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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Old School*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Wolff create in *Old School*? Does this novel speak for more than one man and his personal concerns? What does this voice tell us about the choices and responsibilities of life for a sensitive person in contemporary America?

Divide students into groups and have each group determine the single most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, with references from the text. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Does this novel succeed in telling a story that speaks to and about all young men, not just those in the limited world of private school students? Does the novel tell a story about human beings in general? Why or why not? Write a one-page essay explaining whether the author succeeds in reaching a broad audience. If you disagree, explain why the author fails to reach a general audience. What advice might you give to the author so that he might reach more young readers?

Homework

Students will finish their essays and present their essay topics and arguments to the class.