



ARTS

Jack Leggett, Who Cultivated Writers in Iowa, Dies at 97

By **BRUCE WEBER** JAN. 30, 2015

Jack Leggett, who nourished a generation of poets and novelists as director of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, perhaps the nation's pre-eminent graduate program in creative writing, died on Sunday in Napa, Calif. He was 97.

His death was confirmed by his son Anthony.

In the late 1960s, Mr. Leggett, who had been an editor and was a novelist himself, became a writer in residence at Iowa, where the workshop — officially known as the Program in Creative Writing — was founded in 1936 as the nation's first advanced degree-granting program of its kind.

He took over its directorship in 1970, when the major expansion of college and graduate writing programs had yet to begin and, as he later described it, for good or ill the general profile of a writing student was beginning to change from that of an adventurer less interested in form than experimentation to that of a more academic technique-developer and craft-polisher.

"In 1970 there were a lot of kids out of the armed forces and the Peace Corps," he said in a 1979 interview with The New York Times about his early students. "They were an undisciplined lot. They'd say, 'Don't tell me about form.' Now they are very interested in technique. They want to know what novelists have done in the past. And it shows in their work."

Over almost two decades — he retired in 1987 — Mr. Leggett populated the faculty with well-known writers, including John Cheever, Ian McEwan, Raymond Carver, Jorie Graham, Frederick Exley, Gail Godwin, Barry Hannah, Donald Justice, James Alan McPherson, John Irving and Frank Conroy (Mr. Leggett's eventual successor), and oversaw what became a hothouse of literary talent.

Among the students he admitted — manuscripts were and are a key element of a

student's application — were T. Coraghessan Boyle, Allan Gurganus, Michael Cunningham, Jane Smiley, Sandra Cisneros, Kent Haruf, Ethan Canin, Jayne Anne Phillips, Tracy Kidder, Denis Johnson and Bob Shacochis, many of whom returned to teach.

Owing in no small part to their success, the business of teaching creative writing is now widespread. In 1975, there were 15 master of fine arts programs in writing in the United States. Today, the nonprofit organization Poets & Writers lists more than 200 in its database.

“Jack was a marvelous, generous, lighthearted, intelligent captain at the helm of this program,” Lan Samantha Chang, the director of the workshop since 2006, said in an interview. “One of his greatest gifts was that he was able to see talent at a relatively early stage. He made decisions for admissions that have really resulted in a great legacy for the program.”

John Ward Leggett was born in Manhattan on Nov. 11, 1917. His mother, the former Dorothy Mahar, died the next year in the influenza pandemic sweeping the world. His father, Bleecker Noel Leggett, managed real estate properties and was largely an absentee father. John was reared mostly by a grandmother.

He attended private schools, including the Manlius School (now the Manlius Pebble Hill School) near Syracuse, which included military training, but did not graduate. Instead he spent a year at Bard College and then returned to finish high school at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. He went on to Yale, graduated in 1942 and entered the Navy, serving in the Pacific theater during World War II.

Mr. Leggett worked in publishing in the 1950s and early '60s, first as a publicist and editor for Houghton Mifflin (now Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) in Boston and later as an editor for Harper & Brothers, which became Harper & Row and is now part of HarperCollins.

“In the early 1960s, John Leggett edited my first three books,” the writer Gay Talese said in an email, “and in socializing with him sometimes, at dinners or at book parties, I got my first impression of New York literary gentry, a small circle that included Louis Auchincloss, John Phillips Marquand and George Plimpton. He was a courteous and tweedy figure with an elite education, an understated wit — I think part of the end of the era when book publishing was a gentleman's occupation. He was a gentleman himself, and as an editor wielded a gentle pencil.”

Mr. Leggett's mantra to his Iowa students was “Write what you know,” and he

followed his own advice. For his first novel, “Wilder Stone” (1960), he drew on his relationship with his father. His 1969 novel, “Who Took the Gold Away,” about mismatched college friends, recalled his time at Yale. And “Gulliver House” (1979) was about the publishing industry.

His other books include a biography of the novelist and playwright William Saroyan, “A Daring Young Man,” published in 2002, when Mr. Leggett was in his 80s; and “Ross and Tom; Two American Tragedies” (1974), a dual biography of two young best-selling novelists of the late 1940s — Ross Lockridge Jr., the author of “Raintree County,” and Thomas Heggen, who wrote “Mister Roberts” — each of whom committed suicide in the wake of his success.

“A fine example of literary and psychological investigation,” the critic Jonathan Yardley called the book in *The New York Times Book Review*. “‘Ross and Tom’ is a modest book about two writers of modest accomplishment, but in its understated fashion it gets as close to the question of the price of literary success in America as anything since Jack London’s autobiographical novel, ‘Martin Eden.’”

Mr. Leggett’s first marriage, to Mary Lee Fahnstock, ended in divorce. In addition to his son Anthony, he is survived by his wife, the former Edwina Benington; two other sons, Timothy and John; and three granddaughters.

He and his wife lived in Napa Valley, where, after his retirement from Iowa, he continued his role as a literary Johnny Appleseed as director of the Napa Valley Writers’ Conference for many years.

“If it can be said that any one person was responsible for Iowa City being celebrated as the center of gravity for the workshop culture in the literary life of America, that person was Jack Leggett,” said Mr. Shacochis, who won a National Book Award in 1985 for a collection of stories, “Easy in the Islands,” written at the Iowa Workshop, and whose novel “The Woman Who Lost Her Soul” was a Pulitzer Prize finalist last year. “I could never have been a writer without his support.”

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