

John Hersey's Yale Education

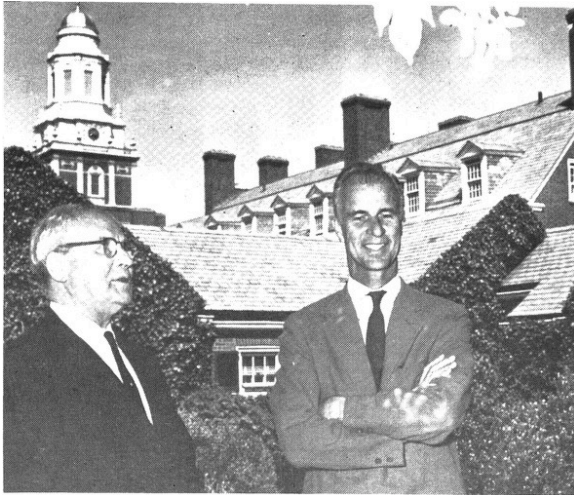


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Art of Biography



HERSEY APPOINTED PIERSON MASTER; NOVELIST TO ASSUME DUTIES JULY 1

-May 26, 1965, Yale Daily News¹

QUINCY PORTER, retiring Pierson master, and
successor JOHN HERSEY in Pierson courtyard.

On May 25, 1965, John Hersey was just over three weeks away from his 61st birthday and qualified for practically any writing job one could offer him. He was a fiction writer of the highest caliber: his 1944 novel about the Allied occupation of Italy, *A Bell for Adano*, had won the Pulitzer Prize, and his 1950 novel about the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, *The Wall*, had been awarded the Daroff Award from the Jewish Book Council of America.² In 1953, he had become the youngest writer to ever be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.³ Still, Hersey was perhaps best known as a prolific journalist, a man who had travelled to China, the South Pacific, and the Mediterranean as a correspondent for *Time* and *Life* during World War II and whose *Hiroshima*, chronicling the experiences of six individuals who survived the atomic bomb explosion and its aftermath, was so powerful that, for the first time in history, *The New Yorker* dedicated its whole issue (on August 31, 1946) to printing the piece in its entirety.⁴ Albert Einstein allegedly ordered a thousand copies. Bernard Baruch wanted five hundred. The Book-of-the-Month

¹ All photo captions are taken verbatim from the *Yale Daily New* articles whose headlines they are adjacent to in this paper (and were adjacent to in their original newspaper form).

² *Great American Writers*. R. Baird Shuman, Ed. Vol. 5. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002, pp. 696, 686.

³ David Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991, p. xiv.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. xiii. *Great American Writers*, p. 693. Thomas Kunkel, *Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of The New Yorker*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1995, p. 373.

club's director sent the piece for free to all members because it was, "hard to conceive of anything being written that could be of more importance at this moment to the human race."⁵

And yet, on that Tuesday evening in May 1965, John Hersey accepted a position that had few ties to writing, a post that, at least in the eyes of those bent on preserving the history, tradition, and insularity of higher education, he was woefully unqualified. That night, Yale University President Kingman Brewster, Jr., appointed Hersey Master of Pierson College, a job that entailed playing counselor, mentor, and surrogate father to 350 students and 75 fellows living in one of Yale's 12 residential communities.⁶ Hersey would become the first man to assume such a position who was not an academic.⁷ *New York Times* called the appointment, "another departure from the academic custom under Kingman Brewster Jr., president of Yale. Masters are usually picked from the faculty. Nearly all of them continue teaching."⁸ Not only had Hersey never taught at Yale, but he also did not plan to begin doing so once he moved into his new three-story residence at 231 Park Street in the summer of 1965.⁹

According to Hersey, the house had played a disproportionately large role in his decision. Throughout his career, Hersey had shied away being so much as an artist-in-residence.¹⁰ John Hersey wrote; he did not act the part of a "writer." He did not do promotional book tours or employ

⁵ Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*, p. 19.

⁶ McCandlish Phillips, "Hersey is Named Master at Yale." *The New York Times*, May 26, 1965. In Kingman Brewster, Jr. (henceforth KB), President of Yale University, Records (henceforth KBR) (RU 11). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Series 1, Box 204, Folder 4.

⁷ Carter Wiseman, "A Life in Writing." *Yale Alumni Magazine*, October 1993: http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/93_10/hersey.html.

⁸ Phillips. Michael Winger, "Hersey Appointed Pierson Master; Novelist to Assume Duties July 1." *Yale Daily News*, May 26, 1965: <http://digital.library.yale.edu/u?/yale-ydn,51897>.

⁹ Phillips.

¹⁰ Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*, p. 72.

an agent.¹¹ When he declined invitations for speaking engagements (which he constantly did), he noted that, "...for a number of years I have had a strict rule in my life, that there were would be no public speaking in it—a rule based on my conviction that a writer should write."¹² A little over a year prior to his Yale appointment, Hersey had declined an invitation from the United States State Department to receive a grant under the Department's Educational and Cultural Exchange Program, money that would have allowed him to visit Chile or some other country and serve as a diplomat turned writer-in-residence.¹³ But by April 1965, Hersey and his second wife, Barbara, were looking to move not to an exotic locale but to a city, and New Haven seemed a worthy contender.¹⁴ Hersey asked Brewster—a friend of about twenty years: the two had nearby summer homes on Martha's Vineyard—if he might have permission to look at a house in New Haven owned by Yale.¹⁵ Brewster agreed, but the Herseys found the place too large.¹⁶ A few days later, Brewster approached the couple at a social gathering and said, as Hersey later recalled in an interview for *The Paris Review*, "I think I can solve your real-estate problem. There's a house on Park Street, and you're welcome to take it if you take on the job of being master."¹⁷ Hersey was not quite sure what the job entailed. He talked with Barbara for a few hours, and the pair decided, "Let's shake our lives up and try it."¹⁸

¹¹ Wiseman.

¹² John Hersey (henceforth JH) to Philip Appleman, English Department, Indiana University. June 17, 1968. John Hersey Papers (henceforth JHP), (UNCAT MS 235). Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University Library, Box 44.

¹³ Elizabeth Braunstein to JH. March 11, 1964. JHP, Box 3.

¹⁴ "John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92." Interviewed by Jonathan Dee. *The Paris Review*, Summer-Fall 1986, No. 100: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2756/the-art-of-fiction-no-92-john-hersey>.

¹⁵ Ibid. Henry "Sam" Chauncey, Jr., interviewed by Zara Kessler. New Haven, CT, April 18, 2012. Note, April 22, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 4.

¹⁶ "John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

While Hersey was not a veteran academic or a tenured professor, the tall (about six feet, three inches), thin man with a long neck— who always stood up straight and possessed “a shock of white hair,” “impossibly elegant hands,” and “searching, soulful eyes,” in the words of his one-time student Eileen Pollack and who caused “heads to turn,” according to former Yale University President Howard R. Lamar— was not wholly unqualified for a position in the education sector.¹⁹ He had served for four years on the School Study Council in Westport, Connecticut, three years on the Board of Education there, and another four on the Citizens’ School Study Council in Fairfield, Connecticut.²⁰ In 1954, he had joined the National Citizens’ Commission for the Public Schools.²¹ In 1960, had become part of the Visiting Committee for Harvard’s Graduate School of Education.²² In 1962, he had been named a Trustee of the National Committee for Support of the Public Schools.²³ And perhaps most significantly, from 1962 to 1964, he had been a member of the Yale University Council on Admissions, where he stressed a need to evaluate admissions procedures not only for how well they predicted academic achievement but also for how accurately they forecast societal contributions in post-college years.²⁴

But perhaps Hersey’s best qualification for his new job was that he himself was a Yalie, and one with a deep and lasting connection to his alma mater. As a member of the class of 1936, he had been a Jack-of-all-trades, taking advantage of the social, musical, editorial, and sporting

¹⁹ Eileen Pollack, excerpt from unpublished manuscript of memoir. Email to Zara Kessler, April 27, 2012. “Yale 1936 Statistical Questions,” October 7, 1935, John Hersey: Alumni Records (henceforth JHAR). Alumni Records Office, Yale University, Records of Alumni from the Classes of 1701-1978 (RU 830). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Box 528, Folder 1. Wiseman.

²⁰ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Memorandum to Messrs. Hersey, Copp, Stewart, and Hyatt,” August 14, 1962, JHP, Box 44.

opportunities that the university offered him. Post-graduation, he had continued to lead his class and to help organize alumni publications. In 1952, he had become a fellow of Yale's Berkeley College.²⁵ That same year, Hersey had received the Howland Memorial Medal, a university honor for achievement in arts, letters, or public service and delivered the Howland Memorial Lecture.²⁶ By the time he was appointed master, Hersey was also a proud Yale parent – his son John Jr. was a senior undergraduate – and the Chairman of the University Council's Committee on Yale College.²⁷

John Hersey's writing career had taken him far beyond classrooms to ghettos and battlefields. But as Yale's campus was teetering on the edge of itself becoming a battlefield of social justice and race relations, no one was better suited to join the fray than Master Hersey. Hersey's famous works had centered around the processes of learning through interviews and experiences, synthesizing, and then teaching through magnificently-crafted narratives and musical strings of phrases. In Yale's classrooms, he would help the nation's next generation of journalists and novelists learn to fall in love with words. In the 1930s, Mother Yale had educated John Hersey. In the 1960s, Hersey returned to play Father Pierson. In the 1970s and 1980s, he came back again, at last in the role of Professor. Through it all, he remained a proud Yalie.

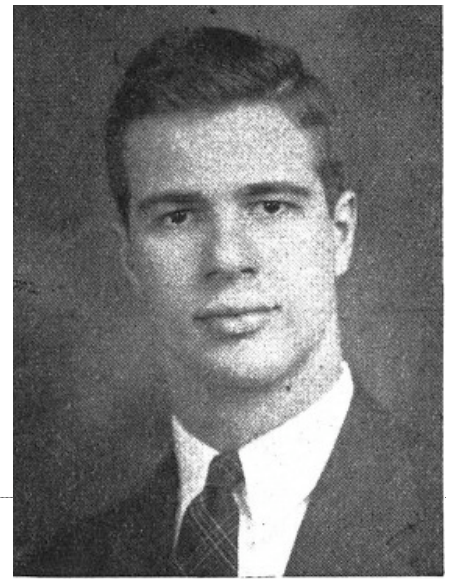
²⁵ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

HERSEY, WARNER ELECTED 1936 CLASS SECRETARIES

-May 1, 1935, Yale Daily News



It is fitting that Hersey reintegrated himself onto Yale's campus through the residential college system, as he was one of its first beneficiaries. Hersey was a member Trumbull College, his class the inaugural one to pass through its whole time in New Haven under the residential college system.²⁸ Unlike students at present-day Yale (and much like students at present-day Harvard), Hersey was not assigned a residential college before arriving on campus but applied to be in Trumbull – one of Yale's first seven residential colleges, all of which opened in 1933 – during his freshman year, along with eight other boys from a smattering of East Coast preparatory schools.²⁹ As he delighted in living in a smaller community on a larger campus, Hersey formed himself into the quintessential Yale man, leaving few corners of that larger campus unconquered.

Hersey's path to New Haven and to Trumbull College began in Tientsin, China. John Richard Hersey was born June 17, 1914, the youngest son of American Protestant missionaries Roscoe Monroe and Grace Baird Hersey.³⁰ It was during his youth in China that the first seeds of his journalistic aspirations were sown: a young John would use the family's typewriter to produce, "The

²⁸ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

²⁹ JH to Grace Baird Hersey (henceforth GBH), n.d., JHP, Box 1. "Timeline of Selected Events in the History of Yale," Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, 2010: http://www.library.yale.edu/mssa/YHO/timeline_text.html.

³⁰ *Great American Writers*. p. 684. Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*, p. xiii.

Hersey Family News,” a publication which included reports of goings on within the household, as well as stories about his experiences at the Tientsin Grammar School and the American School, institutions that educated youngsters living in the missionary compound.³¹ Hersey’s paper even included ads, which, as he later explained in an interview, “offer[ed] my older brothers for various kinds of hard labor at very low wages.”³²

Hersey first spent time in America at age three, when he lived with his mother and two brothers for over a year in Montclair, New Jersey, as his father went on an assignment from the YMCA to France to assist in the Chinese Labor Corps.³³ The Herseys returned to China but transplanted to America for good in 1925, after John’s father contracted encephalitis on a trip to do famine relief.³⁴ Once stateside, John initially went to public school in Briarcliff Manor, New York. In 1927, he matriculated at Lakeville, Connecticut’s, Hotchkiss School; he was scholarship student (his father’s encephalitis had turned into Parkinson’s disease, forcing him to retire), a status that necessitated that a young John clean classrooms, wait tables, and be, at least to some extent, socially segregated from his paying peers.³⁵ Still, at the prestigious boarding school, Hersey excelled as a violinist (he had taken up the instrument as a child in China) and first became truly interested in writing—though he admittedly sometimes struggled in academic arenas he would later excel in, receiving noticeably low marks (73, 68) in English.³⁶ He also won praise as social leader, a mantle he would take up again at Yale, elected as Class President for the fall term of his senior year and chosen

³¹ David Sanders, *John Hersey*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967, p. 17. Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*, p. 1.

