

Princeton University
Honors Faculty Members Receiving
Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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Ulrich Camillus Knoepfmacher



Ulrich Camillus Knoepfmacher—Uli, as we all know him—was born on June 26, 1931, in Munich. On January 30, 1933, his father recorded two facts in the journal he started after his son's birth. The first was that young Uli measured a formidable 85 centimeters. The second was that Adolf Hitler had that day become the chancellor of Germany. By 1934, Uli and his parents left for their native Vienna. If that move did little more than dim a toddler's memories, the family's second exodus, after the Anschluss, left an indelible mark. In 1939, the family fled to Bolivia—La Paz, Obrajés, and finally to Oruro. There, for the next 10 years, Uli attended the Anglo-American School, distinguishing himself as a young scholar. It is no surprise that he became trilingual, conversing in German at home; learning what would become a vividly colloquial, slightly staccato, English at school; and speaking an energetic Spanish everywhere else. In these years, we can trace the history of the 20th century, as its massive catastrophes intersected with the blessedly ordinary activities of precocious boyhood. Deracination deepened rather than crushed Uli's capacity for sympathy; the multi-national, multi-lingual character of his early life made him a comparativist at heart, curious about and open to cultural difference, and sensitive at all times to the plight of outsiders.

In 1951, Uli left Bolivia to attend the University of California—Berkeley, earning an A.B. and an M.A. in architecture, but excelling in English literature. In 1957, Uli pursued graduate study in English at Princeton, studying Victorian literature and completing his dissertation in 1961, under the guidance of E.D.H. Johnson. Uli started his career back at UC—Berkeley, where (in addition to becoming an avid Oakland Athletics fan) he worked his way up from instructor to full professor,

becoming internationally renowned as a Victorianist. He joined the faculty of Princeton in 1979, and in 1988 he became the Paton Foundation Professor of Ancient and Modern Literature.

Three books established Uli as one of the most influential scholars of Victorian fiction: *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater, and Samuel Butler* (1965); *George Eliot's Early Novels* (1968); and *Laughter and Despair: Readings in Ten Novels of the Victorian Era* (1971). Uli's work on the cultural and formal elements of Victorian fiction had paradigm-shifting impact and has stood the test of time: those books are still widely cited, and any doctoral student preparing for exams in Victorian studies today had better know them well. Though this work continues to inform our sense of Victorian fiction, Uli soon began to expand and reshape this field. His co-edited volume, *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (1979), ignited scholarly interest in a neglected novel, and 30 years later, *Frankenstein* remains a vital text on syllabi everywhere.

Uli never stops questioning received wisdom, and in the process, transforming the field. Thanks in large part to his work, children's literature is now seen as a serious, central part of Victorian and early modern literary production. Uli has no peer in the study of children's literature. This is partly because he retains a childlike wonder himself; partly because of his loving care as a devoted father, which heightens his abilities to see double, as an adult and as a child, at once; and partly because of the totality of his commitment to education. If Uli did not single-handedly create the field, he has established its texts and posed its central questions. His 1998 *Ventures into Childland Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* is a magisterial achievement, hailed in reviews as a "brilliant" study that will "challenge readers' assumptions about children's literature"; as "a work of impressive and often exhilarating scope"; as a book with "an almost hypnotic lightness of touch of touch" that "awakens in the reader a pressing desire to reread...the writings he examines so

lovingly and in such detail.” In recognition for his foundational scholarship, Uli recently received the Anna Devereaux Jordan Award from the Children’s Literature Association, the highest honor in the field.

Uli’s work on children’s literature has enriched our University, helping to attract the magnificent Cotsen Collection to Firestone Library. Under the auspices of Cotsen outreach, he has promoted the Cotsen Library’s mission on campus and in the community, reaching children, parents, undergraduates, alumni, teachers, and colleagues in a variety of ways. His involvement with the Teachers as Scholars program has widened the audience for the Cotsen annual conferences, and the number of participants in his National Endowment for the Humanities seminars on children’s literature, many of whom have assumed leadership roles in the field and returned as speakers or organizers of Cotsen conferences.

Uli is an inventive, resourceful, and charismatic teacher and mentor. Inspired by the vastness of his learning and the ease with which he imparts it, his graduate students have gone on to become major figures themselves. Uli’s dedication to teaching at all levels for close to 30 years here has become legendary. In a lecture on Chaucer’s “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” for example, he gives equal time to brilliant exegesis, a learned account of medieval dream theory, and an uproarious acting out of the domestic squabbles between the rooster and hen, who are the fable’s protagonists. Working effectively in these different modes is no small feat, but the deep magic Uli pulls off is modeling for students the mingling of instruction and delight, showing how the intellectual labor of understanding is a form of pleasure. He is the colleague one is most likely to see after 10 p.m. in the Xerox room of McCosh, running off inimitably Ulian handouts, elaborate, graphic arrays of information, embroidered with vignettes that serve as lecture notes. Though Uli loves Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, the traditional English canon is too small for his expansive interests. Ever the pathbreaker,

he worked with energy on the Jewish Studies Committee, he offered Princeton's first course in children's literature, and its first course on Jews in English literature.

"Versatility" doesn't come close to describing Uli's quality as an intellectual. He embodies a rare confluence of three cultures: European, Latino (in a South American version), and Jewish. And there is nothing fustian about his dazzling erudition; when he converses, his eyes sparkle with enthusiasm and kindness and his arms flail with excitement. One colleague swears that she has never come across anything he did not know, including the publication dates of each serialized part of *Vanity Fair*; the birthplace of Chaucer's mother; German nursery rhymes; which Victorian writers spent in excess of six months in an asylum; the name of Maurice Sendak's dog; the best car routes through the Andes; and remedies for feline rheumatism.

Uli's mind is perpetually young and inquiring, and his scholarly energy seems to be increasing. He has been elected to begin a five-year term on the Executive Committee of the Modern Language Association's Division on Children's Literature. He continues to teach for the Princeton Program in Teacher Preparation. He is working on major studies of Lewis Carroll and Rudyard Kipling, and forthcoming publications include essays in the *Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* and *Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War*, a volume of Cotsen conference proceedings, and his memoir *Oruro: Growing Up Jewish in the Andes*.

Though Uli has received many prestigious awards throughout the course of his illustrious career, this year's Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities is the most richly fitting, not only because of the distinction of Uli's work, but also because Uli is himself a distinguished achievement in the humanities. We thank him for his generosity as a colleague, teacher, and friend. And as we wish him well upon his retirement, we know that we will continue to thrive on the exuberance of his knowledge and the vigor of his conversation for years to come.