

# The **ALCALDE**

FOR ALUMNI AND FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ★ MARCH/APRIL 2009

## TOM & HARRY

“My goal is to make the Ransom Center a required stop on any cultural tour of the planet.”

—TOM STALEY, Director  
*Harry Hunt Ransom  
Humanities Research Center*



*Plus ...*

### **In Praise of Pond Scum**

*Move over, solar. The fuel of the future might be algae.*

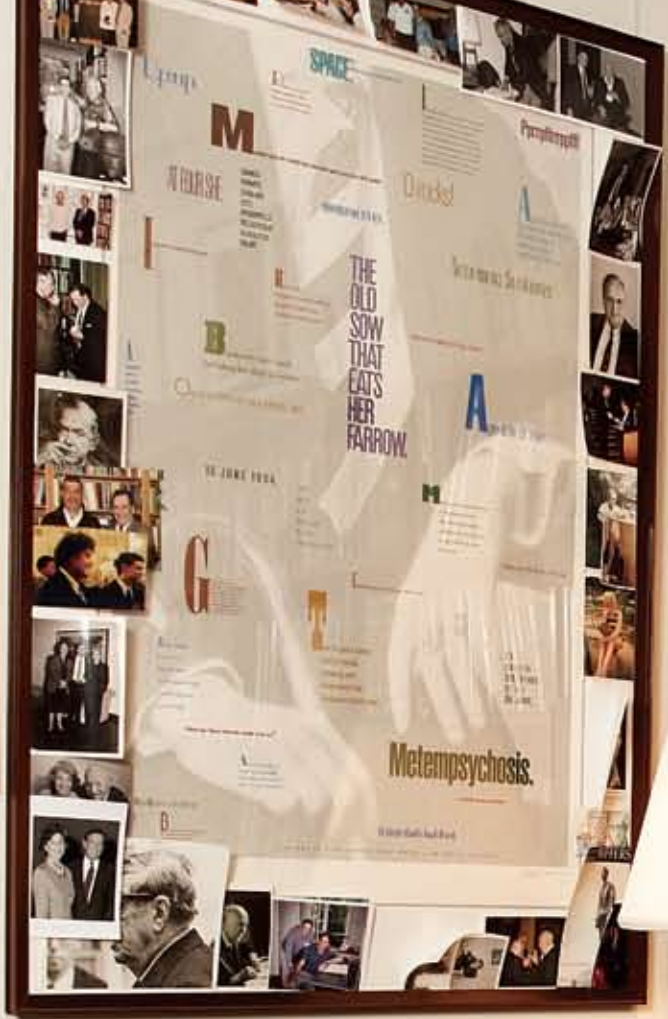
### **Rocket Man**

*NASA's Tim Crain*

### **The University's Missing Piece**

*What do we still need to be the best?*

**TEXAS  EXES**  
*'Til Gabriel blows his horn*





# Oh, the Humanities

## How Tom Staley Took the Ransom Humanities Research Center from Good to Awesome

BY TIM TALIAFERRO

**Q:** *Do you like directing the Ransom Center?*

**TS:** *Would King Midas like sleeping in Fort Knox?*

TOM STALEY, DIRECTOR OF THE Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, opened his own library at the ripe old age of 8. He let friends borrow books on one condition: every now and then they had to donate to his collection. At 12, having amassed a trove of Big Little books, he catalogued and numbered each volume and would stack some in an orange crate to bring to his summer league baseball games. “I liked it because I knew I would have lots of time to read,” Staley says.

For two decades Thomas F. Staley has led Harry H. Ransom’s Bibliothèque Nationale. During that time the HRC has cemented its claim on having the finest collection of literary materials from 20th century American and British writers — in the world. Its photography and film collections rival the country’s best and are growing so fast that the UT System recently bought an additional \$200 million in insurance for the HRC’s holdings. That’s on top of the \$1 billion it already owned.

While UT tries desperately to catch academia’s top institutions, the Ransom Center competes regularly with Harvard’s Houghton Library, Yale’s Beinecke, the Smithsonian, and the British Library. It has pried so many literary treasures out of Great Britain that Parliament relaxed restrictions on government funds being used to buy native writers’ manuscripts. It’s not surprising that the Ransom Renaissance at work at UT — the push toward a smaller, smarter, more elite university — is at present best embodied by the center bearing the former president and chancellor’s name.

