

Jeffrey Forrest Huntsman

One way to gauge the breadth of Jeffrey Huntsman's interests is to pay a visit to his office in Ballantine Hall. The door is festooned with clippings illustrating mangled grammar, tortured logic, and inadvertent humor ("File Shows Man Who Killed Five Before Killing Self Had Problems"). Enter the book-lined room and you will find paintings, musical instruments, parts for computers and other electronic gear, a gleaming sword for dramatizing medieval battle scenes, a carton of Ramen noodles for quick suppers before choral rehearsals, a mounted animal hide next to a sign from a "Licensed Wisconsin Fur Farm," a roll-top desk piled high with papers, on the floor a threadbare Persian rug, and a couch much the worse for wear from countless students who have lounged on it while consulting their polymathic mentor.

It is not hard to find a subject about which Jeffrey will speak passionately and knowledgeably—nature will do, and so will food, physics, language, vintage sports cars, turquoise jewelry, or bluegrass mandolin, along with a daunting range of literary works, from medieval mystery plays to postcolonial fiction. By his own account, he is interested in "about everything in the world except economics." On a recent trip he read books on cosmology, neurology, and mathematics, as well as the latest novel by Philip Roth.

Drama was his first love. After moving from his native Massachusetts to Maine during junior high school, he remained in the north woods to study at Bowdoin, where he threw himself into the college theater program, serving as director, actor, set designer, and even costumer. In the summer following his junior year, he performed with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival in *Richard III*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, an experience that confirmed his passion for everything from script to greasepaint. That summer he also encountered living Native American cultures for the first time, in the art and settlements of the Hopi and Navajo, an encounter that would profoundly shape his scholarly and teaching interests.

Following R.O.T.C. training at Bowdoin, he served in the U.S. Army from 1964 to 1966, most of that time in Manhattan, Kansas, where he helped to found a civic theater. When he completed his military service, he stayed on in Manhattan—"The Little Apple"—to earn an M.A. in linguistics at Kansas State University in 1967. His master's thesis, like his undergraduate honors thesis, dealt with medieval drama. From Kansas he moved to the University of Texas for doctoral studies in English language and linguistics, completing his Ph.D. in 1973.

Meanwhile, he had begun his career in the Department of English at Indiana University as a lecturer in 1970. When he arrived, the department was well supplied with scholars in medieval and renaissance drama, the fields closest to his heart, so Jeffrey began teaching courses in Chaucer, English language, linguistics, and Native American literature. He soon created English L364 Native American Literature, making this a formal part of the IU curriculum; except for a course taught at Berkeley by the Kiowa writer, N. Scott Momaday, this was the first offering of its kind anywhere in the world.

Drawing on his polyglot knowledge, Jeffrey also created English G603 Celtic Languages and Literature. He was among the first in the department to teach courses on science fiction, focusing on visions of alternative societies and emphasizing work by a new wave of female writers in the genre. He was likewise a pioneer in the application of computers to research in the humanities. In the early 1970s he began using computers to develop a database of medieval dictionary manuscripts. Computer languages, like natural languages, came easily to him, so he quickly learned programming, and he taught himself to build and repair these newfangled machines. Before there was even a label for information technology consultants, he served many colleagues as an unofficial cyber guru.

Early in his career at IU, Jeffrey experienced what he recalls as one of the pivotal moments in his intellectual development: he envisioned sentences moving not in the mere two dimensions of the page but in four dimensions, including that of time. This insight enabled him to perceive, in any sample of language, larger patterns stretching across historical periods and across seemingly disparate fields of inquiry. He has sought to help students perceive these patterns by drawing analogies from science, music, film, philosophy, technology, and other domains, as well as from literature. He treats the

classroom as a kind of theater, where one arrives with a script but counts on improvising in response to the intellectual flow. His wide-ranging analogies baffle some students, who complain that he is “always going off on tangents,” while the more imaginative students follow his cross-disciplinary leaps with exhilaration.

Jeffrey is drawn to people who hold, as he says, “more than one world in their heads,” people who straddle languages, cultures, or philosophies. Thus his interest in translation, in bilingual dictionaries, in speculative fiction, in the postcolonial literature of such Anglophone countries as New Zealand (including the indigenous Maori) and Australia (including the Aborigines). Thus his interest in the Individualized Major Program (IMP), where he has been active since 1971; his service as an early director of the summer Groups Program; his efforts through the Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching to enhance education in diversity and global citizenship; and his championing of Native American studies through the Modern Language Association. In such efforts he seeks to exemplify an ideal voiced by the late Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm: “Service is the rent we pay for living on earth.”

Jeffrey recently took on two new IMP students, and he hopes to continue serving this program long after he retires. Among his other post-retirement plans, he aims to complete several scholarly projects, including a study of Native American drama, a book on the Celtic qualities of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and a comprehensive study of medieval dictionaries. He also aims to spend more time outdoors, pursuing his love of nature; more time in his garage, restoring old English sports cars; and more time making music with the Unitarian Universalist choir and the Bloomington Chamber Singers. In all that he does, may he flourish.

Scott Russell Sanders