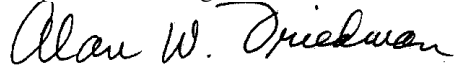


## DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
WAYNE LESSER**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Professor Wayne Lesser, Department of English, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary  
General Faculty and Faculty Council  
The University of Texas at Austin

Arthur J. Thaman and Wilhelmina Doré Thaman Professor of English and Comparative Literature

**IN MEMORIAM  
WAYNE LESSER**

Wayne Lesser, whose career at The University of Texas at Austin spanned forty-two years, died suddenly from an asthma attack on Sunday, July 16, 2017, at his home in Lytton Springs, Texas. He was 68 years old.

Gifted with a remarkable intelligence and scholarly acumen, Wayne focused his scholarship and teaching on 19th- and early 20th-century American literature and on literary theory. His articles—notably “Criticism, Literary History, and the Paradigm,” *PMLA* 97 (May 1981), 378-94 and “The Frustrations and Possibilities of Literary History,” *Studies in the Novel*, 14 (Spring 1982) 155-76—were elegantly argued and proved exemplary, the way scholarship should be done. His talk was a pleasure and it invariably conveyed the flavor of his passionate commitment to the tough work of thinking. He applied this passion not only to literary studies but to his sub-specialty, which was the thorny matter of the profession itself. He was at his best when he was questioning, clarifying, and exploring professional issues. The book he was writing focused on “literary studies as an academic discipline, both its commonalities of professional practice and its ineffective self-representation to the general academic community and to the public at large.” Few had or have such a fund of well-formed ideas about the shape of our values and priorities as teachers, scholars, and bearers of a professional discipline. “Wayne’s graduate training and mine,” writes Professor Evan Carton, “occurred in the golden age of ‘theory,’ and Wayne was a great enthusiast and explicator of theories and methodologies of all kinds, from baseball line-ups to political economies to the reading and teaching of literature. I loved his sheer delight in the life and play of the mind. Like all true intellectuals—but more genuinely and ecumenically than most—what excited Wayne was what Richard Poirier calls ‘the work of knowing’ more than the fact or product of knowledge itself.” Wayne took sheer delight in the life and play of the mind and relished sharing that delight with others.

A dedicated teacher with a profound sense of professional responsibility, Wayne was the intellectual architect of the English Department’s graduate program, serving for many years as Graduate Adviser. As Professor Martin Kervorkian puts it, Wayne’s scholarly output was massive, in that it was nothing less than every dissertation that emerged in the last twenty years from the English graduate program. His contributions to undergraduate education were no less stellar, Wayne, among many contributions, fashioning and teaching the first freshman Liberal Arts Honors class. His high-energy advising provided a structure within which students found both the tools and courage to imagine their personal and scholarly goals. Students, undergraduate and graduate alike, had no better advocate, no better friend, than Professor Lesser. He found money to support graduate students when no money was to be found. He spent hours helping students, the promising and the not so promising, formulate theses topics. Those applying to graduate school or for jobs found his guidance and informed, crafted letters of recommendation invaluable. At times, he talked a stern line, but his empathy and assistance went out to all. Many a student would have failed to finish without his encouragement. As for the brilliant students, he knew how to get out of their way, facilitate their progress where necessary, and celebrate them when they published or got great jobs. Upon hearing of Wayne’s death, one student, no doubt echoing the sentiments of hundreds upon hundreds, wrote: “So, so sad to hear about this. Wayne was always so pleasant--funny, encouraging, and charming. And always so sincerely interested in whatever random shit I was talking about. What a gift!”

Another student wrote that “It wasn’t until my senior year at UT that I finally found my niche, when I took an upper-division English class with Wayne Lesser and was astounded to learn that there is much more to Herman Melville and Mark Twain than *Moby Dick* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At last, a professor who clearly loved the material...I wanted to take the class over and over...”

Scholar and teacher, Wayne was also a tenacious, highly effective administrator, for many years serving as Associate Chair of the Department. His nimble mind proved artful in working with Deans and Provosts to ensure that the Department had funding to teach its classes and in working with his colleagues to fashion each and every semester the schedule of courses. As Chair of the Department, Professor Elizabeth Cullingford, tells it, Wayne was “a whiz at getting around the bureaucracy; he had no tolerance for the kind of silly rules that hold people back instead of encouraging them to go further, and he was ingenious in his pursuit of creative solutions to problems.” We will never know fully the role that Wayne played in helping his junior colleagues, but he mentored many. Professor Kevorkian, who was one of those many, writes that “Losing Wayne is just hard to imagine; he’s someone whose presence always reassured me that everything was going to be O.K.”