How much credit belongs to Staley depends on whom you ask, but at this point it's hard to separate where the HRC ends and Tom Staley begins — people refer to the two interchangeably. There's widespread agreement that under Staley's watch, the HRC has transformed from an institution clinging to its Ransom-era reputation into something hungrier and more sophisticated than ever before. And make no mistake about his ambition: Although the HRC stands out in the Western world, Staley isn't satisfied. "My goal," he says, "is to make the Ransom Center a required stop on any cultural tour of the planet."

**Q:** *If Ransom walked in the door today, what do you think he would say?*

**TS:** *He'd be as happy as can be. He'd say, 'My God, what have we wrought.'*

Staley does not look or act his 73 years. A compact man with outsized charm and the energy of a supernova, he seems physically and mentally indefatigable. He plays tennis in the mornings, works all day, and entertains at night. He practically bounces down the center's labyrinthine hallways, and his mind constantly churns. HRC staffers know that at any minute the boss could appear in their doorway with some new scheme he's hatched. "When he does that," says Danielle Sigler, curator of academic affairs, "we sit down and think, 'OK, how can we make this work?' No is not an option."

Lately Staley's been on a party kick. In early 2008 he had the idea to commemorate what would have been Harry Ransom's 100th birthday on Nov. 22 with a blowout at the HRC. The staff hosted

150 of Ransom's former colleagues and students at a private event. Former Fine Arts dean Robert Freeman and two other musicians performed Ransom's favorite song, "Embraceable You," and, of course, "I'm Just Wild About Harry." At the reception, Ransom's birthday cake was decorated in the shape of three rare books he acquired for the library. Next, Staley plans to bring back to the HRC a portrait of Frida Kahlo that's been on a traveling exhibit since 2002 and throw a Cinco de Mayo fiesta. "We have a lot of people who like to support our parties," Staley says.

Some words make anyone who works in a humanities research library perk up. "First edition," "previously undiscovered," and "support" all qualify. Although Staley regularly finds and buys rare first editions and has an uncanny knack for scoring previously undiscovered letters and manuscripts, it's only because he is a master at rounding up support that the Ransom Center is what it is today.

From the first day he arrived at Texas in 1988, Staley has faced constant comparisons with the man widely regarded as the most influential figure in UT history. Ransom rocketed up the University administration, from lowly professor in 1935 to chancellor in 1961, with a five-year hiatus working in military intelligence during World War II. As director of the HRC he was known as "the Great Acquisitor." In his prime he was so good at soliciting donors that the term "Ransomized" was coined to describe the effects of his charm. No HRC director, save Staley, has rivaled old Harry in this respect.

Staley is at least as good. His rise at the University of Tulsa was equally meteoric. He shot up from professor to dean so quickly as to become the youngest dean in the West. He went on to become

# THE BIG PLAYS

## 20 of the Most Important Acquisitions of the Staley Era

(CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER SINCE 1989)



John Fowles

**1. Stuart Gilbert Collection of James Joyce Materials (1989)** Gilbert (1883-1969) was an English literary scholar and translator; Joyce (1882-1941) is the Irish expatriate author of the landmark novels *Ulysses*, *Finnegan's Wake*, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. **2. Penelope Fitzgerald Papers (1989)** Fitzgerald (1916-2000) was a Booker Prize-winning English novelist, poet, essayist, and biographer. **3. John Fowles Archive (1991)** Fowles (1926-

provost. “The thing about that was: I loved it because I got to run the library,” Staley says. “At that time I realized the link — certainly in my field — between research, scholarship, and libraries. It was all linked.” Staley was in line to become the university’s president when he was passed over. He came to Texas shortly after.

“Harry Ransom was a powerful force, intellectually and personally,” says Greg Curtis, former editor of *Texas Monthly*, now the humanities coordinator at the HRC. “That’s true of Tom. Ransom had a terrific entrepreneurial streak. Tom certainly has that. And Ransom had a great instinct for value. Tom clearly has that as well.”

