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Hassler: Teacher, Author and Artist

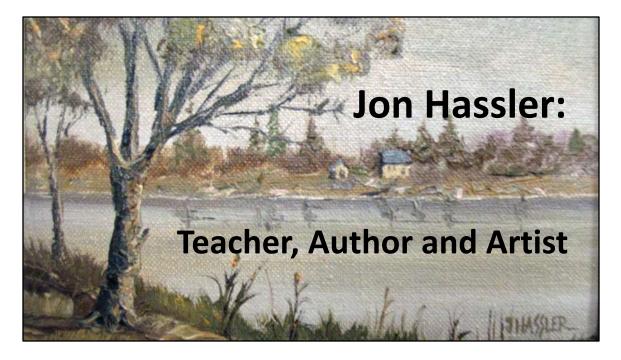
Peggy L. Roske College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, proske@csbsju.edu

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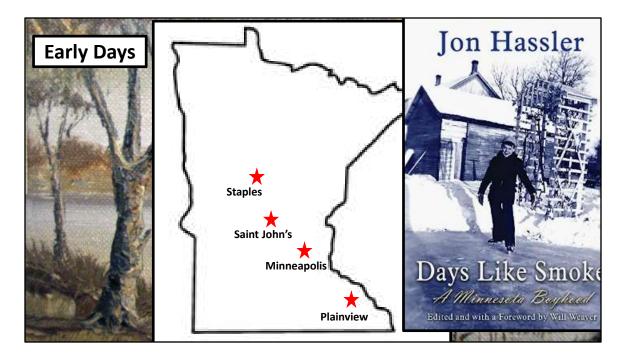
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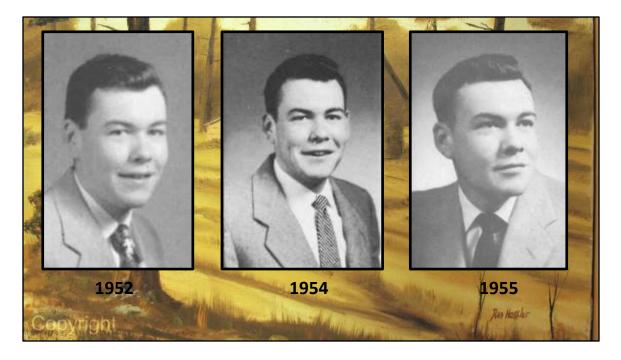
[This presentation was made at the November 15, 2022 SJU/OSB Administrative Assembly Luncheon. The main speaker for the lunch was Steven Lemke, Associate Director of the Saint John's Pottery and Environmental Artist-in-Residence, who came to talk about his work and about the new Jon Hassler Sculpture Garden outside the Alcuin Library Learning Commons.]

I'm no Hassler expert, though I can say I've read and enjoyed all of his books. This presentation is just a quick look at the life of one of our more celebrated alums – who also happens to be the namesake for the sculpture garden outside the library, about which Steve will be speaking momentarily, and some of whose papers are in a collection in the SJU Archives.

Unbeknownst to many, Jon also had an avocation as an artist, a painter. There is an online gallery of his paintings on CSBSJU's Jon Hassler website, featuring his paintings as photographed by his friend and longtime Saint John's Public Information director Lee Hanley. Some of these images will be the backdrops to my slides.



Jon was born in Minneapolis in 1933, <ENTER> lived his first ten years in *Staples*, then one year back in Minneapolis, and <ENTER> his next eight in Plainview, where he graduated from high school. <ENTER> Then he went to *Saint John's*, and his parents moved back to Staples, which is why his home address in the Student Directories is listed as Staples. He graduated with his BA in English in 1955.

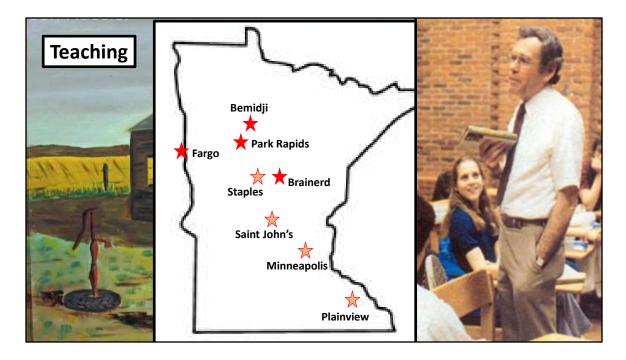


Here are his photos from the Saint John's *Sagatagan* yearbooks. (For some reason, his photo does not appear in the 1953 yearbook, though he *is* listed in the Student Directory.)

Freshman year <u>1952 Sagatagan</u> p. 76 of the pdf <u>https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/33908/rec/34</u> Junior year 1954 Sagatagan p. 61 of the pdf <u>https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/34532/rec/37</u> Senior year 1955 Sagatagan p. 48 <u>https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/34732/rec/38</u>



His only other appearance in the yearbooks is as a member of the Future Teachers Club his senior year, posing here in the library when it was still in Wimmer Hall. Senior year 1955 Sagatagan p. 106 of the pdf <u>https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/34789/rec/38</u> Bresnahan photo from 1955 Sagatagan, p. 63 <u>https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/34747/rec/38</u>

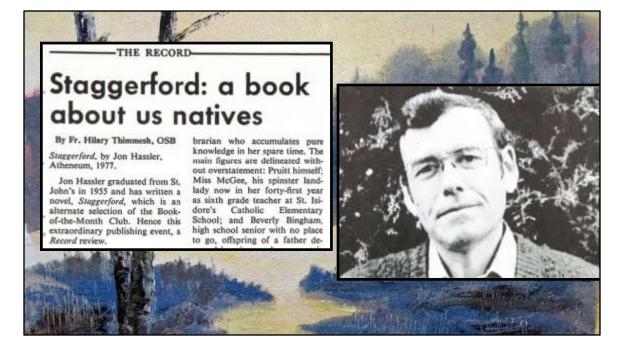


Jon then taught English at three different Minnesota high schools, including Park Rapids, where he managed the local drive-in movie theater in the summer. He taught high school English <ENTER> before, while, and after getting his Master's from UND in Fargo in 1960. <ENTER> In 1965 he joined the faculty at Bemidji State University. <ENTER> In 1970, by then teaching at Brainerd Community College, he began to write fiction. According to https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/

id/31213/rec/1, he also taught in Fosston.



