self-preoccupied. Their attention turns away from external social cues and turns inward toward themselves (Ibid.128). Situations that give rise to emotion capture our attention, while at the same time the arousal of emotion turns our attention inward. This self-preoccupation makes the contents of the mind and the sensations of the body especially salient during emotional arousal. The experience of emotion changes the way individuals encode and organize information about and evaluate the self. Thus memory is closely linked to emotion: because along with the arousal of emotion and the turning of attention inward, we are more likely to remember the events of our lives (Ibid. 131).

Further there is a general agreement among theorists that emotion is the mechanism that prioritizes memory. It is precisely the emotions generated by events in the world that determine what we pay attention to, what we try to record in detail, and what we remember years later (Ibid. 122).

There is a general consensus among Damasio and the other authors cited in this paper that the idea each of us constructs of ourself, the image we gradually build of who we are physically and mentally, of where we fit socially, is based on autobiographical memory over years of experience and is constantly subject to remodeling (Damasio 224). There is agreement that the recall of memory is a creative process. What the brain stores is thought to be only a core memory which upon recall, is then reconstructed, with subtractions, additions, elaborations and distortions (Kandel 281), in what I term a biological and organic analog to life writing. I will explore this analog further in the next section.

To sum up, memory is a process, a function of consciousness that helps us to adapt to our environment. Proto-self, which is non-conscious, gives rise to the core consciousness, a sense of self in the moment(short term memories), which in term gives rise to extended consciousness, past present and future - the autobiographical self (long term memories). The Autobiographical self is an idea, and is subject to revision over time. Emotions increase our ability to remember. Emotions encode and inform our memories.

Self-defining memories are almost always with you; they occupy your thoughts (Singer and Salovey 34).

In their book, *The Remembered Self*, Singer and Salovey posit that “Narrative, through characterization, plot and theme links the two major systems of personality --- emotion and memory (Ibid. ix).” The basic premise of the book is that we are storytellers, perpetually creating

versions of our life stories as we pass through stages of identity formation. These stories live within us, composed of hundreds of self-defining memories that hang together in patterns that may be only barely detected by our consciousness (Ibid. 160).

Further, Singer and Salovey suggest that what makes an individual unique, different from all others, is his or her set of personal memories and, in particular what we call *self-defining memories* (Ibid. 4), which are defined those memories that are most to us and are most salient, memories that are continually revisited over a lifetime and thus figure prominently in our personality and identities. They are memories that answer the question of who we are. Such memories are noted for their intensity, vividness, repetitiveness, linkage to other memories and focus on enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts (Ibid. 12).

Repetitiveness is a function of self-defining memory's densely packed nature. Because the memory may be condensed and associated with other memories, it is likely to be retrieved when similar events or feelings occur in one's life. It may be said that because these stories are deeply engrained in our sense of self, they influence the way our perception of events and thus perpetuate an endless cycle. Each new instance in which the memory is retrieved only reinforces its saliency to the individual and its power as a symbolic representation of events that evoke similar feelings. We grow more and more attached to these particular memories as integral components - ultimately these memories begin to define one's basic interactions with the world (Ibid. 13).

In his book *The Stories We Live By*, McAdams argues that what links the remembered self, the present self and the desired self may be understood within a model of personal identity called the *life story*. An individual's life story unites past, present, and future in a coherent narrative of

the self and provides unity and purpose to that person's thoughts, feelings and behaviors (McAdams 48). I believe this idea particularly apt, especially since an individual's life writing, memoir or autobiography would be a literary outgrowth of this model. So to connect these ideas, an individual's *life story* (McAdams) could be thought of as a cohesive narrative composed of self-defining moments (Singer and Salovey).

Relating to structure, a self-defining memory may be a memory of a specific event, replete with minute details and feelings, moment to moment, or it may be a representation or summary of associated experiences, glossed and folded into one representative memory. It has been suggested that the tendency to blend memories into generic stories that eschew specificity might be linked to defensiveness and/or depression (Singer and Salovey 73). In addition, the blending of experience may also be a necessary property of memory to avoid redundancy and to allow for effective generalization (Ibid. 89). Most importantly Singer and Salovey posit that blended summary/single-event memory is a high stage of ego development. A blend of abstraction and immediacy, of reason and emotion, makes for the fullest and most actualized adult life (Ibid. 117). Thus explained, detailed autobiographical memory is a high function activity, fundamental to the human experience. The middle-level memory, neither vague nor specific, a blending of generalization with detail, context with specificity, might be the most meaningful and affective recollection for the individual (Ibid. 101).

