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CAROL HOUCK SMITH,
VICE-PRESIDENT AND EDITOR-AT-LARGE,
W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

New York, NY, December 4, 2008---Carol Houck Smith, a vice-president and Editor-at-Large at W. W. Norton & Company who edited generations of the nation's most distinguished poets and literary authors, died this weekend at her home in New York City, according to her nephew, Philip Houck.

Ms. Smith spent all of her sixty-year publishing career at W. W. Norton & Company, the nation's largest independent, employee-owned book publishing firm. There, she edited works by such prominent writers as Stanley Kunitz, Andrea Barrett, Gerald Stern, Rita Dove, Stephen Dunn, Maxine Kumin, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Rick Bass, Charles Baxter, Ron Carlson, Brady Udall, Pam Houston, Molly Peacock, and many others. In sharing the news of her death with colleagues, Norton president W. Drake McFeely commented, "In her quiet way, Carol had one of the most distinguished careers to be found anywhere in publishing, editing a Pulitzer Prize winner and three National Book Award winners in the last decade or so alone. I had a running joke with Carol that I'd only read one of her books if it had been nominated for a major prize, and of course that meant I read virtually all of her books."

During the course of her career, Ms. Smith came to be known as a "creative editor," passionate in her commitment to seeking out new talent, nurturing authors, and coaxing them to perfect their work. Notes author Andrea Barrett, "Carol's gifts as an editor were many, most remarkably her absolute engagement with the vision of each of her writers. It wasn't her way to scribble all over a page, to change sentences wholesale, to substitute her vision for a writer's. Instead, she did the simplest (and hardest) task: she asked questions. Questions that presumed the characters created on the page were actual persons, the actions real and consequential, the meanings a matter of life and death." In a Washington Post "Off the Page" interview in 2004, author Joan Silber remarked that Ms.

Smith “would edit at the level of the word, and we would have long discussions about certain words, which was quite fun.” Ms. Smith commented in the same interview that “There is so much pressure to acquire books that there is possibly less editing, and if you’re a voracious reader you’ll find that there are a lot of books in great need of editing. I think the job of the editor is to...discover what the intention of the writer is, and then to try and stand in for the general reader and assess whether the writer has fulfilled that intention. I think it’s a chemical relationship between author and editor, in the same way that you’re attracted to friends when you meet them, and so the editor has really joined the book.”

Ms. Smith was known for her love of nature and animals and her fascination with the sensibilities of other living things. She was drawn to work that spoke of people’s connections to the natural world, such as Stanley Kunitz’s to his garden, or Andrea Barrett’s characters’ to science, or Pam Houston’s to her dogs and horses. She also craved the perspectives of the very young and the very old as well as characters who lived lives out of the mainstream and whose voices might otherwise not be heard, whether an orphaned boy (as in Brady Udall’s The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint) or an African-American girl denied the national spelling bee trophy (as in A. Van Jordan’s M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A). Amid all her care and concern, though, there was a sense of mischief, and those close to Ms. Smith were sometimes caught off-guard by her biting wit.

Carol Houck Smith was born to Oscar and Elsa Houck of Buffalo, New York in 1923 (the same year that W. W. Norton & Company was founded). She graduated from Vassar College in 1944 with a degree in English. After a brief stint working at Standard Brands in New York City, she found her way into book publishing, joining Norton in 1948 as a secretary to an editor in the Trade Dept. Decades before women came to dominate the book publishing landscape, Ms. Smith blazed a trail for herself in what was then a distinctly male-dominated profession. She distinguished herself not only as an exceptionally conscientious worker--described by one supervisor as “meticulous to a fault”-- but also as a caring, passionate champion of authors and their writing who was occasionally criticized for “lavishing time on projects” regardless of their commercial prospects. Her determined progress out of the secretarial pool represented a

breakthrough for women as editors and eased the way for others who followed, both at Norton and in the industry at large, including a number of women whom she went on to hire.

By the mid 1960s, Ms. Smith had become an editor in her own right, and she was appointed a vice-president in March of 1980. She was named an Editor-at-Large upon her “retirement” from Norton in July of 1996, but that so-called retirement turned out to be on paper only. She continued reporting to the office every day, with her retirement heralding one of the most distinguished and fruitful periods of her career. Between 1996 and 2008, she edited two National Book Award winners, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and winners of many other awards including the Whiting Award, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, and the Paterson Poetry Prize.

Ms. Smith was editor to two Poets Laureate of the United States during their terms: Rita Dove and Stanley Kunitz (during his second term), and to a third Poet Laureate following her tenure, Maxine Kumin. She edited three National Award-winning books: Passing Through: The Later Poems by Mr. Kunitz (1995); Ship Fever and Other Stories by Andrea Barrett (1996); and This Time: New and Selected Poems by Gerald Stern (1998), as well as National Book Award Finalists including Ms. Voigt (twice a finalist), Joan Silber, and Agha Shahid Ali. She edited the Pulitzer Prize winning-book Different Hours by Mr. Dunn (2001) and Pulitzer Prize finalists including Ms. Voigt, Ms. Barrett, and Mr. Kunitz. At the time of her death, she was editing a major new work of poetry by Ms. Dove, among other books.

In her quest to connect with emerging talent, Ms. Smith was a frequent guest at writers’ conferences including Bread Loaf near Middlebury, Vermont, the Writers at Work Conference in North Salt Lake, Utah, and the Association of Writers & Writing Programs conferences. Notes Gerald Stern, “It was her joy to be among writers. She adored going to Utah, Bread Loaf and other retreats – I was with her at a number of these places and she just adored being with other writers. She didn’t play up to famous people – there was a democratic ethos in that respect.” At these conferences, she held intimate sessions with aspiring writers and reviewed manuscripts in one-on-one tutorials. In a December 3 blog posting, author Paul Lisicky remembers meeting Ms. Smith at Bread Loaf and recalls her as someone who would support and counsel writers regardless of

whether she published them, “a wise and good soul who cared about books a lot more than she did about celebrity or power or units sold.”

There are two scholarships endowed in her name, one in poetry and one in fiction: The Carol Houck Smith Scholarship in Poetry at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference and the Carol Houck Smith Fiction Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin.

In February of 2008, a group of poets organized a Tribute to Carol Houck Smith, Editor Extraordinaire, at the Associated Writing Programs conference in New York City, with readings and recollections by poets she published: Beth Ann Fennelly, A. Van Jordan, Mr. Dunn, Mr. Stern, and Ms. Voigt. There, Ms. Smith was celebrated for publishing books with a “distinctive voice, narrative dash, and new ways of viewing the human condition.”

Ms. Houck was married in 1969 to Hunter Smith, who died of lung cancer in 1975. They had no children. She is survived by her niece, Judith Houck Lowen of Cocoa Beach, Florida, and three nephews: Oliver Houck of New Orleans, Louisiana, Philip Houck of Boston, Massachusetts, and David Houck of Novato, California.

Gifts in her memory may be made to the Carol Houck Smith scholarships above or to the New York Public Library.

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