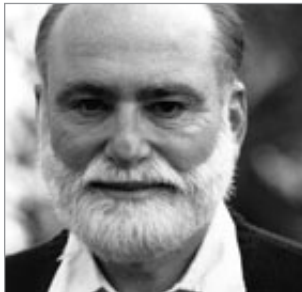


Geoffrey Wolff

A N I N T E R V I E W

by Lacy Crawford



GEOFFREY WOLFF spends the summer months in Bath, Maine, a small, proud ship-building town where the deep-cut Kennebec River meets the sea. The Wolff house is waterside, with a grassy slope leading to a floating dock, and a

Geoffrey Wolff was born in 1937 in Hollywood, California, to Duke and Rosemary Wolff. The family split up when Geoffrey was twelve, and he chose to live with his father, while his much younger brother, Tobias Wolff, spent his childhood with their mother. Under his father's tutelage, Geoffrey learned to race motorboats, crash cars, discern great jazz from good, and skip town in the middle of the night. Later he was educated at Choate, Princeton, and Cambridge, and taught at a university outside Istanbul before beginning his career writing obituaries for the *Washington Post*. His works include novels (*Bad Debts*,

Providence, and *The Final Club*), biographies of Harry Crosby and of John O'Hara, a collection of essays, a book about Maine, and a memoir, *Duke of Deception*, about life with his father. In 2006 he will step down as director of the Graduate Program in Writing at the University of California, Irvine. The fast cars and faster boats of his youth have been supplanted by his family's sailboat and a deep, complex love for the Boston Red Sox. He and his wife Priscilla will retire near their two sons and two (soon to be three) grandchildren in New England, where the Red Sox are World Series Champions and the sailboat awaits.

glassed-in porch facing the far bank. During the long first day of the interview—a gloomy June day of chilly fog—and the second, as gleaming and warm as the first was dark—Wolff often paused in the course of his lengthy tales and looked out over the river, gathering his memory, taking his time.

Geoffrey is the eldest of a pair of richly talented brothers, both of whom have written acclaimed memoirs about their family. In *The Duke of Deception*, Geoffrey wrote lovingly of the father who was a great conjuror, whose obsession with the trappings and trimmings of social class led him to work tirelessly to create

an impression of a high life. As a boy Geoffrey observed the con man at work and drew from him both an exquisite appreciation of surfaces and a blunt intolerance for niceties. Almost in spite of himself, it seems, he has led a life of the sort his father might have conjured: boarding school at Choate, summa cum laude from Princeton, a Fullbright, a Guggenheim, teaching positions at numerous top universities, and, for the last decade, a position as director of one of the most prestigious writing programs in the United States.

As quick and accomplished as Wolff's mind is, he laughed often at the life revealing itself in his words. His ribald tales were almost Chaucerian—bawdy and poetic, each answering a question, each speaking to a different stage of Wolff's journey from gifted observer to master writer. Later he he went over the edited transcript and added touches to deepen the measure of reflection.

The interview had been delayed for several months while Wolff recovered from major open-heart surgery, a medical sequel to the cardiac "event" he chronicled in the title essay, "A Day at the Beach." The only evidence of his recent surgery was a slight breathlessness as we climbed the grassy hill from his boat dock, where he had taken me to see the river at the river's eye level.

The sailboat was missing from its buoy—one of Wolff's sons had run it aground, and it was in for repairs—but that, too, was taken in stride. As Wolff explained, his willingness to approach so much with so little hullabaloo may well have come from watching a father push the envelope always, and very often too far. The possible legacies of such a childhood are two: shame, or wonder. Wolff chose wonder.

LACY CRAWFORD

You began your writing career as a journalist, but it was something of a rocky start.

GEOFFREY WOLFF

I was hired as an obituary writer for the *Washington Post* in 1965, paid the statutory minimum of \$150 a week. There was a six-month trial period for new hires; the paper had six months in which to fire you without cause, after which you became a member of the guild and earned a kind of tenure. So they weren't shy about letting people go if it wasn't a good fit. And I wasn't: I didn't get names straight, I didn't get addresses straight, I was shy about asking for photos of the deceased, and in early July, the city editor fired me. He told me I was overeducated, and that I'd thank them for it someday, and that I had three weeks before I had to be gone.

Priscilla and I were getting married in August, and her parents were already not ecstatic at the thought of my being a son-in-law, so getting canned was gasoline on the fire. When I had ten days left on the job, Ben Bradlee appeared at the *Post*. I knew who he was, because he'd been the national editor of *Newsweek*, but it was unclear what his role was at the *Post*. I was writing an op-ed piece on Robert Lowell's refusal to attend a White House arts jamboree because of the bombing of Vietnam. This refusal was a scandal; nice people thought the rude poet was terrible. But I thought he was wonderful. Someone in the newsroom told me that Bradlee had

been Lowell's friend in boarding school, so I went to talk to him. Well, he didn't have much to say about Lowell, but he did tell me that he'd heard I was the worst reporter on the paper. I said, Well, thanks, Mr. Bradlee, but I've already been shit-canned. But suddenly he unfired me. I had written book reviews for the *Post*, and Bradlee had read them, and he asked me if I'd like to be the book critic on the paper. I said I sure would.

CRAWFORD

Did you enjoy reviewing?

WOLFF

I enjoyed it, and was proud of what it was teaching me. The *Post* let me write about anything that caught my interest. I'd write two or maybe three reviews each week and assign the rest to anyone willing to write six or seven hundred words for \$25. Most people I asked were willing. I was at the *Post* from 1965 to 1969, and I just loved being there. In those days the *Post* was not so much a sacred institution as it was Ben Bradlee's gang of young reporters given a lot of room to be enterprising. Bradlee was exhilarating; he was hiring good writers, some of them outlaws, and most of them irreverent. It was a great place to work, and Washington, D.C., was an animated place to live. We had President Johnson to deplore, and of course the Vietnam War, and while reporters were as scarab-hard on the surface as ever, in those days they were still capable of being surprised—and excited—by dishonesty and calumny. And then they'd get mad. And coming from academic life with its fields and specialties and provincial politics, it was bracing to work among generalists and to try to be one.

I relished the city, and I loved the *Post*. And when I wanted to start my first novel (*Bad Debts*) in 1968, Bradlee gave me a leave of absence for six months and "forgot" to turn off the spigot on my paychecks while I was gone.

CRAWFORD

The resemblance between your own family and the family in *Bad Debts* is unmistakable. The son in the novel, Caxton, who has what one might call your role, is despicable: you yourself have called him a "cruel cartoon." Why did you create such an ugly character?

WOLFF

I was hard on Caxton for the worst possible reason. Anybody who knew me knew that the character Freeman—Caxton's father—was my father. (The truth is that I had begun dining out on stories about my father, and I hoped—after writing *Bad Debts*—I wouldn't do that). But to trick myself into thinking it was not an autobiographical novel, I made Caxton manifestly different from me. Pinched and stiff; a real stick. A petty bureaucrat on his way up. I was throwing down the glove, saying, *This is not me*. I was marking out my future, and also marking the book as fiction.

CRAWFORD

Was saddling yourself with Caxton a way of apologizing to your father for dining out on his story?

WOLFF

Of my books, *Bad Debts* got made for the most psychologically impenetrable motive. After I finished the novel I behaved in ways that I am not proud of. I sent the book to my father with an all-too-characteristically chastising note, *more in sorrow than in anger*, blah-blah-blah. He'd been out of prison for less than a year. He was riding buses up and down the Pacific Coast Highway all day long. He really didn't need a book about his misdemeanors and misadventures!

CRAWFORD

Were you proud of the book at all?

