

Interview

Tobias Wolff

"I had a sense of myself belonging here whether I did or not . . . so my thoughts have returned here."

By David Schrieberg

Much has changed since Tobias Wolff first came to Stanford as a young high school teacher. Then 30, he considered himself among the earth's fortunate to earn a Stegner Fellowship and win the chance to lead the writer's life. By the time he returned 22 years later, in fall 1997, he had become one of America's most renowned short story craftsmen and literary memoirists, and a sought-after teacher of writers. * As any reader of his award-winning memoir *This Boy's Life* knows, Wolff spent his formative years in Washington state. Since then, and throughout 17 years teaching and living in Syracuse, N.Y., he has considered himself a Westerner. Coming back to Stanford, this time as professor of English, means coming home. * In a series of conversations, Wolff recently spoke with Stanford Today about writing, fiction, teaching and Stanford. The following is an edited transcript:

STANFORD TODAY: You return to Stanford as a teacher. Is it a happy homecoming?

WOLFF: Very much so. The depth of learning and enthusiasm and intellectual commitment in my department is dazzling. Many of my colleagues were here when I taught back in the '70s. So it is really being back among friends. I have extraordinary students. The Stegner Fellows are a remarkably talented bunch. One would expect that they would be unusual this year we had 658

applications for five places in fiction, if you can imagine that.

ST: With your students, do you assimilate your past experience as a Stegner Fellow?

WOLFF: I try to make use of that. When I look back on the stories I wrote when I was here, some of them were good, almost accidentally good. Most were not. And I recall that my workshop leaders were tactful in their ways of acquainting me with my shortcomings as a writer. So much so that I hardly realized they were doing it. I want always to keep that sort of thing in mind when I'm teaching. The way you get better in everything in this life is to make mistakes. Otherwise you're probably doing it right by accident. But you have to do everything wrong before you can really start with some authority to do it right. I want to treat young writers as if they might be a Conrad or a Virginia Woolf, but they don't have to write *Heart of Darkness* every time, or *To the Lighthouse* every time.

ST: You've always taught since you were a Stegner Fellow. Why?

WOLFF: I had a pretty healthy acquaintance with what the alternatives were. I was in the Army for four years. Then I went to college. I worked for the *Washington Post* as a reporter not for very long, about six months. I was a very bad reporter and I wasn't getting any fiction written.

After the *Post* I had those kinds of jobs that writers take in order to leave their days free. I was a waiter. A night watchman. I worked as a high school teacher. The greater world doesn't really much care whether you write or not. It doesn't care much about books. It doesn't care about the things that I care most about, and here I am surrounded by people who love writing, who devote their lives to literature and teaching literature and to seeing it as a way of understanding the world and understanding oneself that no other thing can quite afford. That's a very privileged position to be in. Teaching allowed me the time to do my own writing in a way that nothing I'd ever done before had. At a certain point I probably could have lived on my writing and stopped teaching. But I think my life would feel a little empty without it because of the intellectual heat I experience with brilliant young writers and the unexpectedness of what goes on in workshops. You never know what's going

to happen when you go into those workshops. I've learned at least as much from my students as they've learned from me. I know that's a cliché, but it happens in my case to be absolutely true.

ST: You were away from here for many years. You came back to a place from your younger past. In other interviews, you've talked about the importance of place. What is it about the West that stays in your sensibility as a writer?

WOLFF: Well, writers don't write about real places. I mean, the London of Charles Dickens is not London, it's a London that is in his mind and his spirit, his way of looking at the world. That's his London. And I suppose the West is my mythologized place. It's where I grew up. I had a sense of myself as belonging here whether I did or not, of being from here, whether I was or not, and so my thoughts have returned here.

ST: There are those who argue that humanities is dying as a field. You teach writing and literature. Do you think anybody cares about writing and literature?

WOLFF: Oh, I certainly do. The Stanford community could hardly be taken as a microcosm of the whole society, but English is still a very popular major at Stanford. Literary studies in general are very popular. We have many more applicants to our graduate program than we can possibly let in. In the culture as a whole? The disaster of television has created a tremendous vacuum in our culture. I really regard it as a catastrophe. The monster in our house devours the imagination; it's a completely passive entertainment. And reading has been the first casualty, because reading is active, demanding.

ST: At a time when you could say thinking has become shallower because of popular culture, possibly because of TV and computers, maybe because of this notion of immediate gratification, there is a robust literary life that's going strong. What do you make of that paradox?