Throughout *The Remembered Self*, Singer, Salovey and others stress that the past is perpetually reconstructed through the filters of the present. The concerns of the person and the context of the remembrance are of paramount importance; emotional arousal may make certain autobiographical memories more or less accessible. Self-defining memories, our visions of the past, remain vivid and powerful to us only so far as they are relevant to what matters to us in the

here, now, and future (Ibid. 47). This recall is subject to of attitude and mood; those memories that conform to our present state being easier to remember, those that do not maybe be temporarily inaccessible. If an individual is depressed, they may easily recall memories of being distressed, while memories of happier times may elude them. This selectivity is a testament to the mutability of self-defining memories.

Arguments against attention to “meaningful memory” in psychology come on one hand from the behaviorists who feel that “self report from subjects could not be considered reliable data” (Ibid 20) and from psychoanalysts who feel that conscious memories, although important, cannot be accepted on their own terms “without recourse to associational and interpretive speculation” (Ibid. 18). Bruhn, in service of his theory of his cognitive-perceptual theory, has posited that early memories can be viewed as fantasies, with unconscious meanings and be interpreted as projective data (Bruhn 8). Similarly Adler asserted that memories are revised and shaped “in service of one’s enduring attitudes”, rather than factual accounts of experiences, they are but “tendentious fictions that encapsule in their manifest content what is now important to the person.” (Singer and Salovey 19)

Finally, although not embracing such extreme dismissals, Singer and Salovey posit that identity may be as determined by events *we believe* happened to us as ones that actually did. Our illusions, fantasies, and manufactured memories are as much a part of our identity as our mental representation of objective past and present events. We are what we imagine ourselves to be, and we strive to motivate others to cooperate in this construction of the self (Ibid. 19), And in the case of memoirs and other forms of life writing, we are what we write.

So to sum up, according to Singer and Salovey: personal narratives link emotion and memory;

those memories that are most salient and often repeated are termed self-defining memories.

These self-defining memories conform to create a larger, cohesive narrative that McAdams calls *life story*. Within this structure memories may be stored as either specific events, or as summaries.

Further, recall of these memories is filtered by present concerns.

“We hated each other. We hated each other so much that other feelings didn’t get enough light. It disfigured me.” (Wolff 232)

In his memoir, *This Boy’s Life*, Tobias Wolff makes good use of poignant self-defining memories to craft his narrative. The well-crafted story, a combination of specific and summarized memories, chronicles a period in Wolff’s early adolescence in which he travels across country with his mother, a divorcee, ostensibly to “get away from a man my mother was afraid of and to get rich on uranium. (Wolff. 4)” They end up in Washington State with Toby in the clutches of an abusive stepfather. Some of Wolff’s most profound reflections and most enduring memories come as a result of the emotional and physical abuse he suffered. Toby, young Wolff, is an inveterate liar, and one cannot help but wonder how much of these supposed memories are made up or at least enhanced. Wolff admits that he “he made up stories in order to survive (Campbell).” If we are to believe Bruhn and Adler, then it really doesn't matter because all such memories, although based on actual events are fantasies, and those fantasies contain much projective data as influenced by actual events.

The book which began as "a collection of memories I was putting down so that my children would know how I grew up (Campbell)," a chronicle of young Toby’s struggle for his identity from 11-15 years old, is a perfect example of self-defining memories, a *life story* as it were, committed to print.

From the start Toby's memories speak of *self-definition*. "I wanted to be called Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent of my idea of him." Renaming oneself is certainly an act of *self-definition* in the literal sense. In adopting this name, he fashions a new self as it were, daring and adventurous, qualities he wants to be (*desired self*), a common experience in adolescence.

"I was subject to fits of feeling myself unworthy, somehow deeply at fault. 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 (Wolff 13)." This mid-level memory, fairly straightforward, is a composite, a summary of incidents described as "fits" or bouts of extreme emotionality. These events were poignant, salient, most probably painful and recurring such that the memories of specific episodes blended and crystallized. The feelings underscoring these bouts, unworthiness and guilt, informed Toby's sense of self, and reinforced this notion that his mother did not like what she saw. Adler might call this a formidable act of projection; one could speculate that Toby did not like what he saw in his mother, and that he did not like what he saw in himself.