WOLFF

James Baldwin wrote something very kind about *Bad Debts*: he wrote that it was written with a "loving lack of pity." I had known Baldwin in Turkey during the two years I taught at Robert College in Istanbul, and I think he returned the affection and respect I felt for him, so he imagined the book that he wanted to read. But "loving lack of pity" became to me like a mantra of reproach. The book was not loving; it was sure lacking in pity.

CRAWFORD

What did your mother say about the novel, about Ann, the character of the mother?

WOLFF

She was wounded, I have no doubt. She asked to read the book before it was published, and she did the strangest thing. The typescript was a mess, with strikeouts all through it and emendations in its margins; she kept it for a week and retyped it. She returned it to me perfectly neat. But she had nothing much to say about it.

CRAWFORD

Was that generous, or was that cruel?

WOLFF

A generous gesture with a cruel consequence. I mean, a cleanly typed manuscript was extremely helpful to have. But my mother was not a simple woman; by cleaning it up she let me know she had read every word, and to know this made me blush.

CRAWFORD

Outside your family, at least, *Bad Debts* was very well received.

WOLFF

Yes. It didn't sell worth a nickel, but it got very good reviews, and after it came out Robert Gottlieb at Knopf told my agent that whatever my next novel was, he wanted it. I thought, *Wow, that's the spirit!* At the time, I was working at *Newsweek*—I had left the *Post* to become the book reviewer at *Newsweek* because they offered me more than twice my salary. Priscilla and I had a baby boy and another on the way. I hated working at *Newsweek*. It was a horrible place because it wasn't exactly horrible. Not that they took themselves too seriously, but they didn't take themselves seriously enough. I had been warned that I'd have less freedom there than I'd enjoyed at the *Post*. At first this seemed not to be so. I wrote two reviews a week, and I chose the books. They let me do what I wanted with these books, within five or six hundred words; it took me a year to figure out that I was earning my freedom by choosing to write about the books that they wanted me to choose. Also, I missed the fun at the *Post*, the great theater of the newsroom, with reporters batting out front-pagers on deadline and people yelling. There was a one-handed typist there—his other hand held a Lucky Strike—and he was the fastest I ever saw, Kitten on the Keys. He liked to say that he could write better than anyone who could type faster and type faster than anyone who could write better. At *Newsweek* we all huddled in cubicles, and I wanted to leave as soon as I got there.

But Priscilla and I moved with our son Nick to Princeton, and after a year there, Walt Litz in the English department invited me to lunch at Lahiere's and offered me a job teaching writing. This was before the creative writing department was assembled, before Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates and the others. So I was working at *Newsweek*, and teaching two courses at Princeton, and sending my better book reviews to the *New Leader*, which called me collect to edit them, and paid me—well, I wish it was my line, but it's Calvin Trillin's—in the low two figures (I wish!), and on top of it all and the coming of our baby, Justin, I began *The Sightseer*.

Because of the reception of *Bad Debts*, and Gottlieb's enthusiasm, my agent encouraged me to believe that I would be getting a very handsome advance for my next novel. And although I'd used the \$2,500 advance from *Bad Debts* to pay for a skiing vacation to Austria, I was not heedlessly profligate like my father was, and by then we'd saved up some money from *Newsweek* and my teaching jobs. Priscilla urged me to quit *Newsweek* and quit teaching and suggested that we move to Europe, where I could just write. Incredibly, this seemed at the time a most sensible course of action. I was afraid of being what I thought of as a running-dog capitalist, an institutional soul, and I really was miserable at *Newsweek*, so I up and quit,

and we took all of our savings and moved to Europe, where I planned to finish my second novel and, like Trollope, I guess, put the blotter to *The End* and begin a third.

CRAWFORD

But *The Sightseer* didn't come as easily as *Bad Debts*.

WOLFF

It was an exacting novel, an engine of anxiety and dismay. I'd send pieces of *The Sightseer* to my agent, who responded laconically, but circumspect was Robert Lescher's middle name anyway, so I didn't notice the warning flag being raised. He gave me the somewhat alarming news that there were passages that he found difficult to follow. But I finished a first draft in a year and a half, and Lescher submitted it to Knopf. Gottlieb read it right away, and he called my agent and said, *What I meant is that I'll publish anything Geoffrey Wolff writes except this!* The book was quickly shown around Random House and Farrar Straus, and neither house wanted anything to do with it. In the meantime, we'd left with two little boys for Europe with no jobs to come back to, and a brand new automobile waiting for us at the docks at Genoa, and commitments to a rather lavish place in Spain with a swimming pool, and a very unlavish place in the Dolomites in the summer. Oh, and we traveled with me on my motorcycle while the family rode in our Simca hatchback because I didn't want to ride around in the car with the kids. The car was noisy and full of Pampers. The only solace Priscilla had was that it was a really rainy summer that year, and she would look in the Simca's rearview mirror and watch me, hunched over my handlebars, serially drown.

Our money was absolutely finite: it was like watching sand run through an hourglass. We had nothing to call on. Everything had been looking so sweet, and then suddenly I realized, My God, I've got to do something! So I returned to *The Sightseer* and rewrote draft after draft. I changed it from first person to third person, and back again, working really carefully.

One of the things I realize now is that I had confused a writer's stamina with a writer's character. I had always been a little bit awed by those people who write four hundred pages into a book and then realize it's not working and quit, saying to themselves, *Two years gone, but so what, I've learned a thing or two*. When I was younger, I thought that was cowardly—that you saw an undertaking, whatever it was—through. I also believed by some false ethical formulation that the writer owed it to a book to follow through, as though anybody owes anybody anything where books are concerned. So I just kept plugging away on *The Sightseer*. I just kept going and going and going. What Santayana said about fanaticism, redoubling the effort as one loses sight of the aim. I wrote that novel in many drafts with many

voices, but it never won through to its characters. It was a novel of ideas, and not particularly original ideas, either, with some bright passages of description.

CRAWFORD

How was the book conceived?

WOLFF

I had a dear friend at the time who was a documentary filmmaker. He went down to Mississippi in 1966 with some fellow civil rights activists and urged black factory workers to go on strike. The activists brought tents for the factory workers to live in, and food to feed them, because my friend wanted to make a movie called *Tent City*. But I knew enough then to understand that you don't manipulate people like that. Shortly thereafter, I heard about a similar but much worse example of this kind of artistically justified meddling that transpired in Bolivia: a CIA friend told me about a movie commissioned to advertise the benefits of democracy. The film crew chose a mountain town to make a film about the violent overthrow of a communist regime. The village had no communists—it had no Republicans or Democrats, either—and so villagers were singled out by the filmmakers to play certain roles. But nobody thought through ahead of time that this would mean that some villager—owing to his physiognomy—would win the revolution, and another villager would lose. They made this half-hour propaganda movie, and then they packed up and left town. My friend heard about the aftermath: everybody in the village hated everybody else. So between these stories, I thought about the human application of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle—the theory that by measuring something, you always alter it in some way, and you can really ruin lives—and *The Sightseer* was about that, how in trying to capture a life, in a movie or in photographs or as a tourist, you impact what you're seeing so that it's certainly inauthentic and perhaps ruined. That was the idea, and God almighty, did it go astray. I confess this with a certain amount of tenderness, because *The Sightseer* was school for me; I learned much on its behalf, and I'm afraid that everything I had learned since I had left school ended up in the book. I just kept plugging away at the manuscript for six years, and even though the music in the lines wasn't bad, the book didn't work. It didn't work in first drafts, and it didn't get much better. It just kept getting different. But I had so much time invested that I wouldn't let it go. Much later, I figured out that after I got my advance from Random House, who ultimately did buy the book, I had been paid about a nickel an hour.