In 1980 he became writer-in-residence at Saint John's, teaching creative writing courses and writing his novels. By this point he had published *Staggerford*, *Simon's Night*, and two young adult novels.



But before that, back in September 1977, *The Record* published a review of *Staggerford* written by then-English Department chair Fr. Hilary Thimmesh, because the book had been getting some acclaim and had been named an alternate "Book-of-the-Month Club" book.

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/35164/rec/2

THE RECORD

Staggerford: a book about us natives

By Fr. Hilary Thimmesh, OSB Staggerford, by Jon Hassler, Atheneum, 1977.

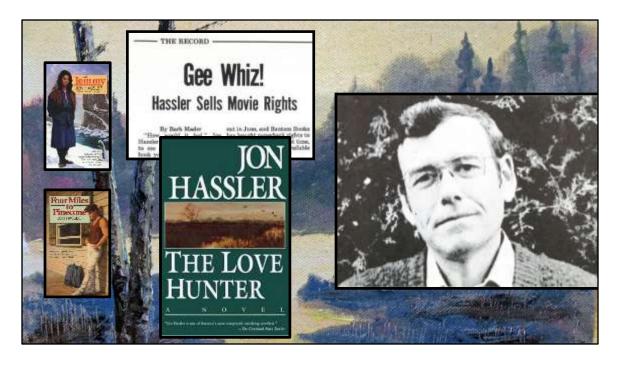
Jon Hassler graduated from St. John's in 1955 and has written a novel, *Staggerford*, which is an alternate selection of the Bookof-the-Month Club. Hence this extraordinary publishing event, a *Record* review.

JOH WASLER

brarian who accumulates pure knowledge in her spare time. The main figures are defineated without overstatement: Pruitt himself; Miss McGee, his spinster landlady now in her forty-first year as sixth grade teacher at St. Isidore's Catholic Elementary School; and Beverly Bingham, high school senior with no place to go, offspring of a father de-

First novels (Hassler published a children's book entitled Four Miles to Pinecone last spring) are often autobiographical, and it is easy to believe that Staggerford incorporates some of the author's experience as an English teacher at Brainerd Community College. But the assured tone and control of dialogue, narrative, and observation are something much better than the work of an aspiring writer ransacking the family attic to find enough stuff to furnish a thinly imagined story. While acknowledging that a certain degree of institutional chauvinism led me to read the book in the first place, I am happy to recommend it on its own merits.

Hilary noted that he didn't know the author, wasn't teaching when he was a student, and that "a certain degree of institutional chauvinism led [him] to read the book. But "despite a distaste for novels about small town Minnesota life," he praises the book: its "assured tone and control of dialogue, narrative, and observation are something much better than the work of an aspiring writer ransacking the family attic to find enough stuff to furnish a thinly imagined story." https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/35164/rec/2



Hassler's third adult novel, 1981's *The Love Hunter*, was optioned by Robert Redford to make a movie; unfortunately, he never has. *The Love Hunter* was Hassler's fifth novel in five years.

Hassler photo:

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/35164/rec/2 Book covers from amazon.com

1981-03-20, The Record p. 7

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/35797/rec/4



There aren't all that many photos of Jon in the Archives. While not one to draw attention to himself, there are occasional photos from campus sitings, such as this event, when the Seton earth-sheltered apartments were dedicated in 1982 (yes, the ones replaced this year by the Seton Townhouses)...

O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Public Relations Office Photos - PC 08\Vol 03\03-009 Earth Shelter Apartments Dedication\TIFF\image09 Jon Hassler.tif



...and attending a celebration – perhaps a book signing? – in the old Bookstore, shown here with German "Professor Herr Doctor Otmar Drekonja" and History professor Dr. Annette Atkins. Drekonja Hassler Atkins.tif

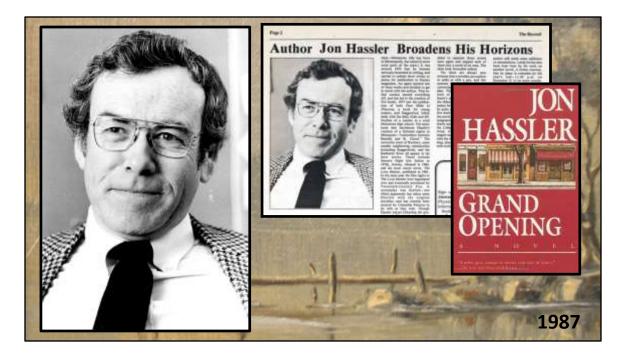


Hassler was chosen to give the commencement address in 1982. You can listen to it – it's linked from the SJU Archives website, on the page listing Commencement speakers. (By the way, the student speaker that year was Rob Culligan.)

