

**Robert Scholes**  
**1929-2016**

Robert Scholes, an inventive and visionary scholar of modern culture, passed away peacefully at his home on December 9, 2016. He wrote or edited some forty books on topics like the history of storytelling, the creativity of science fiction, the complexity of language, and the enduring value of figures like James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. These works were translated into several different languages and studied in classrooms around the world. Scholes did some of the earliest archival work on James Joyce, co-wrote with Robert Kellogg what remains the standard study of narrative history, played a key role in legitimizing science fiction as a genre worthy of serious study, helped create the legendary semiotics program at Brown University, and co-founded the Modernist Journals Project, an early and enduring digital humanities initiative. He wrote textbooks about poetry and fiction as well as literary theory and the reasons why we study literature. He won nearly every honor the field offers, including a Mellon professorship at Brown, a Guggenheim, the Modern Language Association's award for distinguished service, and the National Council of Teachers of English award for research. He held honorary doctorates from universities in the United States as well as France and was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1998 and president of the Modern Language Association in 2004.

This long and distinguished list of books and awards, however, does little to describe the life and impact of a man whose work helped shape careers and classrooms around the world. Scholes was an agile thinker and able writer, who never lost touch with the basic elements of the profession, even in the era of high theory and academic superstars. Some of his greatest books, including *Textual Power* and *Protocols of Reading*, urged us to understand the importance of literacy and the slipperiness of language. He offered, for example, a legendary interpretation of a profane bumper sticker, showing just how complex the everyday world around us can be. He wrote or edited ten textbooks on writing and poetry, storytelling and rhetoric precisely because he believed that teaching lay at the very heart of things. Indeed, some of his final books, including the *Rise and Fall of English*, urged scholars to turn away from the minutiae of theory in order to re-engage with the basic skills of grammar, logic, and rhetoric in the classroom.

Despite his enormous accomplishments, Scholes was a modest, even quiet man. Borrowing a favorite phrase from Joyce, he called himself "a lazy idling little schemer" in school who managed to pass through Yale without taking anything too seriously. After college, he was an active duty naval reserve officer who served in the Korean War and lost part of his hearing to the deafening noises of the gun battery he commanded aboard the *USS Helena*. The navy, however, allowed him to indulge his love of the sea. An avid sailor for much of his life, he managed to strike up what became a close friendship with Ursula Le Guin when he showed her a picture of the sailboat he had named the *Lookfar*--a name taken from her novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

After leaving the navy, he entered the doctoral program in English at Cornell University where he read and studied broadly with what he said was great energy, but little aim. Evinced his trademark modesty, in fact, he said that when it was time to write a dissertation he had few ideas about what to do and was saved by a mentor who suggested that he try his hand at editorial work. Cornell had recently acquired a huge archive of papers by James Joyce and Scholes took on the task of cataloging and editing them. The resulting works--*The Cornell Joyce Collection* (1961) and *The Workshop of Daedelus* (1964)--became cornerstones of the rising field of Joyce studies and still provide essential insights into how the Irish writer set about his earliest work. After finishing his degree at Cornell in 1959, Scholes moved briefly to the University of Virginia, where he taught a course on Faulkner that was attended by the great southern novelist himself. Scholes, in fact, had a particular talent for working closely with authors and struck up friendships not just with Le Guin and Faulkner, but with Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Coover, and John Barth among many others.

In 1964, Scholes headed to the University of Iowa along with his first wife, Joan, and their children, Peter and Christine. There, he taught courses in writing and literature, an experience that forever cemented the importance of holding together these facets of English. In 1966, he and Robert Kellogg published *The Nature of Narrative*, a book that looks at the history of storytelling from its earliest incarnations in the ancient world through medieval epics and contemporary novels. The book remains as fresh now as when it first appeared and is still in print, having gone through multiple editions and expansions, including the addition of a new author, James Phelan, in 2006.

After spending six years at Iowa and rising to the rank of Professor, he then moved to Brown University in 1970 where he helped founded the semiotics program that went on to become the Department of Modern Culture and Media. Shortly after the move, his wife died of cancer and, in 1972, he married a high school biology teacher named Jo Ann Putnam, who added four more kids--Cynthia, Greg, Rick, and Mike--to the family. They moved to a house in Barrington, Rhode Island that had once served as the clubhouse for a local golf course. This quirky, beautiful home began to fill with books and people while becoming a social hive where students, professors, novelists, and visiting scholars all mixed. Many a graduate student has lived in its extra rooms, and serious academic conferences at Brown were regularly followed by basketball games in the driveway and dinners in Jo Ann's extraordinary garden.

While at Brown, Scholes led what seemed like wave after wave of innovations in the field of literary studies. First in the *Fabulators* (1967) and then in *Structural Fabulation* (1975), he placed science-fiction writers like Vonnegut alongside postmodern experimentalists like Barth and Iris Murdoch. He was among the first to treat a genre many still considered pulpy trash as serious imaginative literature, and in the process kicked off what became a long friendship with Vonnegut, who wrote to Scholes of his delight that literary criticism could be so open and accessible: "Some real dumb bastard could read you guys and understand a good deal of it and be glad." One of the reasons Scholes's books remain so important is that they both refuse and refute the idea that scholarship needs to be opaque or technocratic. If an idea mattered, he firmly believed, then it should indeed speak to any "dumb bastard." True to his word, he called

one of the last graduate courses he taught at Brown “Frivolous Fictions” and it helped reveal the serious work being done in books by comic writers like P.G. Wodehouse and Ivy Compton-Burnett.

This insistence on clarity and the commitment to the power of all kinds of writing are everywhere visible in his work. In a series of books on the profession of English, he argues that writing and reading alike are both crafts--not inherent talents, but skills to be developed and honed. Despite having played a key role in launching the theory revolution through his work in semiotics and structuralism, Scholes remained sharply critical of scholarship that seemed willfully obtuse or too narrowly specialized. And he sought always to consider how scholarship might itself feed back into the classroom. His work is thus as important for literary scholars as it is for those who teach writing and rhetoric--in large part because he lamented that these two disciplines had been allowed to drift away from one another.

Ever attentive to writing and its media, Scholes was a pioneer in what we now call digital humanities as well. Shortly after Brown installed its first mainframe computers, he required his students to post regular responses to the week’s reading--an arduous exercise that could only be done at the mainframe terminal in the small hours of the morning. These proto-blog posts became a staple of his teaching since he understood early how essential it would be for his students to work effectively in this new medium. Then, in 1995, he set out to create what would become the enormously influential Modernist Journals Project--a digital archive that made available complete runs of the little magazines that defined modernism. This initiative began modestly enough when he, Mark Gaipa, and Sean Latham set out to scan and make available a few pages of a magazine on what was then the earliest iteration of the modern internet. It has since grown into a major digital initiative housed at Brown and supported by partners at the University of Tulsa, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, and more.

Scholes retired from active teaching in 1999, though he continued to direct graduate research and publish books. (In fact, seven new or updated works appeared after his retirement.) He is survived by his wife Jo Ann as well as his adopted children and their families. And he is also survived by generations of his students, both undergraduate and graduate alike. It’s impossible to speak for all of them, but we too are a kind of family, who learned from him how to write clearly, read craftily, and teach generously. His expansive work could hold Homer alongside Vonnegut, Joyce alongside P.G. Wodehouse. In so opening his mind, he created new spaces for us all.

--Sean Latham