³² “John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. Kimberly Chow, “The Correspondence of Truth to Fiction: John Hersey’s Path from Reporter to Novelist.” Term Paper: History 401, Professor John Gaddis. Yale University, May 2008, p. 4.

³⁶ “John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92.” JH to GBH, n.d., JHP Box 1.

as editor-in-chief of *Mischianza*, the school's yearbook.³⁷ He summed up his high school experience in a letter to his mother: "The main thing Prep school does for a boy is to teach him how to get the most done by the least amount of work, teach him how to study, how to concentrate. The next thing is to teach him how to live with other people, and how to best adapt himself to outside surroundings. As for actual academic work, it prepares the boy best for college by accomplishing these other things."³⁸ Like his older brothers, Arthur and Roscoe, Jr., when it came time for college, John Hersey found himself headed to New Haven.

The introduction of residential colleges was only one of many campus changes that greeted Hersey and the other 885 men of the Class of 1936 in New Haven.³⁹ In 1932, the cathedral-like Payne Whitney Gymnasium was completed, the world's largest indoor athletic facility.⁴⁰ By 1936, Yale's libraries had obtained a collection of Benjamin Franklin's papers.⁴¹ On a broader scale, under James Rowland Angell (University President from 1921-1937), Yale's graduate and professional schools became more firmly established.⁴² Angell fostered a more intellectually sophisticated experience in the classroom and, as Brooks Mather Kelley writes in his history of Yale, helped precipitate, "the conversion of Yale into a university college—a place where the existence of art, music, graduate, and other schools added immeasurably to the undergraduate experience."⁴³ Under Angell, Yale College began to insist that students take classes in different fields (including at least one

³⁷ Ibid. "Mischiianza," The Hotchkiss School, 2012: <http://www.hotchkiss.org/parents/resources/mischianza/index.aspx>.

³⁸ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "About Yale: History." Yale University, n.d.: <http://www.yale.edu/about/history.html>.

⁴¹ Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 379.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 379.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 387.

science course), axed the mandatory daily chapel services and the antiquarian Latin requirement, and introduced “reading periods” before examinations.⁴⁴ In the decade before Hersey arrived, those at the helm of the university chose not to expand enrollment but instead to concentrate on only admitting quality students, a selectivity somewhat ahead of its time and one that only boosted Yale’s institutional stature.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Hersey and his classmates came to campus just as such heightened selectivity was being momentarily eased to compensate for the toll the Depression had taken on the university.⁴⁶ During the 1931-1932 fiscal year, shortly before Hersey arrived on campus, Yale saw its first real deficit in a quarter century, and in 1932, Angell had no choice but to reduce the size of the faculty.⁴⁷ Luckily for students like Hersey who needed financial assistance, the new colleges led not only to ameliorated accommodations but also to a new bursary system, which offered greater opportunities for student employment.

Larger institutional woes likely went unseen by Hersey, who took advantage of the multifaceted university at which he had arrived. As classmate August Heckscher later remembered, “He became one of a firmly cemented small circle of friends but his influence spread, until he was a member of almost every group in the class where judgment and good advice were sought.”⁴⁸ The number of activities Hersey did was all the more impressive given his financial status, which required him to engage in odd jobs – a dishwasher, electrician’s assistant, lifeguard, tutor, and a waiter at a restaurant named Porter’s – to help support himself.⁴⁹ Support came from others too: during his

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 387, 389.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 390.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 391.

⁴⁷ Kelley, p. 390.

⁴⁸ Wiseman.

⁴⁹ “Weekly Bulletin & Calendar.” JHAR, April 5-12, 1993, Box 528, Folder 1. JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

freshman year, Hersey was awarded a DuPuy Memorial scholarship, which offered \$250 per term (tuition was \$225), and in subsequent years, he received scholarships from the Phelps Association, John Bennetto, and the Princeton Club of New York; in his final year, Hersey earned a spot as a “Senior Aide” in Trumbull, a position that, he happily informed his parents, covered tuition, board, and all but \$70 dollars of the cost of his room.⁵⁰

Hersey dove into his studies, writing to his mother early in his freshman year to discuss his love of an English course, in which he was reading Chaucer, and to admit, “All my courses are going to be hard, as far as I can see. I may get poor marks. But I am interested: I have been awakened just a little to possibilities – there is still hope, perhaps!”⁵¹ He majored in History, Arts, and Letters, though to a large extent charted his own academic course.⁵² When, in his junior year, he was assigned to spend the year’s two reading periods studying an individual from American history up to the Civil War and writing an essay on his findings, Hersey requested special dispensation: “What I would like to do,” he wrote his mother, “would be to study, not a single figure but rather the architecture of the early Americans. I am going on the theory that the arts and letters of the History, Arts, and Letters course will be hard to find unless we go out and look for them ourselves....”⁵³ By the end of his junior year, though, Hersey had found an individual who truly interested him, the artist John Trumbull; he made plans to study Trumbull’s work the following year (contingent upon another researcher having ceased her inquiries into a similar topic), “with the possibility of eventually writing a definitive biography,” he told his mother. “The probability is that I shall not be going to graduate

⁵⁰ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1. JH to GBH, March 11, 1935, JHP, Box 1. January 19, 1936, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1. Chow, “The Correspondence,” p. 6.

⁵¹ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

⁵² Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

⁵³ JH to GBH, December 9, 1934, JHP, Box 1.

school beyond college, and I would like to get in some thorough research before I get through.”⁵⁴

Hersey’s intellectual pursuits paid off: he made the Dean’s List and graduated with honors.⁵⁵

Hersey’s lifelong interest in writing took him beyond the classroom to the offices of the *Yale Daily News*, the campus’ daily paper. During his freshman year, he “heeled” the *News*, a grueling competition required to join the publication’s ranks that for Hersey included tasks like carrying notes, tabulating results of a football questionnaire, picking out the “juice” of pre-prepared stories, and occasionally serving as the one to make the “last trip,” which, as he explained to his parents, required “...taking the last batch of copy to the printer’s and staying there for a while to read proof. That means a fairly late night, but since there are some twenty-five in the [heeling] competition, there won’t be many last trips for each one.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, constant tasks and late nights did not help boost classroom performance; at the beginning of the competition, Hersey informed his parents that the process was so tough that rumor had it most men who made it onto the paper’s staff did so on academic probation (though he hoped “to be an exception!”).⁵⁷ Of course, he was. When he wrote home in mid-February to recount his first night as an editor, he also announced that his marks had remained about the same since the beginning of the competition:

Then last night I was on at the News, my first night of work as an editor...I was on last night as E.C.O. (editor in charge of office). The title has no meaning. The job is to add up estimates and try and fit articles into the space allowed. It was a bad night because the allowed space was only 7850 words, material handed in came to over 9000, and there were few articles that could be marked “C.L.O.” (Can Leave Out). But I think everything finally came out all right. But I didn’t get out until 2 am! I slept late this morning, cutting one class.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ JH to GBH, March 17, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁵⁵ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

⁵⁶ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Chow, “The Correspondence,” p. 7.

⁵⁸ JH to GBH, February 16, 1933, JHP, Box 1.

At the end of the letter, he included a small cartoon: a “before” drawing, showing a young man running, with sweat dripping off his face labeled, “HEELER HERSEY,” and an “after” drawing, showing a young man with his legs propped up on a desk, relaxing, labeled, “EDITOR HERSEY!”⁵⁹

As a campus journalist, Hersey covered everything from concerts to the fraternity rush process. He eventually became a music columnist, telling his parents he was delighted to receive “a little cash” each time he wrote and to have been saved from becoming a sports columnist.⁶⁰ Of course, music criticism was also a role for which Hersey was particularly well-suited: in his freshman year, he continued taking violin lessons, joined the Glee Club, and became an usher for concerts at the university’s Woolsey Hall.⁶¹ Nevertheless, he had a snafu in his sophomore year when he called a clarinet a flute five times in the same article.⁶² He worried that he might be too harsh in his criticism, telling his mother of having to review a less-than-stellar concert by pianist Aleksandre Helmann: “I hope my review doesn’t sound too smart or critical, but I was as careful as I could be. He really was pretty bad, and I talked with several very musical people after the concert to check on reactions....I certainly don’t want to set myself up as a ‘superior’ critic, but on the other hand, I have to be at least partially honest.”⁶³ His hard work did not go unnoticed. In January of his junior year, Hersey was elected Vice-Chairman of the 1936 Board of the *Yale Daily News*, a job compatible for him journalistically, if not financially; he wrote home shortly before the election: “I believe that my job will be vice-chairman. I [sic] does not pay quite as high as chairman, managing editor, or Business

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Chow, “The Correspondence,” p.7. JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

⁶¹ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1 (multiple letters, all lacking dates).

⁶² JH to GBH, February 6, 1934, JHP, Box 1.

⁶³ JH to GBH, March 11, 1934, JHP, Box 1.

Manager. But I refuse to go into the business department – it is too narrowing I think....The vice-chairman involves editorial writing and advice on matters of policy – best suited for me, I think.”⁶⁴

Hersey also made a name – albeit a slightly more modest one – for himself on Yale’s fields: as a football player during his four years on campus and a member of the baseball squad his freshman year.⁶⁵ Though he did eventually win a major “Y” as a member of the varsity team, football was not the campus activity at which Hersey most excelled.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, he delighted in the comradeship the team espoused, weeping “from an overwhelming happiness” at the banquet that marked the end of football season his junior year, an event that he told his parents, “put a finish to one of the happiest chapters of my life.”⁶⁷ He insisted he would have been delighted even without a varsity letter: “Even if Ducky Pond hadn’t out of the kindness of his heart put me in for the last two minutes of the Harvard game and thereby given me my letter, I would pride my experience in football as opening up to me friendship with some men than who there can be no better.”⁶⁸

Nevertheless, at moments during his senior year season, Hersey seems to have grown tired of warming the bench, complaining to his parents after he wasn’t allowed to play in a particularly exciting game: “It is disheartening to feel that I can never play until Yale has a safe margin of victory stowed away under her belt, but that seems to be the case. True it is that Chooch Train played as brilliant a game at end as I have ever seen it turned in, and I was almost proud to be his non-playing

⁶⁴ “Notes for Alumni Records,” Yale University Secretary’s Office, January 21, 1935, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1. JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

⁶⁵ Untitled, January 19, 1936, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

⁶⁷ JH to GBH, November 27, 1934, JHP, Box 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

substitute, but if I have to do it all season long, I am afraid I shall not like it.”⁶⁹ A few weeks later, Hersey was still upset, asking the coaches to let him play Jayvee games (they obliged) and telling his parents, “Well, yesterday was a double disappointment: Army beat Yale for the forth year in a row, and your pride and joy sat on the bench for the nth time in a row....”⁷⁰ When, the following month, he subbed in due to a teammate’s ankle twist, he rekindled his love of the game, asking his parents to, “Please pardon my boyish excitement: it was such fun!”⁷¹ Days later, he spent four or five plays on the field during the Yale-Harvard game, his last one and one in which Yale came out on top.⁷²

Socially, Hersey always came out on top. He became the leader in Trumbull as a student that he would later be in Pierson as an adult, learning about the history of his college and serving as Athletic Secretary.⁷³ He wrote to his parents, “I think I have made real friends here in Trumbull something I can’t say I have ever done before.”⁷⁴ He was a member of the Elizabethan Club, a social group centered on discussions of arts and literature.⁷⁵ He was in the Aurelian Honor Society and a brother in the Psi Upsilon fraternity (nicknamed “The Fence Club”).⁷⁶ Of the latter, he told his parents shortly after being selected that it was an “‘ace’ bunch, I really think the best,” though described an outfit that he had to then wear to a football game (a seemingly innocuous bit of hazing): “...a dress, over some blue pajamas tucked into long silk stockings, a pink tie around my waist, a

⁶⁹ JH to GBH, October 6, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁷⁰ JH to GBH, October 20, 1935, JHP, Box 1. JH to GBH, October 27, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁷¹ JH to GBH, November 17, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁷² JH to GHB, November 24, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁷³ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Notes for Alumni Records,” Yale University Secretary’s Office, February 17, 1936, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1.

“About the Club.” The Elizabethan Club, Yale University, n.d.: <http://www.yale.edu/elizabethanclub/about.html>.

