

**PRINCETONINFO.COM**

Reprinted from the October 18, 2017, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

**Landon Jones on John McPhee: Content, Character, Commas**

The name of John McPhee is so deeply rooted in the writing culture of Princeton that it's hard to remember that he was once grafted on to the university as a matter of last-minute expedience. But before the *Literature of Fact*, and before *Creative Nonfiction*, and before *Annals of the Former World*, *Coming into the Country*, and most of McPhee's 30-something other books, writing in a journalistic genre at Princeton was quarantined to a single course. It was modestly called *Expository Writing* and was created by the first Ferris Professor of Journalism, Irving Dilliard, the former editorial-page editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

I know this first-hand since I took Dilliard's course as an undergraduate in the spring of 1966 and later worked as his teaching assistant before his retirement in 1973. In those days, writing without footnotes was regarded by the university as something less than scholarly. The Department of English had washed its hands of this unseemly business and handed it off to the Council of the Humanities, itself a home for foundlings and stepchildren in the academic community.

After Dilliard retired, the Ferris chair was inherited by the mercurial Larry L. King, the co-author of *"The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas"* and *"Confessions of a White Racist."* King was a robust and ribald man who never felt quite at home in the genteel confines of Princeton. By the end of 1974, King had come to the end of his rope and quit, with the happy result that the Council of the Humanities drafted McPhee for a temporary duty that has now stretched to more than four decades.

In those years, McPhee's achievement amounts to convincing several generations of students that factual writing is an art form that carries not only high purpose and high content but also speaks to high character. Good writing amounts to writing faithfully and originally about real people in real places. It is achievable. His students' success can be measured by the astonishing number of books produced by his former students — the total is around 500 — as well as the many prominent journalists and editors who are the alumni of his course.

Along the way, the influence of McPhee's character has resonated not only with his students but also with entire families. One story speaks for many. In the fall of 1998, an unusually promising sophomore named Sean Miles was enrolled in the *Literature of Fact*. Sean chose to write his course papers on subjects relating to his home state of Montana — its natural environment, the Native Americans who first lived there. He spent his Christmas break with his family in his home town of Bozeman. Then, just a few days before he was to return to Princeton, Sean was killed in an automobile accident.

John McPhee gave a eulogy at Sean's funeral and has stayed in touch with his parents for the next 19 years. I spoke recently to Sean's father, Michael Miles, who acknowledges that McPhee remains in close contact, and that his heartfelt memory of their son contains its own measure of grace. "It's private and personal," he says, "so we'll leave it at that. Except to say that John is truly a special human being. Our son not only revered him, he loved him. Over the years we've discovered why."

Lanny Jones is the retired managing editor of *People Magazine*.

[Add new comment](#)

*Become a sponsor! Reach the viewers of PrincetonInfo.com and the readers of U.S. 1.*