And just as Ransom’s competitors both respected and resented him, Staley’s foes show a similar ambivalence. According to Ben Primer, associate university librarian for rare books and special collections at Princeton, Staley is both liked and loathed for having driven up the cost of literary collecting. Primer belongs to a group called Fatheads comprised of heads of major special collections libraries in the country. Staley is one of the few members not affiliated with the Ivy League. “Some people probably would say of Tom there’s a lot of ego and a lot of money there, and so they resent him,” Primer says. “I don’t resent him, because I like him.”

**TS:** *There are a lot of issues we’re facing today.*

**Q:** *Yeah, like what?*

**TS:** *Well, we’re underfunded. It’s hard to believe, but we’re underfunded.*

Harry Ransom had three insights about rare-book libraries that all came true and paid off. One: Ransom collected pre-publication

materials of modern writers when most places didn’t. This was half necessity and half pragmatism. Ransom knew he couldn’t compete with what they had at Oxford and Cambridge. The University of Texas was a young university. Texas was a young state. Modern made sense. The books were still cheap and the manuscripts, dirt-cheap.

“The second thing that he did,” says Staley, “was to give emphasis to the idea of the conception, the gestation process, and that it would profit to understand that the book is the end of the creative process.” At its heart what the Ransom Center does is document the process a writer goes through, from research to first draft to final edits. There’s information in that process that helps understand a final product, and it’s what makes scholars giddy.

But where he was most prescient and what most contributed to his success was convincing the Board of Regents that books and manuscripts were capital expenditures. That made them eligible to be purchased with Permanent University Funds. Says Staley: “He said to the regents, ‘If a book isn’t a capital expenditure, what is it?’ And they said, ‘Oh, we hadn’t thought of that. We’d always thought of books as supplies.’ Well, hell, that was music to everyone’s ears.”

With a spigot on the Available University Fund, Ransom could simply outbid his competitors. He bought so many collections and bought them so fast that even 40 years later some still haven’t been catalogued. There’s an old story the archivists tell around the HRC about a student who came in and asked to borrow a copy of a Graham Greene novel. An archivist, eager to reveal the many treasures of the Greene collection, asked the student what he was working on and if he wanted to see this manuscript or that letter, but the

2005) was an English novelist and essayist.

**4. Elizabeth Hardwick Collection, Including Material by Robert Lowell (1991)**

Hardwick (1916-2007) was an American literary critic, novelist, and short story writer. From 1949 to 1972 she was married to the poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977). **5.**

**Tom Stoppard Archive (1993)** Stoppard (1937-) is a British screenwriter and playwright.

**6. Isaac Bashevis Singer Archive (1993)** Singer (1904-91) was



Elizabeth Hardwick with Robert Lowell

a Nobel Prize-winning Polish-born American author and one of the leading figures in the Yiddish literary movement.

**7. David Hare Archive (1993)** Hare (1947-) is an English playwright and theatre and film director.

**8. John Osborne Papers (1995)** Osborne (1929-94) was an English playwright, screenwriter, actor, and critic.

**9. David Douglas Duncan Photography Archive (1996)** Duncan (1916-) an American, is among the most influential photographers of the 20th century. **10. Penelope**

**Lively Archive**

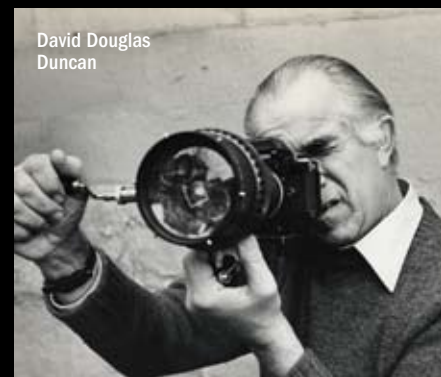
**(1996)** Lively (1933-) is a prolific, popular

and critically acclaimed British author of fiction for both children and adults. **11. Arnold**

**Wesker Archive (1999)** Wesker, (1932-) is a British author of 44 plays and numerous other books. **12. Doris Lessing**

**Papers (1999)** Lessing (1919-) is a British novelist who won the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature. **13. Brian**

