



Tracy Daugherty Oral History Interview, June 2, 2015

Title

“A Citizen, Novelist and Biographer at OSU”

Date

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Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Daugherty provides an overview up his upbringing in west Texas, including the role that his grandfather played in his love of literature, and his own early interests in astronomy and drumming. From there he charts his path as a student, discussing his decision to pursue both bachelor's and master's degrees at Southern Methodist University, and the vibrant literary culture that thrived at SMU during those years. He then recalls his Ph.D. studies at the University of Houston and, in particular, the crucial role that his mentor, Donald Barthelme, played in his growth as a writer. He likewise notes his early use of a manual typewriter to compose texts while a graduate student and the differences in his creative process that arose out of the introduction of computers to his work.

The session next turns its attention to Daugherty's experiences at Oregon State, and as part of this conversation Daugherty recalls his initial interview for the OSU position, his first impressions of the university, his duties as a junior faculty member, and colleagues who became important to him as his career progressed. He likewise recounts the lengthy process by which OSU was able to establish its Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing, and provides a broader perspective on the gradual blossoming of a strong literary culture on campus and in the community.

In its final third, the interview focuses more intently on Daugherty's teaching and writing. He discusses changes in the courses that he taught during his years at OSU, evolving trends in literature and literacy, and the impact that receiving awards can have on an author. He also shares his perspective on the challenges of writing various forms of fiction versus researching and composing a biography, notes the circumstances that have led him to select the three subjects of the biographies that he has penned thus far, and describes the often uncomfortable obligations associated with the modern-day book tour. The interview closes with Daugherty's thoughts on future projects, his engagement with professional organizations, and his pride in having been a part of creating a Creative Writing program at OSU that finds itself in high demand today.

Interviewee

Tracy Daugherty

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/daugherty/>

Transcript

Janice Dilg: Okay, if you would like to introduce yourself, please?

Tracy Daugherty: I'm Tracy Daugherty, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English and Creative Writing.

JD: And I am Janice Dilg, the oral historian for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project. Today is June 2nd, 2015, and we are conducting this interview in the Valley Library. Good morning and welcome.

TD: Good morning, thank you.

JD: I think if we perhaps do a little bit of background, a little bit of where you're from and some of your early family roots, that will inform where you've been since.

TD: Alright. I grew up in Midland, Texas. And that's George Bush's home town, oil country, so he's the most famous son from Midland, and I won't claim to be a famous son, but that's where I came from. And I went to school in Texas, first at SMU in Dallas and then at the University of Houston, and never left Texas until I came here to Oregon for the job at OSU. So, I was a lifelong Texan and did all my studies in writing there before coming here. And my father was a geologist, an oil man, as everyone was in Midland, Texas, and I think I was expected to become an oil man.

But I think my earliest influence in terms of writing was my grandfather, who was a politician in Oklahoma. He came from a very small town called Walter; it's near the border of Texas and Oklahoma, and he was a member of the House of Representatives in Oklahoma. And when he was a very young boy, he was a precocious speaker. And my great-grandfather was a radical socialist farmer in Oklahoma. They don't have too many of those anymore, but back around 1900 and the time of the first World War, a lot of the farmers were quite radical politically, and my great-grandfather was one of those. And he taught my grandfather socialist speeches and quite literally set him on soap boxes on street corners in small towns in Oklahoma and my grandfather would give speeches. So, the first time I saw my name in print was actually on an old poster. I was named after my grandfather. He was also called Tracy Daugherty and he had these posters with a picture of his boyish face and the words "Come here: Tracy Daugherty, good loud speaker." So, I saw that name in print and I liked the way it looked. I liked that name in print. So, that was my first idea about language and crafted language, and he was always encouraging me when I was a boy to speak and to write and to gather history and stories. So, I think he was my biggest influence, in terms of the writing.

And very early on, I loved books. My mother tells me—I don't have the memory of this, but when I was very small she would take me places, say to the zoo, and we would look at the elephants and I would say immediately, "I want to go home now." And she would say "aren't you having fun?" and I would say "yes, but I want to go home." And we'd go home and I would immediately get a sheet of paper and draw the elephants. So, I think that impulse to capture moments before they pass too far into the future is what lies behind a lot of writing, and I had that impulse early and loved books as physical objects. That's something that future generations may lack with electronic books and reading on screens now. But I loved the way books felt and the way they smelled, and again, I loved seeing words in print. And that, combined with my grandfather's influence, I think led me to writing.

JD: And give us a bit of a sense of what Midland, Texas was like when you were growing up.

TD: There was nothing to look at on the ground. It's flat and dusty and pretty barren, nothing but tumbleweeds and oil rigs. So, I was naturally drawn to the sky. My memory of west Texas really is of a distant, flat horizon and an immense sky, and I became very interested in astronomy early on and, as a consequence, joined an astronomy club and we built our own telescope and observatory. So, that was my first real passion, along with writing, was astronomy maps and charts. But again, when I think back, that interest in maps and star charts is akin to an interest in print. I was drawn to the sky but I was also then drawn to representations of the sky in books. So, I kept being tugged in that direction. But west Texas was not a very hospitable environment. I do miss the sky now, in Oregon, which the sky here seems very low and claustrophobic to me.

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When George W. Bush ran for president a few years ago, of course there were articles about his background as a boy in Midland, and I didn't recognize the Midland that was described in those articles. I remember one article saying that "a boy growing up in west Texas did not read books," as a way of explaining George Bush's background. And I wanted to write in and argue and say "well, it's true that we weren't terribly encouraged to be literary, I suppose, but some boys did read books there."

JD: And did you have other hobbies and interests? You talked about the stars in the sky; was there camping and kind of connection with the natural world that got formed then?

TD: No, I think not. Oregon is such a place for camping and natural outdoor activities, but Midland was a desert. It was harsh. So, while people did go camping and hiking a bit, there weren't mountains to hike on, there weren't too many rivers to fish in and it was hot, so camping was not a thing. So, I think because of that I never really did become an outdoors person, which may again have influenced me to be more literary, more of a bookworm. The library was more pleasant than the campground was, so I think that was part of it.

I do recall, too, an early outside influence, and this really does date me, I suppose; I remember very well, I was in the first grade, I believe, when John Kennedy was assassinated, and I remember our teacher's reaction that day in the classroom of shock and going white and bringing a television in so we could watch the coverage. And I remember the adults for many months after that all being very glum and I remember the headlines in the papers being bigger than I had ever seen them. So, that was a very somber period, which was broken a few months later—I remember this very well—by the appearance of the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show. And you know, this is a very silly pop culture thing in a way, I suppose, but I don't think it's overstating things to say that for me in Midland, Texas, which had no sort of artistic culture that I could find, and in this very glum period following the Kennedy assassination, this sort of burst of joy watching these Beatles on TV was actually a very big moment. And exposure to art and cultures that were outside my backyard in a way that I had not seen before, and just the happiness of it. I just thought I wanted to be one of the Beatles. So, I took up drumming. That was another hobby. So, astronomy, writing and drumming were my big passions, and have remained so.

JD: So, that's intriguing, because often when someone sees a band, they want to be the singers, the front guys on the guitar, not Ringo in the background on drums.

TD: No, and actually I do think this relates to writing in a way, because for some reason what impressed me about Ringo was that he was in service to the music. He was not trying to be the ego out front; he was not trying to be the one calling for all the attention. He was the steady background making it happen, and that impressed me. And somehow I knew that early on, that he was not showboating quite as much as the others and he was in service to the bigger art. And I think that was, I don't know how I got that insight early on, but it did strike me and stayed with me and it's something that when I became a teacher of writing many years later, I always tried to impart to students; of course there is ego involved when you create art. You are being bold enough to say to readers "look, I have something to see and I think you need what I have," so there is ego involved. There's a kind of arrogant boldness to that. But if you let the ego take over and make it all about yourself in that you're showing off for somebody, it's probably going to create bad art. You have to be in service to the art. It's the music or the language that comes first. I mean, you're trying to serve it; you're trying to make it happen and not be about you, but about the final product.

And so, I do think that insight occurred to me watching bands, watching who was just up there trying to call attention to themselves, who was actually truly serving the music, and that became a lesson in the writing as well.

JD: And you mentioned that you stuck with drumming, and did you say to this day?

TD: To this day. I've been playing here in Corvallis with a couple of people for thirty years now. We've been together longer than the Beatles, but we haven't gotten any better. So, I play with a guy here who actually is the director of the clinic here on campus. He's a doctor here at OSU, and then my other bandmate is an elementary school teacher. And we've been playing together. We play just parties and for friends. We try to stay young.

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JD: And does the band have a name?

TD: The Remnants, which tells you we're old men trying to be young.

JD: Well, and I did run across a reference to a college band you were in.

TD: Yes, yes. Moist and the Towelettes. When I was in graduate school at the University of Houston in the 1980s, several of the writing students formed a band, and we called ourselves Moist and the Towelettes and we had a rhythm guitar player who had no rhythm and a lead guitar who couldn't play. So, we were not very good. What distinguished that band, though, was the presence of Donald Barthelme who was, for about twenty years, from the early sixties to the 1980s, a regular contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine, a wonderful short story writer, very innovative and experimental, and he was my teacher and mentor there. He had also been a drummer in his youth, except he was more sophisticated. He played jazz instead of rock and roll, but when we formed this band, he wanted to be part of it.

