Humburg: This is Judee Humburg and I'm interviewing Professor Tobias Wolff on Wednesday the 24th of October, 2012. We’re on the quad near his office and this interview is in collaboration with the Stanford Historical Society and the Arts Institute at Stanford. Professor Wolff, before we begin talking about your career at Stanford, I know that you came to Stanford as a student first.

Wolff: [00:00:27] As a Wallace Stegner Fellow. When I came here in 1975, the Fellows were not students. However, there were some MA students in the workshop.

Humburg: The Stegner workshop, right?

Wolff: [00:00:49] It was not called that then. It was called the graduate workshop, because there were only two Stegner Fellows. It was a one year program. It’s a two year program now and completely different. The two Stegner Fellows were not doing degrees. They had the most generous stipend and they had no obligations except to come to workshop. The workshops were held twice a week at that point.

Humburg: You were one of the two Stegner Fellows?

Wolff: [00:01:22] Allan Gurganus and I, we were the two Stegner Fellows in 1975-76. There were also some fellows called Mirrielees Fellows who were expected to do master’s degrees while they were here.
Wolff: [00:01:55] The Mirrielees Fellows were named after Edith Mirrielees.

Then there were also straight master’s students doing a master’s in English with a creative writing thesis. And occasionally the professors would let some favored undergraduate in. It was a motley bunch and sometimes unwieldy. There might be 17 people in the workshop if a professor was particularly generous to the undergrads and let too many in, that kind of thing. It was kind of a mess, in part because people had different financial arrangements with the program. Those of us who had the best [financial arrangements], Allan and me, were sometimes resented a bit, I think, by others especially if we brought in some work that wasn’t that great and they’d think, why?

How come he got the Fellowship?

One year wasn’t really enough time to develop and finish a manuscript. It’s very hard to do that.

The great change in the program came about under the directorship of John L’Heureux, who ran the program for a good 16, 17 years.

Humburg: Yes, I read that he expanded the Stegner Fellowship program.

Wolff: [00:03:47] Well, he managed to get enough funding so that all the people here, including the poets, had fellowships of the kind I had. Now everybody has exactly the same financial arrangement. Everyone is a Fellow. Nobody is required to take any courses, but some of them sit in out of interest. Some of them even are hired as teaching assistants for various professors in the department, but that’s up to them. There’s no requirement that they do so. So they get a living wage. There are five two-year fellowships given in fiction every year and five in poetry. So at any given time there are 10 Fellows in the
fiction workshop and ten in the poetry workshop.

Humburg: This all started under—

Wolff: [00:05:01] John L’Heureux. He completely restructured the program.

Humburg: That would’ve been about?

Wolff: [00:05:06] You’ll have to ask him. I don’t want to say when it happened because I don’t know. I had left. He must’ve been very persuasive in speaking to donors because it did require a lot of capital to make this happen and the university would not have given enough money to affect that extraordinary transformation of the program. The effect has been transformative and entirely positive. I mean, there’s no longer that sense of hierarchy which could be very destructive in the workshop.

Humburg: Is that what you meant when you referred to it being a motley group?

Wolff: [00:06:15] No, I meant there were people of all kinds of abilities.

Humburg: So even that was a wide open thing.

Wolff: [00:06:23] I mean, if you were an undergraduate in the workshop you hadn’t even applied to the program. You just had a professor who liked you and thought you were good and brought you in. There was one professor, in particular, who did that sort of thing and it was resented because other people had applied to the program and, even then, it was very selective. It’s insanely selective now. In fiction last year, we had some 1,100 applications for five places. The poets had about 800 applications for five places. But it’s always been quite selective. You can see why people who had gone through that process would resent somebody getting in because they were the favorite of a professor.

Humburg: And an undergrad.

Wolff: [00:07:11] Yes, and so that stopped. It is referred to colloquially as the Stegner
Fellowship program. In fact, some of the Fellows are Stegner Fellows. Some are Truman Capote Fellows. Some are Mirrielees—but they all have the same deal. It’s just a game of names. There’s no practical consequence to it. They’re all fellows, though, that’s the big thing, creative writing fellows.