In another passage Wolff recalls his friends and their mutual concern for their appearance.

[T]he three of us would press together in front of Mrs. Silver's full length mirror to comb our hair and practice looking cool. We wore our hair long at the sides, swept back in a ducktail. The hair on top we combed towards the center and then forward, with spit curls breaking over our foreheads. My mother detested this hairdo and forbade me to wear it which meant that I wore it everywhere but at home, sustaining the distinctiveness with two different styles with gobs of Butch Wax that left my hair glossy and hard and my forehead ringed with little pimples.

Unlit cigarettes dangling from the corners of our mouths, eyelids at half mast, we studied ourselves in the mirror. Spit curls, Pants pulled down low on our hips, thin white belts buckled on the side. Shirts with three-quarter sleeves. Collars raised behind our necks. We should have looked cool but we didn't. Silver was emaciated. His eyes bulged, his Adam's apple protruded, his arms poked out of his sleeves like pencils with gloves stuck on the ends. Taylor had the liquid eyes and long lashes and broad face of a cow. I didn't look that great myself. But it wasn't really our looks that made us uncool. Coolness did not demand anything as obvious. Like chess or music, coolness claimed its own out of some mysterious impulse of recognition. Uncoolness did likewise. We had been claimed by uncoolness (Wolff 43).

The above passage, another composite of blended memories is significant, first for the obvious reason that act of posing and primping, of attending to one's physical appearance is an act of self-definition, albeit a superficial one. Second is Wolff's realization that they were in uncool. This is the judgment of the writer at the time of writing, and fulfills a thematic need in his larger narrative, perhaps one of transformation. This vignette could be considered a normative adolescent narrative, i.e. the insecure, brash, and impudent youth becomes a thoughtful, confident young man. The details of this memory are exquisite - the ducktails, spit curls, upturned collars, dangling cigarettes. The image is a cliché and conjures up an ethos of the 1950s. I would imagine that the emotion that underscored this encoding of this memory was pride, pride in appearance, and the feeling on recall: nostalgia. Ironic to that he and his friends are trying so terribly hard to be cool and yet feel so uncool. Taken as a whole, the recollection of his lack of self-confidence, and his preening and posing in front of the mirror as a reaction to that, reinforces a belief he has about himself, and thus constitutes part of his identity. Wolff has

portrays himself as gawky and insecure, who perhaps in the arc of his large life narrative, transformed into a comely, secure young man.

After his mother meets Dwight, Toby's soon to be step-father, things proceed quickly.

Dwight drove down that weekend. They spent a lot of time together and finally my mother told me that Dwight was urging a proposal which she felt bound to consider. He proposed that after Christmas I move up to Chinook and live with him and go to school there. If things worked out, if I made a real effort a got along with him and his kids, she would quit her job and accept his offer of marriage.

She did not try to make any of this sound like great news. Instead she spoke as if she saw in this plan a duty which she would be selfish not to acknowledge. But first she wanted my approval. I thought I had no choice so I gave it (Wolff 84).

This memory is more specific than those previously mentioned. It recalls a specific potentially life-altering event which must have scared Toby, especially given his disdain of Dwight. It comes at a point in the story where Toby's behavior has been worsening and his mother is helpless to stop it, so as much as he might resent her decision, his guilt and feelings of worthlessness may have also influenced his acquiescence.

Even a simple, mid-level memory is rendered poignant by craft. "Sometimes I just sat on a railing somewhere and looked up into the mountains. They were always in shadow. The sun didn't make it up over the peaks before classes started in the morning, it was gone behind the western rim by the time school let out. I lived in perpetual dusk.

The absence of light became oppressive to me. It took on the weight of other absences I could not admit or even define but still felt sharply, on my own in this new place (Ibid. 98)."

The line “I lived in perpetual dusk” is ambiguous. It is apt both figuratively and literally, and such a nuanced insight would not have been in the scope of 12 year old Toby’s capabilities. The reflection is a product of distance and the adult writer Wolff’s talent as a writer. It is a figure drawn most probably at the moment of writing, evidence of Adler’s theory that a memory of the past is always filtered by the present.

