

WASHINGTON COLLEGE

CITATION

Raymond Federman

Raymond Federman was born in Paris on May 15, 1938 (an event that we celebrated at our Senior Luncheon on Friday). The date that he considers as his real birthday, however, is July 16, 1942, because it was on this day that his parents, along with his two sisters, were arrested by the French police and later deported to Auschwitz, where they were exterminated. Mr. Federman escaped thanks to his mother, who hid him in a closet—an act that, in his own words, gave him “an excess of life.” The deportation of his family when he was 14 years old haunts Mr. Federman’s writing, although he rarely refers it directly. Instead, he replaces that unspeakably cruel *real-life* scene with an exuberantly playful *writerly* scene in which his readers become a virtual family that occupies, however imperfectly, the absence left by his real one.

Following his arrival in the United States in 1947, Mr. Federman served as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army during the Korean War and then attended college on the G.I. Bill. For his doctorate in French literature from UCLA, he wrote a landmark study of the Irish writer Samuel Beckett, with whom he enjoyed a lifelong friendship. During his many years as a distinguished professor of literature at SUNY Buffalo, he became widely known as a leading writer of experimental fiction, both in English and in French, and as one of the leading contemporary proponents of avant-garde writing. His more than twenty books of fiction, poetry, and criticism have been translated into twelve languages.

In his essay, “The Necessity and the Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer,” Mr. Federman speculates that if it hadn’t been for the Holocaust he would have spent his life slaving in a tailor shop in Paris, or as a teacher in the French provinces. As the Romanian critic Camelia Elias has said, it was by chance that he survived the Holocaust and by chance that he became a writer of loss. His first responsibility towards those who have become memories—whom he calls “the potentials”—was to turn to writing and to say something about potential. Mr. Federman recently gave a playful twist to this idea of potential when, in response to a French journalist who asked him to name his favorite of his novels, he replied (in English): “The one I haven’t written yet.”

We are honored to have him with us as he begins his eighty-second year, and we look forward to enjoying the achievements that lie ahead. In recognition of his significant literary contributions and his faith in the power of the written word to transcend the unspeakable, we present to Raymond Federman the honorary degree, doctor of letters.

Baird Tipson
President
May 17, 2009

B I O G R A P H Y

Raymond Federman

RAYMOND FEDERMAN is an important French-American novelist and academic, known also for poetry, essays, translations and criticism. He held teaching positions at the State university of New York at Buffalo from 1973 to 1999, where he is now a distinguished Emeritus Professor.

Though he has published several volumes of poems, four books of criticism on Samuel Beckett, three collections of essays, a collection of plays, and numerous articles, essays, and translations, Federman considers himself primarily a fiction writer. The former Guggenheim Fellow and Fulbright Fellow has written 14 novels, all widely translated. Among his titles are *Take It or Leave It*, which he considers his best work, and *Smiles on Washington Square*, for which he received the American Book Award. All of his novels have been adapted into radio plays in Germany, and several of them have been adapted to the stage in France.

Federman is a writer in the experimental style, one that seeks to deconstruct traditional prose. This type of writing is quite apparent in *Double or Nothing*, in which the linear narrative of the story has been broken down and restructured so as to be nearly incoherent. Words are also often arranged on pages to resemble images or to suggest repetitious themes. The book was widely acclaimed, winning the Frances Steloff Fiction Prize and the Panache Experimental Fiction Prize.

Born in Montrouge, France in 1928, Federman emigrated to the U.S. in 1947. After serving in the U.S. Army in Korea and Japan, he studied at Columbia University, earning a Ph.D. in French literature at UCLA. He is also a co-founder of the Fiction Collective, a publishing house dedicated to experimental fiction and its writers.