

Storyteller Jon Hassler



(Photo by Greg Becker)

Editor's Note: Writer-in-Residence and Regents Professor Jon Hassler '55 passed away on March 20. At a memorial service in his honor in the Abbey Church on April 30, Jon was fondly remembered by family, colleagues and friends. The following is excerpted from introductory remarks by President Br. Dietrich Reinhart, OSB.

We come together today to celebrate a good and gentle man, a generous friend and teacher, a writer of imagination and stamina. If, as Dostoevsky wrote, "beauty will save the world," then surely we already have a glimpse of what is to come because of Jon Hassler's life in our midst.

Jon's immense life's work started quite simply with images that meant something to him, images derived from close observation and compassionate listening, images worked over faithfully, in season and out of season, by one whose heart was always open to us, a good and generous friend, the best of all.

Five years ago Saint John's University presented Jon with the *Colman Barry Award for Distinguished Contributions to Religion and Society*. The citation makes for good reading on an occasion like this.

Jon Hassler, you tell our story. You are our witness.

We are young and old; we are teachers, shopkeepers, parents and children—ordinary folk, living in small Midwestern towns, pursuing happiness with the usual mixed results.

With a gentle but penetrating gaze, you see us for who we really are, and you give us to ourselves, with love. As we duck around the corner, thinking to escape whatever it is God wants us to do next, we bump right into ourselves running away. We can only stop with a rueful laugh and open our hearts as you so quietly and persistently remind us we must.

Your worldly accomplishments are many: Your books are known and loved from coast to coast, your work is reviewed in the prominent journals of the nation, and literary awards and honorary degrees crowd your biography. But the accomplishment beyond all others for which we honor you today is one that is achieved without fanfare, over and over, as many times as there are readers: We turn the pages of your books, laughing and mourning with our friends in Staggerford, Rookery,

'55 1933 – 2008

Hope and Plum, and, when we have turned the final page and closed the book, we find that you have turned us toward God. We weep for our brokenness; we rejoice in our redemption.

Miss Agatha McGee [a main character in several of Hassler's novels] would be quite incensed if not included in our celebration today. Circling 90 these days, that feisty, intelligent, honorable, quick-witted, reactionary-but-progressive, hot-tempered, indignant, pragmatic, nurturing old lady sounded a lot like someone we all know. And Miss Agatha had something to say about the challenges of aging. Her penmanship, like Jon's, had become shaky with age. She relied on her younger friend Janet Meers, to do her handwriting for her, just as Gretchen has done for Jon these past several years. Through Agatha, Jon wondered if "death is a flaw in God's plan."

All great stories come from a writer's heart, a place of vulnerability, strength and imagination. Today we celebrate the life of a man who never stopped giving, right up to the end. The disease that crippled Jon and blinded him never touched his heart and could not corrupt his masterful use of language. Jon's verbal prowess, kept alive by his creativity and hard work – even to the point of finishing his last novel with only a handful of days left – provides all of us with an example of courage to treasure all our days. Where Jon has gone, we one day will follow. But meanwhile let us bask for awhile in the memory of this good and gracious man.



Jon Hassler '55 and Ryan Kutter '03 reviewing the collection of papers given by Hassler to Saint John's in November 2003. Kutter worked closely with Hassler to organize and catalog this valuable collection of papers representing drafts, galley proofs and miscellanea related to his novels, plays, screenplays and other works.

A Jon Hassler Selection

Hassler was a prolific writer of novels, short stories, essays and poems. The following are some of his best known works.

The New Woman, 2005
The Staggerford Murders; the Life and Death of Nancy Clancy's Nephew, 2004
Stories Teachers Tell (with Gretchen Kresl Hassler and Jerry Fearing), 2004
The Staggerford Flood, 2002
Good People – from an Author's Life, 2001
The Dean's List, 1997
Rookery Blues, 1995

Dear James, 1993
North of Hope, 1990
The Love Hunter, 1988
Grand Opening, 1987
A Green Journey, 1985
Simon's Night, 1979
Staggerford, 1977