Another example of the writer’s reflection on a summarized memory follows, as Wolff recalls his trips with Dwight to visit his mother:

[H]e never let me out of his sight. He stuck close by and acted jovial. He smiled at me and put his hand on my shoulder and made frequent reference to the fun things we’d done together. And I played along. Watching myself with revulsion, aghast at my own falsity, yet somehow helpless to stop it. I simpered back at him and laughed when he invited me to laugh and confirm all his lying implications that we were pals and our life together a good one (Ibid. 99)

Revulsion and overwhelming shock are powerful feelings, so we can suppose that these memories were salient. As Dwight continues to rain Toby with verbal abuse, Toby’s endurance grew. The abuse “went on and on. It never ended, and before long it lost its power to hurt me. I experienced it as more bad weather to get through, not biting, just close dim and heavy.” This growing strength in Toby is an important part of his transformation from a vulnerable victim to an empowered young man. Granted such a trajectory is an integral part of a coming of age narrative, here it gains even more poignancy because Toby suffers so much at the hands of this tyrant. His suffering is an important theme through which the reader can connect with the story. Hence some of the overarching themes of *This Boy’s Life* are suffering, endurance and ultimately survival.

Interesting that Toby does receive one spot of positive fathering when Dwight gives him a Boy Scout Manual. At the core of the Boy Scout's sense of fair play and clean living was the idea that a man must "stand the gaff," weather hardship or strain; endure patiently – and that he must take punishment and come back smiling (Ibid. 103)." The ability to endure hardship is a virtue, but as if rather than bolster Toby in a positive way, Dwight is his punisher, his torturer.

Toby's fight with his soon-to-be friend, Arthur is an important moment in the story. Initially Toby and his friends taunt Arthur for being a sissy, Arthur challenges Toby and a vicious fight ensues. Both boys are pretty well beaten up, and there is no clear victor. What emerges from the draw is a mutual respect for each other and an abiding friendship. Equally important is the way the fight is related to Dwight.

"He had me tell the story again and again. Each time he told it he laughed and slapped his leg. I began by admitting, reluctantly, that I might have started the fight by calling Arthur a sissy; then, seeing how much pleasure it gave Dwight to hear this, I recalled that my actual words were "big fat sissy." I told him I'd knocked Arthur down and I described his swollen eye. I allowed Dwight to think that I had kicked some very serious ass that day (Ibid. 113)."

We already know Toby as a weaver of stories, which certainly foreshadows his career as a writer, and here he clearly gains a benefit by elaborating on the events, spinning the story in a certain way, (Dwight as tormentor) for a certain effect (sympathy for Toby).

In another self-defining summary Wolff writes of hitching rides and venturing further and further away from home only to return before Dwight and his mother returned from work.

As the summer went on I ranged farther and farther down the valley, to Concrete, and Bird's Eye and Van Horn and Sedro Woolley; - all the way to Mount Vernon. I would

walk around the streets of this town for a few minutes, waiting for something to happen and when it didn't I would go back to the road and stick my thumb out again (Ibid. 123).

Such adventures are the stuff of boyhood characterized by playful abandon. They are part of a larger self-defining narrative, but also serve as nostalgic reminiscences. For Toby, such forays are symbolic and perhaps a rehearsal for a real escape soon to come. He may also be imitating if his mother, whose real escapes brought them across the country in the first place.

"I was a liar. Even though I lived in a place where everyone knew who I was, I couldn't help but try to introduce new versions of myself as my interests changed, and as other versions failed to persuade (Ibid. 133)." Here Wolff offers an explicit definition of self, characterizing himself as a liar. The notion of refashioning himself when people see through him again confirms the McAdams theories of life story in that we create a self and then seek out validation of that self from others. So here, if Toby doesn't get validation for the self he craves, he simply tries again and creates another. I would characterize this type of behavior as a struggle for identity. The adolescent Toby doesn't know who he is and he is seeking affirmation from others. This process I would imagine is part of growing up. It seems that if interpreted in the context of self-defining memories, then Wolff would characterize this time as a struggle, and in the overarching narrative, he may eventually "find himself." Wolff does not reflect on this as a basic part of human personality development, but rather takes the negative connotation solely upon himself. Being false is not a virtue, but this reader has enough sympathy for Toby at this point not to hold this against him. My sense is that Wolff still, even at the time of writing sees this as a flaw, a negative character trait which he presumably overcame at some point.

Toby's escape and rescue fantasies permeate the story, from moving to France to live with his uncle, to running away to Alaska.

