



# TRUTH BE TOLD

**HOW CAN A MAN ALL OF 35 PEN A MEMOIR THAT SHAKES THE ENTIRE CITY OF SAN FRANCISCO? WRITER SEAN WILSEY'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS A GLORIOUS READ FAR STRANGER THAN FICTION**

Early in Sean Wilsey's memoir, *Oh the Glory of It All*, he writes, "Whatever I can tell you about my father will probably be wrong. I have a collection of theories and incidents and facts concerning Dad, but no comprehension. I've put him together like an archaeologist investigating a lost civilization while at the same time powerfully longing for it." For nearly 500 pages and spanning the course of thirty years, Wilsey's epic, searing, hilariously juvenile, and altogether brilliant recollection of his life growing up in San Francisco is anything but a token day tour through an excavated ghost town. Wilsey indeed knows quite a bit about his father—heir to a butter empire, \$100-million tycoon, and general playboy of Nob Hill; even more about his model-turned-writer-turned-world's-most-expensive-wife-turned-ambassador-of-peace mother; and remembers much about the ferociously greedy socialite who became his insipid stepmother, Dede. Wilsey writes about being young the way it actually feels—fast, all-over, suddenly revelatory, and darkly honest even in the most disturbing areas of growing up overprivileged and underloved. He also spins the reader through run-ins with the Pope, skateboard street culture, East Coast boarding schools, private helicopter rides, the Great 1906 San Francisco earthquake, juvenile detention, masturbation tactics, last-chance cult camps, and the pain of losing a parent you may never have understood. An editor at *McSweeney's*, Wilsey has written perhaps the best book of 2005 and single-handedly destroyed the comforting Wildean notion that it is only the second-rate writers who lead the interesting lives. **Christopher Bollen**

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** It's funny the extensive research that must be involved in writing the record of your own life. Your book spans about thirty years. How long did you spend working on it?

**SEAN WILSEY** I started working on it really in earnest in 1998. It changed a lot in the course of writing because my dad died. I wrote it with the idea that my dad would read it—which is insane now. My dad would never have been able to deal with it. My mom, on the other hand, has been able to deal with it very well.

**CB** So she's read it?

**SW** Yeah, my mom is amazing. She had a varied reaction to the book, but the coolest thing she said was, "Well, Sean, it is such an accurate portrait of so many people I can only conclude it's also an accurate portrait of me." [Laughs] She said, "I'm really going to have to think about that."

**CB** The memoir starts out all about your mother and ends all about your father. Between these parental bookends is your story. Was this intentional?

**SW** I think that was because my mom is really accessible. She was probably the easiest entry point as she's the easiest character. I think she has always seen herself as the main character of any situation she has ever been in. But if I was going to sustain the narrative, the person who I kept returning to and who I still don't understand—I still have dialogues in my head with him—is my dad.

**CB** I think most people feel a sense of betrayal in airing family secrets. You really put the facts out there. Were you worried about familial retribution, or were you just saying "fuck it"?

**SW** There were definitely moments where I'd write a particular line and then think, Oh my god, what the fuck are they going to think when they read this? But technically speaking, at the time, it seemed so much in the abstract that I really didn't censor myself. It's weird that it's out there now, that someone else is reading it besides me.

**CB** You didn't cut anything out at all?

**SW** There were a few last-minute changes. After I saw the galley I thought, Holy shit, do I really need to say the name of girl X who I knew for two days? Do I really need the nicknames of my friends from high school? My justification was that I come off much worse than they do. But of course they aren't going to see it that way.

**CB** Some reviewers, like Armistead Maupin, have labeled the memoir a "revenge" book. What do you think about this reaction?

**SW** I thought Maupin's blurb was so generous that I wasn't going to quibble. And I'm sure there is that element in the book, but I don't look at it that way. It's funny, the other thing he says is that the book addresses a narcissistic parent. I thought he meant my mother.

**CB** That's what I would have guessed.

**SW** He meant my father. Isn't that funny?

**CB** It was nice of him, especially since you use him in the book as a not-very-kind writer when he satirizes your mother in *Tales of the City*.

**SW** He doesn't come off that great in it, although he did point out very nicely that he put those words in the mouths of some of his vilest characters.

**CB** Then for you there were no feelings of getting back at your childhood adversaries?

**SW** I had a feeling of just wanting to tell the truth. I occasionally receive these engraved invitations to benefit balls in San Francisco and think, Why am I receiving this? You people are bastards. I just wanted to tell my story. The person who I may obviously be avenging myself with is my stepmother, Dede.

**CB** She comes off as such an awful human being. You can't help but wonder what this monster socialite is going to think about this book.

**SW** I have no idea. I am not in touch with her.

**CB** She's an excellent character though. You hate her, but you can't wait to see her in the next scene. She's like the killer in a horror film—evil, but where would the plot be without her?