**Humburg:** Tell me what that means.

**Wolff:** [00:07:42] It means that you are here for two years. You come to workshop every Wednesday afternoon for about three hours. You submit your work a week in advance from the time it’s going to be discussed and everybody reads it and writes up a response to it. Then the work is discussed almost as if you weren’t there. You are expected to listen, but not necessarily take everything that’s said to heart. Some of it you will disregard. Part of the process is learning to disregard as well as to listen. Then, at the end, you respond to what’s been said as you wish or, if you don’t want to, you don’t have to.

[00:08:32] We usually get through two or three pieces of work a week and you do that here for two years. The poets hold their workshop on the same day. Afterwards, we usually have a reading. There’s a good social life here among the fellows. It’s a very friendly, very collegial atmosphere, much more so than when I was here.

**Humburg:** Yes, that’s what I was going to ask, what’s the comparison when you were here as a fellow to now?

**Wolff:** [00:08:59] It’s night and day. It was night when I was here. I mean, some of us were friends and we had good times. I don’t mean to paint it in dark colors. I felt like the luckiest person in the world to be here and to be able to write for a year. I still have great friends who were fellows and teachers here. Ken Fields, for example, was the
director one year when I was here. He is a friend of mine and he was a professor in the department when I was here. Alan Shapiro, a poet who was here, became a great friend. Allan Gurganus became a great friend.

Humburg: What were the workshops like when you were here as a Fellow?

Wolff: They were large, much larger than now. Sometimes as many as 16, 17 people. The work was really uneven, and if you were being honest in your responses that could create some resentment. But I myself I had great help from John L’Heureux, and from Allan Gurganus, who was a tremendous critic; also Nahid Rachlin, who’s gone on to publish several novels. I really listened to them. Others weren’t as mature and so they tended not to be as seasoned in their responses as those that I’ve mentioned.

Humburg: As you look back on your own writing and the Stegner Fellowship, what was the great impact for you or the great advancement?

Wolff: [00:11:49] I had not shown my work much to people previously. I’d had a novel published just before I got here. I don’t even list it among my publications because I so dislike it. Over the course of working alone—I’d never taken a workshop, I was 30 years old when I got here-- I had never had really rigorous readers respond to my work. The editor of that novel just liked it and published it, had nothing to say about a sentence or a word or anything really.

[00:12:26] Allan and Nahid and John L’Heureux were really rigorous in their reading. They made me aware of certain habits of mine, certain things I wasn’t doing that I really needed to do to make my fiction better. So it wasn’t so much that the stuff I wrote that year was so good, though I wrote some good stories that ended up being in my first collection, but that I became more self-aware as a writer through rigorous,
critical scrutiny and occasional encouragement. It was invaluable to me. After that year, Allan and I were asked to stay on as lecturers. 

[00:13:20] I was given a three year lectureship in creative writing to teach undergraduate workshops and I continued doing my work. I almost finished a collection and had some stories published.

[00:14:11] As I began my lectureship, John L’Heureux told me that if I wanted to continue to teach in university, I really needed to have an advanced degree of some kind. While I was a lecturer here, I began to take graduate courses in literature so that by the time I finished I had a master’s in English from Stanford. I did not come as a student. I came as a Stegner Fellow—and I ended up just spending two years rather than three of my lectureship because I was offered a job at Arizona State University, but I had finished my master’s.

**Humburg:** You went off to Arizona State and then Syracuse University before you came back to Stanford.

**Wolff:** [00:14:54] Yes, I was at Arizona State for two years and then I went to Syracuse where I taught for 17 years and then I came back in ’97 as a professor.

**Humburg:** What was it about coming back? I mean, what were the circumstances?

**Wolff:** [00:15:12] You mean why would anybody come to Stanford from Syracuse University?

**Humburg:** No, it’s more for you as a writer obviously concerned about your own development.

**Wolff:** [00:15:22] It’s the most selective workshop in the country. I can count on getting the best young writers in my workshop, though I had very fine young writers at Syracuse, some quite famous now. Northern California was also home for us. My wife and I
met here, not at Stanford but in San Francisco. My wife is a fifth generation San Franciscan. She has a large family that lives around here and we had intended to come back at some point anyway, so this offered us a very nice way of doing it and—

**Humburg:** What were the circumstances of the offer?

**Wolff:** [00:16:11] I don't know what you mean.

**Humburg:** Who made the offer? How did it unfold?

**Wolff:** [00:16:16] I don't remember the particulars. Anyway, I was offered a job and took it and I've been very happy teaching here. I love teaching here.