Those with uncommon intellects who have a gift for thought itself, often on high planes of intellectual abstraction, often lack an enthusiasm for life, a sense of humor, humility, the capacity for friendship and kindness. But Wayne had all of these in abundance. In June of 1980 Wayne urged a small group of us to begin running the then Town Lake Trail; some of us dropped off, some died. The day before he died Wayne was arranging with his running mate of many years, Professor Thomas Cable, yet another run. One of his great passions was baseball. When one of his colleagues recently mentioned that his son was enjoying Little League, Wayne responded, “That’s great! [a typical Wayne affirmation, an ordinary phrase, but infused with his infectious enthusiasm and warmth]. We need more baseball players!” For more than two decades the Quarks were a force to deal with in Austin’s Softball League, the team led by Coach Lesser. As Professor Kevorkian puts it so well: “Wayne’s love of baseball went hand in hand with that commitment to scholarship, and also to something larger: he inspired all whom he met to enter into life with a spirit of play, the joy of sport.”

When Wayne left the office and the classroom, the running trail and the ball field, he returned to life at his ranch in Lytton Springs, to his wife, Lou, and their daughters, Lauren and Channing, for whom his love and affection knew no bounds, a love and affection that was reciprocated. Wayne and Lou mended fences, watched after their ponds, were active in local politics, trying recently to prevent a toxic waste dump from being developed in the area. They shared a great love for the environment and for animals, rescuing donkeys and dogs, at the time of Wayne’s death having four of each. One story will speak for many. When Wayne taught at the University of Paris in 1989, he and Lou came across a stray dog; undeterred by red tape and by the dog’s being incontinent, they enabled Annabelle Rue, a Dalmatian, to journey to Lytton Springs to become a member of the Lesser family.

Wayne Lesser was born on January 21, 1949, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the son of Marilyn Steinfield Lesser and Marshall Jacob Lesser. Wayne played baseball in grade school, where, so story has it, one of the teachers suggested Wayne might need special attention and should be held back a year because when the class was asked to draw a bunny, Wayne drew a purple rabbit. He talked often and had great memories of camping and extended canoeing trips thanks to eight summers at Keewaydin Camp in Vermont. At West Hampstead High School, he played tennis, became an Eagle Scout, and won a Ford Foundation Scholarship enabling him to attend the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1970 with a B.A. degree in English. He went on to take an M.A. (1970-72) and a Ph.D. (1972-75) in English from the University of Chicago, joining the faculty at UT Austin in 1975 at age 26. Wayne was a visiting professor at the University of Würzburg (1978)—helping to set up the exchange between UT Austin and Würzburg—at the University of Stuttgart (1987), the University of Muenster (1989), and the University of Paris at Nanterre (1994). At Green Pastures in Austin on July 7, 1990, Wayne married Lou Ellen MacNaughton.

Wayne was planning to teach an honors course in the fall semester of 2017 that he had already constructed—quite beautifully—and that he called, “Don DeLillo in Conversation with Contemporary Women Writers.” In an altogether fitting tribute to his friend and life-long colleague, Professor Evan Carton taught the class in his stead.

“Whenever I saw Wayne,” writes Professor John Farrell, “I always experienced a jolt of pleasure. He righted the landscape, especially when--from my perspective--it needed righting. He was indefatigable in his ability to convey a spirit of optimism and possibility. This was no flimsy version of typical American buoyancy. Wayne’s sense of possibility was always an earned appreciation, something built on an abiding thoughtfulness about the circumstances, pressures, and opportunities that inscribed what the morning had brought--or hadn’t brought--to our shared experience. I often came to depend on that jolt.” So many of us did.

The grief we feel for the death of Wayne Lesser, our friend, colleague, confidant, and moral compass, will last all the days of our lives, but so will the joy that he provided, memories of his sparkling intellect, good will, his love of animals, his sense of humor.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Emeritus Larry Carver (Chair) and Tom Cable, and Professor Evan Carton.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts on July 2, 2018, and posted under “Memorial Resolutions” at <https://wikis.utexas.edu/display/facultycouncil/Wiki+Home>.