CRAWFORD

What inspiration—either for a story, or for writing itself—followed the frustration of *The Sightseer*?

WOLFF

Before I finished *The Sightseer*, I started the next novel, *Inklings*, as a sort of antidote to *The Sightseer*. *Inklings* was a story about a dyspeptic critic who tries at long last to write his own novel, and about the nastiness he encounters from the people around him. In a way I meant to get back at those people who had turned down *The Sightseer*. At that age, I was very keen to perceived slights! But I also had another book in the works. After Random House initially turned down *The Sightseer*, they asked me if there was any other book I wanted to write. And in fact, not long before, I had come across Harry Crosby in Malcolm Cowley's book *Exile's Return*, and I thought his was a great story. We were still in Princeton at the time, and I went over to Firestone Library and looked him up and nobody had written about him, so I suggested this biography of Crosby to Random House, and I signed a contract for it in 1971. But it wasn't published until 1976. That began a long period of writing during which I'd go back and forth between fiction and nonfiction, and I think it may be too glib to say, but in hindsight it felt to me that I'd go on vacation from one genre to the other. I'd feel oppressed after years of taking responsibility for the creation of an entire world, as you do when you write fiction, because I could never make the world as comely as I wanted to—or not comely, but have it turn out in exactly the surprising ways I'd imagined it ought to turn out—so it would be a holiday to turn to nonfiction and have fact as my obligation, a kind of ballast. The challenge with nonfiction is the arrangement of facts, and to honor what you believe to be true. I believe in a contract between the reader and the writer of nonfiction: the writer won't get every fact right, or even most facts right, but he won't write anything he knows not to be true. I still go back and forth between these different challenges, the arrangement of fact and the intimidating license of invention.

CRAWFORD

So despite the difficult process of writing *The Sightseer*, you were able to settle in as a writer.

WOLFF

My family and I lived very well in Europe for eighteen months, and just as the money was running out, I got a Guggenheim out of the blue.

CRAWFORD

Guggenheim grants generally don't come out of the blue.

WOLFF

Well, no, I'd applied for one, but I had been turned down the year before, and I'd had no idea how we were going to get through. The award pulled the bacon out of the

fire. We moved back to the States, where Princeton offered me a couple of years of teaching as a homecoming. In 1973 we moved to Vermont and built a house on Prickly Mountain, in the Mad River Valley.

CRAWFORD

And it was in Vermont, of course, that you wrote *The Duke of Deception*, your father's biography.

WOLFF

Yes. Writing that book was a surprise; it was actually finished in about as many years as I thought it would take to finish it—two. I began in 1976. It was a very happy experience. I'd get pissed off at my father, and speak to him aloud at times, but I had discovered early in the book that many of the elements I was interested in exploring were qualities in him that I hadn't noticed before I began to write. The book changed course as I realized it wasn't just the story of poor me, who had had an outrageous dad, but also the story of a dad who had me as a kid. Writing it from both sides felt wholesome to me.

CRAWFORD

In the opening chapter of *Duke*, you describe learning about your own role in the family: "One day, writing about my father with no want of astonishment and love, it came to me that I am his creature as well as his get. I cannot now shake this conviction, that I was trained as his instrument of perpetuation, put here to put him into the record."

What was it you came to see during the writing that you hadn't noticed you were learning as a boy, and which led you to believe you'd been trained to record his life and being?

WOLFF

Because my father was so determined to suggest a set of experiences and accomplishments, a heritage that was not his, he was under some burden to be subtle about it. He wasn't stupid; he knew how to be subtle. He left these breadcrumbs around, and it required study and attention to figure out what he was trying to suggest. So I began to be able to decode his hints, and this was like learning a second language: the foreign language of a certain social class, and a certain set of experiences particular to that class and that time.

CRAWFORD

You write a brief and startling coming-clean about the "pretty history for an American clubman" your father sought to project:

Its fault is that it was not true. My father was a bullshit artist. True, there were many boarding schools, each less pleased with the little Duke than the last, but none of them was Groton. There was no Yale, and by the time he walked from a room at a mention of Skull and Bones I knew this, and he knew that I knew it.

My father was a Jew. This did not seem to him a good idea, and so it was his notion to disassemble his history, begin at zero, and re-create himself. His sustaining line of work till shortly before he died was as a confidence man.

But it is true, of course, that a confidence man who cannot inspire confidence in his marks is nothing at all, so perhaps his tuneup of his bloodline, educational *vita*, and war record was merely the price of doing business in a culture preoccupied with appearances.

CRAWFORD

So you became an expert on those appearances?

WOLFF

I think so. At the time when I began learning all of this, I was living in places like Shelbyville, Tennessee, so I did not see it in my environment. Nevertheless, by the time my stepmother paid to send me to boarding school at Choate, I knew enough to know that social comedy was, in fact, funny. My father was pained and provoked by an exclusionary class system, but my experience at Choate was different. In the mid-1950s Choate, like a lot of boarding schools, was divided not by class so much as by attitude. The gross cleavage was between the straight-arrows and the “negos” (negative no-gos), and I was very much in the latter camp: skeptical and sardonic, wise-ass; the headmaster called me “the weak link in an otherwise strong Choate chain.” I couldn’t wait to quote him to my buddies.

But at Princeton, there was a quality that passed for a kind of—certainly not aristocracy—I guess grace, a certain unsolemn large-mindedness, and that quality impressed me, not, I think, because I was impressed by my classmates’ station in life but because I wished I were more civil, and more generous, than I was. Nicer, say. Not tamer, but better. There were interesting people at Princeton—as various as can be—and many of them are still my closest friends. But some of those students who were nominally aristocrats, who carried lustrous reputations as scholar-athletes or fulfilled certain standards of comeliness in very specific ways, some of these students were capable of enormous cruelty, expressed in the horrors of the eating club system, which I wrote about in *The Final Club*. That mechanism caused real, real pain to a lot of people. But you learn from that too. In crucial ways my years as an undergraduate were the most important years of my life. I learned what mattered to me, and Princeton encouraged it.

CRAWFORD

The topic of social pretension, particularly with reference to your father, recalls the Heisenberg Principle. The minute one tried to gauge your father, to size him up, take his dimensions, he became something else, because of course it was mostly a mirage. But he never tried to be smarter than he was, or wittier than he was, or more compassionate than he was; he just pretended to the trappings of a different life. In *Duke*, you wrote that he chastised you when you were a boy for being a small-print artist, for failing, in a sense, to recognize that everyone's public persona is a confection to some degree.

WOLFF

Yes. And that's part of the phenomenon I was speaking of earlier, learning that being his child was something to reckon with rather than boo-hoo about. The study of social surfaces that I learned watching him strongly influenced a method of thinking that is central to me. Here's an example of that thinking. My sons and I are rabid Red Sox fans. We get on the phone after games and talk about them. The detailed part of these discussions—let's call it discrimination—is very pleasurable: anatomizing the statistics, the players. The times being the times, and computers being computers, the statistical calculations have gotten fascinating. That filigree, those tiny little manifestations of success and failure, those little surface lesions in a player's makeup that you can see if you look closely enough—all of that I find interesting. And the manifestation of social pretension is complex in the same way, and preoccupied, of course, with surface appearance, surface being everything. It's interesting the way the novels of Thackeray are interesting, the way Trollope and Jane Austen are interesting. There is a complex system in place with its intentional and ignorant violations; it's an entire world of immutability in collision with variation. Any system—call it a game, call it manners—that is examined with that kind of acuity and relentlessness is to me by its nature interesting.

