

Lee Sterrenburg

Lee Sterrenburg is retiring this year after 37 years of service to the English department of Indiana University. His loss will be felt especially keenly by those of his colleagues and graduate students who have benefited directly from the acuity of his reading; Lee has long demonstrated that most valuable ability to “get inside” the intellectual and theoretical position of someone else’s argument and offer particularly valuable criticism. And we will all miss the integrity of his commitment to individual learning; Lee did not teach in bulk, he taught a great many individuals, both inside and beyond the department—within the major and through his many hours with the Individualized Major Program.

Lee earned his B.A. from the University of Wisconsin (1963) and his M.A. (1966) and Ph.D. (1973) from the University of California at Berkeley, where he wrote his dissertation under the joint direction of Frederick Crews and Uli Knopfmacher. He began teaching at Indiana as a lecturer in 1970, converting to a tenure-track position after defending his dissertation in 1973.

Arriving in the department in the early seventies, Lee was at the forefront of a group of young faculty who sought to energize the department with respect to dramatic changes taking place in critical theory. Early in his career Lee developed what remains the most popular (among faculty and graduate students alike) course offering in our doctoral program, ENG L680 Special Topics in Literary Study and Theory. Moreover, the way in which Lee originated that course could well serve as a model for the department today as it seeks to re-imagine its graduate curriculum. Beyond simply developing a course, Lee organized a four-year lecture series, “Beyond Aestheticism,” that brought important theorists to campus. Involving both his colleagues here at Indiana and these visiting lecturers in collaborative pedagogy, he coordinated the graduate syllabus with the current work of the visiting faculty. The cumulative effect was to involve faculty and graduate students alike in learning the new contours of the discipline as it was being transformed in those less placid times.

It is this truest sense of imaginative intellectual innovation that his colleagues will miss most. Lee’s career has been marked by his substantial contributions to intellectual exchange that occurs outside the institutional box of lecture halls and course numbers. And he has been especially committed to intellectual exchange that is stimulated—rather than discouraged—by responsible recognition of disciplinary difference. The most difficult challenge facing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary investigations is to recognize continuously how the borders of our disciplinary difference serve to stimulate as well as inhibit. Notably, he was instrumental in the department’s developing the first doctoral minor in literature and science in the country. Throughout his career—with his work for Victorian Studies, the multidisciplinary Darwin seminar established here in the early eighties, the Science and Literature Affinity Group that developed in the late eighties, the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies that grew up in the nineties, and his teaching collaborations with Dan Willard and Don Whitehead in SPEA and biology—Lee has been

a remarkably valuable colleague in facilitating conversations across disciplinary boundaries, and in finding ways to bring graduate students and faculty together in a genuinely democratic community of learning. It is hardly surprising, then, that among his colleagues and his former students, he has inspired not only profound admiration, but deep and genuine friendship; and it is equally unsurprising that those feelings are not limited to his department, but distributed across the campus.

Indeed, the campus is much too small a habitat. Lee’s career may have begun as a psychoanalytic theorist, but the commitment to theory soon led to a much larger, more political, and more socially responsible commitment to how theory matters in the world; and many who know Lee from his recent work know him primarily through his commitment to environmentalism and the history of ecology. For Lee, the library is not the only archive, and all who know him, both in the classroom and beyond it, know him as a dedicated environmentalist, an avid birder, and an experienced traveler. When Lee teaches travel writing, as often as not, he has direct knowledge to set against the representation being studied. Whether it is photographing blue-footed boobies on the

shores of the Galapagos or Przewalski's horses on the steppes of Kazakhstan, Lee has followed with attention the footsteps and observations of the nature writers and travel writers who occupy a central role in his classroom.

But for many of us, what we will miss most are Lee's dinners—world-class cooking, fine wine, and intelligent conversation that knows the library . . . and also what lies beyond it. He has been an extraordinary colleague and remains an extraordinary friend.

Richard Nash