O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Digital Archives\People\Hassler\Hassler images from People file.pdf

1982 May 14 The Record p. 9

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/36320/rec/5 Photo: O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Public Relations Office Photos - PC 08\Vol 05\05-004 Graduation, Convocation 1991\TIFF\image07 Jon Hassler.tif

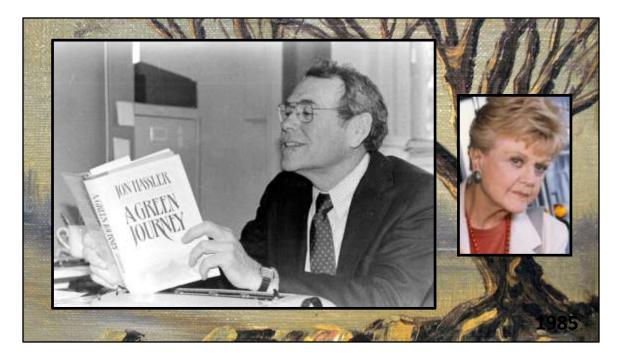


This photo, also taken by Jon's friend Lee Hanley, appeared in several places, including this article in *The Record* in 1983 and on the back cover of Hassler's most autobiographical novel, 1987's *Grand Opening*.

1980s LHanley photo.tif

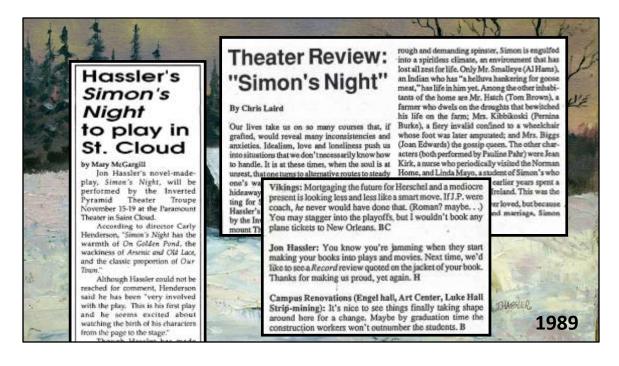
1983 Dec. 1 The Record p.2

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/36332/rec/6



This looks like a posed shot, showing Jon at his typewriter, upon the publication of *A Green Journey* in 1985. (He actually did his first drafts in longhand at first, not on a typewriter.) A TV movie was made of *A Green Journey* in 1988 starring Angela Lansbury. Recently deceased, she is remembered as the star in TV's "Murder She Wrote," and the voice of Mrs. Potts in Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," but Hassler fans will also remember her as his [sometime] alter-ego, Agatha McGee. Reading Green Journey.tif

https://www.msn.com/en-us/tv/news/murder-she-wrote-15-best-episodes-according-to-imdb/ar-AA13QV8i

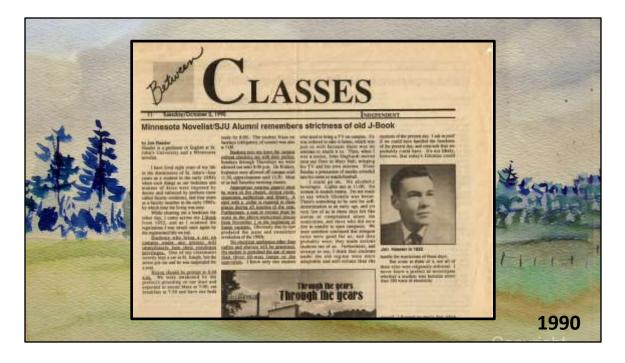


Not a movie, but a play: in 1989, his novel *Simon's Night* was presented as a play at the Paramount Theater in St. Cloud - and favorably reviewed in *The Record* . <ENTER> And when *The Record* awarded grades at the end of the semester, they mentioned that they'd like to see a *Record* review printed on his next book jacket. MC 3 1989 Nov. 7 *Independent* p.1

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/2669/rec/18 1989 Nov. 30 *The Record* p. 8

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/37099/rec/19 1989 Dec. 14 *The Record* p. 13

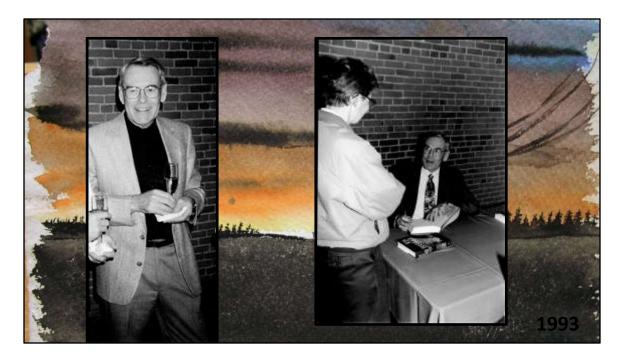
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/37328/rec/20



In 1990 Jon wrote this piece in the Saint Ben's newspaper, then called *The Independent,* about what student life was like during his college years in the 1950s compared to what they were like in the 1980s, when he was a faculty resident for four years. He mentioned rules against bringing cars to campus – or TVs, alcohol, or women – and that the students had Saturday morning classes and a clear dress code.

O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Digital Archives\People\Hassler\Hassler images from People file.pdf

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/2785/rec/37



Here are a couple random photos show him schmoozing at a campus wine and cheese event, and signing the libraries' copies of *Dear James* for Sister Stefanie Weisgram.

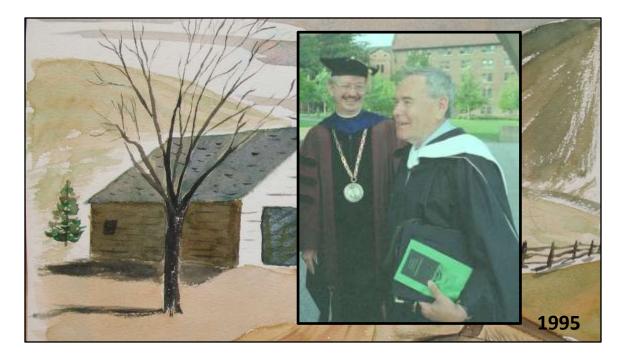
Left image: Wine event.tif Right image: bk signing GBecker photo.tif



Jon's classes were popular with the students, and he enjoyed them, too. <ENTER> One of the more interesting artifacts in the SJU Archives is a "Staggerford High School" T-shirt autographed by Hassler; he gave one to each of the seniors in his 1995 course about Minnesota authors.

