



Hi, this is Stephanie Ruble from the Stanford Alumni Association. I'd like to welcome our listeners to our third book of 2015-2016 Book Salon season, *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel. Today I'm sitting down with Paula Moya, professor of English, and by courtesy, of Iberian and Latin American Culture, who selected this book for our community. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Paula: Very glad to be here.

Paula, can you give me a little insight into what your research focuses on?

Paula: Sure, I usually focus on twentieth century and early twenty-first century literary studies. Feminist theory, critical and narrative theories, American cultural studies, interdisciplinary approaches to race and ethnicity and Chicano and US Latino studies.

And then it looks like you have a few books out also, *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, and *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*, and you've also co-edited three collections of original essays, *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*, *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, and *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. You have quite a few books there. So can you tell us what prompted you to select *Wolf Hall*?

Paula: Well, I think that when you ask[ed] me to do this, I was thinking about what books I really enjoyed reading that I thought a wide-audience might also enjoy, and immediately what came to mind was Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, as well as her follow up book *Bring Up the Bodies*. So, both of them were Booker Prize winners and that's initially why I read them in the first place and I was just taken by the fact that she had two novels that one was a sequel to the next and both of them were Booker Prize winners, and I just thought "Wow. There must be something special about these," and so I picked it up and read it and just found it to be extremely well written, very interesting. It opened my eyes to sort of a moment in history that I don't spend a lot of time thinking about and so that's pretty much why I picked it.

Great. And then can you single out some issues that you think our readers might find interesting to discuss in *Wolf Hall*?

Paula: Well, you know, it's sort of hard to figure out what other people might find interesting, so probably it'd be easier to tell you what I found interesting. So one of the things I found interesting is that I realized that it is a sympathetic character study of the historical figure of

Thomas Cromwell. So Thomas Cromwell was not somebody that in my knowledge of that time period, which was of course Henry VIII, that I had ever thought of as a sympathetic character. And so, for her to make him sympathetic to me and to do such a good job of it, it made me think about why. And part of that is that his antagonist, antagonist probably both in real life, and certainly in the novel, is Sir Thomas More. And so I've always had this very good impression of Sir Thomas More and Sir Thomas More does not come off so well in this novel. You know it's a historical novel, so I just was appreciative of the skill, the writerly skill, that allowed her to do this and it made me think again about the fact that there are always multiple perspectives in any given situation.

**Well, perfect. That sounds great. And then talk to us about what your favorite part of the book is and why.**

**Paula:** I think my favorite part in the book is related to what I was just talking about. So it starts out with a depiction of Thomas Cromwell beaten, laying on the ground, bloodied, and he is actually right in the middle of a beating. His father has come up from behind him, and has hit him on the head, and is really, really, brutally beating him. And so we get that, and it's all focused on Thomas' perspectives, so it is as if we are laying on the ground with him and we see the thread from his father's boots, and we see the father running back to kick him, and of course our sympathy will be with the person that is in that situation. So we have that set up and then we have his sister come and doctor him up and he basically takes off, and then the narrative jumps 27 years into the future and at this point, he is working for Cardinal Wolsey, who is at that point, the main adviser to King Henry VII. So right away we get into that historical era, but there's a scene between Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell where Hilary Mantel does something that I think does a lot to bring her reader in and make her reader sympathetic to him and basically, I don't know how long we have, whether I could read a passage? Is that possible?

**Yeah.**

**Paula:** Okay, I'd like to read this passage because I think it gives a sense of how she... So he's in the room, it's a firelit room, it's dark. He's telling the cardinal, giving the Cardinal some information the Cardinal needs to administer King Henry VII's business affairs. And he's got a bit of rumor that he's teasing, and he's teasing the Cardinal about whether or not he will give him this information and then this is the passage.