⁷⁶ Untitled, January 19, 1936, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1.

baby-bonnet on my head, and some aviator's goggles—I was a sorry spectacle.⁷⁷ Hersey's laundry list of social positions included chairmanships of the Freshman Student Council, the Freshman Prom, and the Junior Prom.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he approached his roles with diligence, compiling a 30-page report after the Junior Prom to give the subsequent year's Chairman some guidance. His date for Junior Prom was a Sarah Lawrence girl named Sarah Key, whom he had met in his senior year at Hotchkiss through a friend and dated throughout his time at Yale.⁷⁹ Though in one letter home John called Sarah, "quite nice, though not extremely beautiful," he was somewhat (though not wholly) more complimentary about his experience with her at Junior Prom: "That night, one of the happiest I have ever had, I shall remember as long as I shall live. About three-fourths of the happiness I can thank Sarah for."⁸⁰

Hersey's busy undergraduate years paid off as he approached his 1936 graduation. In the spring of his junior year, he was chosen for a campus "society" known for playing mischievous pranks, the Pundits.⁸¹ Perhaps more importantly, on May 9, 1935, "Tap Day," he was selected as one of fifteen men to join the prestigious, and infamous, Skull and Bones secret society. In a letter home, Hersey insisted that he had not spent his time at Yale trying to pave his path into Skull and Bones' "tomb," as their windowless meetinghouse was called:

I am sure that in my own case—and I have gotten myself tied into many things—I was not in the least conscious of the beckoning (or the threatening) finger of Senior Societies until the middle of this, my Junior, year. I have been active because I am not happy unless I have something to do; and I agree with Pete Behr [who wrote an opinion piece about Tap Day in the *News*] in thinking that 95% of the "activity men" (unjust epithet) would be sincere in saying the same thing. There is

⁷⁷ JH to GBH, October 18, (no year noted, likely 1933), JHP, Box 1.

⁷⁸ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

⁷⁹ Chow, "The Correspondence," p. 6.

⁸⁰ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1. JH to GBH, March 11, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁸¹ "Notes for Alumni Records," Yale University Secretary's Office, May 8, 1935, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1.

no question that ambition plays a part in this activity, but is ambition altogether reprehensible? If there were no ambition, there would be no “great” men. Ambition hurts only the man it bites.⁸²

Still, Hersey seemed to indulge in the prestige and the fame just a bit. In that same letter, written three days after being tapped, Hersey joked that he was only allowed discuss the whole notion of society with his parents because he had not yet gone inside the tomb and that after he made such an entry, “I will have to keep secrets.”⁸³ A few weeks prior to sealing his lips and entering the secret building that had previously been home to Henry Luce and Briton Hadden and would later welcome George Bush and John Kerry, Hersey was elected Class Secretary.⁸⁴

It likely comes as no surprise that as graduation approached, Hersey received multiple job offers in various fields. He had an “in” at *Time* magazine – started in 1923 by Briton Hadden and Henry Luce, two Hotchkiss and Yale alums, not to mention Bonesmen – because one of his older brothers had roomed with Henry Luce’s brother at Hotchkiss.⁸⁵ But, as Hersey wrote to his parents, a factory job and a job teaching at back at Hotchkiss were also contenders:

I have been offered a job by the Proctor and Gamble Company, and I am going out to Cincinnati tomorrow, Tuesday, and Wednesday, to be interviewed and to look over their plant there. The job I am offered is really the only industrial job I think I would like: it would be in the active part of the business, in factory administration, in actual production. If I accept the job, and I don’t quite think at this point I shall, I would start out at the very neat salary of \$124 a month. However, as you know, I have some other ideas on what I want to do. Hop Luce wrote the other day, telling me to come to see him some time during the holidays to talk over the possibilities of getting into the *Time* machine; an idea which rather appeals to me at the present time. And when Mr. Van Santvoord came down last week for the perfectly wonderful Hotchkiss banquet we had, he again asked me to come up to Hotchkiss next year; he said he wants me to talk with him soon again about that. Well, I must confess that these things make me feel financially secure, or at least I may say I have no terror of starving.⁸⁶

⁸² JH to GBH, May 12, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Notes for Alumni Records,” Yale University Secretary’s Office, May 1, 1935, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1. JH to GBH, September 29, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁸⁵ “John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92.”

⁸⁶ JH to GBH, n.d., JHP, Box 1.

By February 1936, Hersey seems to have given up on the manufacturing business and was still toying between teaching and writing, visiting Hotchkiss to talk about the job offer and telling his parents that he would know for certain whether he could have a spot at *Fortune* magazine, a relatively new Time Inc. publication, by mid-month, insisting, “So my plans will have ‘reached a head’ by two weeks from now. Then I shall have a pleasant time deciding, making up the old mind!”⁸⁷ In the end, Hersey chose neither to return to his prep school to teach nor to head to *Time* (at least not yet): he was selected for a Mellon Fellowship and zoomed off to Clare College, Cambridge, to study English literature.⁸⁸

Hersey’s college years were a tug of war – as they are for many students to this day – between socialization and academics, between his own family’s modest means and his friends’ families’ noticeable financial prosperity. John Hersey graduated Yale with more than a knowledge of History, Arts, and Letters; he also left with an understanding of the discipline and forward thinking that must arise from leading the life of a “big man on campus.” His schedules were rigorous; he wrote to his parents midway through his sophomore year: “Did some reading before and after supper and went to bed early to try to get into shape for a tough week ahead: two concerts to review today, edit tomorrow night, Psi U banquet Tuesday night, and Prom Friday and Saturday nights.”⁸⁹ Such strict regulation of his own time would serve him well in his later years, as a journalist on deadline and then as a man who could simultaneously write books and serve as a teacher or Master. Nevertheless, Hersey was modest and self-critical. He wrote to his parents at the beginning of his senior year: “I am

⁸⁷ JH to GBH, February 1, 1936, JHP, Box 1.

⁸⁸ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5. *Great American Writers*, p. 684.

⁸⁹ JH to GBH, February 18, 1934, JHP, Box 1.

afraid I am not doing thorough justice to my honors work at the moment, but I am promising myself a real drive when football ceases to take a six-hour chunk out of the day.⁹⁰ So too, his Yale years taught him to be frugal; he kept careful accounts of his finances – not only never spending more than he needed to but also comparing his spending between years to assure he was on target – found odd jobs wherever he could, and only asked his parents for money when he was desperate.⁹¹ Despite the wealth that his later fame as a writer would bring, Hersey would never become pompous and would have the uncanny ability to connect with people in far off places and with students in tough financial straits. In that same letter after being tapped for Skull and Bones, Hersey admitted, “Though I may be superficially and temporarily inflated, I retain a much clearer recognition of my limitations than of my ability, a much more piercing scrutiny of my weaknesses than of my power. And before I can turn any strength I may have towards big tasks, I must reduce those handicaps to a minimum.”⁹²

By the time he left New Haven one year later, in the spring of 1936, John Hersey had been trained – at the *News*, on the football field, and, one can imagine, in the tomb – to tackle big tasks.

⁹⁰ JH to GBH, October 6, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁹¹ JH to GBH, February 15, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

⁹² JH to GBH, May 12, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

“HIROSHIMA” GIVEN TO YALE BY HERSEY Manuscript of Report in Sterling Library

-May 3, 1947, Yale Daily News



Hersey returned from England the following year to find the post Luce had promised him at *Time* gone and, unsuccessful in applying to the magazine under normal circumstances, did a stint as the private secretary to novelist Sinclair Lewis. He soaked up lessons from Lewis by osmosis, later writing him to say that he would always envy, “the way you can do an unforgettable line drawing of a guy in two sentences, where I would probably use two pages,” and giving Lewis credit for teaching Hersey to sketch rooms and houses in order to later describe them and to find names for his characters by looking in the phone book, a tactic Hersey used in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Bell for Adano*.⁹³ Lewis, though eccentric and immensely troubled, provided an intimate portrait of someone who had fallen in love with the written word; as Hersey later told an interviewer, “I was exposed to someone who lived for writing, lived *in* his writing in a way.”⁹⁴ Of course, Hersey’s status as a Yale man likely helped him obtain the position: Lewis was also a Yalie (Class of 1907), and the two discussed their days in New Haven during their first meeting, an interview of sorts for Hersey.⁹⁵

Yale was never far from Hersey’s mind and work, even when he eventually did land a job at *Time* — in part because he wrote a 24-page essay critiquing the publication — and went off on travels

⁹³ JH to Sinclair Lewis, June 24, 1947, Sinclair Lewis Papers (YCAL MSS 268) Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Box 520, Folder 47.

⁹⁴ “John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92.”

⁹⁵ Ibid. “Sinclair Lewis.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, 2012: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/338212/Sinclair-Lewis>.

as a correspondent that would skyrocket him to journalistic fame.⁹⁶ In February 1943, Hersey discussed his experiences spending two months on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific, reporting for *Time* and *Life* on American actions in the Soloman Islands, in an open lecture for Yale undergraduates.⁹⁷ In October 1944, he became an associate fellow in Berkeley College. The following May, he gave a lecture in Yale's massive Woolsey Hall entitled, "Some Impressions of Russia."⁹⁸

As he shared his experiences abroad on Yale's stages, Hersey remained a faithful leader of the Class of 1936, serving as Class Secretary until 1949 and spearheading the publication of "class books."⁹⁹ In the latter role, he had a particularly hands-on approach, which included copious correspondence with the Class Secretaries Bureau in regards to the costs of printing, the distribution of questionnaires, and the preparations of biographical statements for members of the class. Seeking such biographical information to publish in the books, he drafted this note to his peers: "There are more ways to choke a friendship than to pour hot butter down a friend's throat. One way is merely to leave college and never see a friend again, and never write to him. In order that we may at least know what our classmates have been doing it is my hope to bring out, once every five years, a complete record book with short impersonal notes on each man."¹⁰⁰ In 1952, Hersey adapted the opening chapter he had written for his class' *Fifteen-Year Record* for publication in *Harper's* magazine. In the article, the majority of which consisted of an amusing laundry list of various undertakings and statistics, Hersey also explained the merits of such histories:

⁹⁶ "John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92."

⁹⁷ Yale News, February 3, 1943, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 4.

⁹⁸ Yale News Digest, May 11, 1945, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

⁹⁹ Wiseman. Memorandum, March 18, 1949, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 6.

¹⁰⁰ JH to Marion L. Phillips, February 16, 1937, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1.

In the first place, the Class of 1936 is getting to be known as Yale's Greatest Class; for not only does it include an unusually high number of men of reputation, notoriety, or fantastic affluence, but also it is extraordinary in that it spreads so wide and reaches so far; it is the best and worst and quintessential of our culture. In the second place, the books assemble some interesting sociological data.... And in the third place, the experience of this class, which was educated during a terrible depression and grew to middle age through a worse war, provides an indirect answer to those who have alleged, lately, that Yale is a larva-bed of socialism and irreligion.¹⁰¹

Hersey's writing was colorful, saturated with quirky facts and joking phrases like, "It is a safe bet that more members of the Class of 1936 have insinuated themselves into the State Department than Communists and homosexuals put together."¹⁰² His interest in sharing the paths of his classmates highlighted that even at the pinnacle of his fame, his successes did not engulf him to such an extent that he left behind his proud ties to his alma mater.

In that 1952 article, Hersey focused not only on professional lives but also on personal ones, writing, "The average member of the Class of 1936 is in his thirty-eighth year. He has been married nine years, six days, twenty hours, thirty-eight minutes, and twenty-four seconds. He has 2.31 children, each of whom he spans 11.5 times a year."¹⁰³ By that point, Hersey was married to Frances Ann Cannon, a Sarah Lawrence graduate.¹⁰⁴ Six years after the *Harper's* article, in 1958, the couple divorced, and Hersey married Barbara Day Addams Kaufman, most notable because her ex-husband, Charles Addams, was the cartoonist who created "The Addams Family" and apparently based his famous character "Morticia Addams," with her long black dress and jet-black hair, on Barbara.¹⁰⁵ Between the marriages, Hersey had five children: three sons and two daughters.¹⁰⁶ "He

¹⁰¹ John Hersey, "Yale '36 – look at them now." *Harper's Magazine*, September 1952, p. 21.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.23.

¹⁰⁴ "Autobiography Since College," March 10. 1941, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 2.

¹⁰⁵ Janet Maslin, "In Search of the Dark Muse of a Master of the Macabre." *The New York Times*, October 26, 2006:

and Barbara were devoted to each other and had a wonderful relationship,” says Henry “Sam” Chauncey, Jr., who worked with Hersey during his time as Pierson Master and remained close with Barbara for years after her husband’s death. “John struggled with his own children...I know one of his sons, at least for a period of time was estranged – they didn’t get along.” Still, Chauncey insists that Hersey was not hard to connect with because of any sort of meanness; rather, he was remarkably reserved, such that, “Just to sit and have a conversation with him until you got to know him was not easy.¹⁰⁷”

Most importantly, in Hersey’s years off-campus he excelled as a journalist and a fiction writer. For a while, it seemed he was being groomed to be Luce’s successor at the helm of an expanding Time Inc. media empire.¹⁰⁸ It was not hard to see why Hersey might have appealed to Luce. Beyond their long-standing family ties, the two had followed remarkably similar life trajectories. Luce had been born in China to missionary parents, had graduated as a scholarship student from Hotchkiss and had been a part of the *Yale Daily News* and *Skull and Bones* before spending a year studying at Oxford.¹⁰⁹ Hersey quickly climbed the ranks at Luce’s *Time* and later became an editor at *Life*, *Time*’s sister publication. All the while, Luce spoke often about Time Inc. being a young man’s company, suggesting that he would hand over the reins to someone like Hersey

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/26/books/26masl.html?_r=3&oref=slogin&ref=arts&pagewanted=print.
Chauncey.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Severo, “John Hersey, Author of ‘Hiroshima,’ Is Dead at 78.” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1993: <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/25/obituaries/john-hersey-author-of-hiroshima-is-dead-at-78.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

¹⁰⁷ Chauncey.

