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## Matthew J. Bruccoli (1931–2008)

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## Matthew J. Bruccoli (1931–2008)

Joel Myerson

Matt Bruccoli joined the English department at the University of South Carolina in 1969, and retired in 2005 as the Emily Brown Jefferies Distinguished Professor of English. As his obituary in the *New York Times* noted, he “continued to cut a dash on campus, instantly recognizable by his vintage red Mercedes convertible, Brooks Brothers suits, Groucho mustache and bristling crew cut that dated to his Yale days. His untamed Bronx accent also set him apart.” As a scholar, Matt published widely on James Gould Cozzens, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Vladimir Nabokov, and John O’Hara. Matt knew more about F. Scott Fitzgerald and his works than anyone then alive. He was also my colleague for thirty-seven years.

Matt Bruccoli defined scholarship (as opposed to mere criticism) broadly, including book collecting and publishing history. He was exasperated by most librarians, describing them as ignorant of books and enemies to scholars. As an English teacher and professor he frightened faculty with his productivity and made students uneasy with his honesty. Students, unused to seeing faculty actually working in their offices, approached him with trepidation, then discovered that he would drop everything to work with them. He believed books were important, often bringing first editions and manuscripts into the classroom. Above all, he held that he was called to teaching, whether in classrooms, through distant education, lecturing around the world before scholarly and civilian audiences, or publishing articles and books.

Matt lived his life according to simple and straightforward principles. Among them:

Publication is the essential act of scholarship. And, when Matt was really holding forth, its corollary: “Everything else is playing with yourself.” Placed against the backdrop of the mantra “publish *and* perish” so beloved by many in the profession, his agenda provided a welcome relief. He had little patience for the “gentleman scholar,” people (of both sexes) who claim that it is the “quality of mind” that is truly important. What good is knowledge, Matt asked, unless you shared it with as wide and large an audience as possible?

Meet your deadline! Matt was in the steadily shrinking minority in the profession who believe that deadlines are sacred. He had little patience for professors who expected him to put up with delays and excuses that they themselves would never tolerate from their own students. (A corollary to this was “The deadline was yesterday,” usually delivered when he made the assignment.)

Make it useful for civilians. Matt firmly believed that if the reader could

not understand and use what you published, then your work was in vain. He had no patience for academics who wrote for each other.

We are put here to do God's work. Matt had a strong sense of social responsibility and, because he had been granted a skill, his job in this life was to use that skill for the benefit of others.

Two other aspects of Matt's career deserve special mention. He was a book collector of the first magnitude (indeed, he considered it a contact sport), and the Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald is now housed at the USC library. He was instrumental in establishing the Thomas Cooper Society, a group that serves as friends of the library, and—through the Cooper Society—in organizing an annual book-collecting award for students. He was also enormously generous to graduate students. According to one legendary story, Matt walked into class one day and announced that he was changing the syllabus because he had just bought the galleys to *The Great Gatsby*, and he thought the class might like to study the relation between them and the published text. He later wowed an undergraduate Honors College class by giving them as a group project the task of creating a hypertext version of *Gatsby*, even though he himself was a computer illiterate.

If it is true, as Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance," that "all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons," then we were privileged to witness the Bruccoli era.

#### Note

For a survey of Bruccoli's life and writings, see the entry on him by Margaret Ann Baker Graham, *Dictionary of Literary Biography 103: American Literary Biographers, First Series*, ed. Steven Serafin (Detroit: Bruccoli Clark Layman/Gale Research, 1991), 65–77, and *The Professions of Authorship: Essays in Honor of Matthew J. Bruccoli*, ed. Richard Layman and Joel Myerson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).