CRAWFORD

The very act of writing about your father must have required such rigorous pursuit of fact and of truth.

WOLFF

Yes. And while others can judge this better than I can, I think *The Duke of Deception* has a voice distinct from anything else I've written. That's my voice, for better or for worse, uninfluenced by any other writers' work, because it was so crucially important to make the work emotionally exact.

CRAWFORD

The other writer whose work comes to mind is of course your brother, Tobias Wolff, who covered much of the same ground in his memoir *This Boy's Life*, albeit from a very different perspective, and in a very different style. While you grew up essentially under your father's wing, your brother lived with your mother, and your memoirs taken together form a truly complex portrait of a family. How would you compare *Duke of Deception* and *This Boy's Life* as narratives?

WOLFF

Let me say first that Toby and I are very, very close. But as writers we're fundamentally different. For one thing, we have distinct approaches to memory, to the process of accessing the past. Toby would never have put photographs in *This Boy's Life*, the way I did in *The Duke of Deception*. If he hasn't described images, then they aren't seeable; he relies on himself utterly to create the world. He declares right up front that in writing he relies completely on his memory as a narrative instrument. He has no wish to measure his memories against documents or interview transcripts. On the other hand, I have every wish to cross-check my memories, because to me it's interesting to record how memory enhances, misleads, to record the process of distortion. For example, in *The Duke of Deception* I say somewhere that memory insists that Seattle, where my father and I lived for a time, had wonderful weather. And I also say that I remember having been a happy and successful student there. Well, the record says otherwise! The weather was shitty, and the student was even worse. So I'm interested: How did that happen? It was chastening to me, and delightful, to discover that my readings of the masters at Choate—just at the most solipsistic level, who was friendly to me and who was not—were unreliable tested against my school files. One of the masters whom I'd confided in, who had hung out with my dad, wrote in reports that I was a spoiled young fop, but another master who'd seemed mean as a snake, my geometry teacher, Mr. Shirk, wrote that I was a well-meaning boy. The disparity was an instruction in narrative, and it reminded me that, particularly in autobiography, when the relentless first person can be so suffocating to the reader, any narrative worth its salt needs to be populated by other points of view. As a writer, I often find my memory is airless, and I need to puncture its protective membrane somehow. Often this calls for a declaration of uncertainty, and always of emotional complication. A fancy way, perhaps, of justifying mess.

Now, Toby's memory is already popping like corn in the oven with plenty of alternatives and characters and so forth, so this isn't a liability for him. But I have to work not to be shut up inside my own memory.

Another difference in our work that jumps out at me is this. I don't mean to speak for Toby, but I believe we take quite distinct approaches to the unfolding of a story.

I would say that he cleans up after himself, and I don't. This distinction is actually at the heart of why I like to write at all. I tend to walk in the rounds, by degrees closing in on emotional and dictional exactitude. I try a word or adduce an emotion, and say, No, not that, or this, or this, and I leave the holes on the battlefield to show where I've shot and missed, where I've been. It's the process of talking to the reader about getting to a point. That process for me is the thing itself. Toby's work, I think, expresses itself differently, removes the scaffolding, sweeps up after itself and leaves on the page what it has achieved, not the process of achieving. Which isn't to say there's no evidence in Toby's gorgeous sentences of struggle, of trying to figure things out; it's rather a different kind of evidence—apt, wise, irreducible—that's been left. This discrepancy explains the criticism I have received from many critics, that there is “too much Wolff” in the writing. I've heard that particularly about my biographies. And I know what they mean. It isn't a failure to get out of the way, it's a refusal to get out of the way. I can't pretend that there isn't a mediating intelligence through which these stories are passing. So my teammate in the mediation is the reader. I think of the writing as talking back and forth about a third thing that's happening. There's an even unfolding before our eyes, and we're talking about it together, the reader and I.

CRAWFORD

You and Toby have also drawn very different portraits of your mother.

WOLFF

My relationship with my mother was never easy. I've never written this, but people used to tell me that she always seemed to be on the edge of calling me “Professor Wolff.” She was never comfortable with me; I was like a scourge. There was a perfect storm in my family when I was twelve. My father came home to Sarasota, Florida, from Turkey, and Mother had confided in me that she'd been cheating on him with a retired state cop. Then, when he got a job at Boeing, she decided that she was going to trick him and make him believe that we were all moving to Seattle, when really she had no intention of following him with the two of us boys. I was in the righteous rage that only a twelve-year-old can inflame, and our relationship never recovered from that. I didn't see her again for years.

In *This Boy's Life*, meanwhile, Toby wrote about her marriage to a man I never met. To me, the marriage seemed consistent with the same pattern—she chose these brutal men, mean guys in flannel shirts who were good with guns. To me it was reliable that she would make the wrong choice, every time—nothing changed.

CRAWFORD

So you knew two different women, you and Toby; heard two different voices.

WOLFF

Well, we did, yes. We used to. My mother spoke in a monotone. There was no music in her voice—it was absolutely flat and deliberate. I interviewed her for *The Duke of Deception*, and she was plenty generous with her time and memories, and as I transcribed the tapes I heard that her words were articulate and deliberate, but they sounded stumblebum; it was like a dentist’s drill, listening to her. She told everything sequentially, with fidelity. Here’s a story legendary with my brother and me: when she was living in Florida, one of us asked her what her next-door neighbor was like. She replied, “Oh, he’s real nice. He paved his driveway. Then he got a new car. And he was backing the car out over the driveway which he’d paved, and he ran over his dog and killed it. It’s a really nice job he did on the driveway.”

In any case, until my son Nicholas was born, she brought out a quiet bloodlust in me.

Now, Toby, by contrast, had experienced her as this wonderful—run any dare, take a chance, go out to Utah to mine for uranium even though she doesn’t know what uranium is—gutsy woman. Our versions of her were miles apart. Over the years those versions have converged, so that Toby and I now recognize the same woman; Toby, though, was much closer to her and cared for her like an angel in her last years.

CRAWFORD

How did she respond to your two books?

WOLFF

She responded to *The Duke of Deception* with a quite amazing letter. She quarreled with some dates and sequences and places, and she wasn’t always right, but she didn’t challenge any of my interpretations, she never said, *You’ve got that all wrong*. But she did say, in a very elegant sentence at the end, “I wish it was a portrait of the perfect mother, but then I wasn’t a perfect mother, but then who was?” And you can’t beat that.

Toby received a similar response from her. She was witty about it, telling the *New York Times* that after both books were published she felt that a train had run over her heading south, and then run over her again going back north. I know that when *The Duke of Deception* was published, I had one of the most bizarre experiences of my life—I should have anticipated it, but I didn’t—I was treated like a character, treated only on the evidence I supplied, treated as an honorable and courageous person, as if in some way I was this poor, plucky boy who had survived this ghastly woman. There were reviews that actually condensed her to such a caricature, that attacked her and let me off the hook. So here’s the simple question I asked myself: Did my mother wish the book had never been written? Yes. She wished it had never been written. Then she wrote one herself. I’ve never seen it, but Toby has. A book about her life. She didn’t invite me to look at it, and rather

specifically told Toby she didn't want me to. It's her point of view, and Toby has said it would not fascinate me. He hasn't said it would anger me, just that it's exactly what I might expect. Her father, for example, was a really grotesque man, a sadistic monster, and in the book she flattens him out into a type. According to Toby, there is the same fatal flatness of tone in her writing that there was in her voice, that ultimately suggests that everything equals everything else. This point of view accounts for her depressing resignation, but it also accounts for her courage. She stood up to a great deal of pain in her life. Without whining.