¹⁰⁸ David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975, p. 76.

¹⁰⁹ Kimberly Chow, “*Time* in Turmoil: The Rise and Disillusionment of Henry Luce’s Favorite Correspondents.” Senior Essay: History Department, Professor John Gaddis. Yale University, April 6, 2009, p. 10.

when he turned forty; but Luce didn't eventually retire until 1964, at the age of sixty-six.¹¹⁰ By that point, Hersey had long bid adieu to his official position at Time Inc.; in 1945, seemingly in large part because of frustrations over the way that Luce reworked articles from the field to fit his own (and a few others') political views, Hersey decided to become a freelance writer.¹¹¹ Indeed, he was already finding success at other publications. In June 1944, he had published a story about John F. Kennedy and his men's struggles to survive when their boat had sunk in the South Pacific in *The New Yorker*, after *Life* had turned it down; "Survival" helped make Kennedy into a hero and was disseminated widely when JFK soon thereafter began to run for political offices.¹¹² In 1946, Luce took Hersey's publication of his monumental "Hiroshima" in *The New Yorker* – Hersey had gone to report in Asia for both *The New Yorker* and *Life*, though Luce likely never would have published the piece – as some sort of disloyalty and removed Hersey's picture from Time Inc.'s gallery of honor.¹¹³ Hersey's ultimate loyalty lay not at *Time* or *Life* or *The New Yorker*, but instead in New Haven. He donated his manuscript of "Hiroshima" to Yale's Sterling Library; in the spring of 1947, Yale in turn awarded Hersey an honorary Master of Arts degree.¹¹⁴

In 1947, Hersey did indeed find himself at the helm of a publication, just not one founded by Henry Luce. He was named president of a new magazine called '47 – *the Magazine of the Year*, a

¹¹⁰Halberstam, p. 76.

¹¹¹ Chow, "Time," pp. 33, 35.

¹¹² Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. New York: De Capo Press, 2000, p. 184. Chow, "The Correspondence," p. 55.

¹¹³ Kunkel, pp. 369, 374.

¹¹⁴ Annual Report of the Yale Library Associates, 1946-1947, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5. Yale University Press Release, June 18, 1947, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 6.

“dream” magazine owned by its contributors, a set of successful artists and writers.¹¹⁵ But though the publication had hopes of seeing quick success, as *Reader’s Digest* and *Time* had in earlier decades, it never took off.¹¹⁶ Hersey devoted more of his energies to fiction, publishing six novels between 1950 and 1965: *The Wall*, *The Marmot Drive*, *A Single Pebble*, *The War Lover*, *The Child Buyer*, and *White Lotus*.¹¹⁷ As his fame as a novelist grew, he made no further attempts to become a Luce-like media baron. And though he refused public speaking engagements and any sort of self-promotion, he was always willing to provide information to teenagers – like high school students Bob Alessandrelli and Tom Currie – who wrote to him explaining that they were completing school projects on his life or book reports on his novels and had a few questions or were seeking further information.¹¹⁸ Hersey had chosen a writer’s career over a teacher’s one, but it seemed that at the back of his mind, he always knew he had a knack for educating not only readers but also students. And of course there was nowhere else he’d rather put such skills into motion than back in New Haven.

¹¹⁵ Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*, p. 35. Class Letter, *Yale Alumni Magazine*, February 1947, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5.

¹¹⁶ Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited*, p. 35.

¹¹⁷ *Great American Writers*, p. 390.

¹¹⁸ Bob Alessandrelli to JH, November 18, 1964, JHP, Box 3. Tom Currie to JH, October 18, 1964, JHP Box 3.

HERSEY INAUGURATED AT PIERSON, GIVES MAIDEN SPEECH AS MASTER

— November 16, 1965. Yale Daily News



JOHN HERSEY (left) and President KINGMAN BREWSTER JR., enter the Pierson dining room yesterday to participate in Hersey's installation as Pierson's sixth master. Hersey discussed the role of a novelist at Yale in his inaugural address.

In March 1965, Yale University President Kingman Brewster, Jr., received a report from William C. DeVane, Herbert Kaufman, and John H. Ostrom, men who had been tasked with leading a search for candidates for the mastership of Pierson College in the wake of Professor of the Theory of Music and current Master Quincy Porter's impending retirement; it noted: ¹¹⁹

Your committee to recommend names that may be considered for the Mastership of Pierson College has met regularly for the past six weeks....In evaluating possible candidates, we tried to keep in mind a host of criteria, the most explicit of which were three: (1) The Master should be a scholar of high standing achievement (or, if a younger man, of great promise) whose reputation and ability would serve as a model for the residents of the College; (2) the Master should be interested in undergraduate education in the broadest sense, relate easily and pleasantly to the undergraduates, and provide leadership and direction for the College; (3) all other things being equal, the Master should, in deference to a number of Fellows who made the suggestion, be selected from among the Fellows rather than from the outside. ¹²⁰

The committee offered the names of nine possible candidates: Franklin L. Baumer, a Professor of History, John H. Ostrom, an Assistant Professor of Geology (who voted against himself but was

¹¹⁹ Yale University News Bureau, Release for May 26, 1965, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 5. William C. DeVane, Herbert Kaufman, John H. Ostrom to KB, March 5, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 3.

¹²⁰ William C. DeVane, Herbert Kaufman, John H. Ostrom to KB, March 5, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 3.

outvoted by the other members), Lloyd G. Stevenson, a Professor of History of Medicine, Donald W. Taylor, a Professor of Psychology, Alvin B. Kernan, an Associate Professor of English, Howard R. Lamar, a Professor of History (who would later become the University's President), Julian N. Hart, a Professor of Philosophical Theology, Charles Seymour, Jr., a Professor of the History of Art, and Eugene M. Waith, a Professor of English.¹²¹

Brewster did not listen to any of the advice. Instead, he and Chauncey, his special assistant, discussed the fact that when distinguished public servants came to campus, students loved to talk to them, seeking to discover what the “real world” offered. What if some of these “real world” individuals could bring their different perspectives to Yale all year round?¹²² They tried to recruit a few politicians – William Scranton, Cyrus Vance – as Masters to no avail.¹²³ And then one day, perhaps spurred by Hersey's foray into the New Haven real estate market, Brewster thought of his famous friend from the Vineyard. He came to Chauncey and said, “I've had this wonderful idea, what about John Hersey?”¹²⁴ Unlike the politicians, who would have a hard time picking up and moving to New Haven, “[Hersey's] was a profession that could be sort of conducted anywhere,” says Chauncey.¹²⁵ Brewster and his right-hand man were not sure how the campus would respond to the unconventional choice: “It was a big deal for us because we were doing something we weren't sure was going to be accepted,” says Chauncey. “And we did a certain amount of testing the waters, talking to select people to see what they thought. I think in the end we were more nervous than we

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Chauncey.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

had to be...He was so distinguished, so disciplined that the academic world could accept him quite quickly.”

Most did accept him. Anthony Garvan, a Professor in American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania wrote Brewster to applaud his choice: “The nicety of your ingenuity and thus combining the experience of a creative artist, a scholarly but not academic mind and a gracious humanitarian must make this one of the most illustrious appointments of your administration.¹²⁶” One of Hersey’s former teachers, L.P. Curtis, told Brewster, “The appointment of John Hersey is a masterstroke. I knew him well when I taught him. I welcome this shift from what I call the iron law of Germanic professorsocracy. The civilized, talented amateur has an important place to fill in Yale College.¹²⁷” Alfred Knopf, Jr. wrote Brewster to say, “That’s the most brilliant piece of offbeat casting I’ve ever seen. It must have taken enormous courage to make the appointment, but with it obviously went a great deal of judgment. I think it’s marvelous for Yale, wonderful for John.¹²⁸” But perhaps, the best congratulatory remarks Brewster received were from the students. Bill Corbent, Class of 1965, wrote the University President to say, “Your appointment of John Hersey to the Mastership of Pierson College has caused great excitement among all the students with whom I have talked today. Whether or not he will be a good master, I am sure he will be, I think the feeling is that you made this appointment for the students, and we very much appreciate it.¹²⁹”

Of course, not everyone appreciated it. And the fact that only weeks after his appointment, in June 1965, Hersey was embroiled in a controversy surrounding the White House Arts Festival, only

¹²⁶ Anthony N.B. Garvan to KB, June 17, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 3.

¹²⁷ LP Curtis to KB, May 29, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 3.

¹²⁸ Alfred Knopf Jr. to KB, May 27, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 3.

¹²⁹ Bill Corbent to KB, May 26, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 3.

added fuel to the fire. The story of the White House Arts Festival began with poet Robert Lowell, who initially accepted an invitation to read his work at the event, but a week later wrote a letter to President Johnson – which the *New York Times* conveniently published on its front page – noting that he would not attend because of the extent to which he disagreed with the President’s foreign and military policies, especially with regard to Vietnam.¹³⁰ In that same issue of the *Times*, Hersey, who was also slated to read at the Festival, indicated that though he was, “deeply troubled by the drift toward reliance on military solutions in foreign policy,” he believed that he would make a more profound statement by, “standing in the White House, I hope in the presence of the President, and reading from a work of mine entitled *Hiroshima*.”¹³¹ Hersey inevitably prefaced his reading – President Johnson was not in the room, but Lady Bird sat in the front row – by stating, “I read these passages on behalf of the great number of citizens who have become alarmed in recent weeks by the sight of begetting fire. Let these words be a reminder. The step from one degree of violence to the next is imperceptibly taken and cannot easily be taken back....Wars have a way of getting out of hand.”¹³² It was these remarks that prompted a Yale graduate from the 1940s, G.S. Mustin, to write to Brewster, furious about his recent appointment of the novelist:

It seems that the experiment of appointing a non-academician to a senior post in which his personal voice can be confused in the public mind with that of the University, has already been proved to be a stupid undertaking by the Corporation. I advert specifically to the incredible performance by the recently appointed Master, Mr. John Hersey, at the Arts Festival in Washington the other day. Criticizing one’s host is distinctly not in keeping with any element of good manners, ancient or modern. This breach of elementary proprieties patently disqualifies him from taking part in the education or guidance of young men. Academic freedom is indeed to

¹³⁰ Dwight Macdonald, “A Day at the White House.” *The New York Review of Books*, July 15, 1965: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/jul/15/a-day-at-the-white-house/?pagination=false>. John Rodden and John Rossi, “Kultur Clash at the White House: Dwight Macdonald and the 1965 Festival of the Arts,” *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Fall, 2007): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27712743>, p. 166.

¹³¹ Macdonald.

¹³² *Ibid.*

be cherished since practically all human progress results from the views of well informed dissenters. Whether or not Mr. Hersey's views are correct, or based on any form of valid information, is therefore, immaterial. What is material is that his egregious boorsmanship reflects great discredit on him and on the University which appointed him. As a practical matter, I suggest that you institute a cram course in basic etiquette, with our in-house novelist as the first student.¹³³

But if anything, Hersey's dissent in his personal life – in the fall of 1965, he marched in an anti-Vietnam protest with other art world luminaries like Robert Penn Warren and Alexander Calder – only better prepared him to enter a campus, which like many campuses in the mid-to-late 1960s was reaching its boiling point.¹³⁴ In the fall of 1964, the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley University began with a series of rallies, riots, and disobedience that led to 773 arrests.¹³⁵ The following March, all eyes were on Yale's campus when a major protest erupted around a popular philosophy professor, Richard Bernstein, being denied tenure; actions included two weeks of protests and meetings and a three-day vigil outside Brewster's office.¹³⁶ The spring of 1965 also brought new attention to the war in Vietnam, with the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder and the television broadcast of an Alabama policeman clubbing and gassing individuals participating in an antiwar march.¹³⁷ Brewster encouraged students to come to their own political conclusions and called honorable rebellion, "a precious right," defending students and faculty who sent an antiwar petition to President Johnson in the spring of 1965, not necessarily for their views but instead for their ability

¹³³ G.S. Mustin to KB, June 21, 1965, KBR, Box 204, Folder 4.

¹³⁴ Herbert Mitgang to JH, November 30, 1965, JHP, Box 3.

¹³⁵ Geoffrey Kabaservice, *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 2004, p. 223.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 225.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 229.

to voice them.¹³⁸ It was in this political climate that Hersey spoke out in the White House. And it was into this New Haven, bubbling with discontent, that he stepped as Master.

