“I saw a scene on a golf course, saw it with clarity and intensity, every leaf on the trees,” William McPherson told an interviewer, recalling the origin of the book you are holding, “It wasn’t a flashback or a memory or hallucination—more like a vision, a tableau vivant.” That first scene, in which Daisy Meyer in her sharkskin dress hits a drive down the fairway of the country club in Grande Rivière, set the tone for this shimmering and lithely transgressive novel. The easy excellence of Daisy’s shot on the “short sixth hole,” white ball and gleaming blond hair, the possibility that time can bend before perfection, are observed by eight-year-old Tommy MacAllister, as intense and determined a narrator as you will find in coming-of-age fiction.

Tommy’s growing awareness of the adult world takes place at a fortuitous time. The year is one we still think about, 1939, the end of Auden’s “low dishonest decade.” The Depression has wrought extensive harm, but in Tommy’s rich world its effect is more fickle, plague-like, bankrupting one family while sparing the next. Social norms are everywhere under strain. Daisy née Addington married a Jew—a converted-from-Judaism Christian but still at bottom a Jew, blood being thicker than baptismal water, as all the best families of Grande Rivière agree. And when Tommy secrets himself under the table at his parents’ New Year’s breakfast, he is amazed to see his mother’s garter unsnapped and her stocking down, Lucien Wolfe massaging the exposed flesh.

The tiny number of important families in this small Midwestern industrial city on the Canadian border retreat each summer to a
group of small islands in the middle of the river that runs by the
town, known always and only as the Island. On the Island, in houses
built for their families, they enact the delicate rituals of their clan.
Each year they open their houses at the same time, have the same
round of parties, go on the same hunting trips. But here too the bat-
tle to make time stand still is futile. Swampy patches are popping up
on formerly dry land and the weeping willow at the edge of the
Sedgwicks’ property is about to fall into the water. Within months
war will come. The government will turn the quaint fort at Grande
Rivièrê into an active base and the empty land near the MacAllister
home will be colonized for army tents. Militarization will divide the
country into soldiers and civilians. Tommy’s two older brothers will
serve, neighbors’ sons will die, and the settled relationship among
the social classes—Ophelia in the country club kitchen, Bill and
Rose and the other Native Americans docilely looking after houses
and rowing whites to and from the Island—will never be the same.
The MacAllisters’ maid’s room becomes an air-raid shelter and when
it is time to convert it back, the maids are gone. All that is later, com-
ing. For now, as Tommy notes, his life is “very smooth . . . : the house,
the Island, the country club, his school, the people on his street, the
swimmers in his sea. It was a smooth and regular life.” The most
discordant note is Tommy himself. Why do people act the way they
do? What is the secret meaning in their deeds? These are the ques-
tions behind the questions Tommy is relentlessly asking.

Testing the Current was originally published in 1984 by Simon and
Schuster. Its fifty-one-year-old author was well known as an op-ed
writer and a recipient of a Pulitzer Prize for criticism at The Wash-
ington Post, but he had not previously appeared as a novelist. It is
hard today—overwhelmed as we are by the hundreds of memoirs
and memoir-like novels detailing minute perturbations of the silken
surface of affluent life from Tribeca to Sausalito—to remember how
different Testing was at the time. Reviewers read it with deep pleasure,
the novel to be “a permanent contribution to the literature of family, childhood and memory” and the Post calling it “something close to breathtaking.” Bearing a delicate cartoonlike cover by Fred Marcellino of an androgynous youth with toes dangling from a pier, it seemed to have emerged from under ice. The 1970s had appeared to obliterate the primacy of WASP life in American fiction; no one had written with care about these people in a decade. And it was a group McPherson obviously knew firsthand. (In interviews he acknowledged that he came from a background much like Tommy’s; he was the son of the director of Union Carbide operations in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan.) At the same time a generation of massive, playful postmodern writing, works by writers like Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, had fatigued readers and critics. The trend toward more and more complicated and self-aware fiction had reached a clangbird end. There was an urge for clarity, simplicity, writing in a more obviously American grain.

