

By William C. Kashatus

During my junior year at Earlham College, a humanities professor called one of my essays "Micheneresque." At her suggestion, I sent the piece to the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist himself, hoping for some reaction. To my pleasant surprise, I received a reply a week later. I will always remember the final sentences of that letter: "You can write. For sheer skill, you're ahead of where I was at your age. If you continue to work at it, you might have a good book in you some day."

Nearly two decades later, I continue to be inspired by those first words of encouragement. They have seen me through some pretty tough writer's blocks, and they have stimulated many commentaries, reflective essays and popular history articles. That is why I will always be grateful to James Michener, who touched my life in a very profound way.

When he recently decided to end his life-sustaining dialysis treatment, I had deeply mixed emotions. On one hand, I respected Michener's decision to face death as he had lived his life — on his own terms. On the other, I felt a special sadness for a man who showed me the importance of treasuring life, constantly learning from it and contributing to it. Today, I mourn the death of a role model.

Raised by a Quaker family in Bucks County, Michener's early life was rooted in Friends' principles. He went on to attend Swarthmore College, where he graduated in 1929 and began his career as a humanities teacher at the George School in nearby Bucks shortly after.

I'm sure he realized there was little money and less prestige in teaching at a Quaker boarding school. But it was the kind of environment in which an aspiring writer could flourish. Friends schools are known for being rich in subject matter,

conducive to personal reflection, and challenging in their expectations of students and teachers.

All these early experiences grounded Michener in a way of life that emphasized service, lifelong learning, and an exceptional appreciation of various cultures.

Years after he became a world-famous author, Michener credited his Quaker background with nurturing in him "a supreme dedication to

those novels were written from personal experience. Michener lived in every part of the world he wrote about, immersing himself in the culture of his subjects. He was just as much at home with a fisherman from the eastern shore of Maryland as he was with a foreign dignitary. He lived their lives to learn about them, to make their experience his experience. Thus his work reflected not only the refreshing humility of a gentleman-scholar but also an exceptional gift for recreating other societies, distant cultures and colorful lands.

Through it all, Michener never forgot his Quaker roots or his native Bucks County. He gave millions of dollars to Swarthmore College, as well as to several cultural institutions in Doylestown, where he was raised. These included the Mercer Museum, the Bucks County Free Library and an art museum named in his honor. These "repositories of wonder," as he called them, "stirred [his] imagination as a child" and had a profound effect on his life.

Recently, I had the opportunity to thank Michener for those words of encouragement he offered me in college. We shared each other's experiences with Quaker education, our mutual love of baseball, and our passion for writing. Then, he politely ended the conversation by wishing me "great success in the future."

Although I may never realize great success, I still continue to write. Writing has become, over the years, a passionate form of personal expression that allows me to feel whole, even if my work isn't read by another soul. For that, I'll always be grateful to the college professor who considered my early efforts "Micheneresque" and to the Quaker schoolteacher turned Pulitzer Prize-winning author who inspired me.

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*Inspirational words
from a man who led
an inspirational life.*

service and an intellectual approach to the solution of a problem." What Quaker education taught him was not as important as how it taught him: "The tangibles were not worth a thing; the intangibles have been the core of my life."

While millions will remember his award-winning novels such as *Tales of the South Pacific*, *Hawaii*, *Centennial*, *Chesapeake*, *Poland* and *The Covenant*, few realize that many of