Though his duties began weeks earlier, Hersey was officially installed as Master on Monday, November 15, 1965, at 3:30 p.m.¹³⁹ The pomp and circumstance involved an academic procession in the Pierson courtyard, a ceremony in the College's dining hall—remarks by Brewster and Porter, Hersey's signing of a "Master's oath," an address by Hersey, and a blessing—and a reception in Hersey's new home.¹⁴⁰ In his twelve-minute speech, Hersey explained his decision to return to campus in characteristically poetic phrases:

There is a pendulous motion in the life of a writer. He swings first toward the world, toward life, toward experience, toward entanglement with vivid human beings, toward a gathering in of grists; then he swings back upon himself, toward serenity, contemplation, and recollection, toward the turning of his inner mill, toward his art. I came here on the outward swing of the pendulum with shamelessly selfish motives: to drink at the fountain of renewal, to limber up by association, to pass time among minds which still forming, are by necessity fluid, eager and free.¹⁴¹

John Hersey returned to Yale in 1965 not to teach. He came to learn.

But could he write at the same time? When Hersey's close friends congratulated him on his new position, they reminded him not to let his job as father-in-residence disrupt his writing. Fred Adams, director of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, wrote, "This is a bright imaginative choice, by you, and by Yale—both fortunate, I hope—Yale certainly so, you depending on how much time you have free of nagging and mind-harassing details. Because I'm sure you need to be able to

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 232.

¹³⁹ Invitation, n.d., KBR, Box 204, Folder 1.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph H. McMahon to Henry "Sam" Chauncey, Jr., October 26, 1965. KBR, Box 204, Folder 1.

¹⁴¹ John Hersey. Installment Speech: "The Artist in the Kingdom of the Teacher," reprinted in the *Yale Daily News*, November 16, 1965. Tom Herman, "Hersey Inaugurated at Pierson, Gives Maiden Speech as Master," *Yale Daily News*, November 16, 1965: <http://digital.library.yale.edu/u?/yale-ydn,52417>.

empty your mind of small things before you can concentrate on writing.¹⁴² Muriel Cowley, wife of the famed literary critic Malcolm Cowley, insisted that the appointment "...wouldn't be such splendid news except for the fact you won't have a teaching load and will be able to write, we hope without interruptions. We know for you, the writing comes first."¹⁴³ Indeed, writing continued to come first, both figuratively and literally. Hersey woke up early each morning before seven a.m., went to his study, closed the door, and wrote. "He was not to be bothered before noon," remembers Chauncey. His work habits became a model of discipline for undergraduates. "He often said to students," says Chauncey. "I sit every morning from seven until noon in my study, but I very well may not write more than one sentence in that time."¹⁴⁴

Hersey's refusal to let students' complaints or New Haven's quirks disrupt his literary process went beyond spending each morning out of touch. Chauncey remembers getting a call one day from the University's Physical Plant Department. The Department had received a work order to paint the beautiful red cherry walls of the Pierson Master's office white and was worried about doing so because the paint would not be able to be fully removed from the wood paneling. "So I called John, and I said, 'I'm concerned about painting the walls white,'" Chauncey remembers. "He said, 'If the walls can't be white I leave. I only write in a white room.'" ¹⁴⁵ It was likely largely encased in those white walls that Hersey wrote the novels *Too Far To Walk* (1966) and

¹⁴² Frederick Adams to JH, n.d., JHP, Box 3. Frederick Adams, 90, Morgan Library Director." *The New York Times*, January 25, 2001: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/25/arts/frederick-adams-90-morgan-library-director.html>.

¹⁴³ Muriel Cowley to JH, May 27, 1965, JHP, Box 3. "Malcolm Cowley, The Art of Fiction No. 70." Interviewed by John McCall. *The Paris Review*, Fall 1982, No. 85: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3137/the-art-of-fiction-no-70-malcolm-cowley>.

¹⁴⁴ Chauncey.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Under the Eye of the Storm (1967) and the nonfiction work *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968), a book about race riots in Detroit that he had decided to write after declining a request to pen part of the report from the Presidential Commission on Civil Disorders and that he dedicated “To the students of Pierson College.¹⁴⁶” Nevertheless, Hersey realized that he needed to keep his roles as writer and as “parent” distinct, once noting, “A novel a day walks into my office – but I’ve promised not to write about Pierson men. It is enough to know them.¹⁴⁷”

Hersey was a stern parent. It was not in his nature to be the congenial, fun-loving type, the Master who rolled out to a bar for a beer with students. Chauncey calls him “rigid:” “If you met him on the street, [he] was absolutely straight, erect; he walked like a military officer.¹⁴⁸” His presence – tall, thin, imposing, and immaculately dressed – matched the personality with which he interacted with undergraduates.¹⁴⁹ Former governor of Vermont, Howard Dean, who grew up with Hersey’s son Dan, and graduated from Yale, and from Pierson College, in 1971, remembers his Master: “He was a little austere and commanded not only respect, but I’d say a slight tinge of fear because – he was a big guy, he was tall and thin,” says Dean. “He’d been in the battlefields, and he was a guy you didn’t just talk back to.¹⁵⁰” Dean recalls a game of touch football taking place on the grass of the college’s courtyard, at a point in the year when the students weren’t supposed to be on the grass: “I

¹⁴⁶ John Hersey, *The Algiers Motel Incident*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968, dedication page. Sanders, *Hersey Revisited*, p. 81. *Great American Writers*, p. 690.

¹⁴⁷ “A Report To all Members of Pierson College From John Hersey, Master,” June 1966, KBR, Box 204, Folder 1.

¹⁴⁸ Chauncey.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Howard Dean, interviewed by Zara Kessler. Telephone, February 17, 2012.

remember him yelling at one of my friends to get off the grass, and the whole game just disappeared immediately.¹⁵¹”

But though he lived a regimented life and put on a serious—“no nonsense,” says Dean—façade, Hersey was not cold. When he saw you on the street, he smiled.¹⁵² If anything, he used his time as Master to be as much a student as a mentor. “As a writer, he had better antennae, understanding what people were thinking about, talking about,” says Chauncey. “He found talking to students, listening to students, very interesting because he was hearing a voice perhaps he hadn’t normally heard. And so for him, it was an enormous learning experience.” When he left his writer’s den at noon, he did so eager to observe. His stern insistence on issues like the color of walls was not limited to personal matters; he was a man of steadfast principles.¹⁵³ He protested when he did not believe the University was providing him a large enough budget for his desired renovations of the Pierson Common Room and Dining Hall; business manager J.F. Embersits wrote to Brewster of Hersey’s discontent: “This project has been considered ‘a matter of honor’ with the Master and its disapproval has been interpreted as a personal affront.”¹⁵⁴”

In April 1968, the Yale Corporation’s consideration of changes to the University’s parietal rules (which limited visiting hours for women) led students on councils in two residential colleges—Timothy Dwight and Jonathan Edwards—to announce that they were abolishing such rules.¹⁵⁵ The administration did not adhere by these decisions, and the Masters in those colleges demeaned their

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Chauncey.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ J.F. Embersits to KB, May 12, 1967, KBR, Box 204, Folder 1.

¹⁵⁵ Timothy Bates and Gideon Gordon, “JE, TD Councils Ban Parietals In Reach For Student Power.” *Yale Daily News*, April 15, 1968: <http://digital.library.yale.edu/u?/yale-ydn,23895>.

students' actions in the *Yale Daily News*, with the Jonathan Edwards Master calling his students' words "meaningless," and the Timothy Dwight Master suggesting, "I don't think they have the competence, really."¹⁵⁶ Hersey later supported the Pierson Council, sending Brewster their recommendation that, "women visitors [be] welcomed as guests at the discretion of the individual members of the community. The individuals will bear this trust with consideration for all others, and with responsibility for the consent of their guests and, if necessary, their guests' parents."¹⁵⁷ Hersey highlighted the merits of his students' solution (calling it, "the most creative suggestion to have recently come from any of the residential college councils"), their ability to compromise, and their right to work alongside the administration for change, writing to Brewster in the note accompanying the recommendation, "I reported your opposition to the abolition of the rule, and also your concern about the position of the girls in case of abolition, and the Council amended its recommendation to take the latter into account. The emphasis upon individual responsibility for parents' consent, if needed, seems to place the burden where it really belongs."¹⁵⁸ Hersey also distilled the broader issue at play—residential college sovereignty— and noted that he agreed with the essence of his Council's suggestion that each residential college must have the power, as much as possible, to regulate its own non-academic life.¹⁵⁹ So too, he approached the matter with a level of realism perhaps drawn from his time outside of Yale's walls, suggesting, "I personally believe that the student would far more soberly assume this burden under these circumstances proposed by the Pierson Council than they will do in the orgy of rebellion, of sleep-ins, and of genuine resentment on the part of the best

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ JH to KB, April 25, 1968, KBR, Box 204, Folder 6.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

citizens that a continuation of the present system, with a slight embellishment of hours, is almost sure to bring.¹⁶⁰” When, in 1969, Yale admitted its first class of women, Hersey – who once wrote of possible plans to bring Vassar College, then all women, to New Haven, that it couldn’t happen “soon enough” – was pleased.¹⁶¹ He later wrote to alumni, “A coeducational Yale is a healthier Yale, or certainly will be when the ratio of men to women is better balanced, than the Yale you knew.¹⁶²”

“Sometimes I thought John was a bit of a crybaby and an apologist for bad student behavior,” says Chauncey. “But in general I think he wanted to understand the students. He wanted to understand and to listen in a very difficult period in the 60s why kids did what they did. My impression was that he was very much respected and liked by the students. I would not use the word ‘love’ because loving John Hersey was a pretty tough thing to do for anyone.¹⁶³” If anything, Hersey showed his own love for his students through his engagement in their lives on campus, using his skills as a writer and reporter to synthesize and artfully express student experiences. He did this in part through annual year-end letters to the alumni of Pierson College, “trying to distill the special spirit of the year.¹⁶⁴” The first letter, in June 1966, included a plea for monetary donations but was far more notable for its vivid phrases. Hersey told alumni that as they tried to picture Pierson they might have concluded that it,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ “Landmarks in Yale’s History.” Yale University, n.d.: <http://www.yale.edu/timeline/1969/index.html>. “A Report To all Members of Pierson College,” (from John Hersey, Master), Summer 1967, KBR, Box 204, Folder 5. “The Vassar-Yale Study,” Vassar Encyclopedia, Vassar College, 2007: <http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/coeducation/the-vassar-yale-study.html>.

¹⁶² John Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971, p. 53.

¹⁶³ Chauncey.

¹⁶⁴ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 1.

...in common with other colleges, is presently one vast pad where alienated and mostly bearded existentialists alternate between charging out to picket lines...and coming in for LSD trips to the moon and back. I'm afraid I must disenchant you. We had a population this term of 376 men...and the vast majority were intensely serious about life, very bright, full of wit and fun, troubled by the draft, divided on issues of the Vietnam war, under fierce heat to get into some kind of graduate school, interested in do-them-yourself movies and amply amplified music and far-out theater and new-wave writing, up to their eyeballs in papers and tests and incredible reading assignments, yet either deeply committed to the enterprises of this world or in rather hectic search of commitment.¹⁶⁵

He praised the students' intellectual vigor – “this year Pierson boasts a Rhodes, a Mellon, a Fulbright, and a Wilson” – joked about their sex lives – “parietal hours (gals in rooms) were well, and I gather, efficiently patronized” – and discussed his own work in setting up informal evening discussions in his house called “Pierson Conversations,” which included a famous visitor – Arthur Miller, Henry Luce, and Theodore White all came that year – talking with a group of 10 to 12 undergraduates for hours on end.¹⁶⁶

The following year's letter came with no pleas for money but more suggestions for change:

There was certainly a sense, for me, of incompleteness about the thrust of the enlivening here. The Yale colleges still do not have the intellectual edge they could and should have, and they will not, in my opinion, until they achieve a fuller and freer seminar program. The Yale faculty has, by and large, a lack of understanding of, and in some cases even scorn for, the students' desperately sincere desire for “relevance” in their academic lives. And it sometimes seems hard to persuade students to take hold of their own day-to-day existences...I cite the students' continuing acceptance of their barbaric social life as an example: monastic weekdays, orgiastic weekends.¹⁶⁷

Hersey expressed students' demoralization about the Vietnam War and the draft, insisting, “The fact I should emphasize is that doubts about the wisdom of our Vietnam policy are not held simply by the very few men here with left-wing views; I would say that most of our solid citizens feel grave misgivings – not simply a concern for their own skins but rather a reluctance to fight a war in which

¹⁶⁵ “A Report To all Members of Pierson College From John Hersey, Master,” June 1966, KBR, Box 204, Folder 1.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ “A Report To all Members of Pierson College,” (from John Hersey, Master), Summer 1967, KBR, Box 204, Folder 5.

they do not really believe.¹⁶⁸” And he didn’t forget to praise his students’ accomplishments, which included a Rhodes, a Henry, two Fulbrights, a Carnegie, and a Rockefeller that year and three-quarters of the graduating class going into careers or further education at least loosely tied to possible service.¹⁶⁹ He noted that there was a shift in the drug scene from acid to pot and used his own experiences on campus thirty years earlier to color his suggestions: “I am distinctly reminded of how I learned to drink in my freshman year under the perverse spur of Prohibition. My own view is that discussion of marijuana should be brought into the open; perhaps the older generation does have the obligation of persuading these bright young men that there are much better routes to insight, creativity and ecstasy than going to pot.”¹⁷⁰ But under the surface, Hersey’s imbuing of his letters, and his time as Master, with his memories of his own years in Yale’s classrooms, went far beyond that brief mention of his drinking habits. The letters showed the student-like wonder with which he approached his second stint on campus, his desire to learn of artistic events and cultural happenings and to take the temperature of student ideals. So too, the letters bore striking similarities to the depictions he wrote of the Class of 1936’s post-Yale activities, showed a desire to be not only a solitary writer but also the nucleus of a group of talented, diverse minds.