**Humburg:** So your responsibilities when you came back were to be involved in the creative writing program as well as in the English Department?

**Wolff:** [00:16:35] Tenured in the English department as all creative writers are if they're tenured here. We're in the English department. We all teach English department courses, literature courses, and we also teach creative writing courses.

**Humburg:** What is the relationship between the English department and the creative writing program?

**Wolff:** [00:16:58] The creative writing program has always been embedded in the English department here. In some universities they’re separate, as at Iowa, for example. The Iowa program has its own building. They’re another department, in effect, and they’re enormous, I mean they take in five times as many students as we do. We wouldn’t want to be that big. We like the selectivity and working with small groups and also we like the fact that it isn’t a degree program. [At Stanford]It is strictly the best of the best coming to write and concentrate on their writing without distraction. It's also been a magnet for undergraduates who like to write or have any thought of
writing later or want to just perfect their writing skills. It’s now the second largest minor in the university or maybe even the largest. About two thirds of those doing an English major here have the creative writing emphasis. That means they take all the courses an English major takes and also the creative writing workshops. 

[00:18:25] So they do a lot of writing for their English department courses and they’re being trained in the great tradition. It’s a very healthy, robust relationship we have with English.

**Humbug:** Sort of a complementarity.

**Wolff:** [00:18:46] I think so, yes.

**Humbug:** It’s interesting to note that when I interviewed Nate Oliveira [Studio Art in the Art Department] and also Michael Ramsaur from the Drama Department, they talked about the two approaches in the arts on campus – the theoretical, or scholarly, aspect and the practice, or the actual performance, aspect of an art form. It sounds like within English and creative writing, you’ve balanced those two elements of excellence in the—

**Wolff:** [00:19:09] For the undergrads, yes, absolutely. I won’t say it’s without its tensions, you know.

**Humbug:** Tell me about that.

**Wolff:** [00:19:16] Some of my colleagues resent the fact that so many of their students are drawn here because of their creative writing interest. But most of the faculty find [the students] to be particularly responsive and enthusiastic about literature, as they would be.

[00:19:59] I mean, they want to be writers, of course. So in any situation like this, you know, there’s always going to be some tensions, but the program that I taught at
Syracuse, by contrast, had an awful atmosphere. It was toxic. The tensions between the English department and the creative writing program were really, really bad and partly that was because it was a really distinguished creative writing program. Raymond Carver taught there, Grace Paley taught there, I taught there, Philip Booth, Hayden Caruth. Delmore Schwartz had taught there and a lot of our students were becoming famous, too, people like Jay McInerney, Mary Gordon, George Saunders, Lily King, Claire Messud, Tom Perrotta, all these people were making reputations and the English department itself was rather second-rate.

**Humburg:** Somehow here at Stanford you’ve achieved more of a balance.

**Wolff:** [00:21:17] There’s a balance because [English] is a first-rate department.

**Humburg:** Feeding back and forth.

**Wolff:** [00:21:20] Yes. It’s a first-rate department so they’re not insecure about their standing in relation to us. I’m friendly with almost all my colleagues here and indeed most of the creative writers are.

**Humburg:** Has this kind of collegiality influenced the way you teach or how you teach?

**Wolff:** [00:21:53] I don’t know that it—no, not any more than the kind of dysfunction between creative writing and English at Syracuse influenced the way I taught. No, I can’t think how it would, except that it makes me happier to be here.

**Humburg:** In terms of teaching or maybe even in your own professional writing career, are there any significant collaborations that you’ve had with other faculty at Stanford over the years?

**Wolff:** [00:22:44] Collaborations? In teaching, yes, definitely. I team teach a course every fall with Professor Lee Yearley from religious studies to incoming freshmen. It used to be called Introduction to Humanities. It’s now called Thinking Matters and all
freshmen have to take some chapter of this course. It used to be they had to do it for the whole year and so everybody would take a fall course. Everybody would be in a winter and a spring session. Now they can choose just one quarter.