**Moore Archive (2000)** Moore (1921-99) was an Irish novelist. He was



David Douglas Duncan



Isaac Bashevis Singer's Typewriter

# THE BIG PLAYS



Julian Barnes



Bob Woodward (left) and Carl Bernstein, at the Ransom Center

acclaimed for his descriptions of life in Northern Ireland in the post-war era. **14. James Salter Archive (2000)** Salter (1925-) is an American novelist and essayist. **15. Julian**

**Barnes Archive (2002)** Barnes (1946-) is a contemporary English writer. **16. Woodward and Bernstein Watergate Papers (2003)** Bob Woodward (1943-) and Carl Bernstein (1944-) are investigative journalists and authors who, together, broke the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of President Nixon. **17. Don DeLillo**

student insisted he just wanted to read the finished product. In the story, the student and the archivist scoured the collection in vain looking for a copy. When they brought the matter to Ransom he was dismissive. "You can always get the book," Ransom reportedly said. "Get the manuscripts whenever you can."

Although West Texas oil no longer fuels the acquisitions engine as it used to, the impression remains that Texas has money to burn. While the HRC has a budget for acquisitions (\$486,883 in 2006-07) allocated and approved through the various bureaucratic channels of the University, Staley has in his 21 years drilled into deep private financial reserves. The budget could not have survived a \$5 million buy of the Woodward and Bernstein papers in 2003. Nor could it have bankrolled the Norman Mailer acquisition in 2005. For those, and others like them, Staley went private.

It's one of the things that keeps the Ransom Center's competitors off-balance — no one, expect maybe Staley, knows how deep his pockets are, which makes him a difficult opponent to gauge. This has led his competitors to believe, or at least assume, his pockets are bottomless. Which is just how Staley likes it.

**Q:** *How do you go about building relationships that lead to acquisitions?*

**TS:** *Well that's what everyone wants to know.*

**Q:** *Well tell us what you're willing—.*

**TS:** *I don't want to brag.*

When Staley gets really excited about something, he sits forward in his chair, scoots to the edge of it, and lowers his voice dramatically. "You know what it is, in a word," he whispers. "You have to believe in what you do. I think this is the most important thing in the world. It isn't cyclotrons, and it isn't all of those other things. It's the humanities."

Staley is himself a renowned modernist and James Joyce scholar. He's written extensively on Joyce and even started and edited

the *James Joyce Quarterly*. This gives him scholarly caché, but it also helps explain the importance of his "I think this is the most important thing in the world" belief.

Almost everyone who tries to explain Staley's appeal mentions both his personality and his enthusiasm. Lisa Avra, the HRC's chief development officer, calls Staley "one of those people you love to be around. He's always got a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face." Primer says he's the kind of guy who'll slap you on the back. Sigler says speakers can't wait to meet him, and visiting scholars mob him.

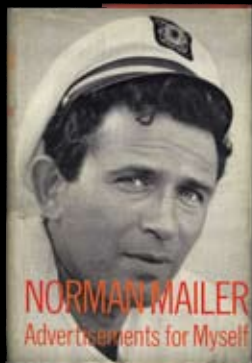
Staley's enthusiasm for the materials, the programming, the research, and the exhibitions is viral, infecting donors, staffers, visiting scholars, and ultimately, the public. "His excitement and enthusiasm are what make him so effective," says Joan Sibley, the HRC's head archivist. "It never gets old to him. It's never rote. He's always excited."

Staley's enthusiasm accrues tangibly when he pitches the HRC to potential donors. Any research library has various departments — archives, preservation, cataloguing, public programming, scholars programs (the HRC even has a bug zoo where it purges new collections of nefarious critters) — and all take on various levels of importance, especially to writers. Some want to know that their life's work will remain preserved and organized forever. Some in particular care that it be made available to the public. Some want students to have access. Some want assurance that their literary resting place is kept properly humidified and at the right temperature.