Upon accepting his role as Master, Hersey made clear that he was coming not only to Yale but also to New Haven. He intended to keep his status as an “outsider” to the inner-workings of academia and to try and use that status to expose Yale to the broader world. In the speech he gave at his installment, he remarked, “The outsider on the inside may be able to breach this steel-ribbed

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

stone – to the end that the life of the scholar may flow into and become one with the life of the citizen, and so that the campus will not be inured from what is often called ‘the outer world’ in a way that makes society seem the unreal, and education the only real, world.¹⁷¹” Hersey worked on a Yale-New Haven History Education Project, became the president of the New Haven Half Way House, and in 1968, in the wake of his publication of *The Algiers Motel Incident*, whose royalties went to improving race relations, established the Hersey Trust (he himself was not a director) to give donations to charitable and education organizations helping to lessen neighborhood conflicts, prejudice, and discrimination, beginning by giving funds to small projects in New Haven.¹⁷² Chauncey says that Hersey was one of two or three Masters who got involved in the community: “It was characteristic of John that he was concerned about people who were less fortunate than himself.”¹⁷³

Hersey was thus poised as an outsider and an insider when Yale and New Haven came crashing together in May 1970, at the end of his five-year term as Master. That spring unrest about the nation’s actions in Vietnam collided with the impending murder trials of Black Panthers Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins in New Haven.¹⁷⁴ In May 1969, three individuals that identified with the Panthers, a Black Nationalist organization, had murdered a teenager, Alex Rackley, in New Haven, under the false assumption that he was an informer.¹⁷⁵ Two of the perpetrators confessed, but, at least in some people’s minds, the FBI took the incident as an occasion to fight the Panthers as a larger

¹⁷¹ John Hersey: Installment Speech.

¹⁷² November 24, 1969, JHP, Box 44.

¹⁷³ Chauncey.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Conniff, “A Tale of Two Windows,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, January/February 2010: http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2010_01/tiffany4449.html.

¹⁷⁵ Paul Bass and Douglas W. Rae, “The Panther and the Bulldog,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, July/August 2006: http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2006_07/panthers.html.

organization, and thus charged Seale, the national chairman of the group, with ordering the murder, and Huggins, a local leader, with conspiracy.¹⁷⁶ Panther supporters from around the country planned to descend upon New Haven on May 1, 1970, calling on Yale students to join the efforts. The prospects did not look bright. In mid-April, 1,500 protestors had staged a march at Harvard, and the university had locked its gates in hopes of keeping any violence out. Instead, the uproar that ensued resulted in \$100,000 of property damage and over 200 people hospitalized.¹⁷⁷ At Yale, there was talk of burning down the whole place.¹⁷⁸ If nothing else, young Panther leader Doug Miranda told over a thousand students on Yale's campus in late April, they should strike: "You can close Yale down and make Yale demand release [of Seale]."¹⁷⁹ By late April, many Yale students heeded Miranda's words and went "on strike," though it wasn't at first clear what that meant.¹⁸⁰ Meanwhile, New Haven's black community was not pleased by the radical behavior. The local Black Coalition helped raise money for the Panthers' legal defense but aimed on keeping New Haven's black citizens away from the May Day protest, hoping to prevent the weekend from growing violent.

Brewster and Chauncey, advised by Archibald Cox – who had been the person in charge of dealing with the turmoil at Harvard – decided to keep Yale's gates open and to allow protestors to eat and sleep in residential colleges.¹⁸¹ Hersey's experiences as a journalist in violent, warlike scenarios became of the utmost importance. In the weeks leading up to the protest, Chauncey met with the college Masters approximately every other day to organize what would happen and found himself

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 105.

¹⁸¹ Paul Bass and Douglas W. Rae, *Murder in the Model City: The Black Panthers, Yale, and the Redemption of a Killer*. New York: Basic Books, 2006, locations 1446, 1478.

confronted by a lot of childish behavior: “Some of them literally sat there and cried,” says Chauncey.¹⁸² Hersey later wrote that such meetings turned into “group therapy sessions.¹⁸³” Masters were terrified that buildings would come crumbling down. “John was one of three or four really constructive ones,” remembers Chauncey. “He would say, ‘Now, if we have to do this, could we do it this way?’”¹⁸⁴ When Pierson was assigned to be the first aid center, Hersey procured doctors and nurses to be present.¹⁸⁵ On a personal level, while he did not seek violence, he wanted to assure a fair trial.¹⁸⁶ So he wrote letters to help gather funds for the New Haven Defense Trust, set up to help pay the Panthers’ legal fees.¹⁸⁷ When the “Pierson Poker Seminar” gave \$1 from every pot over \$15 and \$2 from every pot over \$100 to the Fund, amassing a \$100 donation, Hersey responded with a characteristically witty and thoughtful note:

All I can properly do to thank you on behalf of the New Haven Defense Trust is to wish you luck in the game. In view of your thoughtful action, I cannot wish you luck one by one; rather, I wish you luck in twos and threes, and sometimes, if possible, all at once, so that you have horribly tense hands. This distribution of luck will conspire to cause big pots, and in your wisdom you will use cuts from them again and again for the betterment of this sorry world.¹⁸⁸

In late April, the Yale faculty approved a suspension of academic “expectations” for the remainder of the semester, meaning that faculty and students could choose to what extent they held and participated in their classes. Students could go home if they wished, but few did.¹⁸⁹ Brewster made it clear that Yale could not contribute money to help the Panthers’ cause as a not-for-profit

¹⁸² Chauncey.

¹⁸³ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 64.

¹⁸⁴ Chauncey.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Bass, *Murder*, location 1554.

¹⁸⁷ JHP, Box 38. Bass, *Murder*, location 1554.

¹⁸⁸ Pierson Poker Seminar to JH, n.d., JHP, Box 38. JH to Pierson Poker Seminar, n.d., JHP, Box 38. Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 90.

¹⁸⁹ Chauncey.

institution, but that individuals should make their own choices with regard to their opinions (just as Hersey had done).¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, during a faculty meeting, Brewster uttered perhaps the most famous words of the May Day controversies at Yale, words that would forever color his stint as University President: “In spite of my insistence on the limits of my official capacity, I personally want to say that I am appalled and ashamed that things should have come to such a pass in this country that I am skeptical of the ability of black revolutionaries to achieve a fair trial anywhere in the United States.¹⁹¹” Those words led to much support, and of course, much outrage, across the country. Vice President Spiro Agnew all-but-called on Brewster to resign: “I do not feel that students of Yale University can get a fair impression of their country under the tutelage of Kingman Brewster.¹⁹²” John Hersey had never been prouder of his boss and friend. He later wrote, “My own immediate response to the candor of Brewster’s personal position on the fair trial issue was one of admiration and relief. It did not shock me because I would have gone further.¹⁹³”

As May Day approached, there was talk of 50,000 radicals descending on New Haven.¹⁹⁴ Columns of National Guardsmen filled the streets. The University prepared 248,000 meals of rice, granola, and lettuce.¹⁹⁵ Chauncey and others had secret meetings with national radical leaders to prepare to keep things in control. They were under the impression that Nixon would welcome an explosion – even a death – on campus, in hopes of winning votes in the upcoming election from

¹⁹⁰ Bass, “The Panther.” Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 108.

¹⁹¹ Bass, “The Panther.”

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 110.

¹⁹⁴ Chauncey.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

middle-income whites, who might be disgusted by such radicalism.¹⁹⁶ Fear mounted as 145 pounds of mercury were stolen from the Sterling Chemistry Laboratory, and 280 riot guns were taken from an unguarded truck.¹⁹⁷ Hours before May 1, President Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia, a statement that would provoke even more outrage in New Haven and that, days later, would lead to the infamous events at Kent State University in Ohio.¹⁹⁸

In the end, closer to 15,000 people showed up in New Haven, and the hours of speeches were, for the most part, powerful but calm. A fake report of a black man being arrested for entering the Green after dark prompted momentary chaos. A few bottles and bricks and cherry bombs prompted tear gas. But the “People’s First Aid Station” in the Pierson Common Room went joyfully unused. Hersey described the first “casualty,” a girl from out of town with a stubbed and split toe:

She has been treated, with bountiful tender loving care, by three doctors of extraordinary distinction – a famous molecular biophysicist, who has consulted his son’s Boy Scout manual to brush up on First Aid, a kidney specialist, and one of the University’s most eminent psychiatrists; three nurses from Yale-New Haven Hospital; four medical students; and three Pierson students serving as medic aides.¹⁹⁹”

Around midnight, bombs exploded blowing out the glass of on the ends of Yale’s Ingalls Rink.²⁰⁰ But everyone escaped more or less unharmed, from the rink and from whole day’s activities. Only 21 arrests were made that day in all of New Haven, some which had nothing to do with the protests.²⁰¹ The next day brought more speeches but smaller crowds; an unnecessarily large dispersal of tear gas from exhausted Guardsmen brought many individuals to Pierson to have their eyes washed out with

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 117.

¹⁹⁸ Bass, “The Panther.”

¹⁹⁹ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 120.

²⁰⁰ Bass, “The Panther.”

²⁰¹ Ibid.

water.²⁰² Yale and New Haven remained whole. As Hersey later wrote of the events, “to everyone’s astonishment, the house didn’t come tumbling down and indeed seemed to be shored up stronger than ever.”²⁰³”

Hersey wrote that statement in his final “Letter to the Alumni,” which in October 1970 was published as a book. What *Letter to the Alumni* showed was that though Hersey did not play a huge role in the May Day events, other than doing what he was told, he was keenly noting what was occurring. Chauncey remembers him as “an acute observer.”²⁰⁴ He was being a journalist. He was learning. His *Letter to the Alumni* spoke not only of the events of late April and early May but also of relations between blacks and whites, of interactions between youths and adults. Hersey held back little, opening the book with the statement, “All is not bullshit that is now called by the name.”²⁰⁵ He reflected and scolded:

Soon after graduation from college I was poor in the midst of the Depression. The gut issue then was how to get three squares a day down the alley to the gut—I ate for a long time on less than a dollar a day—and I was appalled by the system that could produce such economic ruin. I am now appalled, not by the mere fact of hearing on the tongues of some students of today’s radical fringes rote repetition of old left agitprop phrases of those distant bygone times, nor by the fact that the recurring rhetoric is often mouthed by sons and daughters of Yale men, preppies, privileged upper-class youths, but rather by the rigidity of the formulations, by their unshifted quality, by their lack of tactical imaginativeness, by their willful disregard of the history of the last thirty-five years.²⁰⁶

Hersey made observations and generalizations, “Today is all that matters. Now is the time,” and “The wish of the young is to live. The need is to be reassured by experience, vivid if possible, that the state of being is really there, and that it is worth it. The drive is to purge the self, through new

²⁰² Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, pp. 126-127

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 2. The charges against Seale and Huggins would ultimately be dropped in May 1971 (*Yale Daily News*, May 26, 1971).

²⁰⁴ Chauncey.

²⁰⁵ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 5.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

and ever new experience, of the whole station-wagon load of junky white middle class values and of the guilt the wagon carries on its chrome rack.²⁰⁷” He told a story of a student unfairly arrested, suggested that universities offer more courses in the arts, praised the value of athletics on campus, and noted that students were looking for role models, needed to be both “given autonomy” and “held accountable.”²⁰⁸ He called hypocrisy “the worst crime of the older generation,” spoke of liberation, relating, and helping, and criticized the interaction between Yale’s graduate and undergraduate departments, noting, “It does not comfort undergraduates, who live on the ground floor, that they can hear faint strains of chamber music in the apartments upstairs.”²⁰⁹ He praised students for their ability to organize, dissected what lay ahead for private universities, and spoke of two futures, one in which the nation’s youth was disillusioned and another, more tolerable, option, centering on trust and on a decentralization of power.²¹⁰ When he narrowed in on May Day, Hersey did so with the critical eye of a reporter and a scholar; he praised “the solidarity of the black community and the openness of the Establishment (read: Yale) to change.”²¹¹ He remembered a student speaking before members of the University administration and explaining that if Yale kept its gates shut, it would appear hostile and that sincere hospitality would be the only way to temper the radicals. Hersey admitted that this plea and other similar ones led the older generation to relinquish some authority to the ideas of the youths: “...we had not been castrated; we had been taught. It turned out that we had been taught the right lesson.”²¹²

²⁰⁷ Ibid, pp. 69, 33.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 36, 61, 71.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 36, 157.

²¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 5, 137, 171.

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 131.

²¹² Ibid, p. 65.