*Testing the Current* became a sleeper, a word-of-mouth success, a favored discovery of readers and editors—the *Times* named it a Notable Book of the Year. It quickly sold out its first printing. This was not only for literary reasons. Set in an era of social displacement, it was published into one of restoration. It seemed at first glance a companion to cigar bars, Alcott and Andrews, and the new Ralph Lauren store about to open in the Rhinelander Mansion on East Seventy-second Street, another retro gesture of the Reagan years. In this situation it was joined by a number of lightly fictionalized memoirs of privilege, all WASP-like if not actually WASP, from Lisa Grunwald’s *Summer* to Susan Minot’s *Monkeys* to Peter Taylor’s *A Summons to Memphis*. A trend emerged, as distinctive as the narrowing of men’s ties or the shortening of their hair, as Americans, confused by more than a decade of unrest and rethinking, took comfort in reading about older traditions, a novel set in the time when the Midwest was still an industrial powerhouse with flourishing cities and its own claim toward sophistication—Sault Sainte Marie once even had its own opera house—and where the culminating scene is a wedding anniversary dance at a country club. But in
fact the novel was a harbinger of a different kind of trend, a return to intense, skeptically observed portraits of American life, a companion to Banks’s *Continental Drift* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. If the Reagan era was one of restoration, it was also one of rising inequality, a trend that would find final fictional utterance in Margaret Atwood’s dystopian *The Handmaid’s Tale*. *Testing the Current* showed how it had ever been thus.

But the book’s elegant, deceptive part in this tradition was overlooked at first. Instead it seemed to suggest that the reflective establishment denizen, with his or her soupçon of sadness and delicate register for social niceties, might be back for good. And this of course was not the case. The era of the WASP had passed. The inevitable alterations in who reads and what they want to read continued and, by the mid ’90s, memoirs of privileged moroseness, especially male moroseness, were once more out of style (and this book, a victim of mistaken identity, out of print). The children and grandchildren of Ophelia and Bill and Rose had come out of the kitchen and the run-down shacks on the part of the island nice people never went to in order to tell their side of the story, a development that little Tommy MacAllister certainly would have noted and might well have applauded. As he learns in this literal roman-fleuve, you can’t step into the same river twice.

The social rituals and codes of *Testing the Current* are as obscure as those of the Trobriand Islanders. Tommy is trying to master them at the same time as he is wondering why they are necessary. Every golf club has a name: mashie, niblick, spoon, brassie, driver, mid-iron, putter, wedge. The way tennis is scored baffles. Silver should come from Peacock’s in Chicago, Pi Phis are a notch above Tri Delts, President Roosevelt is a dangerous radical, elbows don’t belong on tables, and though there is no one better to play with than your cousins, you mustn’t marry them.

With his “skinny little frame topped with a cowlick and huge, flapping ears,” Tommy is one of those precocious, awkward, optimistic
children who even today seem to inhabit the cosseted environs of country clubs and upper-class resorts. He is solitary, socially aware, delicate, assertive, informed, sheltered, and most of all curious.

Understanding money, how it forms and deforms, who has it and who lost it, is central to his inquiries. As Tommy sees, money is especially determinant for women, who lack other sources of power and to whose company he is naturally drawn. Madge McGhee has a fortune, left to her after the early death of her parents, which allows her to behave as she wants, while when Margie Slade’s parents die, she is left in a battle with relatives and comes under the protection of an unscrupulous lawyer; when Tommy’s brother proposes to Margie, his parents make it clear they wish it were Madge. Mr. Steer’s family lost their money in the Depression, while, miraculously, Tommy’s own family seems to have grown richer, having “somehow taken it out of the hole everyone else’s was going into.” Tommy echoes his parents when he adds: “and they were very fortunate.”