CRAWFORD

Your sensitivity to your mother's diction and tone is not surprising, given that diction is in so many cases the primary element of your writing. I wonder, then, where you learned such patterns of language. For example, your father stuttered. Did this cause you to learn to listen in a different way?

WOLFF

There's pleasure for me in answering those questions. First of all, I've thought often about how this started, why I wanted to write, why I thought I could write, and at the heart of my writing is the experience of my father, of driving around with him, which I did a lot—I'd go shopping with him, he'd be going out to hornswoggle somebody or buy a new suit or get a haircut or get me a haircut—and he would sing to me. He knew tons of Bessie Smith songs—I remember "Back in Black Mountain," "where a child will slap your face and all the birds sing bass." Then he'd do limericks and ballads. I could recite whole patches of the "Ballad of Eskimo Nell" when I was eight. I could have delivered it to my third-grade class: "so give me a seat and stand me a drink and a tale you I'll tell, of Dead-eyed Dick and Mexico Pete and a girl called Eskimo Nell." Verse after verse. I didn't understand what many of the words meant, but I loved the way they stirred up one another. My father would come to a really good enjambment in a limerick, and I'd hear it, and syntax was probably the first thing I noticed about sentences: the turns and the surprises. I listened to him sing and recite for hours and hours. It was the best training this young writer could ever have. This was when he was around, living with the family and not in London or Peru or Turkey or wherever the hell, when I was eight, nine, ten. And when he'd leave on long trips there would fall over our house this sudden poverty of language. Cornucopia, and then desert. It was utterly unfair to my mother; he was doing a vaudeville act in a way, or a recital, mostly to amuse himself; but it stuck. So I developed a perhaps excessive affection for verbal surprise, for the way the last line of the limerick turns it, or the way the parts of a sentence or a verse fit together yet collided with expectation. I learned this music.

CRAWFORD

How was this love of spoken word, this attuned ear, translated to work on the page?

WOLFF

The next time that a sustained verbal fit overcame me was at Choate. I was always jailed in obligatory study hall, and when I was supposed to be reading about quadratic equations and plane geometry, I was in fact reading from another school textbook, which I had disguised by coloring the cover with a crayon. It was Lewis Untermeyer's *Anthology of American Poetry*. I'd be stuck in study hall hour after hour after hour—*please, don't throw me in the brier patch!*—and I ate through the entire book. I loved the poems. I had never been so revved up. The good ones and the bad ones. Robert Penn Warren's "Ballad of Billie Potts" and Hart Crane's "The Bridge" ... I began to distinguish between refinements of cadence. And then, when I studied in England for a year after Choate, I got a huge dose of Milton. Most improbably, Milton had a huge effect on the way I made sentences.

CRAWFORD

That's apparent: the last lines of *Paradise Lost* appear in at least three of your books.

WOLFF

I'm surprised only three. That stuttering good-bye, as far as I'm concerned, is about as good as it gets: "They hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way."

There's music, too. That's the other huge influence on my style, and it goes back to listening to jazz with my father, no doubt about it. My father would play the record player—Billie Holliday and Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young and Art Tatum—till the cows came home, and I love scat vocals, hip and surprising and inevitable all at once. A wonderful group came together for a short period in the late 1950s, the Jimmy Giuffre trio, which was Bob Brookmeyer on valve trombone, Giuffre on clarinet, and Jim Hall on guitar; it had no rhythm section, no piano. Those are all melodic instruments, and their music would weave in and out: one instrument would be leading, and then another would fade in, take over. It wasn't that each instrument would take a set or a chorus, and then stop and hand it off. Instead they were always adjusting their prominence, coming in and out. Their music has been described as akin to a mobile turning in the wind, showing one face and then the other. And that pattern is embedded in my ambition for what I want my prose to do. I want several things to be going on at once, and one face being held to the light, and then another being held to the light. This pattern does introduce the possibility of confusion, so that's the work of my revision, developing the prose so it is complicated, but not confused. I'm not always successful.

CRAWFORD

The characters in your novel *Providence* have especially distinct voices—the slang of the gangsters, and of their moll—voices of a place and time not seen in your other work. How was that novel born?

WOLFF

Providence was an indulgence; I loved playing with it. We had lived in bucolic Vermont seven years when we moved to Providence. From hearing the sound of snow falling on white pines I went to hearing the big-band-blare neighborhoods drunk on ethnicity. Italian, mobster, patrician, Portuguese, Irish. What spurred the novel was getting robbed a couple of times. We were renting John Hawkes's house, a gloomy place, with mattresses on the floor and fifteen-year-old dust devils hiding behind the concrete block and pine board bookcases. The first robbery happened while I was in Los Angeles, working on a magazine piece, so Priscilla was alone with our sons. One night the boys had a fight, and one of them broke a window. The burglar reached in through the broken window and unlocked the door. He, more likely *they*, did not come upstairs, as the thieves do in *Providence*, but we did have a golden retriever who welcomed them, and they made off with a lot of gear. I got the call in Los Angeles from Priscilla, who was rightly terrified, and once I was back home, just when we thought it was all going to be okay, the pricks came back and took the rest of our stuff. I was in a murderous rage. I made myself something of a pain in the ass at the police station. The thieves had stolen our credit cards, and the police knew exactly where they'd been used, so I asked for information. Who are these guys? But Providence was a mob town, so the police had bigger crimes to worry about. So I started going down to court myself, to see who these people were, who broke into houses twice. And the first afternoon I was there, I realized it was the most amazing place I'd been to since the Old Vic. The interactions were so compressed; you could hear so much of the lives these people lived. There were only about four or five criminal lawyers in town, so a lawyer would show up one day with a big mobster, like Baby Legs Minocchio, and then show up another day with some pretty guy who'd just been caught in a home invasion. It was all lingo, all richness of language. One of the exchanges I heard in the court made it directly into the book: someone asking a criminal, "How many people have you killed?" And the guy replies, "Killed or shot? Killed? Ten, twenty, I don't know, forty." I mean, that sequence amazed me. I could go near some of the places where these criminals hung out, like the Acorn Tap on I-95, and I'd sit and listen. The language was wonderful. And the moment where I felt the book all came together was that moment when the thug Skippy is in the dumpster behind the Acorn Tap, and he decides he's got ambitions, that he wants to be in management.

From *Providence*:

Several predawn hours in a dumpster provided the occasion for Skippy to reflect on his circumstances, his ambitions, his limitations. He would never, he knew, throw long on third for the Patriots. A point guard for St. Anselm's was not, at five-eleven, a point guard for the Celts. A schoolboy shortstop riding the pine seven innings out of nine was destined to join the Red Sox family as paying rather than paid kin.... Down there in the dumpster, with about half a load of the stuff they put in dumpsters, Skippy conceived a kind of philosophy of life. Skippy's philosophy of life was that he wanted what he wanted, and wanted it for free. And he wanted to be wearing nice clothes when it was delivered to him. Skippy wanted a clean cop-proof hustle. He wanted the street to come to his office. He aspired to give rather than receive commandments. "I want," he told Lisa, "to be a management."

The language in that passage was exactly what I wanted for the book, and finding it made subsequent drafts exciting. I'd heard the voice. Now, that's a book that I knew would have a very brief shelf life. The slang is very much of the moment. But I was happy writing it.

CRAWFORD

The world of *Providence* could not be more different from the rarified, blue-blood world of *The Final Club*.