Hersey's *Letter to the Alumni* in a large sense was a summation of the lessons he had learned in his five years as Master. One might think of it as akin to an undergraduate's senior thesis paper, albeit better written. The secretary to the Dean of Pierson later told Hersey that she found the small book, "perhaps the only way the people in the New Haven community were able to get a clear picture of what really happened."²¹³ Hersey had "drank at the fountain of renewal" by opening himself up to learn again on Yale's campus, this time not in its classrooms but in its offices, in meetings, in interactions with New Haven. He wasn't the life of faculty parties. But his writing gave him not only something to devote the first five hours of his morning to but also a sense of self, in an insular community to which he did not quite belong. In the speech he gave at his installment, Hersey said, "At one level the non-academic man in the academic setting is free to provide certain shock values. He has no reason to hide his astonishment at the inertias of a great University. He can afford the easy steadfastness of one who does not want or need anything from the institution, least of all those terrifying velvet handcuffs known as tenure."²¹⁴ Freed from those terrifying velvet handcuffs, freed even from any obligation to play intellectual, John Hersey, Master of Pierson College learned. He let Yalies teach him.

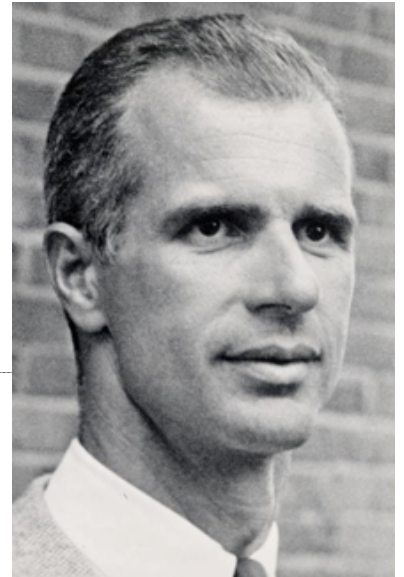
And then, at last, he went on to teach them.

²¹³ Virginia Hird to JH, July 2, 1971, JHP, Box 38.

²¹⁴ John Hersey: Installment Speech.

COLLEGE SEMINAR CHANGES FEATURE GREATER 'EQUITY,' IMPROVED FACULTY

– April 8, 1971. Yale Daily News



John Hersey spent the 1970 to 1971 academic year at the American Academy in Rome. But by October 1970, he had received a note indicating that Peter Brooks, who had succeeded him as Master of Pierson, had suggested that he return to campus to offer a college seminar on writing.²¹⁵ (The college seminar program, which began during Hersey's tenure as Master, aimed to bring in individuals from diverse backgrounds to offer seminars, which gave preference to students of the college.²¹⁶) Hersey scribbled notes drafting his idea for a course:

Because I would want to read the students' work with some care and want to meet each week in individual conferences with half the class, I would not be able to handle more than ten students... Toward this general aim, the work of the course would be of this sort: writing, with strong emphasis on revision, on re-writing, on efforts to sharpen and clarify and perfect, and the reading and discussion of writers' writing on writing. By this I mean I would not want the students to regard the course as a vehicle for self expression, nor for that matter as a "how to" course in exposition or "creative" (whatever that is) writing, rather it would be a serious inquiry into what it means to be a writer, what it means to live by and for writing, what attitude one who does takes toward his work and how he goes about his work. My assumption is that it is not possible to "teach" or "learn" how to write masterpieces. But one can learn if he has some of what it takes, to produce masterpieces or ever just go work, to be a writer.²¹⁷

The first class of C5PC57a, "The Craft of the Writer" took place in the fall of 1971.²¹⁸ Over the next few years, Hersey selected ten students annually to work with him both in class and in individual conferences. Students wrote a 2,000 to 3,000-word draft of a piece one week, revised it

²¹⁵ "John" to JH, October 20, 1970, JHP, Box 38.

²¹⁶ Hersey, *Letter to the Alumni*, p. 144.

²¹⁷ JH Notes, n.d., Box 38.

²¹⁸ Yale Course Catalog: 1971-1972. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

for the next, and then repeated the process.²¹⁹ In turn, Hersey repeated the teaching process for the next thirteen years. He later admitted in an interview that he had “backed into teaching” because he thought it would constrain his writing too much but that after he left Yale, he realized that he’d “become addicted” to having youth around him: “I found the struggles of students who were trying to find themselves as writers fascinating and very moving. I think that their struggles somehow had echoes in my own continuing struggles. A writer never really finds his voice, but is always striving, I think, to find it.²²⁰” Indeed, in 1972, one student wrote on an anonymous course evaluation that he had not only learned discipline and how to improve his writing from Hersey’s class but that he had also had “revelations about the limits of my abilities.²²¹”

By the late 1970s, John Hersey was still writing and was also teaching two courses listed among Yale’s English Department offerings, “The Craft of the Writer,” a fiction workshop, and “Form and Style in Non-fiction Writing,” a nonfiction workshop.²²² The former required students to write new short stories on a bi-weekly basis and had them read Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner.²²³ The latter, according to a 1977-1978 course catalog, “[confronted] the challenges of journalism as an art. Emphasis on form. Study and discussion of texts from imaginative literature that may suggest mode, voices, forms, and styles for various sorts of non-fiction pieces. Weekly writing projects, revision stressed; conferences.²²⁴” Hersey assigned readings from an anthology he had edited and published in 1974, *The Writer’s Craft*, which included Henry James,

²¹⁹ Yale Course Catalog: 1972-1973. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Notes, n.d., JHP, Box 38.

²²⁰ “John Hersey, The Art of Fiction No. 92.”

²²¹ Course Questionnaire, 1972, JHP Box 38.

²²² Yale Course Catalog: 1977-1978. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

Flannery O'Connor, and W.H. Auden, among many others.²²⁵ In the introduction to the book he wrote, "The art of the word – and there will be one as long as the human species has a tongue – can never be merely received. This art is made, and made again, and made again by every mind that takes it in....The writer must love words – their shapes, their sounds, their shimmering meanings."²²⁶

Today, the students with whom Hersey shared his love for words over those thirteen years fill the mastheads of national publications: David Lauter, the Washington Bureau Chief of the *Los Angeles Times*; Ruth Marcus, a columnist and editorial writer for the *Washington Post*; Jackson Diehl, the Deputy Editorial Page Editor of the *Washington Post*; Melinda Beck, a health columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*; famed *New Yorker* staff writer Jane Meyer; the late foreign correspondent Marie Colvin.²²⁷

Getting into one of Hersey's classes was no small task. Students submitted applications, with writing samples (and often pleading letters). Hersey made careful lists of applicants to sort through, with names, residential colleges, class years, and other accolades, achievements, or quirks: "wrote poetry at Hopkins," "Engl. Major," "Scientist," "Writing samples – Newsday, Yale Lit."²²⁸ Jean Heilprin Diehl, who writes fiction for both children and adults and took both of Hersey's courses,

²²⁵ *The Writer's Craft*, John Hersey, ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974, pp. ix-xi. Eileen Pollack, interviewed by Zara Kessler. Telephone, April 28, 2012.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.

²²⁷ Pollack Excerpt. David Lauter, interviewed by Zara Kessler. Telephone, April 17, 2012. "Ruth Marcus: Opinion Writer," *The Washington Post*, 1996-2012: http://www.washingtonpost.com/ruth-marcus/2011/02/24/ABjkDzI_page.html. "Jackson Diehl: Deputy Editorial Page Editor," *The Washington Post*, 1996-2012: http://www.washingtonpost.com/jackson-diehl/2011/02/24/ABccMXN_page.html. "Melinda Beck: Columnist, The Wall Street Journal," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2012: <http://topics.wsj.com/person/B/melinda-beck/1255>. "Contributors: Jane Mayer," *The New Yorker*, 2012: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/jane_mayer/search?contributorName=jane%20mayer. James Barron, "Recalling Her Determined Daughter, A Journalist Killed in Syria," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/23/nyregion/marie-colvin-mother-recalls-determined-journalist-killed-in-syria.html>.

²²⁸ Notes, n.d., JHP, Box 38.

remembers seeing her name on the posted list of students accepted into the fiction class and thinking that it was, “like a certification of literary promise.”²²⁹ Her now husband, Jackson Diehl, who took the nonfiction course in 1977, remembers getting into the class as being like “getting into Yale all over again” calling the course the “Mount Everest” of Yale’s writing instruction offerings at the time and saying that students “worshipped” Hersey.²³⁰ Ruth Marcus, who took the nonfiction course in the spring of 1978 admits, “Everybody who thought they cared about writing wanted to take this course.” Students writers and editors from the *Yale Daily News*, the publication that jumpstarted Hersey’s own journalism career, Marcus among them, filled seats of the Pierson seminar room in which Hersey taught.²³¹

Lauter was an editor of the “News” section of the *Yale Daily News*; he enrolled in the nonfiction course. He remembers Hersey as “courtly” and “soft spoken,” not “someone who was going to put his feet up on the table.”²³² Jean Diehl, an editor of the *Yale Daily News Magazine*, remembers him as “formal,” “kind,” and a bit “remote.”²³³ Marcus admits, “He was a WASPY older man. He wasn’t a Jewish grandpa type.”²³⁴ He let his students talk and react to one another’s work, didn’t dominate the classroom.²³⁵ A central focus of his teaching was explaining his concept of literary nonfiction: “He had been someone who was one of the founders of the idea that nonfiction could be written in a literary way and that you could write nonfiction narratives as something other

²²⁹ “About the Author,” Jean Heilprin Diehl, n.d.: <http://www.jeanheilprindiehl.com/about.html>. Jean Heilprin Diehl, interviewed by Zara Kessler. Telephone, April 27, 2012.

²³⁰ Jackson Diehl, interviewed by Zara Kessler. Telephone, April 27, 2012.

²³¹ Ruth Marcus, interviewed by Zara Kessler. Telephone, April 23, 2012.

²³² Lauter.

²³³ Jean Diehl

²³⁴ Marcus.

²³⁵ Jackson Diehl.

than hack work,” says Lauter.²³⁶ Hersey worried that the term “new journalism,” which was beginning to be associated with such forms of creative nonfiction, “had veered off in the direction of impressionistic, subjective, and not necessarily always true, work,” says Lauter, “and that the line between fiction and nonfiction was being blurred in a way that he thought was morally wrong.²³⁷” Hersey felt compelled to get the form of nonfiction journalism that he helped launch back on track and realized that the way to do this was to teach the correct mode to the next generation of writers. “He wasn’t going to go off and edit a nonfiction magazine at that point,” says Lauter. “So this was his way of having an impact on the profession.”²³⁸

Hersey used to joke, Lauter remembers, “That the First Amendment gave you a hunting license, but the restriction on the license was that what you wrote had to be true.²³⁹” Hersey had students read works by Ernest Hemingway, Truman Capote, and Tom Wolfe as examples of individuals who had pushed the notion of bringing fictional elements into nonfiction too far.²⁴⁰ Marcus calls his insistence on how important it was not to fabricate anything, “almost a sort of religious fervor.²⁴¹” Lauter says that Hersey highlighted, “If you want to write a novel, there’s nothing wrong with writing a novel, writing a novel can be great and some people are much better novel writers than they are nonfiction writers, but you need to know what it is you are doing. Are you writing nonfiction or are you writing fiction? And you can use the techniques that fiction writers use

²³⁶ Lauter.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Marcus.

to create narrative, but it always has to be grounded in that hard truth.”²⁴² Hersey had students put such an idea into practice by requiring them to write nonfiction pieces using various narrative techniques typically found in fiction. Lauter at one point tried to recreate a day in the life of a fellow student using Virginia’s Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* as a model, no small task.²⁴³ So too, Lauter’s class had discussions about the ethical limitations of journalism, in light of a contemporary controversy over whether *The Progressive* magazine should be allowed to publish an article about the making of the hydrogen bomb that included classified information but that was reported completely using only non-classified sources. Hersey seemed to be of the opinion that the First Amendment was not absolute and that there were cases in which journalistic freedom should be constrained (this being one); in the end, the piece ran.²⁴⁴

Lauter admits that as he writes today, Hersey’s words still impact both his understanding of the absolute necessity of getting the facts correct and the notion of contemplating structure and narrative even in seemingly straightforward pieces.²⁴⁵ When Lauter was covering the White House, he thought back to Hersey’s tales about interviewing President Truman. (Generally, Hersey shied away from telling war stories from his days a reporter.) Hersey had figured that he would get about an hour with the President and prepared for the interview carefully so as not to waste any time: “His feeling was he wasn’t the first reporter who was going to interview Harry Truman,” says Lauter. “It wasn’t like he was going to trick Truman into saying something that others hadn’t gotten.” Instead, Hersey’s technique was to learn in minute detail everything that went into Truman’s day, from when

²⁴² Lauter.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

he got up in the morning to when he went to sleep; he spent a great deal of time interviewing others about the President's routine before his rendezvous with the big man himself. This way, Lauter explains, when he met Truman, "He could ask him about the specific things in his life rather than the general. And his [Hersey's] feeling was that if you ask people questions about things that are really specific you are much more likely to get good information.²⁴⁶" Marcus admits, "I don't think I ever understood before I took that class that everything you write has a particular shape to it...I now write columns, so 750 words, but they still have a shape. They are better if they end up where they started and go in a little circle there, but that notion that everything had a kind of inherent structure that you needed to figure out what the right structure was for that piece [was a major lesson].²⁴⁷"

The time spent in the Pierson College seminar room was only one part of the John Hersey experience. Students also spent hours each semester in one-on-one conferences with their professor, in his book-lined office, also in Pierson, discussing the intricacies of their written assignments. Jackson Diehl remembers Hersey pulling H.W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* off the shelf and saying, "Have you ever seen this book?"²⁴⁸ Hersey did not write comments on papers.²⁴⁹ Jean Diehl remembers that instead if there was something that he didn't like, he put a light penciled vertical line in the left-hand margin of the page. If there was something he liked, he'd make a tiny check mark. "I remember going there and him just going through these vertical lines, one by one...going through your story with you in a very detailed way and giving you the reason that he'd

²⁴⁶ Lauter.