And so, he and I were the percussion section, and we played a few book parties in Houston when someone had a book; a bookstore would have a reading and they would ask us to play and people would dance at the reception. And our big claim to fame, I suppose, was one book party, I believe for the writer Max Apple. *Texas Monthly*, which was quite a big magazine, came and covered the party and wrote about us and said "this is the worst band in Houston, if not the universe." So, we immediately decided we were going to get t-shirts made: "worst band in the universe." I mean, it's kind of a distinction.

JD: Any publicity is good publicity, right?

TD: Yes, yes. And shortly after that, Barthelme dropped out of the band, I don't know why.

JD: So, you clearly had a lot of interest, and was it expected in your family, that you would continue your education after elementary and secondary schools?

TD: No. As I say, I think most people growing up in west Texas tended to stay there and most went to work for the oil companies, which was really the only going concern out there. I was never pushed, though, by my family to do one thing or the other. They didn't say to me "you have to stay here and follow in your father's footsteps." They didn't really—they weren't bookish people, so they didn't really understand writing and literature that much and so they couldn't encourage me, in the sense that they couldn't help me particularly, except to help pay for my education, which they did. They were very generous that way and were quite willing to let me follow my own path. So, they didn't discourage me, but they very much just kind of were waiting to see where is this going to lead.

I think I became legitimate in their eyes, really, when I became a teacher. The teaching they could understand as a profession more than the writing. And so, as I was on that path, for a writer it's hard to make a living just from your writing, and so the paths that most writers tend to take; you can go into publishing, you can go into journalism, write for the newspapers or radio, TV, or you can teach or join nonprofit arts organizations. Those are kind of the day jobs for most writers. And I did a little journalism early on when I was still in college and discovered that that kind of took some of the same energy that I was giving to my own writing, so I found that teaching was a compatible profession, because I could talk about books and writing and share it with students and keep the energy going in talking about writing.

So, early on I learned that teaching was a very compatible way to go, and my family was quite okay with that. My grandfather died in 1978, but as I say, he was, he did directly encourage me. He loved language and history and stories. Right before he died, he gave me several written notebooks that he had kept about Oklahoma history and gave me some cassette tape recordings. He wanted me to be the family historian. So, he was quite encouraging that way. But I think going off to school and leaving home, those were things that didn't really happen in my family, and it was kind of a tough break to do that.

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JD: And so, how did you decide on Southern Methodist University?

TD: Really it was because my father had been transferred to Dallas when I was a senior in high school, and so we were there in Dallas. And I was looking around, I wanted a liberal arts school. I knew that—I didn't know how to be a professional writer. I didn't know what paths were open but I knew that writing was my main passion, and so that

whatever I did had to involve writing. So, it made sense to look at a liberal arts school, which SMU was. And so, I applied there and to a few other places, and it came down to location and finances. My parents were still there, so I can live at home, save some money. I got a little scholarship, so that helped. So, the decision was kind of made on those very practical bases. Then my family moved back to Midland and I was left in Dallas there.

JD: And what was your college experience, just kind of broadly, as far as sort of the social side as well as perhaps professors or events that inspired you?

TD: Right. SMU turned out to be a perfect place to start. So, this was 1973 I believe, when I began at SMU, and in the early seventies there weren't too many graduate creative writing programs in American universities. Really after the second World War in the forties, the University of Iowa started the first master of fine arts program in creative writing. So, teaching creating writing, literary writing, was a fairly new thing in universities. By the seventies there were a few more programs here and there. SMU did not have such a program but they did have some creative writing courses. There were a couple of teachers; Marshall Terry was a fiction writer, Jack Myers was a poet. They were teaching literary writing there at SMU and they were terrific mentors. So, they were very encouraging and very positive.

But it was a rather new thing at universities, and most English departments, including the one at SMU, felt a little suspicious I think, because if you were an English major, you were supposed to study the great books: Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, and become a scholar, become a teacher and a scholar. The idea of becoming a writer, writing your own creative books was still looked upon as not really legitimately academic by a lot of the old-school professors. And there was some of that at SMU, but Marshall Terry and Jack Myers were great spirits, great encouragers.

And I'd gotten lucky, because I fell into a group of black sheep, really. SMU is a fairly expensive private school where the fraternities and sororities are quite popular, and that really wasn't my path. And writers tend to be a little bit iconoclastic and rebellious and don't kind of follow the normal path, and there was a small group of us there who were all interested in writing fiction and poetry, and we tended to be the outcasts, the geeks, the oddballs, but we found each other and we grouped together. And we worked together on the literary magazine and with Jack and Marshall's encouragement, we created a little literary society and created a literary festival.

And actually, we went to the student activities organization, which funded student activities, and gave a little presentation and said "we need some money to bring in some outside writers," and they were quite skeptical at first, but we managed to persuade them eventually and got a little money and brought in some writers. And then, within a couple of years, the SMU Literary Festival became one of the finest literary events in the country, in part because no one was watching the money and we were spending it left and right. And we got in a little trouble eventually, because the money was just flowing. But the first couple of years, we brought in people like Saul Bellow, right after he'd won his Nobel Prize. It was his first appearance after winning the Nobel Prize. We brought him to Dallas, it was a huge deal. We brought Larry McMurtry, who was probably the biggest writer in Texas at the time, wonderful poets, Louis Simpson, John Cheever. You know, people of national stature came to this thing, and it was a week-long party. The English department would just shut down and we had readings every day.

So, that was my first exposure to real writers. I had never—and I think this is an important thing for all writing students; young writers grow up reading the fairytales we all hear as children, and reading these exotic stories, I think young writers early on think that stories are about magical far-away places, very exotic, and it's a real lesson to learn that, when you're writing; it's done by real people just like us and you can write about what you know; you can write about Texas, you can write about Corvallis, Oregon, it doesn't have to be some magical kingdom somewhere. It can be right here, what you know. And that's—it sounds obvious but it's a hard lesson to learn and an important early lesson.

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And so for me, at this festival at SMU, reading people and then having them come and talk to me face-to-face and seeing these people, seeing them in all their dazzling wonderful, but also seeing their flaws, that they're human beings, they're just people. And some of them aren't very nice. And that's important to learn too; they're just people writing these books and you can do that too. So, that was a huge, huge lesson for me early on. And SMU was a great place for it. As I say, we kind of spent the money left and right and then a few years down the road people said "you know, no one's watching this

and we're way over budget, we're in debt," and so the festival got scaled back. So, I was there at the perfect time when nobody was watching.

JD: And during this time, you're doing all this, you're going to classes and then you continue at SMU for your master's degree.

TD: Right.

JD: And talk a little about your decision-making process of, you know, you started out by saying well, you didn't really know what kind of career or what one does to be a writer, you just, that was your passion. How were you starting to figure that out?

TD: I'll be honest, I think I was not very conscious about what I was doing. I knew I wanted to write, school turned out to be a nice environment, I found like-minded people there, so that I knew it was an environment I wanted to stay in as long as possible. And I confess, I think that in those early days, I was just stalling for time. I did not have a very conscious career path. Students today are much more mature and conscious of that. I think they have to be because of the economic realities today. I was on a little scholarship and so I was able to kind of get by and I wanted to be in that environment, so I was stalling. I was just trying to take enough time to write a book and hope I could publish it. That's really all I was thinking. And once I got my BA, I was told that there were a few of these graduate creative writing programs around the country, these MFA programs. That seemed a logical next step, just stay in school for a couple more years if you can. Stay in that wonderful environment.

So, I went off to Bowling Green, Ohio which had an MFA program, and I lasted all of two months there. I went away, got to Bowling Green and the wind off of Lake Erie was the coldest wind I'd ever felt and I thought "I can't stay here," so I ran back home to Dallas. I worked in a bookstore for a year and then went back to school, reenrolled at SMU, and that's when I first began to teach, because that was a way of getting through school. They would pay me to teach classes and therefore I could afford to stay in school. In those days at SMU, they did not have a training program, so my training as a teacher was they handed me a textbook and said "alright, tomorrow morning you go into the classroom and you teach this." I had no training at all.

So, I walked in terrified the first day of class, had no idea what I was doing. I feel even now I should probably have written letters of apology to all of my first students that first year. I didn't know what I was doing, especially a lot of the big football players were in my classes. These were intimidating guys, would come and I'm trying to teach them to read a poem, you know. It was kind of a disaster. But I did learn that I kind of liked it, for all my terror, and occasionally it seemed to get through to somebody, that somebody would actually change their major and become an English major because they loved what I was teaching them to read. So, I began to see the rewards of it and I was able to keep writing while doing that and go to classes. So, it was a compatible thing. I kind of eventually overcame my shyness in the classroom. It took a while but I just got more comfortable.

So, I learned there that there was a path. That's when I first started to become conscious that I could teach and that would also allow me to write and stay in this wonderful, nurturing environment. So, that began to seem like a good way to go. And then from SMU I went to the University of Houston in the PhD program there and continued to teach and then take classes.

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JD: And was there a particular allure to University of Houston? Or what drew you there?

TD: No, again I'll be very honest. I was not as conscious as my students are today. I followed a girl to Houston. I got into the university—

JD: Oh, I think that still happens today.

