

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Before winning a scholarship to a prestigious Eastern prep school, Tobias Wolff grew up in an isolated, working-class community in the Pacific Northwest. Thus, like the narrator of *Old School*, he felt himself to be something of an outsider among many classmates from backgrounds of great wealth and privilege. Like the narrator, he was forced to leave before graduation (in Wolff's case for academic reasons, not an issue of plagiarism). Also like the narrator, Wolff later enlisted in the Army and was sent to Vietnam, and ultimately he went on to become a well-known and successful writer.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track One. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points learned from the CD.

Photocopy the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Biography" (pp. 6–7), and "Tobias Wolff and His Other Works" (pp. 12–13). Divide the class into groups. Each group will present a summary of the main points in its assigned essay.

Writing Exercise

Read the first three paragraphs of the novel to the class (pp. 3–4). Have your students write a similar description of their own school, touching on some of the same points that Wolff emphasizes: the economic and social backgrounds of the students, the school's expectations of them, the relative emphasis placed on areas such as academics, sports, and creativity.

Homework

Read Handout One: The Importance of Frost, Rand, and Hemingway. Read the first chapter, "Class Picture" (pp. 3–25). Prepare your students to read approximately 25–30 pages per night in order to complete reading this book in seven lessons.