WOLFF: There is a need in us for exactly what literature can give, which is a sense of who we are, beyond what data can tell us, beyond what simple information can tell us; a sense of the workings

of what we used to call the soul. People go where they can find that. They need to find that. In this secular and material culture, it's a kind of oasis.

ST: One of your colleagues here praised you as someone who has extraordinary sensitivity and gentleness in dealing with your writing students. Is that deliberate?

WOLFF: Grace Paley was here the other day and someone asked her about her teaching and what she thought the goal of the teacher should be, and she said, "Do no harm." She's right. You should not do any harm. When I first started teaching creative writing, I took every bad sentence as a personal affront, you know, as if my students really did know better and were doing it to provoke me. I think I was a little hard on them for a few years. But because my own growth as a writer has been rather slow, I've come more and more to understand that theirs is going to be slow, too; that I can't expect them to turn around fast. Not only that after a while you begin to realize that what you perhaps were impatient with was that they were writing differently than you might have written yourself. It's more fun teaching now; it's more exploratory than didactic.

ST: How does your approach change when you're teaching literature? What are you trying to impart when you teach literature, let's say, the short story?

WOLFF: I like to take the long view of a story. I want my students to know something about the historical and social context of the story, maybe a little bit about the writer. In the end, though, we have to approach the story as an object in itself, and so I look very closely at language and form. How do writers use the resources of language, voice, atmosphere, all those things to make you feel what they want you to feel, to make you think what they want you to think? How does it hang together? What's different about it from what other writers do? Why are we reading this? And what has this person done to advance the art in this particular story? What have we seen here that we maybe haven't seen in other work?

ST: Author and poet Lewis Buzbee wrote of your fiction: "Wolff is never harsh. Indeed, there is little judgment and no fingerpointing." Is that an accurate way to describe what you do?

WOLFF: As Camus said, "To breathe is to judge." I do think that there's judgment in my work. Perhaps it might be more exact to say I hope that there's little condemnation. There's a difference between judgment and condemnation. I believe in the possibility of evil, and sometimes it appears in my work, but I wouldn't find it interesting to write completely evil people. It would be beyond my capacity to imagine them.

ST: You did these two memoirs (*This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*) that dealt with your early life. Do you see yourself doing memoirs of the last 20 years and dealing with yourself as a family person, as a teacher, as a writer?

WOLFF: I have no thoughts of doing that now. I won't say I'll never do it because I said I'd never do the other two, and I did them. So I'm wary of these sorts of declarations. My interest right now is fiction. I feel relieved of the sense that a memoir is the book that needs to be written, which is why you write a book.

ST: Why did those books need to be written?

WOLFF: That was the material that was most urgent for me. When I started to write *This Boy's Life*, I was working on a short story collection that I wanted to be working on, but this material was so insistent that I finally had to surrender and put the story collection to the side and work on this book, which I did for four years. I was very reluctant to enter into the business of writing memoirs. But whenever I started to invent around this autobiographical material, it would go flat, conventional. Whenever I'd go back and deal with the genuine experience, track it very closely, then it would come to life again. I used to have a very different idea about writing. I used to think, well, you just sat down and you damn well did it, and you did what you wanted to do. But as I get older, I'm much more aware of how subject I am to the material itself. Sometimes things are very

intractable; they don't seem to want to be written, and you finally have to leave them alone. Other things that you don't particularly want to write about will come at you again and again until you write them, so there's a strange, somewhat irrational and uncontrollable element to writing.

ST: You have said that you have no theory of stories, just a theory for each story you write. What makes a short story work?

WOLFF: Every successful short story works in a different way. Chekhov's story "At Sea" doesn't work in the same way Joyce's story "The Dead" works. Every story that is successful is successful on its own terms. There's the short story according to Borges; there's the short story according to James Baldwin; there's the short story according to Fitzgerald or Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter. There's no form you can prescribe for a short story. I would say that the stories that have stayed with me over the years are stories that make some unexpected use of the form, that open people up to scrutiny in a way that I haven't quite seen. I go case by case. Not why are stories good, but why is *this* story good.

ST: What draws you to the short story?

WOLFF: Perhaps that it's so inexhaustible and so elusive a form. Also very powerful and challenging. Gabriel García Márquez has a great line. He said, "With a novel you can win by a decision, but a short story you have to win by a knockout," and that's true. A story has to be really efficient. You cannot waste anything. You've got to go in far and you've got to land it hard. It demands both economy of means and magnanimity of ends. You want large results from it, and you're compelled by its very shortness to using all your resources of language, form and understanding. ST

David Schrieberg, former South America bureau chief for Newsweek, is a California-based journalist. His last article for this magazine was on Stanford and the corporate world.