TD: I know, yeah it still happens. I got into the University of Iowa in the poetry program there, but the girl I was dating at the time did not get in there, she got into Houston. So, at the very last minute, I decided I wanted to stay with this woman and I applied to Houston at the very last second and they let me squeak by and get in. So, I went to Houston and then

within a few months the girl had left and gone somewhere else and I stayed in Houston. So, it was serendipity, it was capricious, but it turned out, again, to be good for me. Houston was a good spot for me.

And Houston—this was 1980—Houston had a brand new program. It was just getting off the ground, and that turned out to be very fortuitous, because to be a student in a program that's just beginning has some rough spots to it, but also a lot of opportunities, because the students were very much a part of building that program. So, in addition to teaching I was also then, as a student, asked to be on a lot of committees advising the faculty what does such a program need, what do the students want out of this program, how can we make this happen? So, I started getting involved in some of the decision-making, some of the finances. I learned a little bit about how an academic program gets financed. These were great early lessons for me, which turned out to be handy when I came to OSU many years later. But I got to see the inner workings of an academic program.

JD: And in the course of earning your masters at SMU, you did write your first novel.

TD: Well, I began to write a novel at SMU which kind of fell apart, didn't go anywhere, but from the ashes of that novel I began a new one, once I got to Houston.

JD: Oh, okay.

TD: So, I was at Houston for six years and I wrote a lot of stories, but most of that time I was revising and reworking this novel, which did become my first novel. And it was really Donald Barthelme's encouragement. I didn't really know what I was doing with it. I was teaching myself to write a novel by doing it. That was really all I knew how to do. And the model for most creative writing programs, and this was true at Houston, is that we tend to have what we call writing workshops. So, you're in a class full of several students who are all writing stories or novels and you have the teacher who is a kind of facilitator, and you essentially edit each other's work as it's in progress. That's the way these workshops go. So, you bring something in that's very rough that you've just written and everybody sits around a table and tears it apart and tells you what's wrong with it or tells you "here, I liked it, here I got involved, this paragraph seemed to be good." But it can be rough and difficult but it's also you're getting an honest response from readers and you're getting a panel of editors helping you cut away the bad stuff.

But at a certain point, if you're working on a long project like a novel, having all those different voices telling you different things can be very confusing and difficult. And I think Barthelme saw that I was in this long-term project, and he kind of plucked me out of the class and said "you got too many voices in your head, just keep working." And then he would meet with me one-on-one. We would meet at his house, actually, and go over the manuscript. And he would quite literally, with me watching him, we would sit down face-to-face with my manuscript and he would take a pencil and say "this line you don't need, this line's good, keep that one, cut this page, keep this page, rearrange it, put this page in front of that page," and you know, that was my education in writing a novel. And it was that book that became my first published book.

JD: Can you take us back just a bit to where the idea for either this novel or your subsequent novels, or any of your books, your biographies, where's that germ come, and can you kind of take us through a few steps to where you have something to hand off to Donald or your fellow students for criticism?

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TD: Of course every writer begins differently and has different obsessions. For me, a story always starts with a character. I'm not a very plot-oriented writer; I don't think of an elaborate series of actions, I don't think of a brilliant concept. I always start it with a person and from that person the story either will or will not grow naturally. So, in this first novel, as an example, I mentioned earlier I was always drawn to star charts and maps, I always loved maps, and my father, as a geologist, had huge maps on the walls of his office from floor to ceiling. I just loved the way maps looked.

So, it was not a great stretch, I think, for me to think of a character who was a map-maker, a cartographer. That was kind of a natural early character type for me to think about. Not really based on my father but based on someone like my father who worked with maps. So, that's how it began. I didn't have a story or a plot in mind, but I just thought alright, let's think about a map-maker. What kind of life would a map-maker have? And that was the initial seed. And I studied maps, I read

technical books about map-making and how a map-maker works. One night, Donald Barthelme even said to me, "I was at a dinner party last night and I met your character." He met a map-maker who worked for an oil company, and he actually introduced me to the guy. And so, I talked to the guy and got details about what a professional map-maker does. I still didn't have a story, so the first drafts of this novel were just a lot of random scenes leading nowhere.

But out of character, a story has to grow. And I think what works is you think what kind of personality is drawn, say, to being a map-maker. So, you know my stereotypical thinking about that was "well, a map-maker is someone who wants to put things in their proper place, wants to locate things and organize space." So, that gave me a little more of the character. Here's a guy who's kind of maybe a little tight, a little over-organized, wants to be proper, so that gave me a little bit of his temperament, his personality, and then I thought "how do you make a story out of that?"

Well, story of course is always about trouble. It's about conflict. So, if you've got a person who is deeply organized and wants to be proper and have everything in its proper place, how do you create a story out of that? Well, the conflict, obvious conflict, is you get that guy lost. You know, he's a map-maker, he wants to be in the right place, so get him lost. And what did that mean? That meant get him lost any possible way that you could, in his personal life, in his professional life, literally got him lost; in a few scenes, he's out in the Arctic lost in the snow. That's one part of the novel. But he's lost in his personal life, his marriage is breaking up. He's having trouble relating to his children. I mean, everything I could think of; how do you get a person lost? And that became the story. Those were the conflicts that drove the story forward; get him lost and then see how he can find his way back again, and that became the story of the novel.

And really that became the template for every other story I've ever written. Start with a person, try to figure out who is that person, what are they like. Given what they are like, then what kind of trouble would they obviously get into and how could they find their way out of that trouble, given who they are? And for me, that's the heart of all stories and that's what I always tried to teach my students, as well. And Barthelme was quite amenable to that idea. He was also not interested in elaborate plots and action inasmuch as who are these people and what makes them get through their lives.

JD: So, you've mentioned Donald Barthelme a couple of times here. Expand a bit on who he was and how the two of you worked together.

TD: And he became the subject of my first biography many years later. And again, biography starts with characters, it's the story of a person's life, so it was kind of natural for me to move in that direction. Barthelme was born in Philadelphia in the 1930s but he was raised in Texas. His father was an architect and came to Houston quite early. So, Barthelme temperamentally was a fellow Texan, but again, just as I was growing up in Midland, Texas kind of in this oil country and books and literature were a kind of odd thing to get drawn to, I think that was Barthelme's experience too, as a young man in Houston. Again, Houston being a big oil town, a big oil center.

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But his father was an architect, drawn to aesthetics and art, and so Barthelme had a kind of rarified upbringing. So, I think maybe that was one of my first points of connection with Barthelme, being a kind of odd duck in Texas; being a Texan but being a little bit skewed. You know, not quite the typical Texans. So, that was something we had in common. He, again, kind of foraged his own way. There was not really a literary culture in Houston, but when he was a student at the University of Houston, he founded a literary magazine and kind of found his own way.

He eventually, as a young man, went to New York and just—he didn't have a job there, he just went to try to be a writer. He was a lot bolder than I was. I don't think I would have had the guts to do something like that, just go off to a city and try to be a writer. But he did and he got in with *The New Yorker* magazine, which really was his home for his professional life. From 1963 up until he died in 1989, he was a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, and his stories were very quirky; again, not plot-driven, very strange, almost poems more than prose. And in the sixties and seventies, this was a very experimental time in all the arts. He was quite an important figure and probably the most imitated short story writer of his day in the late sixties, early seventies. He's not much read now, but at that time he was quite an important figure.

But he always kept his ties to Houston, and in the early 1980s when that program began, everybody at the university kind of tried to woo him back from New York to be a part of this program. And he did, he came back to Houston and was an amazing citizen. And I think this was another wonderful lesson to me, is again, here is a figure who could have been a

showboat, an ego, he was an important writer, well-known, well respected, but he came back and he gave of himself as a teacher and as a citizen in that program. He really sacrificed a lot of his own writing time to be a teacher and a member of that program.

And that was another hugely important lesson to me. If we have a continuing literary culture in this country, it's because we have citizens of literature, people who work to keep it going. And he could have been an ego and could have said "I'm an important writer, I don't have time to fiddle around with fundraising or donors, or I don't have time for that." He was not that way at all. He was quite present. And again, as I say for me, he would sit with me for hours with my manuscripts, editing my manuscripts. So, he taught me citizenship and how that's related to teaching. So, he was a terrific mentor. And I wrote the biography many years later after he died because his work began to fall out of print and people weren't reading him and I thought people need to know who he was. And so, that's why I wrote the biography.

JD: And you're young, you're developing your style, you're developing your skills, what was it—I mean you mentioned that you thought the two of you were both kind of odd ducks, but was there something beyond that? You're putting a lot of trust in someone to say "this is one important person whose opinion I want or need." Can you talk about how you knew that with him?

TD: Well, that's a very good question, because when I first began to read Barthelme's stories he was, as I say, an experimenter. His fiction was very strange. It was not realistic fiction about realistic people. And I didn't understand it, to be very honest. When I first read his work, it was over my head. I just thought "I don't understand this stuff." So, I knew that he had the reputation of being an important writer, so for that reason, he was an authority figure whose opinion I knew I should trust because he had achieved a certain level. On the other hand, I didn't particularly like the work or understand it, so I wasn't sure I wanted his opinion, to be honest. But I think that was a healthy kind of skepticism, like "alright, this guy knows some things and I don't know that I want to go down the same path, because I don't know that I really share it," but I tried to open myself up to it. And I think that was an important thing. And again, something I've always tried to teach my students is don't close yourself off to any possibilities. You do need to know sort of who you are at your core, what's proper to you.