**SW** I went out of my way in writing about her not to go for any cheap shots. I tried to stick to what I knew and what happened to me. I've heard from a number of people who have read it that "she's really going to like this." I'm not sure that's the case. I think that's totally perverse, but I wouldn't put it past her. It just portrays

her as the absolutely ruthless person she is, and she doesn't really care who knows it. That's an interesting way to lead your life...

**CB** There are so many autobiographies about people coming from extreme poverty or from comatose middle-class suburbia. Your position is radically different. You came from such extreme wealth, hundreds of millions of dollars, and yet everything is still completely fucked up. The very people who should have it all are the most off-balance. Their eccentricities are expensive, but they don't make them happier.

**SW** Money is a weird topic. It's a total taboo topic in many ways, and I don't think I have gone far enough in writing about it. I'm sure I'll write about it a lot more. The redeeming thing about my mom is that she came from a greater level of poverty than anyone you will ever meet in this country. And her whole relationship with money is very odd because she is always teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. She has no regard for it. And then there is my dad and his unbelievable chest of treasures. I didn't get any of it. My feeling about money is that it's kind of evil, although necessary. It's a moral tightrope-walk to figure out how to live your life with it. It's a lot better than not having any, though. I certainly wouldn't have been a writer if I had inherited billions of dollars. Would I be here writing a memoir? Probably not. I don't know what I'd be doing.

**CB** You have an excellent memory for detail. I loved the scenes where you met the Pope and visited the Kremlin on your mother's "Children as Teachers of Peace" missions.

**SW** That's all from video. That whole meeting with the Pope took like twenty or thirty seconds, but it covers two or three pages in the book. I watched that tape over and over and yanked every nuance out and wrote it all down. Originally, I wrote that scene from memory, and when I read it aloud, I got so many laughs I didn't want to touch it. But I was a fanatic for getting every detail right that I could. All of that Russian trip is also straight from a transcript.

**CB** You're lucky to have such a well-documented childhood.

**SW** My mom would always say, "These will be historical documents." I always thought, Bullshit, but it's sort of weirdly true. My mom is so talented. I remember once landing in Beijing and literally having no agenda. My mom got on the phone at the hotel and just started calling the government. Through sheer willpower and charm and self-possession we got a meeting with the premier on Christmas Day. I remember her saying to one of the higher-up people on the phone, "You know, people in America think that you don't like children. Wouldn't this be a great opportunity to show that you do?" [Laughs] Two days later it was the biggest hoe-down you've ever seen in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

**CB** The book is very much a San Francisco document. You live in New York now. In fact you have a wife and son here.

**SW** I pretty much left San Francisco for good at 18, and so now when I go back I can see it for what it is rather than for the place I've always lived. I love San Francisco.

**CB** It seems like a good place to grow up.

**SW** It wasn't a good place for me to grow up. [Laughs] I definitely had my moments where I thought, My life sucks but at least I'm living in San Francisco.

**CB** You've been an editor at *McSweeney's* for a while. It's kind of odd that both you and Dave Eggers have published autobiographies. Are you worried about comparisons?

**SW** I'm sure the publicity department would welcome comparisons. Dave has been very supportive. He's been so great, and we've had a lot of fun on *McSweeney's*.

**CB** Do you think you'll turn to fiction now that you're done with a memoir?

**SW** I don't know. I feel like I found a voice as a first-person non-fiction writer. Before writing this, I wrote a novel that I wasn't able to sell. It was so wildly experimental. It was about this guy who falls in love with money. He has a wild affair with money and tries to liberate it from its financial obligations. He marries money in the end, and they have this beautiful marriage, and the world is free of money. It's kind of funny but a total disaster. Dave wanted to publish it in *McSweeney's*, but at one point he said, "There is this problem of how some of it doesn't make any sense, so we need to fix that." But every time I tried to make sense of it, it would lose its spark.

**CB** There was a moment in scheduling this interview where they said you might be too busy reading the book for its audio release.

**SW** I'm not actually doing that. I wish I were. The way you do that, you have to be an audio expert.

**CB** Who's doing it then?

**SW** Some guy in L.A.

**CB** Isn't it weird to have some stranger read your most private confessions in your own voice?

**SW** He has a good voice. I've heard some of the books he's done before. But he doesn't sound like me. I kind of wanted to do it. I may do the abridged paperback version if that comes out. Unabridged, it's like seventeen CDs.

**CB** Jesus, that's a lot. I wonder how many authors actually listen to their own books.

**SW** I'm going to listen to the first ten minutes, and that's it.

**CB** You should have parties where you play disc four and mix in disc thirteen.

**SW** Totally. "Yeah, throw that on!"

Sean Wilsey in his studio in New York, March 2005

**Photography** Sasha Eisenman

*Oh the Glory of It All* is out from Penguin Press in May