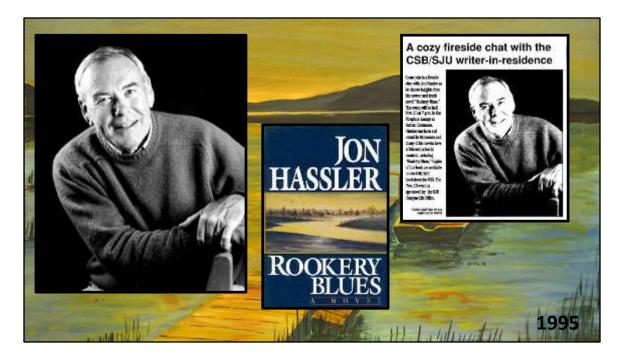
MC 3 - Hassler Collection\Files for Hassler website\jonhassler\imagesHassler, Jon in Quad class from CSB IA Smugmug 0886, 1989

T-Shirt from 2010-008 Hassler Collection, from 83/1



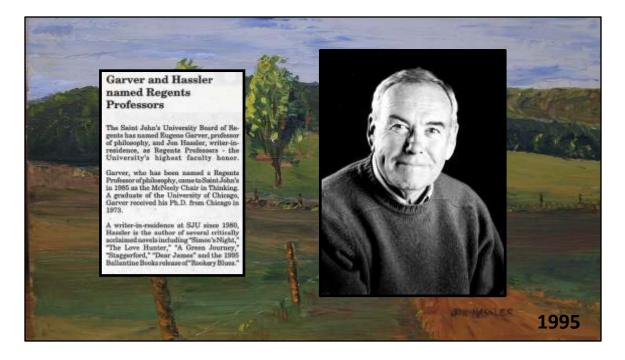
Jon gave the convocation address in 1995, a talk he titled "The Last Generation of Readers."

O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Public Relations Office Photos - PC 08\Vol 03\03-058 Convocation 1995\TIFF\image03 John Crosby, Dietrich Reinhart, Jon Hassler.tif (cropped)



This publicity photo, another one by Lee Hanley, was used when *Rookery Blues* was being promoted in 1995, and appeared in Saint Ben's *The Independent* in November of that year. Jon also collaborated with George Mauer to produce an audiobook version of *Rookery Blues*, complete with George's jazz piano providing the "blues" in the background.

by Hanley 01.tif 1995 Nov. 2 *The Independent* p. 12 https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/4108/rec/36 1995 Dec. 7 *The Independent* p. 12 https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/3930/rec/38



In 1996, Hassler and another professor were named Regents Professors, SJU's highest faculty honor. by Hanley 02.tif 1996 April 18*The Record* p. 2 https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/39601/rec/40

Hassler rewrites 'Grand Opening' for the stage

by Damon Kuchl Independent editorial staff

A ritual has taken place every day since 1970 for Saint John's University writer-in-residence Jon Hassler.

write immediately upon getting out of declined the offer to write a script. bed until I get my six or eight pages of the play or 400 words of a novel think about the book much and yet, said. when I wake up every morning, it's on my mind and all the characters are there, ready to go."

This dedication has yielded Hassler eight novels, most recently "Rookery Blues," which was released last fall.

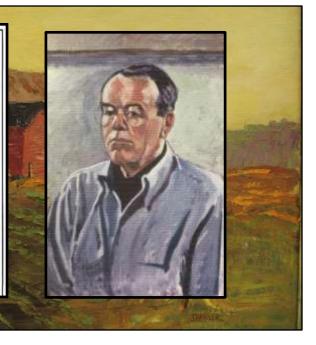
the same name, ran in Minneapolis at the Lyric Theater for two consecutive seasons in 1991 and 1992 due to its popularity.

The same theater wanted to perform a play based on "Grand "I get up in the morning and I Opening" and Hassler agreed, but

"I told them I didn't want to write a play, you see, because the last one then I put the nevel away for the rest took me nine years so they said line, of the day," Hassler said. "I don't even we'll get someone else to do it," he

Hassler recently listened to a reading of a script, authored by another writer.

"It was such a disaster ... it got offtrack early and the characters were doing things my characters wouldn't do." Hasler said.

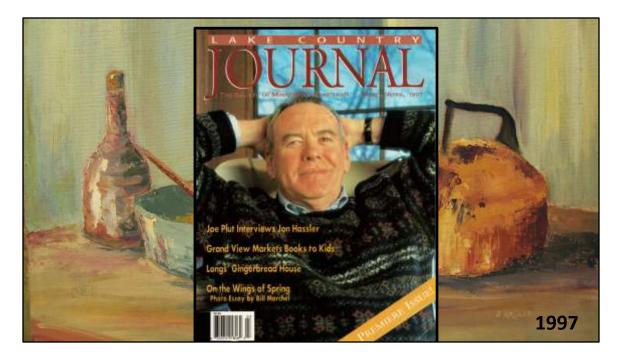


In a 1996 interview in St. Ben's Independent newspaper, Jon revealed his daily writing routine: "I get up In the morning and I write immediately upon getting out of bed until I get my six or eight pages of the play or 400 words of a novel... then I put the novel away for the rest of the day."

This portrait of Jon was painted by art professor Bela Petheo. Unfortunately, he later painted over the image, but not before taking a photo, which is part of his (Bela's) manuscript collection in the SJU Archives.