[00:23:19] We used to have about 250 students. We’re now down to about 70 because of the fact that they can choose which quarter to take their one requirement in. I think it’s a shame that the university has given so much ground on humanities. I think they should expect more of the freshmen in terms of becoming acquainted with the liberal arts. The university knows how I feel about this. Anyway, I’ve taught that course with Professor Yearley now for 14 years, and I love it.

Humburg: I’m sort of going back to the theme that’s come up with others I’ve interviewed that the diversity among the students coming from other majors often adds a dimension to the classroom experience, to the teaching, that they have found changed either their own artwork or their own teaching.

Wolff: [00:25:17] Probably most of the students who’ve taken my classes are readers whether or not they’re English department majors.

[00:25:31] I haven’t noticed any great difference. Stanford students have gone through quite a selection process themselves, and if they’re really drawn to taking a writing course or a literature course, it’s because they’re already interested. They’re already readers. Maybe their professional goals are such that they are doing human biology as their major or electrical engineering, something like that, but nevertheless, they have this interest in literature and at that age, they’re not so markedly different from those who would declare themselves as English majors.

Humburg: How would you describe your own teaching philosophy?

Wolff: [00:26:26] I don’t really have one.
Humburg: It's interesting because Dagmar [Logee, English Department administrator] said that you're really quality-on with the students, that you have a very good rapport with them. So that's obviously part of how you approach your teaching. Is it just that you haven't thought of it as two or three sentences to describe?

Wolff: [00:26:49] Yes, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to give you a nutshell of my whole life. You know what I mean? The way I teach is my whole life. It's the way I think. It's the way I express myself. It's the way I deal with others. It's how I encourage my students to deal with each other, how I encourage them to read, the importance of literature, all these sorts of things go into it and I simply can't give it to you in a nutshell.

Humburg: Do you have any favorite moments in class or in advising students that really stand out for you as being very meaningful personally either for you as a writer or—

Wolff: [00:27:34] When I see them become really excited by something that they're reading—and maybe especially if it's the work of a contemporary, as in a workshop. Generally speaking, the thing I have to keep saying is because it's a workshop, we tend to think that the reason that you're here is to read something that's broken and to help the person fix it. But what if it's really good already? What if there's not much to be done? You have to be prepared for that eventuality as well.

[00:28:11] Don't just come in here with your red pencil ready. We're all naturally competitive, especially when we're young. Stanford students are pretty good at not showing it, but they are or they wouldn't be here. To see that fall away and just to see naked appreciation in their reading of something --those moments are golden.

Humburg: You've been in the creative writing program as a fellow, as a masters student, as a teacher, as a writer. So you've experienced the department from several perspectives.
So if I were to ask you another one of those nutshell questions—has the emphasis changed over time in the English curriculum and, if so, how has it evolved? You talked a little bit about how the creative writing program has changed.

**Wolff:** You’d probably do better to talk to an English professor with more history than I. I can say roughly that, as is true with most English departments, there used to be an emphasis on what was called coverage, that is, you’d want to make sure that students took classes, say, in old English and ended up with the modern novel, a sense of the historical sweep. That is not so much a concern of the English curriculum anymore. We do have what we call the Core that English majors take, but we’re really more interested in critical thinking, how to read deeply in a text, how to apply the skills you learn in engaging critically with a text, to other texts. It’s changed a lot in that way. I did my undergraduate work at Oxford and there we literally began with Anglo-Saxon and we went up to about 1914 and ended there. I liked it. I liked moving through the tradition. But it’s also true that there was something a little superficial about the way we were doing it. Whereas here, the idea is to sink deeper shafts into the work and to form habits of mind that are more useful than some forgettable information about the Augustan Age.

**Humburg:** How would you describe, in a sort of parallel way, if possible, the changes in the workshopping practice or how the students and fellows experience the creative writing program?