WOLFF

Those two novels were two really different experiences. *The Final Club* was a strange book to undertake. I had doubts all the way through about whether I should be doing it at all. Partly it seemed possible to me that at the core it was a book about a world preposterously petty and local. I wrote it without a contract, because I didn't want to describe the world of the book to a publisher. I knew that if it was going to be any good it would have to speak for itself, because I couldn't argue for why it should be written. The one terrifying question that any novelist asks himself, and has to ask all the time (unless he's a megalomaniac) is, *Who the hell cares?* And then the corollary question, *Why do I care about this?* I'm not interested in the psychological answer to that question with regard to my own work. In the case of *The Final Club*, my answer is this: I believe intellectually and emotionally that suffering is where you find it, hurt is where it happens, whether the world where it happens seems tight and small or grand and historically consequential. I tried to tackle that question, to challenge myself in my John O'Hara biography (*The Art of Burning Bridges*) by making the analogy that while it is true that a person failing to be tapped for *Skull and Bones* might say, and believe, *Now I know what it would be like to get a cancer diagnosis*, it is unimaginable that someone who's just gotten a cancer

diagnosis would say, *Now I know what it feels like not to get tapped for Skull and Bones*. And in that distinction is suggested the reality of a reader's sense of scale, a reader's finite patience with a character's troubles. Nevertheless, the writer, or *this* writer, is stuck with another reality: grief is where I find it. After the publication of *The Final Club*, Bryant Gumbel asked me on the *Today Show*, "With all due respect, here are a bunch of people at Princeton, well-fed, well-dressed; how can we possibly care about their troubles?" To which the only answer for me is that I care about them. I know it's not enough that I care about them, but it's what I'm stuck with. When I wrote *The Final Club* in 1990, the kind of social anxiety I was writing about was already an antique, which may be another way of admitting that I'm something of an antique. There's consistency to the way I think and work. *The Final Club*, *Black Sun*, the O'Hara biography, all of those books drew me to the margins, not to what I would recognize as the center of things. To the margins I am drawn, shame on me.

If I'm inclined to give myself bad reviews, if I'm inclined to charge myself with the absence of a piece of equipment that I admire in writing and in writers, it is that I have no tropism toward gravity. That I do have a tropism toward the coarse, the misbegotten, the vulgar, and the comical. Now, comedy's deadly serious to me; it's the way I live, it's how I keep myself in proportion. But still, I do recognize that Shakespeare's not just Falstaff. He's also Richard II.

What I've come to believe at age sixty-six is that being a writer, a good writer or a successful writer—two different things—has a lot to do with what you choose or are given to be interested in. And I think it's the one variable in writing that you can't do very much about. I've always admired in John McPhee that he writes so willfully about improbable matters: shad, oranges, the pine barrens; these are not obvious things. But boy, does he ever dive into them. McPhee is always drawn to procedures in which someone has demonstrated a skill whose exercise is remarkable to him: How do they do that? So that's a constant: he's trying to anatomize and to admire by understanding a process, such as making a birch-bark canoe. But I don't believe that anybody can be taught what to be interested in. And in the end, that may be half of it. That may easily be half of it. *What* a writer's interested in may be the better half.

CRAWFORD

What was the seed of interest for you in writing *The Age of Consent*?

WOLFF

The Age of Consent took longer to write than it should have. It's an example of the peril of long projects, the phenomenon of the novelist growing sick of the novel that the novelist is working on. It was written on behalf of Maisie, a sassy girl character I

had been interested in for a while. Also, given the child-abuse panic going on at the time, it seemed to me that it might be interesting to present a young character who refused to displace responsibility for her actions, refused to think of herself as a victim. The novel never meant to be didactic, was character driven, about a phenomenon particular to that one character, and one place. I wrote the book originally in three first-person voices, which I know now was an amateur solution to the creation of the story. It took two years to write, and when I finished it I submitted it to Knopf and my editor, Gary Fisketjon, sent it back edited and mentioned, casually, that all things being equal, the world would be better if the novel could have been told in one voice rather than three. I hung up the phone, and a year later I finished a draft all in Maisie's voice. But it was a mess. There was so much this young girl didn't know, and it made her preachy about herself. A year after that, I finished the book in its current form. So. By the time I got through those two extra years, and then got the new revision back from Gary, then a copyedited book, then a proof, I was sick to death of it. I wouldn't read *King Lear* that many times. Much of the delay and revision was cumulative, the intrusion and excision of my own voice. I was laboring to solve problems that I had willfully created, answering formal questions that had never been raised. There comes a moment—or there came one to me—when a writer has to say, *Begone. I don't want to talk to you anymore.* And each time that frustration point is reached, it takes a little while longer to get over it and move on to what's next.

CRAWFORD

The Art of Burning Bridges was next for you: the biography of John O'Hara.

WOLFF

Yes, and writing about O'Hara did a few things to me that I won't let happen again. I will not willingly write a nonfiction book about a mean person again. I'll write a novel about a mean person, which is what I'm working on now, but I won't ever again write about somebody I want out of my house, especially if he never knocked, never asked to come in! The writing took ten years of very little fun, and it's the one book I wrote because somebody suggested it to me, and I thought I could write it because O'Hara seemed very much like my father; I thought it would be like falling off a log. Well, it was like falling off a log into quicksand. Even when I wrote about Harry Crosby—who had charm and verve—I came not to enjoy his company. Now I've learned, slowly, as long-book writers do. You learn one or two things with each book. That's why story writers are so blessed. They learn one or two things with each story.

CRAWFORD

How come you've never written short stories?

WOLFF

I don't know. I've started them. A couple of my novels have begun as short stories, including *Providence*. I think I know how to judge them, I know how to read them, I love reading them, I think I know how they work when they're good, but I don't know how to make them. I don't know how to make a watch, either. It's just a different skill. But because I don't write stories, the fiction I do write is perhaps closer in its initial conception to biography, or my biography is closer to the novel, than it would otherwise be. If I were a story writer, then there would be a huge gulf between the short story and the biography—having to do with duration, with accumulation of matter, even in the research: how much you think you need to know about a world. I would rather read stories than anything, but I build novels.

CRAWFORD

You've written about the first novel you ever wrote, which you wrote during your year off from Princeton. Your writing teacher, Richard Blackmur, read it and told you to lock it in a drawer in your desk, throw away the key, and then burn the desk. The tale, as you tell it now, is funny; but it's hard to imagine that you laughed then. Were you crushed?

WOLFF

I wasn't. Maybe owing to thickheadedness. And when I say thickheadedness, I mean that I'm not exquisitely fine-tuned to insult, to being slighted. But more important, and this is something at the heart of me: I have never had a huge amount of interest in myself as a subject, except as an enactor and butt of farce. It seems a seriously unserious way to think about oneself, except that I think about myself in this unserious way very seriously. These are the kinds of stories I like to tell about myself, although not about other people: I like the narrative thread of a blind improbable dream, where suddenly the blinders are lifted, and I say, *My God, what was I thinking?* It goes with tenderness of ego. Mine is not so tender; I prefer the roughneck of farce.

This isn't to say that I can't be wounded, though. What would an interview be without a confession? So here's a shameful confession: I did the stupidest thing a writer can ever do. I actually looked at the customer reviews of my John O'Hara biography on Amazon.com. And I couldn't eat for a week. I mean, those people hated it. And I moped around for a bit, but then I caught myself. The experience suggested an idea for a character—a curmudgeon—in this mean little novel I'm working on. One of the mean things the mean man does is put reviews of everything on Amazon.com. Electric mixers, Shakespeare's plays, toasters, clock radios, you name it ... he lets it rip. I'm teaching myself to ignore those eruptions of bad temper

I read in the website reviews of my book. I mean, lest I go forth and sin again, these people wanted to lop off my hands.

