

Words of My Youth

JOE MACKALL

Joe Mackall is an author of books about culture and his own life. In this memoir, he talks about growing up in the suburbs. Notice how his voice seems to emerge from the text as he tells his story.

I stand at the edge of my suburban driveway on Fairlawn Drive, sunned and safe. My friend Mick and I play Wiffle ball. Each swing of the bat sends the ball flying into the mystery grip of physics and aerodynamic wonder. The ball appears headed straight up before some hidden hand of wind and speed and serrated plastic jerks it over to the lawn of the widow next door. Mrs. Worth's boxer drools the day away, watching from the backyard in its own state of ignorant awe.

We take turns "smacking the shit" out of the plastic ball. I don't notice, not right away, an older kid—a man really—walking down the other side of the street, his eyes straight ahead. Not from around here. As the kid-man gets closer, I focus more intently on the game, as if this focus will protect me from what's about to happen. I chase the ball as if catching it matters more than anything, more than my first kiss or my last day of school. I make careful throws, keeping my eye on the ball, trying to anticipate the direction of its flight and fall.

I fear—as I so often fear—that something I have done has found its way back to me. And now I'll pay. Five or six houses away now, the kid-man crosses the street. He's not from around here, but I recognize him from somewhere. There's something in the way the kid-man never looks around, as if his entire world centers on a horizon only he can see. He's smoking. Not a good sign. I pick the ball up off the boxer's drool-wet lawn, wipe the drool on my jeans, and toss it a few feet in the air. When I look up I see the kid-man—black hair

greased and straight, a broken mustache, patches of dirt and beard—punch Mick in the nose. Mick bends over and covers his nose with cupped hands in one motion. Blood oozes through his summer-stained fingers and drips onto the hot cement. Although the kid-man—eighteen, nineteen, probably—has just punched Mick in the face, I'm stunned stupid when the kid-man walks over to me and slams me in the nose. We run to the porch.

"My girlfriend's not a dyke," the kid-man says, as he lights a new cigarette from the old and walks off.

It's true. We have called the man's girlfriend a dyke. Often and repeatedly. But still, standing behind the harsh-sounding, cool-sounding word with blood dripping from my nose, I who only a minute ago was playing Wiffle ball on a summer afternoon, realize I cannot define nor do I understand the word we all so love to use.

II

Again on the Wiffle ball driveway, also summer, also my twelfth year, I call one of my Gentile friends a dumb Jew. Soon all of us revel in the discovery of this new slur. This new way of degrading each other catches on quickly. Not one of the Catholic boys schooled in the Judeo-Christian tradition is sure why calling somebody a dumb Jew is derogatory. But we celebrate this new slur anyway. But wait. Wasn't Jesus a Jew? Isn't Bill Rosenberg a Jew? We all love Bill. This must be something else. It sounds different. It sounds like it

shouldn't be said. So we say it and love saying it, we boys without weapons.

The screen door slams. My mother has caught the sound of the slur. She motions for me to come inside. "Tell your friends to go home," she says. I do not have to. They're gone. This is 1971, and the suburbs. Somebody's parent is everybody's parent. Parents stick together. They know who the real enemy is.

She grabs my hair and pulls me into the house. Inside my head I'm screaming.

I do not say a word.

"What did you say out there? What were you saying?"

I understand that my mother knows the answer to her questions. I realize I had better not repeat what I said outside, not even in

answer to her questions. I know she never wants to hear that again. Not ever. Not from me. Not from anybody.

"Where did you ever hear a thing like that? That kind of talk?" she asks.

An excellent question. I honestly do not know. I have no idea. The slur just seems to have been out there, there and somehow not there, like incense, like the way a Wiffle ball whips and dips, the way adults laugh at things kids don't understand, the way background noise from a baseball game leaks out of transistor radios, the way bits of gravel bounce out of pickup truck beds, the way factory fires flirt with the night sky, the way sonic booms burst the lie of silence.

A CLOSER LOOK AT

Words of My Youth

1. A memoir doesn't just recount events but selects and arranges those events into a "plot" that helps the reader infer causation, or a sense of what causes what. There seem to be two stories here, but is there a single plot? What single question or theme is evoked from this plot? Outline the two stories and show how they follow a single plot.
2. In this memoir, the Wiffle ball is more than an object that the narrator and his friends throw and smack. The Wiffle ball itself—the actual object and the way it behaves when it is thrown—serves as a symbol of some other idea or problem. How is the Wiffle ball used to illustrate other concepts in this memoir? Examine the memoir's final sentence closely.
3. Compare the ending of "Words of My Youth" with the ending of "Book War" or the ending of "Binky and Toodles: A Frontier Saga." How do the endings differ and how do they help the memoirs achieve their purposes?

IDEAS FOR

Writing

1. Explain the purpose of "Words of My Youth." What theme or question is Mackall encouraging readers to explore with him? Try to articulate that question or theme in a single sentence. Write a one-page response in which you identify that question and explain what Mackall wants readers to take away from his memoir.
2. Mackall chooses to use strong and perhaps offensive language, and to describe violent events and offensive behavior. In a one-page response to this memoir, discuss whether you feel the language and events were warranted, considering what you believe is the central theme/question of the story.