²⁴⁷ Marcus.

²⁴⁸ Jackson Diehl.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

made a little mark.²⁵⁰ She recalls him teaching her that, “the eraser is more important than the pencil,” that leaving space for the reader’s imagination is necessary, and that the sound of language itself can have subliminal effects.²⁵¹

Many of the successful writers who took these classes owe Hersey for much more than a few lasting lessons about journalism or novel writing; they also owe him for their first jobs in the field. “He really cared about his students,” Marcus says, noting that Hersey wrote her a recommendation to serve as a clerk to famed *New York Times* columnist James Reston. “And seeing them succeed in the world and succeed in the right way.²⁵²” Jackson Diehl credits his job at the *Washington Post* to a recommendation from Hersey. Jean Diehl obtained a position at a small newspaper in Concord, New Hampshire, *The Concord Monitor*, because one of Hersey’s former students, Eileen Pollack, had been working at the paper and wrote to Hersey saying that she was going off to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and wondered if another of his students would be interested in her feature-writing job. Hersey read the letter aloud in class, and Jean Diehl applied for and received the post in New Hampshire.

That former student Eileen Pollack’s story is perhaps the most symbolic of Hersey’s power as a teacher and a mentor. In the spring of 1978, Pollack was a Physics major at Yale, planning to get a PhD post-graduation.²⁵³ She was not an editor at the *Yale Daily News*. She did not even apply for Hersey’s class. She had taken another writing class with a man named Martin Goldman and without telling her, Goldman had passed along her essays to Hersey, suggesting to him that Pollack would be

²⁵⁰ Jean Diehl.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Marcus.

²⁵³ Pollack excerpt. Pollack interview.

too modest to apply to Hersey's course herself.²⁵⁴ One afternoon Pollack received word that John Hersey was trying to reach her; when she returned his call, she learned that he had saved her a spot in his nonfiction seminar. He wanted to know if she wanted to take it. Pollack was in her last semester at Yale and in order to graduate needed one more physics course. She decided to spend an extra semester on campus. She said yes to Hersey.²⁵⁵

Pollack entered a class of refined journalists ready to learn. She arrived an hour early for her conferences with Hersey and sat outside in the Pierson courtyard, "[I was] both feeling so nervous, I was going to barf and so excited," she says. "I just thought, 'This is the best thing in my life.'"²⁵⁶ When she finally entered his office, she watched as he erased the penciled marks on her essays after they went over them and as he grew more informal in the one-on-one sessions. In her as-of-yet unpublished memoir she recalls him telling her, "Sometimes when someone criticizes your work, you've got to say, *Fuck that. What other people say has nothing to do with what I know about my writing.*"²⁵⁷ Pollack recalls a student suggesting that she needed to write with a lot of time on her hands in a quiet and inspiring place, and Hersey responding that he used to think that way before he had to write during World War II in the holds of cargo-planes.²⁵⁸ (One can't help but thus note the hypocrisy in his insistence that the University paint the walls of his Master's office white.) Hersey helped Pollack get an essay published in *Life* and encouraged her to fuse her various interests and try her hand at science writing; her final project for his course involved shadowing a doctor at Yale-New

²⁵⁴ Pollack excerpt.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Pollack interview.

²⁵⁷ Pollack excerpt.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

Haven Hospital.²⁵⁹ When she returned to New Haven the following spring, after finishing the coursework for her diploma in the fall, Hersey allowed her to audit his fiction seminar, despite the fact that it meant extra work for him.²⁶⁰ That semester she read voraciously and plunged into her writing; one of her short stories was so powerful that it prompted a phone call from Hersey telling her that she had moved him and bringing her to tears.²⁶¹

The two grew particularly close. Pollack thinks that this was perhaps the result of her humble background and the fact that she was a scholarship student at Yale: “He had been a scholarship student, and I think he had felt out of place, and he understood that I did.”²⁶² In her memoir she writes, “Once, when I told Hersey that I had heard the rhythm of the sentences I wanted to write before I had any idea as to what those sentence [sic] might say, his face lit up and he nodded with the delight of a man who regularly listens to the music of the universe and unexpectedly has encountered a young acolyte who can hear and hum the same harmonics.”²⁶³ She later adds, “Even as he gave me stories to read that taught me to love the crazy Yiddish rollercoaster of my own voice, he taught me to love the more dignified possibilities of the language as it was spoken by the son of a Protestant missionary. He spoke with dignity but no pretension. He didn’t waste a word....²⁶⁴” When he taught of the difference between “that” and “which,” he made the members of the class promise to one day pass along the lesson to their students: the correct usage was dying out of the language.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. Pollack interview.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Pollack excerpt.

²⁶² Ibid. Pollack interview.

²⁶³ Pollack excerpt.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Pollack now teaches students in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan.²⁶⁵ She said goodbye to physics. Though he never explicitly said a word, Hersey helped her decide. She writes in her memoir,

I wish I could say I made a rational decision to give up physics to become a writer. But mostly what happened was that I found myself sitting in Hersey's office one afternoon, and I looked across the desk, and I thought: *I want to be like you. I want to spend my life the way you're spending your life. I want to keep writing stories. I want to keep reading books. I want someday to send you a copy of a novel I've written and hear you say you like it.* And next thing I knew, apropos of nothing, I blurted out that I had decided to become a writer.²⁶⁶

She remembers Hersey mouthing the word yes, explaining that he hadn't wanted to tell her what to do, hadn't wanted her to come back in 20 years blaming him for her life's path.²⁶⁷ She took that first newspaper job. She wrote to him for years, sent him a story when her teacher at the Iowa Writers' Workshop ripped it to shreds (he wrote back with encouragement), and once paid an impromptu visit to his house on Martha's Vineyard (he welcomed her in).²⁶⁸ Over twenty years later, she's not only a teacher but also a writer of fiction and creative nonfiction, a genre she credits Hersey for creating. "I don't want to say I stole his ideas because I give him credit, but every course I've then went on to teach...I was developing the ideas that Hersey had really come up with."²⁶⁹ Pollack has published the textbook and anthology *Nonfiction: A Guide to Form, Content and Style, with Readings* and recently, her second novel.²⁷⁰ The long answer to how she changed from being a physicist to a writer is in the memoir she recently wrote. "The short answer," she says, "is John Hersey."²⁷¹

²⁶⁵ "Biography," Eileen Pollack, April 28, 2007, <http://www.eileenpollack.com/biography/>.

²⁶⁶ Pollack excerpt.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Pollack interview.

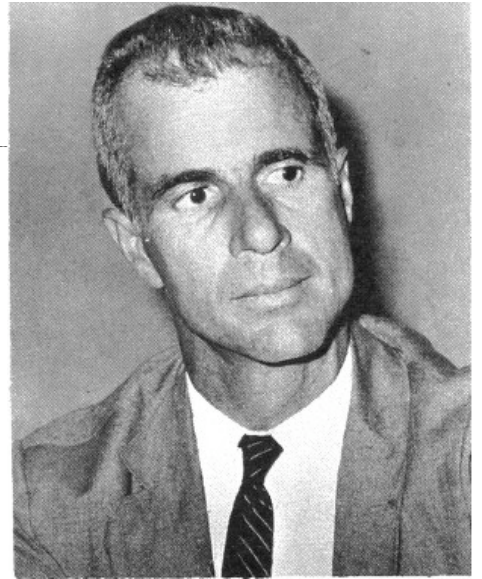
²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ "Biography."

²⁷¹ Ibid.

FORMER PIERSON MASTER DIES AT 78

– March 25, 1993. Yale Daily News



John Hersey died on March 24, 1993, in Key West, Florida of colon and liver cancer.²⁷² A memorial service took place for him on Saturday, May 15, 1993. Only one location was fitting: Yale University's Battell Chapel, where Hersey had been a deacon in his undergraduate years.²⁷³ His burial service occurred on Martha's Vineyard, where he had grown close to Kingman Brewster, the man who brought him back to Yale as an outsider of the highest caliber. Jules Feiffer, a syndicated cartoonist, eulogized Hersey, "Not only was he a superb talker like most good writers, he was also a superb listener, like few good writers...But mostly, he was civil. He brought a value to civility. A kind of decent, thoughtful calm. He may have been the last of our civil writers."²⁷⁴

At the end of his life, though, Hersey had to buffet claims that tarnished his reputation for civility. In 1988, four years after he retired from teaching at Yale, a *New York Times* article accused him of lifting paragraphs, with only minor revision, from Laurence Bergeen's biography of James Agee, in an article Hersey wrote for the *New Yorker*.²⁷⁵ Hersey offered his apologies, though admitted to the *New York Times* that he didn't think he was fully in the wrong, saying, "I'm very

²⁷² Obituary: *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1993, JHAR, Box 528, Folder 1.

²⁷³ JH to GBH, September 29, 1935, JHP, Box 1.

²⁷⁴ Wiseman.

²⁷⁵ Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, p. 109.

sorry if I've offended Mr. Bergreen. I don't believe my real offense in terms of normal practice is great. There's always a fine line between facts and the work of another writer;" he nevertheless added, "I think probably I should have given Laurence Bergreen and other sources more credit."²⁷⁶ A decade later, Anne Fadiman wrote in an essay in her *Ex Libris* collection that Hersey had also snatched material from her own mother for his book *Men of Bataan* (1942), when Fadiman's mother and her first husband, Melville Jacoby, were correspondents in the Far East during World War II.²⁷⁷ Fadiman quotes her mother as having told her, "I think Hersey was ruined by the Time Inc. method of writing from correspondents' files. He just got so used to running other people's work through his typewriter and calling it his own that he started to think the whole written world was raw material."²⁷⁸

But to the most of the world, John Hersey was not a plagiarist. Two days before his death, author David McCullough, gave the first John Hersey Lecture at Yale, established by the University's then president Howard Lamar; McCullough said of Hersey, "He has given us the century in a shelf of brilliant work, and we are all his beneficiaries."²⁷⁹ To the public, Hersey was the writer of dozens of books and countless more articles, the man who attached faces and names to the bombing at Hiroshima. To his friends and companions, Hersey was a reserved man but one who cared deeply about those around him. Letters from faculty, from students, from peers rarely went unanswered. Journalist and teacher Tom Herman, whose father was a member of the Yale Class of 1936,

²⁷⁶ William H. Honan, "Hersey Apologizes to a Writer Over an Article on Agee," *The New York Times*, July 22, 1988: <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/22/nyregion/hersey-apologizes-to-a-writer-over-an-article-on-agee.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

²⁷⁷ Fadiman, p. 109. *Great American Writers*, p. 690.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 110.

²⁷⁹ Wiseman.

remembers that in the aftermath of his father's death, his mother received a beautiful letter from Hersey, which noted how Hersey and Herman were always on the same page of yearbooks and reunion books.²⁸⁰ To members of the Class of 1936, Hersey was the man who helped create those yearbooks and reunion books. He was a journalist, a football player, and a Bonesman. To Pierson students in the late 1960s, he was a parent, a stern and reserved one, but a principled, observant one nonetheless. And to the students in his seminars, he was a mentor, an inspiration, a man in whose tall, erect shadow to follow.

Each spring, Yale's English Department awards a student or students the John Hersey Prize "for a body of journalistic work' reflecting the spirit and ideas of John Hersey: engagement with moral and social issues, responsible reportage, and craftsmanship."²⁸¹ John Hersey's true craft was learning through experiences and teaching through words. And in those endeavors, he was first and foremost a Yalie.

²⁸⁰ Tom Herman, Email To Zara Kessler. May 5, 2012.

²⁸¹ "Prizes and Deadlines," English Department. Yale University, 2012: <http://english.yale.edu/undergraduate-program/prizes-deadlines>.

Note on Sources

The John Hersey Papers in the Collection of American Literature at the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library are have not yet been fully categorized and labeled with folder numbers, hence the appearance here of only Box Numbers. Abbreviations used in the footnotes include KBR (Kingman Brewster Records), KB (Kingman Brewster, Jr.) JHP (John Hersey Papers), JH (John Hersey), GBH (Grace Baird Hersey), and JHAR (John Hersey Alumni Records). “N.d.” indicates materials without marked dates.

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