And as for writing and ego: I don't know if it's because other things are more important, or because I feel prized at home, but, as much as I love his sentences, I think Faulkner's infamous remark that he'd run over any number of old ladies on behalf of a snippet from *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is fatuous. Not me. I wouldn't. I have a pretty profound indifference toward the idea of posterity, and my feelings are pretty hard for strangers to hurt these days.

Now, Blackmur's response to my first try at a novel was a really important moment in my life because first of all it taught me something as a teacher. I would never say to a student anything like what he said to me. But I try to say what I say to them the way he said that to me, by which I mean that there was never the slightest hint of contempt in his voice. He made it clear that he was remarking on an utterly unremarkable, on the verge of being uninteresting, phenomenon, that a kid had written a bad novel, and to him, or so I took from him, this had no prophetic value. And that is something I think about, and something I tell my students. Our writing workshops are sanctuaries because the history of your previous writing—your early drafts—has no value at all. You get a brand-new, clean start every time you approach the work.

CRAWFORD

How did you come to teaching?

WOLFF

The first place I taught writing was Princeton. At that time, other than my studies with Blackmur, I'd never taken a writing course. The Writers' Workshop at Iowa was around then, the University of Michigan had a writing program, but it certainly never entered my mind to go to one. The whole idea when I was a kid was a little suspect. And like a lot of people, I doubted that it was possible to teach anything about the practice of fiction writing that was useful. I discovered very quickly that a lot can be taught.

CRAWFORD

What can be taught?

WOLFF

How to get better. Not how to get good, but how to get better. My instinct as a teacher has always been to hold the writer to whatever is best in her work. I don't say, *Here's how Flannery O'Connor did it*; I say, *Here's how you did it on page 8, and why, I wonder, can't you do as well on page 6 and page 12, and maybe you can, and*

here's a way to think about doing that. And the other instinct in my teaching is that I never tell someone whether or not to keep going with a project. As I said earlier, I don't believe bad work is prophetic, although God knows if enough work has gone by and nothing seems to be happening, well, it's probably telling you something. It's not for me to tell, it isn't. Even at Irvine, when I'm asked by somebody, *Should I press on with this*, I'll go so far as to say, I wouldn't keep on with *this*, but I can't answer the question about whether or not one should keep on with the writing. I haven't the vaguest idea.

CRAWFORD

That must frustrate people.

WOLFF

Yeah. But so what? I mean, it isn't that I'm afraid to hurt someone's feelings. God knows there are many signs offered in a graduate writing program that things are going well or not going well that have nothing to do with whether the work is published or the students get agents or editors, and has everything to do with how the students judge the work they're doing. People aren't stupid. But to go back to the beginning, the principle that I have followed from the beginning is just golden rule stuff. I won't tolerate incivility. Indecorum I welcome, but incivility and cruelty I won't abide. I tell my students this before we start, and I also let on that I'm not curious about the extraneous difficulties of composing work, so I am not the one to come to with, "Oh my boyfriend left me, it hurts so bad." And it isn't just that I don't much care, it's also that I'm no use to them, there's nothing I can do about the bullying of everyday life, that's what the writing is meant to beat back. Now, there are students who complain that they can't find time to do their writing, and to them I say, you don't have to, there's no one making you do it. You should finish this graduate course, I guess, or not even that, but you're under no obligation. And the only piece of life advice I give is this: Do not make whoever it is you love miserable because you didn't try it and you should have, or you didn't stick with it long enough. There's no shame in not doing it if you don't want to. So all of these things lead to a certain preoccupation common to all the better writing programs: keeping the attention, even artificially, primarily on the work, on the process of making it better. So I don't talk about agents, I don't talk about editors, except when it bears anecdotally on some question of the work itself: then I might invoke a particular editor's practice, if that seems useful. And the students learn that very quickly. At some competitive programs, as you know, there's huge temptation to worry less about how the work goes than snagging the home telephone number of the fiction editor of *The New Yorker*.

Here's what our merry band of twelve does once every week, three-plus hours per workshop: every student writes about every other student's work, a couple of pages or more, delivers a copy to the person who wrote the work, and another copy to me. I read these comments after the workshop, and often respond to them the following week. The students also line-edit one another's work, but I don't look at that. When I first taught writing I didn't require students to submit to me copies of their comments to one another because I thought it was like reading other people's mail. But I soon learned that there is no privacy in a writing workshop anyway, and my reading the comments is a deterrent to the various forms of laziness and bad character that somebody might express in the course of responding to a classmate's work. Because I read the comments, the natural competitiveness of students in these programs gets expressed in the form of more and more responsible and thoughtful responses. These comments are invaluable to the writer, perhaps the single most useful tool an MFA program can provide.

In addition, when I began leading workshops I was scrupulous about keeping my mouth shut until the end of class, and letting the students talk in their own workshop. Now I run roughshod over them. I reckon I'm paid to have judgments and express them. And the students seem to be indulgent of this. They also feel comfortable telling me to shut up, so that works out. In any case, the workshop experiences at the graduate level at Irvine have been the happiest classroom experiences I've ever had.

CRAWFORD

Because it's the most challenging, the most prestigious program?

WOLFF

We have about four hundred and fifty applicants every year, and we accept six. And it's not that they're six brilliant writers. Usually at least one brilliant writer comes in, but mostly they're six people who've never met, who because of force of voice or of passion or enthusiasm or some other factor have been selected to share in this workshop. Morale is high. We take usually half men and half women, because it's as easy to do it as not.

CRAWFORD

How do you select writers to admit?

WOLFF

My colleague, Michelle Latiolais, is the other full-time fiction writer teaching at Irvine, and between us we read all of the applications ourselves, and anyone who's in the finalist bin, about forty applicants, is read by both of us. For me, the principal

determinant is voice. I figure I can teach architecture, how to release information, and I can improve by line-editing musical expression, but I can't help a writer who has no sense of what music is, or why it matters. So I'm looking for a distinctive sound provoked by a distinctive attitude, and beyond that I don't really care about the nature of the work. I'm not interested in science fiction, so I don't choose to spend my time teaching it. Experimental fiction is fine with me so long as it's not some shopworn notion of what experimental fiction is, which it usually is. Michelle has a refined bullshit detector—she'll alert me if what we've got isn't a string of pearls but just a pile of pearls. She's a little bit of a sucker for the unconventional, just because it's unconventional. But in the end, we don't horse-trade. We always want the same students, in the end. We don't take anyone we don't both want. So they know they're wanted. A culture of goodwill develops and gets passed along. Second-year students will take the first-year students out into the playground and beat them up if they don't behave well.

CRAWFORD

How do you run your classes?

WOLFF

The students train one another. The workshops are charged. There's a lot of laughter, a sharing of enthusiasms. We try to talk about issues of writing that matter to all of us. The close line-editing—unless a matter of diction turns on a strategic narrative choice—that's all done on the page, and not in the workshop. We might, though, strip-clean the first paragraph of a story. There's a great deal of talk about telling and showing, and, as I think is true of other top programs, perhaps excepting Brown's, we don't favor any certain school of writing. We take the work on its own terms. Students in the workshop are very good at that. So the conversations are at a level of engagement that I find exciting.

CRAWFORD

Will you talk a little bit about the role of these MFA programs? It's been suggested a thousand times that they're replacing the lost Maxwell Perkins relationship between the brilliant young writer and the brilliant mentoring editor, that no one has the chance anymore to sit at someone else's knee.