**Wolff:** It’s much more collegial now, and more rigorous. The procedure of the Stegner workshop is, anyway, and I think the undergraduate workshops are as well because we all learned how to teach in the Stegner workshops. When I was a Fellow you didn’t hand out your work a week ahead of time. You came in and read it aloud.
So that took a lot of time out of the workshop, especially if it was a long story. At the time, I thought it was a very inefficient way to conduct a workshop. So when I began teaching, I had my students hand out their things early. But a lot of the lecturers still kept that habit in their undergraduate teaching of having the students read their entire work aloud. [00:33:25] There may be value in that, in training students to read and speak well in public, and to hear how their sentences sound – to hear their own music. Anyway, now all the professors here in creative writing have their students in possession of the work to be discussed at least a week in advance so that they come in not only with thoughtful responses, but even have them written out, which really adds immeasurably to the quality of discussion of the work. So in that way the workshops have changed very much for the better, though I don't mean to disparage what I experienced here.

You have to remember that creative writing as an academic whole enterprise was still pretty new when I got here, and people were still trying to figure out how best to do it. Now there are over 300 of these programs in the country. Then there were maybe five or six.

**Humburg:** You were the director in the creative writing program for two years.

I think you’re right. I think it was two years. But I was interim director, just kind of place-holding for Eavan [Boland], because she is a great director. She’s like John L’Heureux in that way. She has a gift for it. Not many writers do.

**Humburg:** The administrative part of it?

**Wolff:** [00:35:19] Yes, but you have to like doing it. I mean the kind of thing that John did, getting so much more funding for everybody, for example. You can live now on what you make as a fellow here for those two years. In my time you could barely, barely survive.
Humburg: When you were the interim director of the creative writing program, did you have any vision for it?

Wolff: None. Let me just sit on this thing without breaking it until Eavan gets back. That was my vision.

Humburg: Is there anything that occurred when you were director that you are particularly proud of or excited about?

Wolff: I’m very proud that it survived my direction for two years.

Humburg: [Laughter] I’m sure you’re being very modest. Okay. [Laughter] Were there any challenges?

Wolff: Yes, there were challenges. There were political tensions among some people in the workshop that became inflamed. I did my best to handle them. But one never does these things perfectly. I probably could have done a better job than I

Humburg: Have you had any other roles in the university outside of the English Department or the Creative Writing Program?

Wolff: Oh, yes. Several. I’m one of the founders of the Ethics and War Speaker Series that was held here. I’m now on the committee on the Ethics and Wealth project. Both were inspired by Dean Debra Satz, who also directs the McCoy Center for Ethics and Society. I interviewed Tim O’Brien, George Packer, Sebastian Junger, people like that, and we had others in, as well.

[00:38:30] Richard Rhodes came and spoke. I just did a benefit for the library a couple weeks ago. I’m doing a benefit tomorrow night in Los Angeles for the Stanford Humanities Center, and I’ve done several of those. I’ve just started something here called Another Look, a Stanford book club.

Humburg: I read about it.
Wolff: [00:38:55] That’s going to be having its debut on November 12th at the Humanities Center. So I’m active in university affairs.

Humbug: Across all that you’ve contributed, what are you most proud of? What’s been most meaningful for you?

Wolff: [00:39:14] Probably the help and encouragement that I have been able to give to some of my Fellows and my undergraduates. Sometimes I can see the effect, and it makes me feel good.

Humbug: Has being at Stanford affected your actual writing practice?

Wolff: [00:39:39] When you are living always with the attention to texts that you have to live with here, it can make you very self-conscious of your own practice. It can make you a little too demanding, second-guessing yourself too much. But I don’t really know how it’s affected me, because there’s no “control me” who’s lived without teaching here. Right?

Humbug: [Laughter] Yes.

Wolff: [00:40:09] So you never know what you’d have been like if you hadn’t done this or if you had done that. It’s always guesswork. But certainly teaching literature and writing makes you very aware, and perhaps hyperaware of your own work. It can become paralyzing, I suppose, for some people.

Humbug: Who were some of the most memorable people within the university that you’ve encountered and have influenced—

Wolff: [00:41:09] Oh, I’d leave someone out if I did that. John L’Heureux was a great teacher and mentor. Eavan [Boland] is—I mean between her directing this program and John L’Heureux directing this program, I can’t tell you what a bounty this program has enjoyed because of these people. Eavan is one of the most selfless
people I know. When she wakes up in the morning she doesn’t think, how do I feel today? She thinks how do I get more health insurance for my lecturers? That’s the kind of person she is.

Humburg: And John L’Heureux?