Behind the money, as Tommy sees, are the family alliances, and he realizes “practically everybody seemed related somehow.” The Grande Rivière of 1939 is a small town. Tommy is allowed to play on occasion at the homes of friends with last names like Malotte and Bonnaro, but the ten or so families he socializes with all marry among themselves. Tommy puts a lot of his inchoate energy into deciphering the subtle class rebalancings that each alliance entails. Life is like a living version of **Debrett’s**. His mother’s maiden name is Bigelow but through her mother’s side she is a Hopkins, “and you know what *that* meant,” Tommy’s uncle Roger pointedly jokes. Roger is married to Aunt Elizabeth. His mother’s other sister, Clara, and her husband, Andrew, are too splendid to spend the night on the Island. Uncle Christian is a bachelor with good taste in clothes and design, the implications of this left unspoken. Tommy’s father has a brother, Archie, an alcoholic who lives in a one-bedroom apartment and shows the bad form not to be ashamed about the money Tommy’s father gives him at Christmas. Though this is a Midwestern novel, the names of Ivy League halls dominate: Griswolds and Sedgwicks and Farnsworths. There is a clear pecking
order in Grande Rivière—these Protestants with their country club and their Island, and below them the Catholics, and somewhere far below that the Negroes, a people so unclubbable that Tommy intuits it is impolite to think of Ophelia as a Negro in her own presence, good breeding involving not making people feel inferior even while thinking they are.

And the final and biggest mystery is sex and the secret ways it unites and separates people. Tommy, fresh from Sunday school, wonders what adultery has to do with being “adult.” “You don’t need to worry about that yet, Tommy,” Phil Meyer counsels him at the country club. “Worry about keeping your eye on the ball.” The answer does not satisfy Tommy (little does): “There were a lot of things he would have to see when he was grown,” he notes. So, like the other customs of the Island, the codes and implications of it must be pieced together from clues. Bob Griswold, Margie Slade’s erstwhile protector, spends a lot of time with Daisy. Dr. Rodgers has wandering hands and a distant marriage. And whenever Tommy’s father is out of town on business, Lucien Wolfe—“Luke the Wolfe,” as one of his female friends calls him—magically appears at his mother’s side. Tommy is not sure he likes that, but all the adults seem to accept it and it causes barely a ripple in the community. The adults continue to get along, coming to each other’s parties, giving one another gifts. “Oh, what’s a little adultery among friends?” Mrs. Sedgwick blithely asks in her silvery voice. The key, as with Mr. Sedgwick’s false teeth or Mrs. Slade’s morphine addiction, is to not mention it, really to pretend it isn’t happening. Yet if sexual misbehavior upsets class, the response is as swift as in a Jane Austen novel. When Daisy’s grandfather, the former governor of the state, marries his young adopted Indian daughter, no matter his power, he is promptly expelled from the caste.

Tommy is a relic of a time when parents had no particular ambitions for their children beyond hoping that by osmosis they would grow into miniature copies of themselves. The central question of the book is to what extent Tommy will accept this fate. His gimlet gaze takes in many possibilities, from his manful father, the owner
of a chemical factory whose “glowing fires” Tommy can see from his bedroom window; to his mother, tender, glamorous, “forty pairs of shoes in her closet,” who sweeps her relationship with another man along with anything else uncomfortable under the rug; to the more overt sensualists like Daisy and the intellectual Mrs. Steer. Foreign-born and the only Democrat among the families, Mrs. Steer is the one woman who finds her identity in ideas rather than in things, yet she too is fundamentally conservative, having escaped the disorder of Europe. In the end it is clear that Tommy has to find his own way. He already has an intuition of “solitude, the mystery of life, that sort of thing” but is too young to have “the structure in which to put it.” Which is another way of saying that the Tommy who mostly asks why in this novel will soon grow into a young man who dislikes the anti-Semitism, racism, drug abuse, alcoholism, and infinite varieties of snobbery he finds as a child.

We know this better from *To the Sargasso Sea*, the 1987 sequel to this book, in which Tommy is now forty, but it is clearly present in these pages as well. Tommy’s preference for the company of Ophelia and her rough nephew Buck suggests it, as does his stance of perpetual interrogation. It is one of McPherson’s gifts to gradually reveal how seditious Tommy’s at first glance neutral questions are —they serve to highlight and lay bare the hypocrisy of the people around him; they show them to have made choices when they only thought they were behaving as they had to. Tommy’s insistent wonderment page after page steadily erodes the lies and euphemisms set up by generations. The movement of the book is the motion of his thought, part of his journey toward the larger currents of life, as the novel spins and circles, beginning in Tommy’s eighth year, circling around back to his seventh, and pirouetting again to end just beyond where it began, September 1939, with the world days away from war and Tommy marching off to third grade.

—D.T. Max