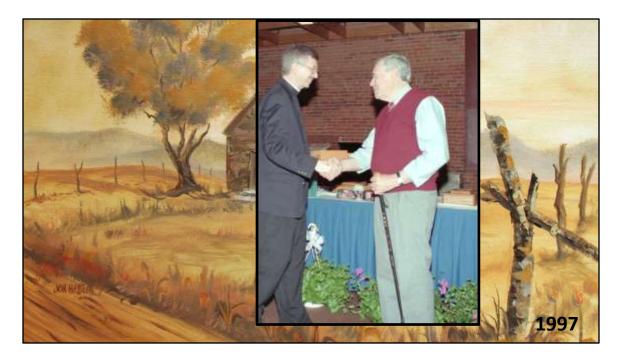
1996 May 9 The Independent p. 10

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/3962/rec/41 Image: O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Digital Archives\People\FACULTY\Hassler, Jon\Petheo, Bela painting



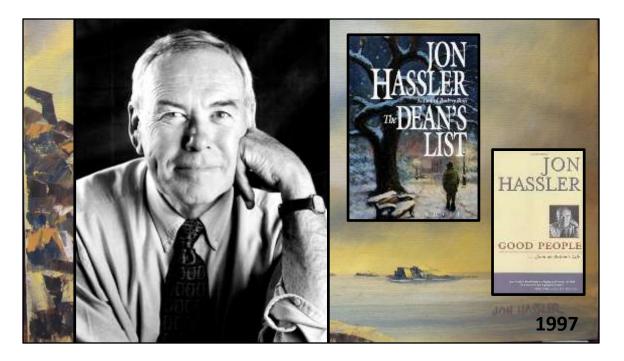
The *Lake Country Journal* published an interview and featured Jon on the cover of their "premier issue" in spring 1997, as he was about to retire.

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In this photo, SJU president Brother Dietrich Reinhart congratulates a retiring Jon at the faculty awards event in 1997. Jon's Parkinson's-like disease already necessitated his use of a cane to prevent falls.

O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Public Relations Office Photos - PC 08\Vol 03\03-061 Faculty Awards 1997\TIFF\image12 Dietrich Reinhart, Jon Hassler.tif



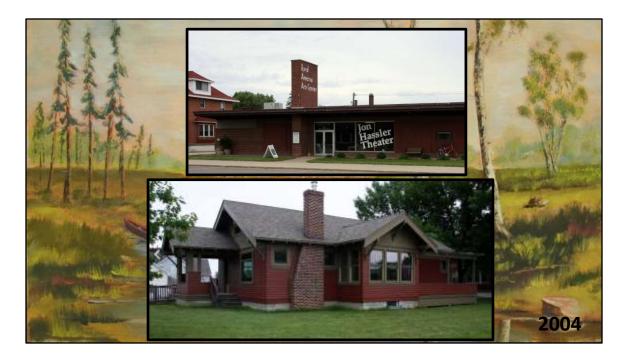
This ca. 1995 photo by Greg Becker was used for the book jacket for *The Dean's List* in 1997 (and also for *Good People,* 2001).

O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Digital Archives\People\FACULTY\Hassler, Jon Photo appeared in *The Record* in November 9, 1995, p16 https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/38856/rec/37



As mentioned, some of the Hassler works were produced as plays. That contributed to the creation of the Jon Hassler Theater, which "was a professional live theater located in Jon's former home town of <u>Plainview</u>, <u>Minnesota</u>."

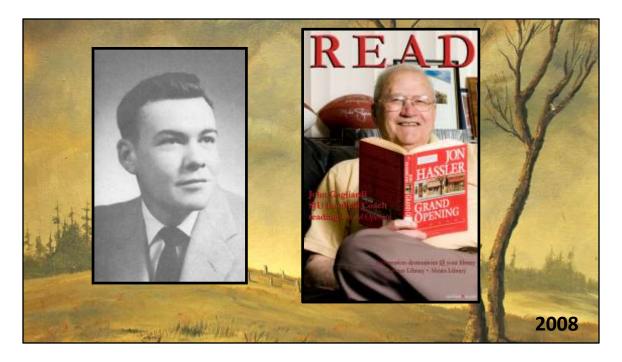
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Hassler_Theater



"In 2004 Jon Hassler's second childhood home, in Plainview, was moved onto the same block as the Hassler Theater," restored and refurnished, and "used to hold meetings for the Hassler Theater's Writers Center and to house actors during the runs of shows." The theater closed in 2014.

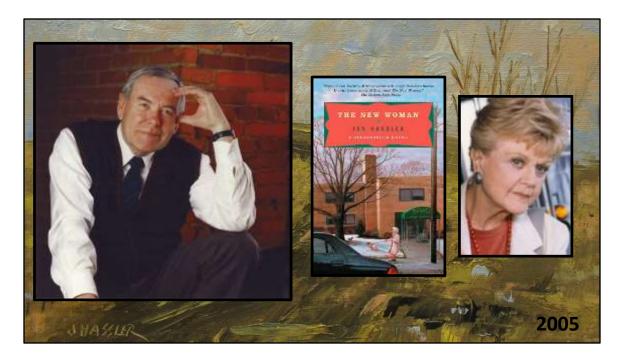
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Hassler_Theater

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Hassler_Theater#/media/File:HasslerHouse.jpg



When the library did a series of "READ" posters, John Gagliardi posed with one of his favorite books. When Gagliardi first came to coach SJU football, he lived in the dorm as a faculty resident in Mary Hall, and senior Jon Hassler lived on his floor. (He lived in Mary Hall for his last three years: in room M308 as a sophomore, M232 as a junior, and M138 as a senior.)

