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Updike Scholar Remembers Novelist's Visit to Campus

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The passing of Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John Updike on Tuesday invoked memories of his visit to the Illinois Wesleyan University campus, and the thoughts of Updike scholar James Plath, a professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan.

“What John Updike has done for American literature is astounding,” said Plath, who has studied Updike for more than 20 years, including working closely with the novelist while editing the book *Conversations with John Updike* in 1994. “His work connects us with our American literary past, and he is forever a part of that now.” Updike died Tuesday at the age of 76 after a battle with lung cancer.

Plath discovered the works of Updike in an English class at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. “I didn’t choose to be an Updike scholar, he chose me,” he said. “His work spoke to me in ways other writers hadn’t.” Plath decided to write his dissertation on Updike, and began a correspondence with the celebrated author. “He didn’t do my work for me, but he was always gracious,” said Plath, who wrote his dissertation on “The Painterly Aspects of John Updike’s Fiction.”

Updike was featured speaker at the 1993 Hemingway Days' Writers' Workshop & Conference in Key West, which Plath directed from 1986-96. “That was the first time I met Updike face-to-face,” said Plath, who spoke with the novelist as he sat for a portrait painted by Hemmingway’s grandson, artist Edward Hemmingway. “We visited Edward Hemmingway’s first art exhibition in Key West. Updike, who was a skilled critic of the arts, pointed to one painting and said, ‘This is the best piece in the collection.’” Plath later bought the work and donated it to The Ames Library, where it hangs today.

It was during the 2002 dedication of The Ames Library when Updike and Plath met again, this time at Illinois Wesleyan. “I can’t imagine a more perfect person to help dedicate a library than a man who once wrote, ‘What a wonderful use of a life it is to write one good book,’” said Plath, who invited the novelist to campus. Updike also gave the speech for the

Founders' Day Convocation that day, where former University President Minor Myers, jr. bestowed upon him an honorary degree of humane letters. "He has made himself an American legend with his books, his comments, his place in America's letters," Myers said during the ceremony.

Entertaining the audience with his speech "Readings Not Totally Unsited to Founders' Day," Updike read several of his poems at the Convocation, and offered the audience his insights on learning. "Education is not an entirely pleasant experience," said Updike, who often described the hidden turmoil in suburban life in his works. "It can be painful as we go from caterpillars to butterflies."

Plath has more personal memories of the novelist known throughout the world. "He helped me propose to my wife," said Plath. During a trip to New York City, Plath took his future wife to the Empire State Building. "She expected me to pull out a ring, but instead I pulled out a book, a copy of Updike's *Marry Me*," said Plath. Inside the book, Updike had inscribed a personal message. "It said 'If you say yes, you just might get a ring at the Rainbow Room,' and then he added his congratulations," said Plath.

According to Plath, many literary scholars lament the fact that Updike never received a Nobel Prize in literature. In fact, Plath had been leading a group of Updike scholars to nominate the novelist for the coveted award when he passed away. "He did some highly original and inventive things," said Plath. "In *The Centaur* Updike took mythology out of the shadows of literary allusion and incorporated it on the same plane as his realistic narrative. In his *Scarlet Letter* trilogy, he reexamined Nathaniel Hawthorne's story of adultery from three different points of view and took the notion of intertextuality to new heights." Plath noted that with the novel *Couples*, Updike was one of the first American writers to incorporate "frank and poetic sexuality in literary fiction."

An author of more than 50 books, numerous short stories, poems and critical essays, Updike won the Pulitzer Prize for two of his "Rabbit" novels and won several National Book Awards as well. "In his Rabbit tetralogy, Updike uniquely revisited his character Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom every decade in order to give not just a portrait of an individual growing and aging, but also the changing face of American culture," said Plath. The publication of his wife-swapping novel *Couples* landed Updike on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1968, and he gained further recognition as the author of a magic realist novel, *The Witches of Eastwick*, which was

made into a movie starring Jack Nicholson. Updike lived in Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, where he had made his home for most of his adult life.

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