

# Once Again, Is It Literature or Licentiousness?

By Gail Gilliland

In the opening pages of Geoffrey Wolff's 1990 novel, *The Final Club*, a teenager is awakened one night by his gun-brandishing mother to decide whether she or his drunken father should be allowed to live. And while subject matter of that book — the lives of some Princeton undergraduates during the early 1960s — may not have interested many readers outside the upper class, the book took an honest, undeviating path from the absurdist roots of its first few pages to a satisfyingly funny denouement.

*The Age of Consent* (Knopf, 226 pp), Wolff's sixth novel, also begins with a tragic family event witnessed by an adolescent boy. But unlike *The Final Club*, this book takes itself too seriously.

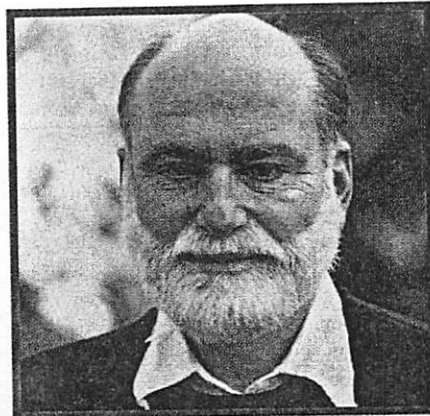
Ted Jenks is 13 when, during a Fourth of July picnic in the idyllic New York mountains, he watches his rebellious 15-year-old sister Maisie execute a perfect dive from the top of the Raven Kill gorge into a shallow pool. Contrary to her apparent intent, Maisie doesn't

die but, after coming out of a coma, slowly recovers, the consequences of her neurological damage reduced to just the slightest evidence of a limp.

Because Maisie's remarkable recovery strikes us as almost too much of a medical miracle, we expect a human comedy to evolve. But the events leading up to the accident turn out to be far from humorous. The book's major flaw — in the end perhaps even a moral one — is that its humorless characters are so slow to find the truth.

No reader familiar with the work of Henry James will be able to overlook the fact that this story about hidden evil is dependent upon younger brother Ted finding out *what Maisie knew*. And as Ted figures out that an old family friend, Doc Halliday, has taken Maisie to bed, some readers may grow uncomfortable, if only from a textual standpoint, with the frequency with which young female characters engage in or describe kinky sex.

An incestuous scene takes place between the young Ted and Maisie, for example, on a camping trip prior to her near-fatal dive. Even if we assume that the scene is meant to show us the degree to which the despicable Doc has stolen Maisie's innocence, we are at the same time titillated with voyeuristic descriptions of sibling sex. Elsewhere, we may wonder if the author means us to believe that a 13-year-old girl may *want* to be abused. As Maisie tells her brother: "It's a soap-opera word, but it means something to me. Do I need to tell you it was more



NICHOLAS WOLFF

Wolff: Lots of sex, little style.

than sex? Sex was gravy. It was being initiated, catching a glimpse of him anxious, afraid, exposed. He was such a big deal to us, but finally, in bed, lit by a kerosene lamp, he was a naked boy with bony shoulders, a chipped tooth, a scar on his chin where he fell out of what he said was the only tree in Oklahoma." Maisie's defense of her erstwhile lover, even in a fictional context, is chilling.

Of course, the literary necessity for exposing readers to the deflowering of nubile girls is a subject debated since Petronius' *Satyricon*, and the question will not be settled here. But the issue might have been clearer in this case were it not for the absence of Wolff's usually eloquent style.

In his collection of essays, *A Day at the Beach*, Wolff established himself as a writer who cared deeply about his literary roots and the possibilities of language. Yet he has chosen to write *The Age of Consent* in a language with no more depth than ordinary slang. By the time Doc has said "Chill out" and "Cool your jets, man" a few times, we're on to him; he's a man who refuses to grow up. Unfortunately, all the other characters speak in slang, too, as does the third-person narrator, so that we have the impression here that everyone speaks in one voice.

In the end, Wolff's apparent decision to keep his distance from the issue of Maisie's abuse, and at the same time to abandon both his sense of humor and sense of style, results in a novel that fails. Those readers who were able to stay with the Princeton undergraduates of *The Final Club* because that book was so clearly poking fun may find it difficult to stay with these characters, whose retreat from the exigencies of the human condition leave them awash in the shallow pools of their self-conscious lives.

Gail Gilliland is the author of *Being a Minor Writer*.

than Barthes' antibiographical *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes — an epigrammatic account of associations and events.



LOUIS MONIER

Barthes: No truth, only interpretation.

*Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes' first major work, published in 1954, cemented his presence on the academic scene. In 1960, he joined the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and during the next two decades would be a chain-smoking omnipresence in Saint-Germain-des-Pres, dining at the Cafe de Flore with Julia Kristeva or Michel Foucault, or playing piano with Vladimir Jankelevitch.

Responding to Picard in *Criticism and Truth* (1966), Barthes uttered his famous proclamation of the "death of the author." For Barthes, there is no reality or truth — only interpretation. Accordingly, the authority of the author must be shattered. Barthes invited us to a new practice of reading, an assertion of the reader's freedom, dislodging authorial intent to focus on form and language.

By Kenneth R. Weinstein