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And I'm basically a realistic writer. I'm not the kind of writer Barthelme is. So, I didn't go to him to learn how to be him or to write like him, but I did try to open myself to what I could take from him, what did he have to offer me. And so, it was not just I gave myself over to him and took whatever he said. It was a give and take. It was a little bit of a push-pull, which I think is a very healthy thing with a mentor and a student. A student can't just lay at the feet of the mentor and just take whatever the mentor says. It has to be a give and take. And again, he was a good teacher in that way. He didn't force me to write the way he did. If I said to him "no, I don't want to do that," he would argue with me a little bit but he would finally say "alright, you got to go your own way," and I think that's a very important thing for both teacher and student.

And so, I think that's a real key in any kind of teaching, but particularly with this workshop style. There is a tradition of literature and there are standards, there are grammatical rules, there are all kinds of rules, but finally, when it comes to art, to creative writing, there is a lot of room for taste, just personal taste; what's great art, what's not great art. We can talk about our standards and our reasons for it, but it is a kind of personal thing, finally. So, even if you're working with an editor in a publishing house there are times when if you're the writer you may have to push back and say "no, I'm not going to do that." And a good editor will say "okay, it's your work." And so, that's very important in the teaching of creative writing and Barthelme was a great model.

JD: You keep using the word "writing" and "I was writing," what are the technologies that you're using over this period of time?

TD: Well, the first novel was written in the—well, I began writing on a manual typewriter, and every time you make a mistake you have to either white it out with that whiteout stuff, which I hate the smell of, or start over. So, I remember those days. You couldn't just push a button and erase your mistakes. That first novel was written on a manual typewriter. And the one thing I miss about the old days; at a certain point I had a draft of this novel, maybe say three hundred pages, and still didn't have the structure quite right, and I remember one night in my little studio apartment, which was about the size of this table in front of me, I took that novel and separated it into several stacks. So, I took all the sections in the novel

that had to do with the character's work life and put it in one stack, all the sections that had to do with the character and his children, put that in one stack, all the sections that had to do with the character and his wife, and I had about seven stacks based on the different aspects of this character's life, and then I started kind of just literally reshuffling them. Like, if I put this scene with the children here with this scene at work, put those back-to-back, or no, maybe in this order, and I reordered it all by hand and took all these very ordered stacks and messed them up and reshuffled them almost like a deck of cards until I had a structure that made better sense to me.

And the actual act of manually doing that, almost like working with clay, I think—it was paper—but it was almost like sculpting, reshaping this novel quite physically. It's something that we don't do now with computers. I mean, it's so easy now to rearrange a text just by pushing buttons, and the ease of that is wonderful but I do think something is lost where writing is not just a conceptual thing in our minds; it's physical. To me, words on a page and blocks of paragraph take physical shapes, and to actually work, I mean I'm using my hands now as I think about it; to actually work with them like sculptural blocks, I think that came from the experience of that old technology. And I still do it. I mean, when I'm doing early drafts on a computer, I'll punch the buttons and erase things, but finally I will print things out and still work with the pages. I just have to do that. I'm an old-fashioned person that way. So, I do worry that something's lost with all this easy, new technology, and I still can't read on a screen for very long. I have to print it out or get it in book form.

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JD: Do you remember the first writing that you did from beginning to end on a computer?

TD: Well, probably the final draft of that first novel, because by the time—I mean, I started it in that early form, but by the time I got to the final draft, so we're talking late '85, early '86, the computer was beginning to kind of become part of our life and I had a personal computer at that point, one of those big clunky screens, and we were all using floppy discs. You remember the floppy discs?

JD: Oh yeah.

TD: And I had it on a floppy disc and I remember DOS, the old programs. So, I think I did do a final draft of that novel. I didn't do it from beginning to end on the computer but I did start typing it on the computer. I also remember learning how to use a computer and making horrible mistakes, I mean erasing thirty pages by accident and not getting them back. I remember that as well.

So after that, really it was not until I got here to Oregon State, I think, that computers really began to be just an everyday part of our lives. I remember getting my first computer from the English department here and the mandate that we all had to have a computer because we had to have email. It was a necessary part of our job and became more so, of course, as years went by. But that was early here, so we're talking '86, '87.

JD: Well, that's a great segueway into, as with all college students, college years come to an end at some point and it's out into the real world. And so, talk about what drew you to Oregon State University from Texas?

TD: I didn't know where Oregon was. A lot of people say that writers really need real-world experience and should spend a lot of time doing some kind of manual labor or some kind of job, and I don't know about that. In one sense, I think I was very lucky. I learned, as we have been talking here, pretty early on that I wanted to teach, I liked teaching, and so I went straight through from undergraduate to MA to PhD and taught and got my teaching experience and knew that's what I wanted to do. So, in that sense I was lucky, I found my profession. And so, I went straight from grad school to a teaching job here at OSU, and that's all I've done. In one sense that may not be lucky, in that I've missed a lot of other real-world experience that might have fed my writing in other ways.

But anyway, by the time I finished my PhD at Houston, I knew I wanted to get a teaching job. So, I flooded the market with my resume and I was applying all over the country. I didn't want to leave Houston. I was very much at home in Houston, but I knew that if I had stayed in Houston, I would have—any teaching job available there was just a part time thing. So, I knew I had to leave. So, I just, anytime there was an opening in creative writing, I sent out my resume. And I think the year that I got the job here at Oregon State I had applied for thirty-some odd jobs.

Every year around Christmas time there is a national conference of English teachers and universities, the MLA, the Modern Language Association, it's called, and that's where all the universities come to do their job interviews, and out of those thirty applications, I got nine interviews at MLA that year. Oregon State was one of them. And I remember, really the only two interviews I remember—this was in Chicago, the conference was—coming from Texas I had no winter coat, I went up to Chicago, the river was frozen over. I remember it was below zero, I had no coat, I had to walk to my first interview about six blocks. I went out and thought "I can't make six blocks, I need a coat." So, I walked into the first clothing store I saw and said "I need that coat, right now," because I was going to be late for my interview and the guy said "well, let's try this one on, let's try this one on," I said "no, that coat right now," spent all my money on this coat, had no money for the rest of the week to eat on, so that was my job experience interview.

And I went to that interview, I remember that, I won't name this school, it was not OSU. My very first interview, I walked into the hotel room, which is where the interview was. English departments would rent these hotel rooms and conduct the interviews there and these people were all kind of sitting on the bed. There were four or five people with their heads in their hands and there were empty wine bottles on the floor and they looked up at me and said "oh, you're the creative writer, right?" I thought "is this what it's like to try to get a job?" Most of the interviews were very professional. That was a very strange one. That was my first one, so I thought they were all going to be that way.

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The other one I remember is the University of Alaska. They didn't ask me about my writing, they didn't ask me about my teaching, they just said "how do you feel about the dark? It's dark a lot in Alaska." And of course I said "oh, I love the dark," which is not true. And then OSU, which was a very pleasant experience. I remember that interview very well and there were four or five people from the OSU English department there, including a wonderful man, Bill Potts was his name. He was the acting chair then. He was a Joyce scholar; James Joyce was his passion. Wonderful little Irish, passionate man about all things Irish. And he had read my book, and just very warm, very personal. It was the most personal interview that I had, where people actually had taken the time to know my work and know a little bit about me. And it seemed like a young department at the time, a lot of vital, young teachers beginning to be hired.

So, I had a very good impression right away with OSU. At the end of that process, I came down to OSU and one other school, I had an offer from one other school, but because OSU had seemed so personal and very warm, I just came. I remember my—this was 1985, was when I did this interview, and I came here in '86. My salary was, I think, twenty-one thousand dollars a year to teach nine classes a year. So, in the terms of the profession at the time it was not the greatest offer, in practical terms, but I just felt a warmth from the department, and I was not wrong about that. It was a good place to come. A big change from Houston, Texas to come here. As I say, I didn't really know anything about Oregon, but—

JD: Do tell about your first impressions.

TD: Well, it's remained my impression in terms of as beautiful as the landscape is. To a west Texan, as I say, used to that flat horizon, the trees and the hills and the low clouds, it feels very claustrophobic to me even after thirty years. So, my first impression was "I'm not sure I can stand this." And I still have trouble in the dark, grey winters. But the community was wonderful, the town was wonderful. And again, I feel that—let me get into this here in just a minute—in the early to mid-eighties, the English department here was beginning some new directions, so I felt I was getting, again, on the ground floor of something that was just being built, and that was a really exciting thing.

JD: Well, go ahead and expand on kind of what the English department was about and sort of the coursework and the perspective.

TD: Well, the history of OSU, this is very simplified, but in the state of Oregon the humanities school had always been considered University of Oregon in Eugene and Oregon State was more the science school, the Ag. school, the oceanography school, so the humanities were not taken terribly serious at—you know, were not thought of very much here. So, even as late as 1986 when I got here, the entire College of Liberal Arts, including the English department, I think were still very much considered, by a lot of faculty and administrators at OSU, to be service departments, by which I mean they weren't really looked upon as departments that offered their own majors so much as our job was to teach the students to be better writers so they could succeed in their other majors in business or engineering or whatever. The idea of an English major was still kind of strange-sounding to a lot of people.

