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Plath to Discuss "Backdoor Scholarship" and The John Updike Childhood Home

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The top of Jim Plath's desk is pretty typical for a professor of English – scattered envelopes, notes and papers to grade cover its surface. But as he works, the boxes of author John Updike's first-edition classics beneath his feet are on his mind. The books will soon fill shelves in the living room of Updike's restored childhood home in Shillington, Pa.

On Friday, April 4, Plath, president of The John Updike Society, will share the details of this important project during his Faculty Colloquium presentation at 4 p.m. in Anderson Auditorium (C101) of the Center for Natural Science Learning and Research (CNS).

Updike is best known for the multiple Pulitzer Prize-winning novels in his Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom series and his short stories for *The New Yorker* in the 1950s. According to Plath, Updike also wrote, "what sports writers now consider the best piece ever written about sports – *Hub Fan Bids Kid Adieu*," a near-mythic account of Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams' last at-bat.



Jim Plath

Along with his daily responsibilities at the University, Plath handles all things legal for The John Updike Society and serves as the public figurehead. A passionate Updike scholar himself, he has aided students and professors as far away as India and Iraq in their attempts to access Updike materials that their own libraries could not provide.

When Updike's childhood home in Shillington, Pa. went up for sale, the Robert and Adele Schiff Family Foundation donated the money to purchase the home. Suddenly, a society that was launched in May 2009 became a property owner just three years later, and Plath, as president, has had to take the lead. He officially purchased Updike's house by fax in between classes at Illinois Wesleyan. Now, he works with Maria Mogford, the curator he appointed to lead tours of the house, various contractors, and Habitat for Humanity of Berks County leaders to turn The John Updike Childhood Home into a literary center and educational museum.

While visiting the home to plot the first phase of "deconstruction," Plath recalled memories of some of his personal visits to the Dickens house in London, the Fitzgerald house in Montgomery, Ala., and Hemingway houses in Cuba, Idaho, Oak Park, and Key West.

"Writers' houses are kind of special," he said. "When you walk through the house of a historical figure, history comes alive. In the case of a literary figure, you get a better sense of their books, their world and their life," said Plath.

The John Updike Society's timetable was for 2013 to be devoted to deconstruction, and 2014 for construction. Plath will return in May to outline the group of projects that need to be done, and to plan a society member volunteer construction week. Plath said that a number of members have already expressed a willingness to wield hammer and saw, and he has heard that Updike's grandchildren may even be interested in helping with the project.

"Our first group of college students is coming to Shillington by bus the first week in May. I've just ordered chairs and accepted a donation of a big-screen television for the museum's education room, which will be ready for their visit," Plath said.

Once the museum is completed, teachers and professors will be encouraged to hold classes in the house free of charge, and tours can be arranged by appointment through the Society's website. A Pennsylvania filmmaker will soon begin work on an educational video on the importance of the house, the community, and Pennsylvania to Updike.

Plath said the restoration is demanding a slightly different kind of research than the typical literary scholarship. Yes, he's scouring Updike manuscripts and interviews for statements about the house, and he's interviewing Updike family and friends. But there's also a bit of architectural detective work to find "footprints" of the original location of now-missing walls, room dividers, pillars, and grape arbors. Decisions are often changed, too, based on new information. In one such instance, a bookcase added by Dr. Hunter, who purchased the home after the Updikes had moved to a farm in nearby Plowville, Pa., was slated to be torn down until the Society learned that Updike returned to visit the house several times during his lifetime—and one of those times he sat in a chair next to those bookshelves, where the Hunters kept their collection of Updike books, and he signed every one. Plath said it would be the perfect place to house those boxes of Updike first editions now sitting under his desk.

"Updike is considered one of the biggest literary figures of his time," said Plath. "We figured that we owed it to Updike and people who love literature to create this museum."

For additional information regarding the colloquium, contact Sherry Wallace, director for news and media relations at (309) 556-3792.

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