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/2785/rec/37

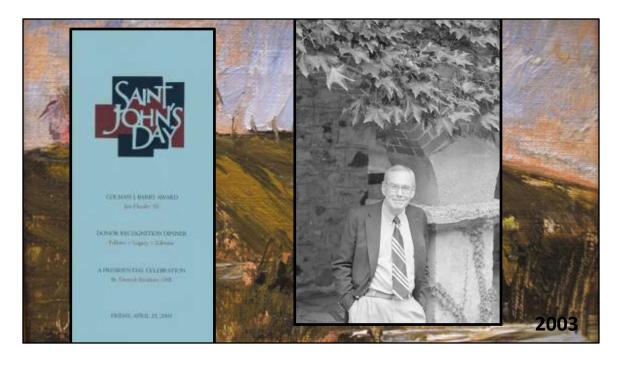


This great photo was used for the book jacket for *The New Woman* in 2005. It's the last of Jon's works to feature Agatha McGee. Unfortunately, if they ever make a movie of it, they'll have to find a new actress to play Agatha. Color.jpg



The same photo was used when *The Record* announced in April 2008 that Jon Hassler had died. One of his former students said that "it was a lot of hard work, but great fun" being one of Jon's students.

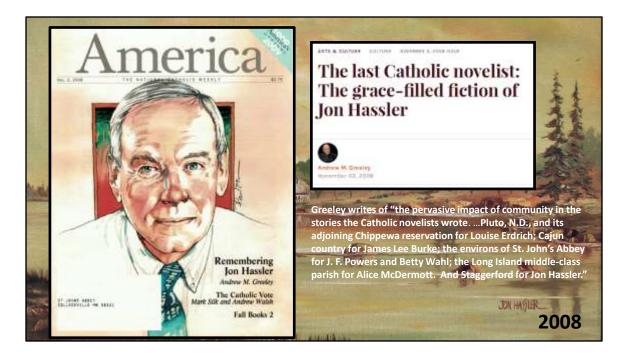
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/26703/rec/53



Jon had been awarded honorary Doctor of Letters degrees in the mid-1990s by Assumption College in Massachusetts, by the University of North Dakota, and by University of Notre Dame. President Dietrich had recognized Jon in 2003 with the Colman J. Barry Award for Distinguished Contributions to Religion and Society. The Saint John's Community would lose both Dietrich and Jon five years later – Jon in March 2008, and Dietrich in October.

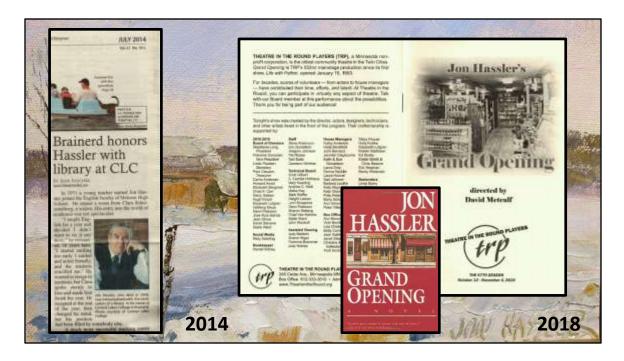
Left: O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Digital Archives\People\Hassler\Hassler images from People file.pdf

Right: Image005.jpg



A month after Jon's death, Andrew Greeley named Jon Hassler "the last 'Catholic novelist" in this cover story published in *America*. Greeley wrote of "the pervasive impact of community in the stories Catholic novelists wrote," and cited, among others, St. John's as the community for J. F. Powers and his wife Betty Wahl, and Staggerford for Jon Hassler.

https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/674/bookings/last-catholic-novelist



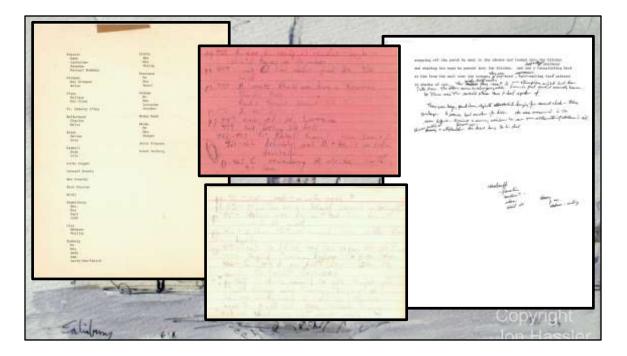
Years later, Brainerd's community college, now called Central Lakes College, named their library in his honor. And another somewhat random thing in the SJU Archives: Minneapolis's Theater in the Round performed a play adapted from Jon's autobiographical novel *Grand Opening*.

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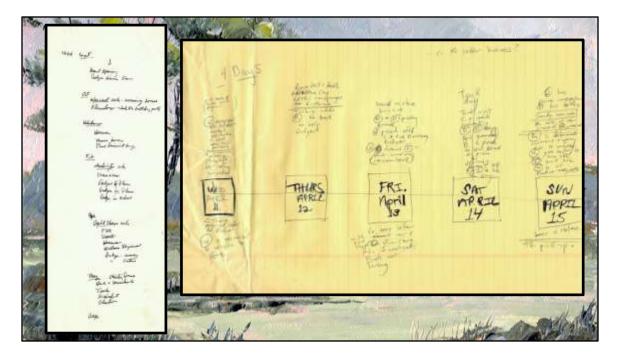
Five years before his death, Jon donated some of his papers to the SJU Archives. Our own Ryan Kutter was then a student employee of the Archives, and he traveled to the Hassler home with Sister Eva Hooker, one of Jon's former English Department colleagues.

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SJU's Hassler papers include these preliminary notes related to Grand Opening.