So, we were service providers. Our service was to teach students to be better writers so they could succeed in other fields. The idea of majoring and focusing on the writing or literature was to—this is kind of an odd thing. And there was a BA degree offered in English, but there were no masters programs, there were no graduate programs in English at the time. And so, those were all beginning to be talked about in the department. So, and we were teaching, we were on the quarter system; three ten-week quarters, and tenure track professors were teaching three, three, three; three courses each quarter, which was a fairly heavy load compared to other English departments around the country. Heavy in the sense that if you were teaching three courses, you might have well over a hundred students whose papers you were grading during those ten weeks. You were also expected to keep up your own writing and publishing in order to keep your job. So, it was a heavy load.

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So, we began to think "we want to get the OSU English department in line with the rest of the profession nationally," which meant not lessening the importance of the teaching but giving faculty more time to do their own research and writing, as well as creating some graduate programs, being taken a little more seriously as a department. And so, we began to work on that. There were a couple of people; a fellow named Simon Johnson, who was a writing teacher here, established in the late 1980s a master's degree in scientific and technical writing, which again, had a kind of a service idea behind it. We would teach students to be better writers in science. But it was a master's degree. It was the first of its kind here.

Then, a man named Bob Wess, who was a theorist and a teacher here in the department, really worked hard to create the masters of English here at OSU, and that was the first master's program here. And using Bob Wess's model, I and a few other colleagues began to work on a masters of fine arts program. The problem we had, really, throughout this process—and it took fourteen years to finally establish the MFA program here, and the reason it took so long was because the Board of Higher Education and the state of Oregon really did consider Eugene, University of Oregon, to be the humanities school. And that meant that they didn't want duplication. We had these two universities only forty miles apart in the state. And the fear was if you have duplication of programs, if you have masters of fine arts degree in Eugene and also one in Corvallis, you're going to split the student population. There's only enough population for one program.

So, we had to convince using numbers, using statistics that in fact, we wouldn't be competing with U of O, we wouldn't be stealing their students, we'd draw on our own student pool, we'd have a whole new contingent of people for our program and that there was room enough for two, that they weren't going to cancel each other out. That was really the argument that we had to overcome.

JD: And fourteen years is a fair amount of time.

TD: Yes.

JD: How did your allies change or your strategies change, or did they need to? Kind of what finally pushed you over the top?

TD: They did. We explored several different options. So, I came in 1986; in 1989 we hired a fellow named Ehud Havazelet, a wonderful writer, and he became my colleague in creative writing. And then in subsequent years, we kept hiring more, because the demand for the courses were growing. I think we were having an impact at the undergraduate level. The courses were becoming very popular. A lot of students wanted to continue their studies. So, there began to be pressure from the students to have further courses, which led to us hiring more creative writing teachers, which was great for me because I got company and colleagues.

And so, in the early nineties we hired Marjorie Sandor, who is still here, and then some others have come and gone over the years, but we created more positions for more teachers. So, that was the first step. Then I actually explored the possibility of having a consortium with the University of Oregon. I was asked a few times to be acting director of their MFA program. We had a lot of fiction writers here, because that's the way it had always been. Bernard Malamud was the first creative writing teacher here, really, in the 1950s, although he wasn't really allowed to teach fiction because it was, again, a suspicious activity, I suppose. But we did have a tradition of fiction writers being hired in this department, so at a certain point we got a lot of fiction writers. Just for quirky reasons, I suppose, University of Oregon had a lot of poets

but not too many fiction writers. So, we thought "well, we've got the fiction, they've got the poetry, let's combine it." And we looked at that for a long time and I actually went down there to Eugene and taught a few courses there, became quite friendly with their faculty. And we went quite a bit down that road toward trying to officially create a program both here and there where faculty and students could go back and forth. I still think there's a lot of merit to that idea. But at a certain point, the people at U of O decided they didn't want to share, they didn't want to play with us. I'm blaming U of O. They all have a different story, but that's my story.

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So, we came back to the drawing board and said "alright, we'll have our own MFA program here." And by that time I had seen enough of what their program did and what kind of students went there and how different their students were from the type that typically came here that I could make the argument a little better that we're going to draw from a different pool, we can sustain our own program, we won't be competing with them. But there were these different iterations. It was very frustrating over fourteen years to keep making these arguments and so on, but what was steady throughout that time was we were hiring more creative writing faculty. We were getting a coterie of people here, and the student population was growing, too.

JD: And so, when you finally achieve that goal, I'm sure there's just a certain mechanics of getting in place, but—and maybe that's a little too mundane to talk about—or what did you do to celebrate finally reaching that goal?

TD: Well let's see, I think it was 2001 is when the MFA program became official here. And early on, because I had been going back and forth to Eugene a little bit and working with them some, our first graduate students we actually drew from the U of O pool of students. So, the students, what typically happens at an MFA program is there are just a limited number of spots for students, usually based on how many teaching assistants you can afford to hire. So, a student coming to our program, we'd want to be able to fund them by hiring them as teaching assistants and to pay them to teach, which helps support their schooling here. And you can only afford to fund so many students, and so the U of O had their limit and then they would put people on a waiting list, say "we'd like to let you in here but we don't have funding for you." So, we here at OSU, we raided their waiting list. We wrote to the people on their waiting list and said "alright, U of O doesn't have room for you, come to OSU instead."

And so, the first two or three years, that's what we did. That's where we started drawing our pool of students. So, that was a great time. They came here and we had our community, was beginning to build. And to celebrate, we didn't do much except our work. We have a reading series every year; we bring national writers to campus to read to the students and to read student manuscripts and we got a little more funding for that once the program became official, and so that was a great thing for the students. So, our celebration really took the form of doing what we'd always done but doing it a little better. And then we no longer had to depend on U of O's waiting list. Word got around pretty quickly that there was an actual program here and students began to apply directly.

JD: And in addition to the reading series, do I understand correctly that Literary Northwest is also kind of a piece of that?

TD: Mhmm. Nowadays we really have three different components of a reading series. We have a regular Visiting Writers Series, it's called, where we'll invite two to three nationally known writers every year to come give readings, visit classes, sometimes read manuscripts. Then there's the Literary Northwest Series, which concentrates on regional writers, people here in the Northwest, local writers, published books. So, that's a separate reading series. And then we established, a few years ago, the Stone Prize, which was established with the very generous help of Pat Stone, who is an OSU alumnus, who said that his life was changed by the courses he took in the College of Liberal Arts and so he wanted to give back. And he gave back by endowing this literary prize, because he learned that the creative writing program here was growing and getting a national reputation and he wanted to help spread the word about all the activity here, and he thought this prize was a way to do that.

So, the Stone Prize offers a nice financial award to a nationally known writer who has got a lifetime body of impressive work but who also is a citizen, a teacher, who has a reputation of being a good teacher, because we want to stress that. It's not just about the writing here, it's about mentorship and teaching and about creating a community of writers. So, that's a big part of the Stone Prize. So, the first Stone Prize winner just a few years ago was Joyce Carol Oates, who is probably

the most productive writer in the county. Every time I turn around she's written three more books. But she's also been a great teacher all her life and a great supporter of young writers and literary magazines.

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The second one was Tobias Wolff, another fine, fine teacher and short story writer and novelist. The third Stone Prize reader will come next year in 2016. That reader has been chosen but it's still a secret at the moment, so I can't talk about it. But so, every other year we give the Stone prize and bring in this reader who gives a reading here in Corvallis, a reading in Portland and tries to, again, sort of create a wider community for the state of Oregon, a little more exposure to literature.

So, those are the three components of the Visiting Writers Series. And as I said earlier, for me it was such an important moment to be a student and to see actual writers, real people for the first time, and so this is what we do for the students here.

JD: And so, those are probably some of the very direct effects that the MFA program has had on OSU, are there perhaps less tangible ones that you, being an insider, feel have manifested here and was part of the motivation for bringing it, a program like that here?

TD: Yes, well I can see just the wider community here in Corvallis has changed. I've been here thirty years now and when I first got here, there wasn't much of a literary community. There were a few things happening. There was a wonderful woman who unfortunately passed away just a few months ago name Margarita Donnelly and she founded a literary magazine here in Corvallis called *Calyx*, a magazine for women, to publish women's literature, and that magazine is still going. *Calyx* was here, but beyond *Calyx* there wasn't a lot of literary activity in town. Over the thirty years, because, in part because of, I think, the activity here at OSU and in part because of the great support of Grass Roots Bookstore, which has stayed around all this time, there's been more and more of a community building. A lot of students will come through the program here and stay around, or go to Portland and come back often.

So, between Corvallis and Portland there's been a big OSU contingent of former writing students who are now involved in various projects here. One thing we do every year here in Corvallis; we have a community reading called the Magic Barrel, which raises money for the local food bank. So, local writers and sometimes students will read at this event and it raises money for the community. So, it does get out beyond campus. There's an organization in Portland called Literary Arts and many of our students have gone through there. They bring writers and give awards and fellowships to writers. A lot of our students have worked for Literary Arts and have benefited from their fellowships. And so, we have a connection there.