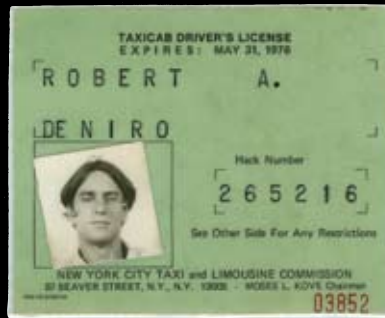
That his staff is both exceptional and enthused is one of Staley's greatest assets, and it may well turn out that part of Staley's legacy will be the well-oiled machine he's built. For all his acquisitions acumen, which has drawn so many comparisons with Ransom, his wider managerial successes are what separate and elevate him above Ransom. The archives department has developed into something much more comprehensive than it ever was under Ransom, so much so that the archives staff is going back and re-cataloguing the HRC's entire holdings. "It doesn't do you any good to have this

**Archive (2004)** DeLillo (1936-) is an American author whose work paints a detailed portrait of American life in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. **18. Norman Mailer Archive (2005)**

Mailer (1923-2007) was an American novelist, journalist, essayist, poet, playwright, screenwriter, and



film director. **19. Robert De Niro Archive (2006)** De Niro (1943-), a two-time Oscar winner, is widely regarded as one of the most influential actors in the history of film. He also directs and produces. **20. David Mamet Archive (2007)** Mamet (1947-) is an American author,



essayist, playwright, screenwriter, and film director. His credits include *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), *The Verdict* (1982), and *Wag the Dog* (1997).



material if you can't make it available," Staley says.

And since it wouldn't do any good to have the material if mold and silverfish promptly ate it, the preservation department, too, is top-notch. "The information school at Texas and the preservation training area are the place to go for preservation staffers," Primer says. "I can think of a number of people now in the industry who came out of Texas. That's one area where Staley has made a real contribution." On the whole, the HRC now employs 88 full-time staff members, seven graduate interns, 30 Federal Work Study students, and 15 temporary workers.

To many outside observers the Ransom Center appears to be perpetually improving. It is. And one of the main reasons why has to do with what you might call a snowball effect. When the HRC acquires a writer's collection, her contemporaries take note. Once the HRC has 10 of a writer's contemporaries, she takes note. When Staley brings writers in to visit, oftentimes all he has to do is walk them to the fifth floor and show them the writers door where Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams and Tom Stoppard and Gore Vidal and Larry McMurtry and David Mamet all signed their names. Ego takes it from there. "To have their archive here," Staley says, "ratifies their position in the canon." Lisa Avra puts it more idiomatically: "Writers like to know the company they're keeping."

The company is so good now that Staley and the acquisitions team don't have to work quite as hard at getting collections. When the HRC bought spywriter Alan Furst's papers, he was asked why he sold them to Texas. "Why?" he asked. "It's like why do you subscribe to *The New Yorker*. It's the best." Some collections just come. "We've reached a point that we're so well known that writers contact us," Avra says. When donors contact the HRC to gauge interest in an acquisition, Staley gets them an answer — and a number — fast. He expects the same in reverse. "Once I make my offer," Staley says, "I say it's good for 24 hours. If they're going to use me to bid up the cost of their papers, they better move fast."

**Q:** *How long do you think you'll stick around?*

**TS:** *Not forever.*

Tom Staley has no successor-in-training. He has no protégé. He does not appear interested in finding or training one. At present he remains focused forward. Even though the HRC has a pretty firm grip on 20th century writers' archives, it's looking at the next crop of writers. Staley has five young curators reading and keeping up with up-and-comers. "We've got a list of young writers you wouldn't believe," Staley says. "And we're moving on them, too."

The HRC is also gearing up for a \$30 million capital campaign. It is looking to create an acquisitions endowment, endow curatorial and archivist positions, and enhance the residency scholars program. In 2008-09, the HRC awarded 50 fellowships to scholars from 17 states and nine countries. It's planning public exhibitions more than three years out, and the acquisitions snowball keeps rolling. Staley says he's close to acquiring four or five major film-related collections on the scale of the Robert De Niro archive.

Much work remains to be done with the Web. It is the next great frontier for research libraries. "Think about this," Staley says. "We had that Gutenberg Bible for, what, 30 years? We digitized that book. The first month or so we had 17 million hits. Imagine that. The entire time we had it here not that many people saw it. The implications of that are enormous."

Under Ransom's guidance the Humanities Research Center grew out of what was exclusively a rare-books collection. Under Staley's guidance, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center has grown into a juggernaut. "Staley is the most perfect follow-up to Ransom," Avra says. One can only imagine the most perfect follow-up to Staley. 🐮

*Tim Taliaferro, BA '05, a former assistant editor at THE ALCALDE, is a graduate journalism student at Northwestern University.*