

# George Hitchcock, Kayak Magazine Founder, Dies at 96

By WILLIAM GRIMESSEPT. 4, 2010 *The New York Times*

George Hitchcock, whose poetry magazine, *Kayak*, born in the cultural ferment of the 1960s, was one of the most distinctive, eagerly read literary journals of its time, died on Aug. 27 at his home in Eugene, Ore. He was 96.

His death was confirmed by the poet Robert McDowell, an editor of “One Man Boat: The George Hitchcock Reader” (2003).

Mr. Hitchcock, a former actor, playwright and political organizer, founded *Kayak* in 1964 and for the next 20 years ran it as a one-man show. He designed the magazine, edited it, printed it, illustrated it and organized the collating parties where its pages were stapled together, slipped into mailing envelopes and stamped.

With great ingenuity, he created *Kayak*’s archly cruel rejection slips: Victorian engravings depicting a beheading, or a mountain climber slipping into a crevasse, with a brush-off caption appended.

He was, as he liked to say, *Kayak*’s dictator. “A kayak is not a galleon, ark, coracle or speedboat,” read the motto printed with each issue. “It is a small watertight vessel operated by a single oarsman. It is submersible, has sharply pointed ends, and is constructed of light poles and the skins of furry animals. It has never yet been successfully employed as a means of mass transport.”

Although he leaned toward surrealism and the dreamlike style of the deep imagist school, Mr. Hitchcock included a wide variety of poets, publishing the early work of Philip Levine, Raymond Carver, James Tate and Charles Simic.

“He was the pre-eminent maverick independent magazine publisher,” said Howard Junker, the editor of [Zyzyva: The Journal of West Coast Writers and Artists](#). “He was open in his tastes, unflinching in his energies, knew everyone and kept the thing going against all odds.”



George Hitchcock, in 1993, carving stone at his home in Eugene, Ore.

Credit Paul Neevel

George Parks Hitchcock was born on June 2, 1914, in Hood River, Ore. He attended the University of Oregon, where he was a reporter on the school newspaper, and received a

bachelor's degree in 1935.

After school he worked as a reporter for The Western Worker in San Francisco and as the sports editor of The People's Daily World, for which he wrote a sports column under the byline Lefty. He also became friends with Kenneth Rexroth, who encouraged his interest in poetry.

When the United States entered World War II, he enlisted in the Merchant Marine, which sent him to the South Pacific and put him to work as a cook and waiter.

After the war he traveled throughout California trying to organize dairy unions. He later taught at the California Labor School.

In the 1950s, while working as a landscape gardener, he began writing plays and acting with two San Francisco repertory companies, the Interplayers and the Actor's Workshop.

During the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 1957, the House Un-American Activities Committee summoned him to testify in San Francisco, where he delivered what may well have been his finest performance.

When asked to state his profession, he answered: "I am a gardener. I do underground work on plants." He then refused to answer questions about membership in the Communist Party, "on the grounds that this hearing is a big bore and waste of the public's money."

The director of the Shakespeare Festival demoted him to spear-carrying roles.

Physically imposing — a hefty 6-foot-4 — Mr. Hitchcock cut a flamboyant, dandyish figure. "He reminded me of those bigger-than-life character actors in Hollywood movies, like Wallace Beery and Charles Laughton, or like Vitamin Flintheart, the ostentatiously dressed and extravagantly posturing character in Dick Tracy comic books," the [poet Morton Marcus wrote](#) in his memoir, "Striking Through the Masks."



An example of one of Mr. Hitchcock's creative but archly cruel rejection slips for Kayak magazine, which he ran as a one-man show from 1964 to 1984.

Credit "ONE MAN BOAT: The George Hitchcock Reader"

In 1958 Mr. Hitchcock became an editor of The San Francisco Review, which had published his two-act play "Prometheus Bound." Soon after the review ceased publication in 1963, Kayak was born.

It made an immediate impact. Mr. Hitchcock had a strong personality, visual flair and keen eye for writing talent. The long list of poets and writers who found a home in his pages included W. S. Merwin, Anne Sexton, Robert Bly, Margaret Atwood and Hayden Carruth. Criticism, reviews, the occasional prose piece and Mr. Hitchcock's collages rounded out the content.

Kayak enjoyed fights. It set up in opposition to revered publications like The Kenyon Review and The Hudson Review, and nourished a spirited contempt for what it saw as the overly intellectual poetry of writers like Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur.

Creatively frugal, Mr. Hitchcock acquired an offset press from the Pacific Steamship Line

that had been used to print menus and learned to run it himself. He printed one issue on paper that the Army had rejected for target-practice use.

Kayak operated outside the world of foundation grants and government support, although the National Endowment for the Arts, unsolicited, gave the magazine two grants. Mr. Hitchcock used most of the money to publish books by Mr. Simic, Carver, Carruth and others. He used \$500 to create a prize for the best poem about Che Guevara.

In 1970 Mr. Hitchcock moved the Kayak operation to Santa Cruz, Calif., where he had been hired to teach playwriting and poetry at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In 1984 he rang down the curtain, and Kayak ended its run after 64 issues.

“Any more, and it would risk seeming an institution,” Mr. Hitchcock said. “After that, ossification and rigor mortis.”

An early marriage ended in divorce. He is survived by his longtime companion, Marjorie Simon; a sister, June Harman of St. Helena, Calif.; a son, Stephen, of Carbondale, Ill.; two grandchildren; and a great-grandchild.

Mr. Hitchcock was rather cavalier about his creative brainchild and its influence. “In 1964 I found most American poetry magazines extraordinarily boring,” he told the magazine *Caliban* in 1986. “I thought that Kayak might relieve the tedium, *c’est tout*.”

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## In Memoriam: George Hitchcock

September 02, 2010

[Santa Cruz Sentinel](#)

By [Scott Rappaport](#)



George Hitchcock (photo: Jim Hair)

George Hitchcock, poet, painter, publisher, and UCSC lecturer emeritus in Creative Writing (Literature), died on August 27 at the age of 96.

He taught writing at UCSC from 1970 to 1989, and created the Hitchcock Poetry Fund at Porter College in 2002. The endowment supports a variety of poetry-related programs on campus, including visiting poets, poetry journals, and conferences.

Porter College provost David Evan Jones noted that “First through his own work as a poet, actor, director, publisher, teacher, and later through his generosity and vision as a donor, George Hitchcock empowered multiple generations of innovative poets.”

“Projects supported through his Porter College Hitchcock Poetry Fund have given Porter and UCSC more generally a national profile as a center for contemporary poetry representing a wide variety of aesthetics and approaches,” said Jones.

Jones added that in 2007, Porter College honored Hitchcock and his long-time partner Marjorie Simon with a poetry reading marking the installation of a memorial bench for George at a quiet spot overlooking the Porter meadow.

“When asked what inscription should appear on the bench, I thought of the *moire* patterns the wind makes in the tall grasses of the Porter meadow,” Jones recalled. “In George's *One Man Boat*, I found the following line in one of his poems:

“...I shall lean into the calligraphy of new wheat”

“I have heard George referred to as an ‘abundant’ personality,” said Jones. “Indeed. We shall miss him very very much.”