

## The Narrator's Coming of Age

Among its other qualities, *Old School* fits into the tradition of the Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, a work in which the protagonist goes through a process of maturing from adolescence to adulthood. Two classic examples of the Bildungsroman are the Charles Dickens novels *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861). In our own time, one might even say that the Harry Potter books, taken together, fit into the category.

At least since the time of Sophocles and Oedipus the King, down through Shakespeare's King Lear and many, many other works, much of the great literature of the Western world has been founded on a core set of assumptions: that those who foolishly believe themselves superior beings will sooner or later be forced to confront their own flaws and mistakes, and that from this recognition of our own limitations may come humility and a greater compassion for the weakness and imperfection of other people. Writers, critics, and teachers have always maintained that reading great literature and learning this lesson will help to make us more compassionate toward and tolerant of others. One of the many remarkable qualities of *Old School* is that it shows us that very thing—a young man becoming more understanding and accepting of others not only through personal encounters, but also through his encounters with works of literature.

From the very beginning, ignorance and misperception characterize the narrator in his dealings with other people, whether in the unintentional pain that he causes the janitor, Gershon, or his later misunderstanding (and subsequent discovery) of the reason for Bill White's sadness and withdrawal. The clear lesson of the Bill

White episode is that we never really know what's going on with other people, and therefore we shouldn't be quick to judge.

Perhaps the book's most effective and moving example of how the narrator's ignorance and misunderstanding give way to deeper and more compassionate insight comes in connection with his grandfather and his grandfather's wife. When they visit him in the hospital, he is vaguely ashamed and dismissive of them. When he looks at them in the light of his reading of *The Fountainhead*, he is openly contemptuous of them. But when his personal exposure to Ayn Rand shows him the narrowness and heartlessness of her views, he comes to recognize their decency and their love for him. Through this experience, as well as through his reading of Hemingway, he comes to embrace woundedness and imperfection as the reality of the human condition.

This lesson—the precariousness of human nature, the hidden sorrows in everyone's life—is one that he keeps learning over and over. It is not until many years later, for example, that he discovers that Mr. Ramsey's editing of the Hemingway interview for the school paper was motivated not by disrespect, but rather a desire to protect Hemingway from himself. As the narrator tells us late in the novel, "The appetite for decisive endings, even the belief that they're possible, makes me uneasy in life as in writing" (p. 169). Clearly, at least part of the reason for his uneasiness is his knowledge that we never achieve perfection, that our own pride and arrogance must be constantly resisted, and that the lesson of love and forgiveness must be learned again and again for as long as we live.