WOLFF

That's bullshit. First of all, I don't think Maxwell Perkins was a Maxwell Perkins. I think Gary Fisketjon is. And there are others: Morgan Entrekin, and Elizabeth Sifton at Farrar Straus, are fastidious line editors and enter into imaginative dialogue with the writer's work they're trying to make as good as it can be. There

are acquisition editors and there are line editors, and there are people who do both. In my amateur studies of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and O'Hara (whose best work Perkins rejected), I've seen enough of Perkins's undistinguished responses to be skeptical about his legend. What writing programs can do, and it's their only utility, but it's crucial, is to socialize the process for a limited time—a couple of years—to take what is essentially a solitary practice and create a group of people who are struggling on behalf of a common enterprise. But who are not coming to a twelve-step meeting about that struggle, who are coming together to talk practically about it, and who will be read intensely by their colleagues. Colleagues are everything. In terms of the quality of the teachers, I mean, the worst programs can have terrific teachers. The quality of the students is everything in these programs, and students learn the most from fellow students. And basically what the MFA replaces is not Maxwell Perkins but a waitress job, from my point of view. It is a better way to feed yourself while you're beginning to write. If, on the other hand, somebody has to leave a writing program crippled by debt—and \$60,000 is not an uncommon load of loans at some writing programs—then attending them is a bad idea. I advise my undergraduate students not to go to any program that makes them pay tuition, that doesn't promise to support their study. It isn't worth it. In that case it is better to be a waiter or waitress.

The idea that there are workshop stories is another infuriating canard. You know, God knows how many people have said that there's a *New Yorker* story; well, maybe there was a *New Yorker* story in the fifties, although I'm suspicious of any generalization—but in my experience there isn't any such thing as a workshop story. There are bad undergraduate stories that are frequently and ludicrously the same, with either the smoking revolver on the pillow or the overturned sleeping pills on the bedside table. Every undergraduate workshop story written by a boy of a certain age begins with the alarm clock waking him up, he's got a hangover, he either has a stranger in bed next to him or he's ruing that he doesn't have a stranger in bed next to him. But these are kids. This is like making generalizations about teenagers, this isn't talking about creative work.

So as long as there's fair dealing between the institution and the students, as long as their time is not pissed away by the institution on useless stuff, you know, courses in library science, as long as they have some time to write, and they don't have as much time as they think they have, ever, because they are teaching, then at least, no harm done, and it's honorable work, so there's not much argument against it. Except, after all the hoops some of them have gone through to get in, every year there are two of them who say, *Phew, I'm in, I'm going to lay back and chill for a couple of years*. In that case, they're suckers, because if they don't work on behalf of their writing, if they coast, they've competed for the worst teaching job in America. Our students have teaching jobs at U.C. Irvine that pay \$15,000 a year.

CRAWFORD

What led to your decision to retire?

WOLFF

I've been teaching since 1961. What is that? Forty-three years. Oh, God. What I don't like about it is that I've been doing it so long. It's exhausting. Each of the students can tune out of classroom discussion for a brief time, thirty seconds, but I can't. If I lose it in there for one second, it's lost. So sometimes I feel as an outcome of concentration that I've forced myself to premature opinions. And that demoralizes me, and confounds the slow, however-long-it-takes, systematic labor of trying to figure out the choices I want to make on the page. And no question, my writing has suffered. I have less energy to spend; I'm older; I used to be able to do three things at once; now I can't do two things at once, and when I'm teaching, and reading theses, everything else goes to shit. It's worse during the application process, when I'm reading applications all day and all night for six weeks. I'm ready to go back to a simpler way to do things, which is not to do more than one thing anymore.

But I will leave with a good taste in my mouth for the institution and the students. I'm proud of them and of what they let me do to help them.

CRAWFORD

Will you return to writing?

WOLFF

Yes, yes; I'm working on this novel I've mentioned, and also a book about Joshua Slocum, who circumnavigated the world on his sailboat.

CRAWFORD

What are you reading?

WOLFF

Well, right now I'm reading about the tulip mania. And I was on a long run of reading yards and yards about Churchill, and by him, and I get pulled back to the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, and particularly in Europe, whether it's history or fiction. My last big novel immersion was in *Vanity Fair*, which I hadn't read since I was a schoolkid, and I loved how long it took to read, how leisurely things unfolded, and I was letting them unfold without applying responses in Thackeray's margins. I'm a patsy for Patrick O'Brien, too. Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* is shockingly prescient. My next reading project will be clipper ships, the China trade, all of that, circumnavigations, to prepare for my Slocum book.

CRAWFORD

Which writers do you most admire?

WOLFF

Two more or less contemporary writers who are utterly different: Robert Stone and Stanley Elkin. Bob Stone is the real article from the nineteenth century, the real McCoy. There are writers aplenty with big ambitions, but one of the few who really thinks big is Bob: he's an artist, and for better or worse he's a philosopher and he's a theologian, and he's somebody who thinks thinks thinks, and he does not write about anything local, it's always grand. The writers that I know and admire have great respect for him. He's a long-ball hitter. But the person my heart goes out to is Stanley Elkin. Elkin didn't care about posterity, he was perfectly willing to write books that would be used up, which is to say so exquisitely slang-ridden that they had no hope of surviving more than five or six years. Stanley Elkin I would rather read than almost anybody I can think of. The lavishness. And if, incidentally, I can see real traces of influence on my work, Stanley would be the person I'd have to say whose voice I hear echoed in my own. From time to time I will see something I have written and say, that's an Elkinism, that's how Stanley might have written it, except he'd likely have done it better.

CRAWFORD

Can you think of a particular instance of Elkin in your work?

WOLFF

Oh, sure, hand me *A Day at the Beach*, and I'll find one pretty soon. The first sentence of the title essay: "I'd be the last one to brag up my vacation, show slides of Mustique's Cotton Club, Curtain Bluff you, Bitter End you, call Petit St. Vincent by its initials (PSV). As for chitchatting my physiological bona fides, my regime, pulse rate at rest, systolic upper (let's talk through the roof), and diastolic lower (shoot the moon), my SGOT abnormalities, the uric acid settled in gouty crystals at my extremities—would I impose the particulars?"

That's Elkin. I didn't know it when I was writing it, but I'm talking to Stanley there. The sort of piling on, the making verbs out of nouns, the syncopation of it, the riff.

CRAWFORD

My experience of reading your work, particularly a book like *The Sightseer*, is that it is fun to watch you play. But I think it also requires somebody who's very comfortable letting the writer play, and I can imagine there are some readers who read for plot, and who are very uncomfortable with the eddies.

WOLFF

Yes, yes. *The Sightseer* came for me pre-Stanley. That is to say, I hadn't read any Stanley Elkin when I wrote *The Sightseer*, and there is a pre-Stanley and a post-Stanley, there is no question about that in my mind. And what happened post-Stanley is that the paragraphing tends toward luxury rather than parsimony, but the structuring is more coherent. Things bounce off one another when it's working more than it had before when they were too often set pieces on display. If I've gotten better, I owe more than a little thanks to the example of Stanley Elkin.

CRAWFORD

Are there books you have left to write?

WOLFF

I don't know how many books anyone is supposed to have in him, but I do know there's a limit. Sometimes there are a lot of books, and sometimes there's one. But I do feel a scary sensation of fighting for ground I've already taken. Now what to do about that—Do you say, *Well then, that's it? Closing time.* That would be okay for me to say: *That's it, I knew some things, I didn't know as many things as I wanted to know, I had some things on my mind, and not as many things as I thought I had on my mind, and now I'm just going back over the same ground, and so now I'm done.* I want to find that out after I stop teaching. That's what I don't know now, whether a certain lack of renewal of passion is owing to the obstacle of teaching or whether it's the natural, organic way of things, that the creative imperative gets used up. I hope that I write a fine book about Joshua Slocum, because he was a fine adventurer and deserves the best I can give. But let me say I don't resist a valediction, when it comes. ▣

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