*Laughing, the cardinal pushes back his chair, and his shadow rises with him. Firelit, it leaps. His arm darts out, his reach is long, his hand is like the hand of God. But when God closes his hand, his subject is across the room, back to the wall. The cardinal gives ground. His shadow wavers. It wavers and comes to rest. He is still. The wall records the movement of his breath. His head inclines. He splays his fingers, his giant firelit hand. He places it flat on his desk. It vanishes, melted into the cloth of damask. He sits down again. His head is bowed; his face, half-dark. He Thomas, also Tomos, Tommaso, and Thomaes*

*Cromwell, withdraws his past selves into his present body and edges back to where he was before. His single shadow slides against the wall, a visitor not sure of his welcome. Which of these Thomases saw the blow coming? There are moments when a memory moves right through you. you shy, you duck, you run; or else the past takes your fist and actuates it ,without the intervention of will. Suppose you have a knife in your fist? That's how murder happens. He says something, the cardinal says something. They break off. Two sentences go nowhere. The Cardinal resumes his chair. He hesitates before him; he sits down. The cardinal says, "I really would like the London gossip. But I wasn't planning to beat it out of you."*

Okay, so that may have been a long passage that may not make much sense, but let me see if I can explain it. Basically, you know, they're in this dark room, and as they are talking, the Cardinal is laughing, and he stands up. I don't know what he is going to do, but he stands up, he makes a sudden movement. And Thomas reacts to that by basically just jumping up and backing up against the wall. And what we come to understand is that his upbringing, his beating by his father, his fighting his way, his you know, his scrabbling up from nowhere has led him to develop a way of being in the world that is very much about watching his back. So even though the likelihood that the Cardinal was going to strike him is not great, he reacted without thinking about it. He reacted just on the basis of his, you know, the sort of schemas he had developed for living in the world. I found this whole scene so fascinating because this together with the first opening scene of him being beaten, work together in a very interesting way to build for us a very sympathetic schema for Thomas. So we see in him, you know, the beaten, the young beaten boy, and we see in him someone who has been at risk, we see his need to protect himself, and in the process, we sort of forgive him for whoever he might have murdered in the past. Well, if he did it it was because he was attacked. There are all these ways in which what we might know of the historical Thomas Cromwell we are now willing to forgive. That I just find fascinating, that skill in writing that brings the reader in to make her care about a character. And then, of course, we go onto the next two novels, where we are following him and, you know, he's the hero, so we like him. There's something really interesting about that especially because I don't know if I should take a pause, especially because, for me, coming into this reading Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, and you know, thinking of him as the intellectual, and the important figure, and certainly not Thomas Cromwell, to be called to rethink these figures was extremely interesting to me, not least in part because I grew up Catholic. And of course, a big argument, this is a very Protestant book, a big argument about this book is about Protestantism, about the rise of Protestantism. And so, again, to have Cromwell as a major figure in that, and is somebody who again goes on to affect the course of history in his dealings with King Henry VII, and the breaking with the Church to create the Church of England, it made me care about all of that in a way I had never cared about it. And I think that when literature can do that, that's really exciting.

**Yeah, I totally agree. And I recently was reading an interview, an older interview, with Hilary about how challenged she was to make sure that people were in the correct place in her book, in *Wolf Hall*, that they were actually in history too, and it just all ties in**

**together, and I can't wait to dive in. And then, lastly, I wanted to mention to our readers that PBS aired a TV series also called *Wolf Hall* this spring, and I wanted to know if you had taken a chance to watch it.**

**Paula:** Oh, well, I would have if I had been able to. We were actually teaching in Berlin this spring, in the Bing Overseas program, and that was a wonderful experience, but I didn't have access to American TV at that time. So which was hard, actually. There were series, serials that we were right in the middle of, but couldn't watch. Yes, I look forward to watching that, I think it would be fascinating. I did develop quite an interest in that whole time period, and you know, Henry VIII's wives, and all that as a result of reading this novel.

**Yeah, I think that the video or episodes are still available online, anyone who is listening or Paula yourself, you can jump on and watch them. Thank you so much for sitting down with us today and introducing us to *Wolf Hall*.**

**Paula:** Okay, well, thank you for having me.