So it's a wider—it does create a wider community. A number of our students have gone on now and become teachers on other campuses, so it's kind of like a branch campus of OSU is out there, you know. But again, that's how the literary culture survives. You create a community, you create a sense of tradition and then it goes out into the larger world and spreads it.

JD: You spoke poignantly early on about some of the things that Donald Barthelme taught you about being a citizen and being a teacher and you were in the classroom for many years here, can you reflect a bit on sort of the skills and the types of courses that you taught when you first came here and where you've felt you were by the time you retired with your teaching?

TD: When I first got here, the creative writing courses were very large, say twenty-six people in a class, which is difficult in this workshop format when we're all trying to edit each other's work. And then I was teaching a lot of introductory literature courses, which I always loved to do, right up until the end. Those introductory courses can often also be very large, sometimes sixty to eighty students in some sections, when I was teaching them. And very often they're full of students who don't really want to be there because it's a requirement they have to take a literature course for their majors and they don't really like to read that much, and so you get a mix of people.

But very often, it's those students who don't think they like to read who come across something in a class like that that really catches fire with them, and you can see that change happen over the ten weeks. You can see them start to think

about stuff they hadn't thought about before or really get attached to something. And then they'll come in afterwards to the office hours and want to talk to you one-on-one about it. And very often some of them will change their majors and become English majors. And those were always very rewarding times. You sort of feel like you're converting people to something. But it's a great thing. So, I always loved to teach those courses.

Over time, though, we got the creative writing courses organized in a way so that there's an introductory period of writing, then intermediate and then more advanced and then a student can go on to take graduate courses, if they're admitted into those courses. And so, it was very gratifying to me as a teacher to see students appear at an introductory course and then stick with it and then over four years or more, stay with it and get better and better and better and more and more involved, and also become parts of the community. Students will work at the Reading Series as ushers at these events. And I mean, they get involved in literary activity and it's great to see that community filled.

The wonderful thing for me, with the graduate program now, is that really it's the students who are their own teachers, as much as the teachers teaching them. The students teach each other now. And there's really a tradition that's kind of developed where the second-year students in the graduate program will sort of take over the care and feeding of the first-year students and welcome them in and help them find places to live in town and nurture them and teach them how things are done and how to negotiate their academic requirements. So, they're really helping each other and they've created a real sense that's just got an ongoing community and tradition here, and that's been very gratifying to see it happen. And again, to me, almost as important as teaching a craft and teaching a skill is teaching that sense of citizenly responsibility. I mean, that's a wonderful, wonderful thing to see happen.

JD: You mentioned one of your motivations for writing the biography of Donald Barthelme was that people weren't reading him as much. There's certainly trends in literature, just like there are in anything else, and how have those changing trends affected your teaching or the content that students are asking for in the courses or that you want to provide them?

TD: Yeah, I think it's a fascinating push-pull that happens in any creative art where you need both a sense of tradition as well as the boldness to break that tradition and create something new. You know, for the art to stay healthy it has to constantly evolve, and so you need innovators, and innovators who will break the traditional rules and move forward. So, but if you lose that sense of traditions; if you don't know where it came from and how it's developed, if you're just out there randomly throwing darts at the universe, you won't know what you're doing. Breaking the rules means knowing the rules to begin with, in order to move things forward in a healthy and interesting way.

So, there is that push-pull, you need that. And in my teaching I always wanted to give students both a sense that this country, as well as the western world in general, has a literary tradition. You need to know it, you need to be grounded in it, and then you need to move out and do your own thing and break, be bold enough to break it if you have to.

Technology certainly is part of those changes. I don't know what the computer and reading on screens is going to do to literacy. There's a part of me that worries that we're losing a lot of our literacy; that people aren't reading as well as they used to because our attention span's being shortened by this constant multitasking and reading on screens four or five lines of text at once and clicking, you know, you're tweeting very short messages and getting messages as you're—you know, my stepdaughter used to have the TV on, radio plugged in, the computer and then writing at the same time, and she claimed she could do it and she did. You can see she's much more able to multitask than I am.

So, that's a skill. That's a new kind of literacy, I suppose. Some of my colleagues in Rhetoric would say "it's not that we're losing literacy, we're just changing." Well, maybe. A part of me worries that we are losing it. We're losing our ability to concentrate and focus. I do worry about that. On the other hand, I do have to stay open to the idea; well, this is the new world and so it's going to require new skills and students are going to have to learn those skills.

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So, a student now coming to a graduate program probably is, in general, less grounded in long texts than I was when I was learning. So, the idea of a long, dense novel, that may vanish in the future; I don't know if readers will be able to read such a thing. The idea of what a novel is may change very drastically. And I'm probably not equipped to go there. It's probably a good time for me to retire. I didn't want to get in students' way by being an old fuddy-duddy and say, you know, "I don't

want any part of this." I recognize they have to follow these trends and they will create new forms of literature. And I may not be able to follow them but I wish them Godspeed, because it does have to keep changing, and I recognize that. But I did, I think I did reach a certain point where I thought "I'm all for innovation and experimentation in new things, but at a certain point I'm an old dog. There's certain things that I can't get past and certain things that I do love and that I have to stick with, and at a certain point, I can't help them."

For example, one very practical thing, when I first began teaching, I was able to tell students how to submit their work to editors for publication. It was pretty straightforward, the process of submitting stories or poems to a literary magazine or to a book publisher. It was pretty straightforward. Nowadays, it's not so straightforward because so much publishing is online-only or it's online and in text, and in my day, you didn't multiple-submit. That is, I wouldn't take one story and send it to six different editors at the same time. I would only do it one at a time, because they would get back to you and say "yes, I want the story" or "I don't want it." If they didn't want it, you would send it to the next editor. Now though, there's so much stuff out there that editors, I think, expect writers are submitting things everywhere at the same time and they don't really mind anymore. The rules are changing because there's just so much text out there.

So, I feel it's a new world just in practical terms; how do you submit your work. I'm losing track, I don't know how it's done anymore, the way I used to. So, I'm less effective as a teacher in that sense than I used to be. So you know, I think I was sensible enough to recognize when it was time for me to step back a little bit, and then younger teachers need to step in.

JD: You're named as Distinguished Professor though, at one point, so you must have been doing many things correctly, or were recognized.

TD: I would like to think so.

JD: And also, you were talking about sort of literary arts and other people who were getting awards, and you've won a few awards yourself, and fellowships. Those are two different things, but perhaps talk about each of those in turn and what they mean to a writer at various points in your career.

TD: On one level, I think it's uncomfortable for writers to feel they're competing with other writers. There's something that never seems quite right about that. So, the idea of being selected to be the best in one year, that you wrote the best book in Oregon of a particular year, seems a little odd. And I don't quite believe it, you know. And I don't feel comfortable competing with fellow writers. On the other hand, when you win an award, especially if the award is given by your peers; if it's other writers judging your works, it's of course hugely validating and quite gratifying. If people who do what you do say "we think you did something special here," that's a very nice thing, obviously. So, it helps keep you going.

The writing life—and this is something I always try to teach students—is a very rewarding life, but it's also a difficult one, because one thing Barthelme used to tell me over and over again, slightly ironically, but he was being serious too; what a writer does is fail. This is the reason we revise all the time. Your first draft is almost always terrible. It's a failure, it's awful. So, you have to revise it and take it into a second draft, and then the second draft is not much better, so you do it again. And this is the writing life. No matter how many books you've written, how many awards you've won, when you start a new project, you're facing a blank page or a blank screen and you've got nothing in front of you except blankness and you're starting over again, which means you're going to fail a lot until you find your direction in that project. And that's the writing life, is just a life of a lot of patience, a lot of frustration and failure on your way to that success. So, the awards are validating. They just help you along the way; that pat on the back like "yeah, you're on the right track, you're doing okay." So, that's important.

[1:20:27]

The great thing about revision, while I'm thinking about it, though, is I feel writing is one of the professions where you're able to be better than you really are, in the sense that when I write a first draft, it is terrible. But there's a kind of a second version of me who comes in and writes the second draft. I mean, if I let that first draft sit for a moment, then I come back to it with fresh eyes, fresh energy, it's almost like I'm a new person. A different me is now looking at it and I can see different things in it than I did the first time, so I can make it better. Then I set that aside and a third me, he'll come in a

month later. So, it's like there's several different versions of me and I get to improve myself along the way. That's a nice thing. But a lot of failure and frustration in that process.

JD: And I would guess that, in some way, bodes well for being a teacher, that you're continuing to write, you're continuing to be involved in the same process that they are?

TD: Yeah, and I think students appreciate that too. It's not, you know, we're not dealing with dead, inert material here. We're dealing with a living, ongoing process that the students are writing their works and struggling through their drafts and trying to get better, and I'm doing the same thing right along with them. I'm one of them. And that's the other beautiful thing, I think, about the workshop process, is that when I'm in a workshop with students, I am one of them. Now, I may be a slightly stronger voice in the sense that I may have more experience; the problems they're encountering I have encountered before, and so I can have advice for how to get through it, and also as the teacher I have to kind of lead the discussion. If you've got six or seven people all wanting to talk at once, of course I, in a very pragmatic sense, lead the discussion, but basically I'm just one voice among the group in that process. We're all editing each other. And I really don't try to dominate a conversation in a workshop, I just try to facilitate, let everybody have their chance to say it and bring out the best in the work.