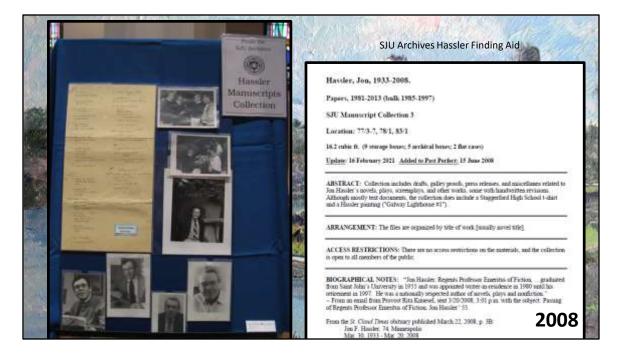
Originals in 077/4 (Box 03:01): Grand Opening Preliminary Work Images in O:\Archives\SJUArchives\SJU\Finding Aids\Manuscript Collections\MC 3 -Hassler Collection\Images from 77sh4Box3f1 for PPt\....pdf Cards are 5 x 7"



The archives of Jon's works are actually located at three different libraries. The other two are SCSU and Drake University. The latter has the bulk of them, as part of the archival collection of Jon's literary agent.

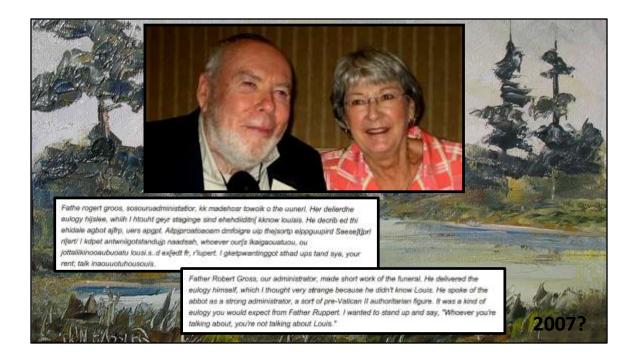
Originals in 077/4 (Box 03:01): Grand Opening Preliminary Work

Images in O:\Archives\SJUArchives\SJU\Finding Aids\Manuscript Collections\MC 3 - Hassler Collection\Images from 77sh4Box3f1 for PPt\....pdf



The SJU Archives created a display for the Hassler Memorial in April 2008 in the Great Hall; the finding aid for his papers here is available online.

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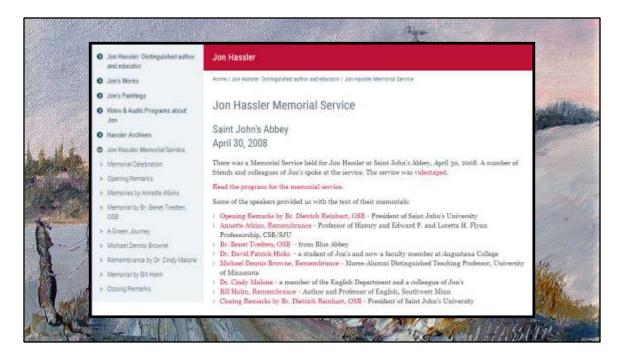


In an article for *MinnPost*, writer Dave Wood revealed how Jon and Gretchen Hassler continued to work on Jon's books, even as his disease took its toll. Jon would use a keyboard, though he had little control over his hands, such that what he typed looked like a lot of gibberish. But then he would read it aloud to Gretchen, who would type up what he said, and then they would further edit that version together.

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http://www.minnpost.com/stories/2007/11/12/42/word by word typo by typo p age by page

O:...MC3 - Hassler Collection\Files for Hassler website\jonhassler\images\w_gretchen.jpg



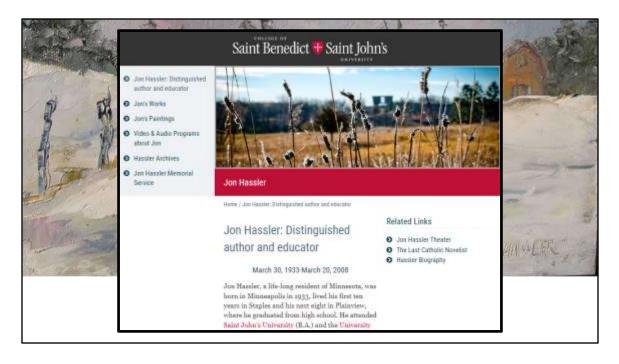
Jon's memorial service is well-documented on the Jon Hassler website. You can read, listen to or view the remarks and eulogies...

https://www.csbsju.edu/jon-hassler/jon-hassler-memorial-service

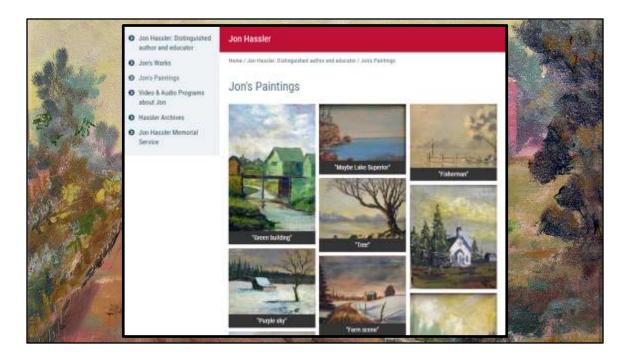


...and a few other things as well.