I planned to travel alone under an assumed name, Later on, when I had my feet on the ground, I would send for my mother. It was not hard to imagine our reunion in my cabin: her grateful tears and cries of admiration at the pelt covered walls, the racks of guns, the tame wolves dozing before the fire (Ibid).

Not only would this fantasy solve the real problem of Dwight, but it also speaks to Toby's need to see himself as a powerful conqueror of nature, a hero to his mother. Again this kind of fantasizing is a normal part of human nature, yet. As Wolff spins it, it becomes an important aspect of character. Toby is a liar and a dreamer and a thief.

On sexuality, and with Arthur: "One night he kissed me, or I kissed him, or we kissed each other. It surprised us both. After that, whenever we felt particularly close we turned on each other (Ibid. 159)." In the story, Toby's sexuality is never explicitly addressed, although he is clearly attracted to Dwight's older daughter, Norma. This memory is particularly salient, the kiss, potentially underscored by a range of emotions: affection, lust, surprise, fear, embarrassment and perhaps shame. And interesting ambiguity is created in the last sentence depending on how the phrase "turned on" is understood. The text and the lines that follow lending themselves to the reading as "turned against," but it can also be read as "excited" each other. Although nothing more is made of this encounter. Romantic encounters are by nature self-affirming, and this kiss, a negative or positive memory for Wolff, is a self-defining moment, a moment of abandon, a moment of intense feeling,

Rhea moved to Concrete from North Carolina halfway through her junior year, when I was a freshman. She had flaxen hair that hung to her waist, calm brown eyes, golden skin that glowed like a jar of honey. Her mouth was full, and almost loose. She wore tight

skirts that showed the flex and roll of her hips as she walked, clinging pastel sweaters whose sleeves she pushed up to her elbows, revealing a heartbreaking slice of creamy inner arm (Ibid. 187).

Wolff's language here is like a lustful embellishment. His adjectives, flaxen, golden, full, loose, clinging and creamy, are all aesthetic evaluations, his experience with Rhea was punctuated by lust and the memory perhaps filtered his yearnings in the present.

A good example of a specific memory is Wolff's recollection of the time he tried to forge a check in a convenience store.

I picked up copies of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest*, then prowled the aisle for other adult items. I collected some Old Spice aftershave, brass-plated finger nail clippers, a hair brush, and a package of pipe tobacco. As I approached the cash register [the cashier] smiled and asked me how I was today." "Grand," I said, "just grand (Ibid. 194)

The emotions at play here are fear commingled with guilt, and they give this incident incredible power. The check is not accepted; Toby flees and is chased by the police. The scene reinforces Toby's belief that he is a liar and a thief, and the fantasy of escape is achieved in that he is not caught. He even encounters the cashier again but she doesn't recognize him. Toby is lucky.

Another strong example of a specific memory and perhaps the climax of the memoir is the episode where Toby is attacked by an enraged Dwight after he throws away what he believes to be an empty mustard jar.

He held the bottle close to my face. There were a few streaks of mustard congealed under the neck and in the grooves at the bottom. Pearl said, "It looks empty to me." I

didn't ask you," Dwight told her. "Well, it does," she said. I said that it looked empty to me, too. "Look again," he said, and pushed the open neck of the jar against my eye.

When I jerked away he grabbed me by the hair and shoved my face back down toward the jar. "Does this look empty to you?" I didn't answer (Ibid. 202).

This incident, which culminates with Dwight striking Toby, is fraught with emotion. Toby is humiliated, angry and fearful, and feeling sorry for himself. It is precisely the kind of memory that as a function of the trauma would be involuntarily repeated in an effort to process the event. If Toby were to take this lesson to heart, he might define himself as a victim, powerless in the face of authority. After the incident Toby calls his brother who implores him to get away from Dwight. Other events reinforce Toby's contemptuous beliefs about himself: he forges transcripts and recommendation letters when he applies to several elite boarding schools, he gains admittance to one and thus manages to escape Dwight and a life in Washington.

In sum, *This Boy's Life* is an act of self-definition. It is a literary record period in a Wolff's life when he is struggling for an identity. Wolff, just as Singer and Salovey propose, has fashioned a self from his memories and we as readers corroborate that self. *This Boy's Life*, or any memoir for that matter, is more than just a testimony, it is an act of affirmation, a representation of the self perhaps more stable than the unarticulated concept of self as held in the mind, but no less mutable given the range of interpretations and contexts that literature enjoys.

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