And again, we're trying to privilege the work. Somebody brings something they've written into class and they're very vulnerable, because this is personal. You know, it's you've put a lot of work into it. Often creative writing is based on someone's own life, so it's very intimate sometimes, very personal. They're revealing things about themselves. It can be scary to come in front of a group and offer this and then the group is kind of jumping on it and all trying to edit it. So, it can be a scary process, and that's something that you have to pay attention to as a teacher. But the thing you do is, again, you say "this is not about you, this is about those pieces of paper. You now are separate from it. The work exists on its own now, apart from you. So, we're talking about this and not you and we're trying to make this better. And we're not trying to change it or judge it; we're trying to bring out its best potential."

And that's what you do as a teacher in that process, just as one voice among many. It's, I think what the students appreciate is that we're all struggling through this, we're not—and you get better. You have successes, but then again, you go back to the drawing board with each new project, so you know, we all continue to face the same difficulties, and those same pleasures.

JD: And you were actively writing all these years that you were a professor here, and in a couple of different genres, if I might use that term.

TD: Right.

JD: Can you talk a bit about what drew you, at various times, or with various characters, to say "this is going to be a collection of short stories, this is going to be a novel"? Clearly biography is very different than that, but what draws you to each of those forms?

TD: I think in a short story, the primary impulse is to capture a moment. Usually it's a moment of change in a character's life. You focus in almost microscopically on a particular instant in a character's life where some kind of turn has taken place, something has happened that's never happened before in that character's life, and they're changed by it. And it's that instant that you kind of want to focus on. In a novel, there's more of an impulse to create a wider, broader world, I think. So, early on in a draft, as I say, I always begin with a character, with a person, and the story grows out of that person. And I try to learn early on from the material whether that person's story really is about one strong incident, and that's really where the energy is, or is it more about the world around that character and how that world is shaping the character? And I don't always know until, again, I write several drafts into it, until I find out where's the real energy here. Is it [snaps fingers] an instant, or is it a broader picture?

[1:25:50]

And sometimes I'll get very deeply into what seems to be a novel and realize, you know, this is not happening. But here in this particular chapter, at this particular moment, is interesting. And so, I pluck it out of a novel and it becomes a short story. I mean, sometimes that happens. You know, I cannibalize my own work sometimes, because you just realize you

have to let the writing guide you. There are, you mentioned earlier that there are trends, as in anything in the culture, there are trends, and I do think that when I was younger, the novel was considered the sort of premiere literary form, sort of the king of literature, as it were. And the short story was kind of a stepson, sort of.

And then there was a period in the 1980s, I think, when the short story had a kind of flowering moment. Raymond Carver was a very famous short story writer, Donald Barthelme influenced a lot of young people; the short story became very popular among younger writers. Nowadays, nonfiction is more prominent than it used to be. Personal essays, memoirs, journalism that has a kind of personal cast to it, that's become a much more popular form. Again, I think partly because of technology. Reality TV shows, I think they're terrible but they do influence the larger culture. I think people like to see what they think of as reality, even though it's edited and shaped by the medium.

But we have, I think, an impulse to look at documentary forms now, more than we used to. So, nonfiction's very popular now and more and more students want to study it and learn it. So, the trends also affect what courses get taught, what courses are popular and where the profession's going to go.

JD: Sure. And the first writing that you did was a novel and then what—is it difficult, has that changed over time, to go from being a novelist to a short story author, and then you decide to write Donald Barthelme's biography?

TD: Yes. It was difficult in the beginning. As I said, I think when I started, just culturally speaking, the novel was considered—if you wanted to be a literary writer, the novel was the thing to write. So, I thought I had to write a novel. It was arbitrary in a way, but I just thought that's what I—I had to be a novelist. And then I wrote the first novel and struggled to write my second novel. It was really the struggle to write the second one, which took a long time. I didn't publish my second novel for another ten years because I was struggling to figure out what I was doing with the novel form. So in the meantime, I wrote some stories, in some ways just to stay active while I was trying to figure out this novel, and then also parts of that novel, as I say, I would pluck them out and they would become stories. And so, I began to write stories that way, and it was kind of difficult at first. But then I began to enjoy the short story for its own properties, as well as novels, and began to think there's no reason why you can't do both. I mean, why not?

And then I began to write some essays, again, in many ways just to keep my mind active in moments when I was engaged in a long process and knew that it would be a while before I really had this thing together. So, in the meantime, how do I stay working? So, I'd write these shorter pieces. Now, I have to say, I don't worry so much about the distinction. I think in writing an essay, readers are more open to a voice that is speaking to them. In fiction, we demand action and movement and drama and sort of narrative momentum. In essays, I think we demand less of that. We're more open to just a voice talking to us.

[1:30:04]

So, why not have a voice in fiction, or why not have action in an essay? I mean, I'm simplifying the terms here, but I've come to think there's no reason to have these genre distinctions quite so rigid, that you can write a story that is voice-based, you can write an essay that has a lot of momentum and movement, you can write journalism that reads like fiction. In my biographies, I very much want to write a book that will read like a novel, to keep a reader turning the pages quite literally, not getting bogged down in facts and dates and so on, but trying to find out who this character is and what's going to happen to this character.

So, the distinctions, as I've gotten older, are less and less important to me, which again, presents kind of a teaching problem. When you're teaching beginning writers, you want them to have a sense of structure. You don't want the work to be sprawling and random, so it is important to teach sort of rules and structural distinctions, and so the genre forms are important to impress upon them. Having said that, though, as I've gotten older, as I say, I'm less interested in those distinctions. But I think you have to know what they are first before you can start to mix and match.

JD: And you had a very personal connection with the subject of your first biography, and then what drew you to the next ones? And you have one coming out?

TD: I do, yes.

JD: On Joan Didion, this fall.

TD: You know, I'm recognizing as we're talking here that a lot of what I have to say is that my career path has been very serendipitous. Not a lot of planning and forethought in some of it. The first biography was personal for me. Barthelme had been my teacher, and as I said, the impulse behind that was to reintroduce him to younger readers. I had heard that someone was writing a biography of him, and at the time I was teaching Barthelme in some of the classes here at OSU and I kept waiting for this other biography to come out, thinking I might use it in one of my classes, but it never did appear and I finally wrote to the person who was supposedly writing it and said "when is your book coming out?" And he said "I've given up on it, I just, for whatever reason."

So, that's when I began to think about writing the biography, and I did, and honestly, I didn't think the book would necessarily get published, because Barthelme's work had fallen out of print. I thought publishers might not be interested. But I got lucky. Again, it was kind of luck. I found an agent who was a Barthelme fan and she found an editor who was a Barthelme fan, so the book came out and did quite well critically, got a lot of notice.

And because it had done well critically, my editor, a guy named Michael Homler at St. Martin's Press, came to me and said "we'd like you to do another one." So, I really had not considered the possibility of writing another biography. I thought I would do this one, because it was personal. But he said "we'd like you to do another one" and he said "has anyone ever written a biography of Joseph Heller?" And again, now Joseph Heller is not as well-known as he used to be, but in my generation Heller wrote a novel called *Catch-22*, which was an innovative sort of rebellious novel of the 1960s, kind of an anti-Vietnam novel is the way it was taken to be. It's really set in the Second World War, but it was published in the sixties and it was quite irreverent with the military, so it kind of became an anti-Vietnam novel to that generation, and it was quite well-known.

No one had written a biography of Joseph Heller, so my editor kind of nudged me in that direction, and so I went back and reread all of Heller's work and interviewed his daughter and started interviewing other people who had known him and really then kind of stumbled into this second biography. I didn't really intend to do it, but I was having fun. I really had a good time writing that book, it was a lot of fun. And that book also then did well critically, and so the editor came back and said "we'd like to work with you again."

So you know, I really have taken off into this direction of biography, but it's kind of been by accident. This time, the third biography is going to be of Joan Didion, who is well-known as an essayist and journalist, and again from the same period. Barthelme, Heller and Didion, all three made their reputations in the 1960s, a very turbulent time for the culture. And I'm interested in that period too, because I was young then and it shaped a lot of my attitudes and my first awareness of the outside world kind of during that period. So, I'm very interested in how I was shaped by that time, and reading these writers helps me explore that as well. So, even though I'm writing about them, there is a kind of personal aspect to it.

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But my editor, this time, said "nowadays more women than men buy books, so your subject needs to be a woman this time." So, that was a very pragmatic decision, but as it turns out, I've been reading and teaching Joan Didion for forty years and love Didion's work, so she was a natural subject for me. So, this is the third biography and I suspect I'll do others, because I've had fun writing these books.

JD: And as you're speaking I'm thinking about just kind of sort of the publicity side of writing, which is very much a part of the world of a writer.

TD: Yes.

JD: How has that changed, or what's been your experience with being out on book tours, or that piece of it?