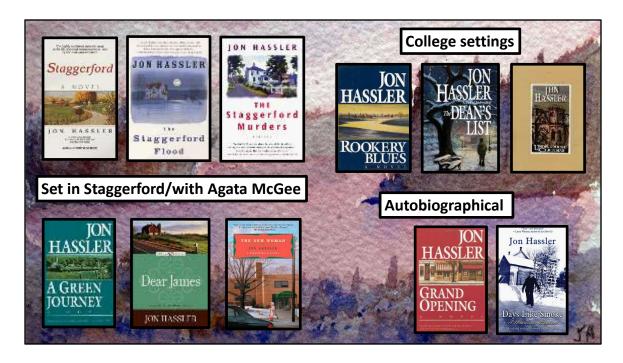
://www.csbsju.edu/jon-hassler/video-and-audio-programs-about-jon



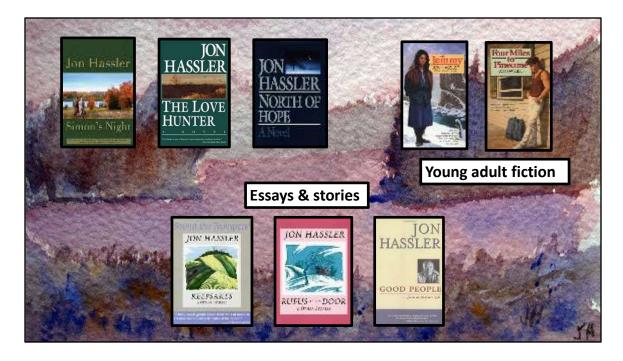
The Hassler website is linked from the "H" page of the A-Z Index.... https://www.csbsju.edu/jon-hassler



...and also features his paintings. https://www.csbsju.edu/jon-hassler/jons-paintings



Some of his books can be categorized, as shown... Book jacket images from amazon.com



...some, not so much. But they are all worthwhile reading. Book jacket images from amazon.com **Chronological List:** Staggerford 1977 Four Miles to Pinecone 1977 Simon's Night 1979 Jemmy 1980 The Love Hunter 1981 A Green Journey 1985 Grand Opening 1987 North of Hope 1990 Dear James 1993 Rookery Blues 1995 The Dean's List 1997 Underground Christmas 1998 My Staggerford Journal 1999 Keepsakes 1999 Good People 2001 The Staggerford Flood 2002 The Staggerford Murders 2004 The New Woman 2005 Days Like Smoke 2021

Staggerford & Agatha:

Staggerford 1977 The Staggerford Flood 2002 The Staggerford Murders 2004 *A Green Journey 1985 Dear James 1993 The New Woman 2005

*adapted as a television movie, *The Love She Sought*, starring Angela Lansbury

College settings:

Rookery Blues 1995 The Dean's List 1997 Underground Christmas 1998

Young Adult: Four Miles to Pinecone 1977 Jemmy 1980 Other settings:

Simon's Night 1979 The Love Hunter 1981 North of Hope 1990 Keepsakes 1999

Autobiographical: Grand Opening 1987 My Staggerford Journal 1999 Good People 2001 Days Like Smoke 2021

(Up next: a presentation about the new Jon Hassler Sculpture Garden installations.)

New SJU sculpture garden introduces its first piece

By William Nicolay yd01@cabsja.ie

After several years of planning and anticipation, the first steps usward diaptay pieces. The centerpiece itself was sculpture ganlen in the space its very inception, the sculpture garden was envisioned by the architect of the Richard Bremahan Learning Commons as it was being connected to Alcain Library.

vantage point over the space, making it concerts base. The name Kara comes perfect spot from which to view the display. The first art piece installed these is titled Kora - Prophetic Messenger, and it makes for an impressive sight over the low wall of the sidewalk.

The garden itself was lunded sciernally. connected to Alcain Library. on the promise that it would be dedicated to the fate author lon Hassler, a St. John's share. It will be comprised of six concrete sculpture bases, and four will be home to a rotating selection of founed works from partnered art moseums. Tim Termis, director of the St. Johns

lible and caritor of Alcain Library's

re Sectared attevries, will carnie the art selection. St. John's is currently collaborating with the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in onler to obtain commissioned in 2019 by former St. underniath the Learning Constrons John's President Michael Henrisith, is building are finally coming together. At the designed and constructed by master potter and Saint John's resident artist.

The sculpture garden's centerpiece, Kata, is a massive artwork standing The tail building gives an excellent over 8 feet tall and resting on a massiv from the Japanese word meaning sacred vessel. Underneath the large bostn stands a semi-circular piece of granite, a tribute that was taken from removed walling when the Learning Clammons was

> Holding up the main vessel are two black granite pillars, originally quartied in the late 1800s, which first served as the steps to the St. John's Church. One can still see the imprint of uncountable firststeps on them. The two pillars support the main vessel - a massive grain hin which contains 178 city containers.



TRUCK MOTION + Instant/Collicates) ects The first addpture added near Alouh Library The entire passe functions as a kind

of time capsule for future use; such container is filled with heirloom ands for variaties of corn, spash and beam, many of which are endangered. Each and every container has within it a

ndwritten dedication to the ren tolk singen/songwriter John Prine, who was a close friend of the artist.

Alongside the seed basik, the vessel contains a first floot long handwrittee scroll of the Bale of St. Benedict. This was contributed by Mary Brano, the o and operator of the Brano Printing Press in 52. Joseph. In the event of a natural disatter or climate emorgency. Kara car regenerate agriculture in the affected region and furnish the rules of life on which St. John's Benedictine tradition is founded.

in addition to Kura, a polyhe shaped sculpture designed by Father Langues of the St. John's Minustery will be permanently displayed. It is carrently acheological to be constructed.

Rob Cullips, the Vice Pros Institutional Advancement, said the overall garden space will take time to come together and that its completion is likely several years out. "St. John's has a great history for doplaying beautiful works of art, and [the sculpture garden] continues this tradition," Calligan said.



(The original presentation of this "history lesson" on Nov. 15, 2022 was followed by a presentation by Steven Lemke about the Pottery Studio and Saint John's and the Jon Hassler Sculpture Garden's newest art installations.)

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