Wolff: And John L’Heureux was like that, too, about his charges in this program. So they’re inspirational.

Humburg: What would you say you’ve learned from these special people? Because usually when you say somebody’s a mentor, something about their person or their approach you’ve taken into yourself.

Wolff: Yes. John was a great critic. I learned a lot about how to read manuscripts from him, not just books. I had a sense how to do that before, but how to deal with living people on the other end of a manuscript, because it isn’t the same thing. And watching him do that. He brought along a lot of young writers. David Vann, for example, who has had a great success, was a protégé of John’s.

Wolff: I met David when he was John’s undergraduate student here when I was teaching at Syracuse. John took him under his wing and brought him along. We all hope to do that. I’ve done that. I helped with a few people along the way.

Humburg: So I’m intrigued when you say “learning how to read a manuscript where there’s a living person on the other end.” Tell me just a little bit about that. I know I’m running up against time you have available, but I’m just so intrigued.

Wolff: It obviously is different from reading a poem by T. S. Eliot, or a novel by Mickey Spillane, you know.

Humburg: A nonliving person. Okay.

Wolff: Yes. You know, you can throw I, The Jury across the room and say what a
piece of shit. Right? You can’t do that with some 18 year old or even some 27 year old sitting across from you.

**Humburg:** Or some 57 year old, for heaven’s sake.

**Wolff:** [00:43:50] Yes. Exactly. Actually, we do have people in their 50s in our workshop. Harriet Doerr, *Stones for Ibarra*, was one of John’s protégés, and she was in her 60s when she was in the workshop, when she was a fellow here.

**Wolff:** [00:44:06] She won the National Book Award for that book. *Stones for Ibarra*. It’s a great book. Anyway, so yes, you have to be aware of the human dimension. At the same time, you have to be honest. So there’s a balancing act you have to do psychologically, spiritually even, when you’re dealing with people who’ve written something. They can really be hurt. At the same time, they need the truth to get better. So how do you negotiate those things? Chaucer’s feelings are not going to be hurt if you don’t like the *Canterbury Tales*, right? But it’s different when someone is still forming their sense of identity as a writer, and even wondering if they really can be a writer. Maybe you like this story, but there’s something in it that bothers you. You find it absurd and speak of it dismissively. You know you’re just talking about one element in the story, but the person hears it as if you don’t really think that this is a respectable piece of work. Unless they have a very strong sense of themselves, that can be very harmful. You have to be respectful and tell the truth at the same time. Some people don’t have that gift.

[00:45:38] I have tried to learn from people who do. I came up in a very rigorous boys’ school, a boarding school in Pennsylvania. I was a scholarship student there. I got my ass kicked by my English professors there, my masters, as they were called. It was the style of teaching there, very magisterial, tough, often sarcastic. I developed a
tough skin in that way, and I enjoyed it. Then I was in the army for four years. Then I was in a men’s college at Oxford where no slack was given you if you brought something in that was substandard. The irony, you could cut it with a knife, and the sense of disappointment your don could convey. I could take that kind of treatment, the Parris Island [laughter] style of intellectual training, and I prospered under it.

[00:46:34] But not everybody does. When I first started teaching, I think I taught a little like that. I could see it wasn’t really working very well sometimes and was having the opposite effect to what I intended. It was not inspirational to my students in the way it had been for me. As young men at Oxford, or in the army, we were all in the same boat, we enjoyed trading stories about this tough tutor or drill sergeant we had. We felt a kind of pride in what we could take. Most of my students haven’t come up in that way. I don’t mean I treat them like babies, but I’m not so bruising in my way of teaching as I might have been when I first started out.

Humburg: People like John, it sounds as though you learned from his example.

Wolff: [00:47:50] Watching people like him, yes. Ken Fields is like that, too. He’s very rigorous, but he also has a sense of humor, he’s warm, he gives respect to his students. I’ve learned a lot from watching other teachers. Lee Yearley, who I teach with, is very good that way.

Wolff: [00:48:23] I’d better get down to my office. I hope this is helpful.

Humburg: Totally helpful.


Humburg: Thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

Wolff: [00:48:29] I tried to be honest. [Laughter] So see you later, Judee.
[End of Interview with Tobias Wolff – October 24, 2012]