TD: Well, that piece of it, I am very uncomfortable with it, to be very honest with you, but you're right, it is a part of being a writer now. Marketing is so much a part of everything, including academia. OSU is quite involved in marketing itself, I mean it's just what every institution has to do. But I have kind of kept a distance, and I have to say, the teaching job here enabled me, I think, in many ways, to stay apart from that. I had a steady job here at OSU, I had my safe little world here at OSU, so in some ways I could write what I wanted to write without having to think about the marketplace very much, and without having to go out on tour very much, even though I had my space here.

In 1986 when I published the first book, I got a pretty good advance for it. In the mid-eighties there was a lot of money in publishing and they were giving out big advances to young writers. And in some ways, the publishers bankrupted themselves. I think they gave away too much money for books that didn't sell. So, my first novel didn't sell terribly many copies and they gave me a lot of money upfront. So, they lost money on me, and after that I published most of my fictions with what's called in the trade "small presses," not big New York commercial publishers who want to make big profits from their books, but presses that are devoted, again, in that citizen way of keeping literature alive.

So, I published with publishers who knew they weren't going to make a lot of money from me, but who thought the work was worthy. And so, in that sense I didn't have to go out and publicize it much. Now, the biographies are a different story. They've gotten a lot more attention and I have some book tours, I've done radio interviews and gone to bookstores and toured a few cities, done a few little TV morning shows with some of these books. They never know how to pronounce my name, or they never know what the book is about; they've never read the book, you know. So, that's kind of typical. But it's, the whole idea is to get out there and to plug the book and it's, as I say, for me it's kind of uncomfortable. I think a lot of writers have fun with it.

Joan Didion right now is very popular, and so my book is not yet out; there's already been more, I guess "buzz" is the word, about this book than I've experience before, and I'm a little worried what may be coming. I mean, they're talking about movie interest and stuff like that, which I don't even want to think about. In some ways that stuff is exciting but it has so little to do with writing. And for me, a book is a very different thing than a movie. If I wanted to write movies, I'd be writing movies. So, as much as I love movies, it's just not what I do.

So, that whole notion of—but again, I think this is a pressure that's on younger writers and our students coming out of this program are going to face it more than I ever did, that you're not just writing a book, you're creating a product that can be a book or it can be a video game or it can be a movie or it can be a this or a that or it can be a YouTube video; it's a product that can change and take many forms and be marketed in many different ways. I mean, that's just the new world. I mean, that's what technology is doing. So again, it's changing the idea of what a literary artifact is, something I didn't have to deal with much but our students going forward probably will. It's a whole new world, one that I don't really feel part of.

[1:40:09]

JD: So, you did retire as a professor in, I'm losing the year, 2012, '13?

TD: '13 I believe, yes.

JD: And in an earlier talk we had, you referred to yourself as an "extinguished" professor.

TD: The extinguished professor, yes.

JD: You're clearly still actively writing and very busy, what's next for you? Or is it still serendipitous?

TD: Serendipitous in a way, although I still feel very much a part of the community here. I go to the readings and this very week, in fact, my wife and I are going to be having a party for the graduate Creative Writing students at our house, kind of an end-of-the-year celebration, so I still feel very connected here. I'll be taking part in the Magic Barrel community reading here in Corvallis, so locally very much a part of the writing community, continuing to write both fiction and, as I say, I probably will do another biography soon. I'm turning my thoughts to that.

And the other thing, there are summer writing programs and little residency writing programs where you go sometimes for ten days and work with students, and I suspect that the teaching bug will get me again very soon and I'll work with some students one-on-one through programs like that. I mean, I still very much love the contact with young writers and helping them with their manuscripts. And so, again, I've mentioned this word several times now, the idea of citizenship. I still feel it's important not to be the kind of writer who withdraws from the world into the ivory tower and just does your work, but to continue to promote literature, not just your own, but others, to be a part of it, to help. So, through those kinds of summer programs and through the community here, I still want to keep my toe in the water. But I am able to spend more time on my writing now than I used to, which I have done and I appreciate that too.

JD: And as more time—I think you've talked in the past about just kind of having a routine that writing is part ritual and part work, and—

TD: It is, yeah.

JD: And how has that changed, with perhaps having more time?

TD: Yeah. You know, I—that's something too that I try to impress on students, is that it's not a matter of waiting for inspiration to hit you; you have to work for it. So, it's important, I think, to think of writing as a job, as work. And so, I always did have a kind of ritual when I was teaching. Teaching forced me to be an early morning writer, really. I would write in the mornings before the day began and get the bulk of my work done then. Then the school day would begin and my mind was filled with other things. Now, since I'm not teaching, I'm able to stay at the desk longer in the mornings than I used to, and so I'm not quite the early morning writer I used to be. I can be a little more leisurely getting up and then have the morning to write and then turn to what needs to be done around the house in the afternoons. So, it's a little more leisurely but it is still very much a ritual for me. I have my working hours where I'm at the desk and I do that before I turn my attention to the other things that need to be done.

JD: And as the writing profession's changed, you've certainly been part of many professional organizations, how has that been important in your career, or kind of enmeshed in your work, and perhaps even now?

TD: Yes, it is. So, there's an organization called the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, AWP, which is the national organization for teachers of creative writing, and I've been very much a part of that for many, many years. And again, it's like getting awards, it's like being validated by your peers. I mean, belonging to an organization like that and going to the conference every year, meeting people, seeing the same people year by year and feeling part of a national community I think is very, very important. I tell the students that, as well, that if they can get to this conference, the AWP conference every year, it's a good thing, because it plugs them into a larger community.

I was on the board of Literary Arts up in Portland and I was on a lot of committees here at OSU. Again, for me it's all part of that citizenship impulse, it's just things don't happen by themselves and it's easy to take for granted that yeah, we have books, we have writing, we have literature, we have literary prizes. Well, we have them because people keep them going year after year. They keep organizations going that support these things, they give an infrastructure to people, they give fellowships to people, they create programs where students can come and take classes. People have to do that and those things have to be funded, they have to be organized, they don't just happen.

[1:45:28]

And whatever's going to happen, for all of my worries about the future and technology changing literacy and me feeling left out of it, whatever shape it's going to take, it's going to take it because of the people who were in classes here at OSU now. The people who care about literature are then going to go out into the world and create the future. I mean, quite literally. Whatever shape literature is going to have, it's going to be because of these people now here. But it means that they can't just focus on their own writing and lock themselves in a room. They have to go out and do something and be part of something.

So, I always think, and that's the great thing about literary tradition, even to me, literature is a long, long, centuries-long conversation. It's been going since the beginning of the written word, and as a writer, you're just plugging one sentence or two into that long conversation and then it would continue long after you're gone. But that's a great feeling, to feel you're part of something much, much bigger than you. It's not about your little gem of a book that you've written; it's about, you know, you're throwing that book into this long stream of books, and part of something bigger, and I think that's hugely important for people to feel.

JD: Well, I think we're ready to wind-up here and I certainly want to give you a chance to offer any final thoughts about anything that we haven't touched on that you'd like to, or OSU specifically.

TD: Yeah, let me talk about OSU specifically and about creative writing programs, because this is going to continue, I think, to be a bit of a contentious issue going forward; the place of creative writing in the academy. As I mentioned early-on in our discussion, when I was a student just beginning, English departments didn't quite know what to make of creative

writers. They weren't quite sure it was a serious academic program of study and there weren't that many creative writing programs in universities. When we started the MFA program here, I think there were maybe something like three hundred graduate programs in creative writing at that point, which is quite a lot. Now there is something like seven hundred. These programs are proliferating.

And so, that's leading to a lot of discussion about, on the one hand, what happens to all these people who want to be writers? They're getting degrees; is there a place for them in the world? Do they have a professional future? Is there room enough for all this many? That's a serious question and it's an issue our students will face. There's also a question that can writing be taught? It's an art, it's creative, it's imaginative, can you teach those things? As I've suggested, I think you can certainly teach people to be better readers and better editors, so there are pragmatic things you can give them, but the idea of what a creative writing program can give students is going to continue to change and evolve. And so, there are a lot of doubters out there; that there are too many programs, programs are not really very practical, what's the place of creative writing in the university. So, I know that controversy will continue.

I am obviously a supporter of these programs. I think they do a lot of good work, and as I've, I think, strongly suggested, as much as teaching craft and reading and writing, I think the work they do is create community and foster bigger community over time. So, I think they have a very important place. And OSU is an unlikely place for such a program to take root, I have to say. As I mentioned earlier, University of Oregon was the humanities school, it was not OSU. For a creative writing program, an arts program to take root and flourish at Oregon State, I think is a wonderful testament not just to the people who've been involved creating the program, but to Oregon State. And here I'm becoming a company man; I really think the university has gotten behind this program in a wonderful way and in a way that we might not have expected, given how unusual a program it was.

But it has flourished and it's one of the best in the country right now. I mean, I say that not just because I was a part of it, but I think it's, objectively speaking now, the word is out. The program is getting something like a hundred and twenty to a hundred and forty applications every year for six positions in fiction writing. That's just one example how competitive it's become in the country, but how much OSU has become nationally known and sought by students. So, I feel very gratified. It's been a lucky place, in terms of this serendipity, if it was serendipitous for me to wind up here, it was just a very lucky thing for me.

JD: Well, I'm so pleased to have your recollections added to the archival collection that this'll be a part of.

TD: I appreciate it.

JD: And thank you so much for your time.

TD: Thank you.

[1:50:46]