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Review of The History of Living Forever

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While Wolff's debut novel is many things, it is mainly a story of the love of a teenage boy, Conrad, for his high school chemistry teacher, Sammy. Besides being lovers, Sammy and Conrad are collaborators on an experiment to find the elixir of life. When Sammy unexpectedly commits suicide, Conrad begins an urgent search not only for the elixir, but also for the meaning of Sammy's life and death. As Conrad investigates, Sammy's past merges with Conrad's present.

The many flashbacks and multiple timelines, in addition to the historical asides into prior misguided attempts to find the secret of immortality, create a variegated panorama that risks confusing the reader. The story of the teenaged Sammy parallels the story of the teenaged Conrad: readers will have to stay on their toes to differentiate them.

Wolff's narrative moves forward to a conclusion grounded, disappointingly, in reality. Finding out that the elixir of life is merely a vain fantasy seems anticlimactic; the fact that so many intelligent people could pursue it as though it were anything real seems implausible.

But the novel isn't really about that. It's about developing relationships and growing. It's about learning to live.

VERDICT: A noteworthy first novel.