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Mark Krupnick, scholar of Jewish intellectual life, 1939-2003

University of Chicago professor Mark Krupnick, one of the nation's leading scholars of Jewish-American intellectual life, died of Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS) on Saturday, March 29 at his Chicago home. He was 63.

A professor in Chicago's Divinity School since 1990, Krupnick devoted much of his life to studying the New York intellectuals – a group of literary and political critics, most of them Jewish, who rose to national prominence in the 1940s and 1950s, and whose writing appeared in opinion journals such as *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*.

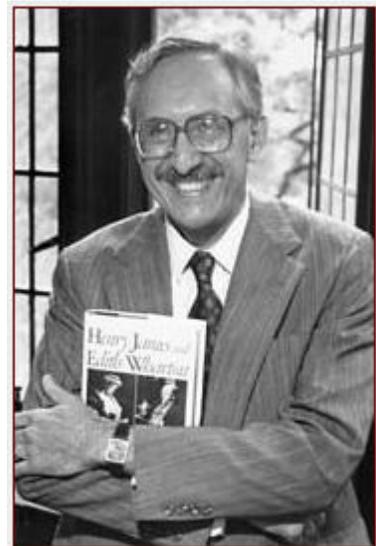
Of all his work, Krupnick is best known as a critic of Lionel Trilling, said Bruce Lincoln, the Caroline E. Haskell Professor in the Divinity School. His 1986 book, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, a critical analysis of the most distinguished of the New York intellectuals, and the most important literary critic of his generation, was significant not only as a seminal work of scholarship, but also because of its boldness, Lincoln said. "Mark ultimately faulted the master (Trilling), not for any technical or aesthetic lapses, but for a failure of courage, leadership and moral vision when it came to Vietnam."

Krupnick's fascination with the New York intellectuals, which began in his teens, was life-long. Weeks before his death, Krupnick completed a manuscript for *Jewish Writing: The Deep Places of the Imagination*, a collection of his essays, which will be published by the University of Wisconsin Press, on Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, and other Jewish intellectuals.

"What distinguished Mark's writing about New York intellectuals is that he knew these people," said Wendy Doniger, the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor in the Divinity School. "He wrote about these people with a deep understanding and sensitivity."

In addition to his book on Trilling, Krupnick edited and introduced *Displacement: Derrida and After*, a collection of original essays on his second major research interest, theories of textual interpretation.

But, like the New York intellectuals he wrote about, Krupnick was drawn to the writing of essays, rather than full-length books.



Mark Krupnick

“Mark believed the classic essay was the finest form of scholarly expression,” said Richard Rosengarten, Dean of the Divinity School. “It could be technical in orientation yet deeply accessible.”

As an essayist, Krupnick addressed a vast number of themes, ranging far beyond his academic interests. Altogether, he published nearly 200 full-length essays, review essays, shorter reviews, brief articles, and op-ed pieces on such varied topics as his detestation of SUVs and the sale of donor eggs for the making of babies.

Krupnick wrote several of his most celebrated essays during the last years of his life. After learning of his terminal illness two years ago, Krupnick, in addition to his usual interests, increasingly wrote about death and dying. Fascinated, in particular, with a genre – writing about death --Krupnick, who had himself written obituaries for the English paper *The Guardian*, studied the obituary like a literary form, and wrote an essay in last fall’s *American Scholar*, titled “The Art of the Obituary.” He also wrote an essay in the *Chicago Tribune* that admonished a culture in which terminally ill patients are told to never give up hope. And another Krupnick piece, titled “Revisiting Morrie: When His Last Words Are Too Good To Be True,” criticized the wildly popular Mitch Albom book *Tuesday’s With Morrie* for its treatment of death.

“If anything,” said Doniger, “his style as he approached death became even bolder.”

He was a great essayist throughout his life, not just because of his style, humor, and wit, but because of this boldness, Doniger said. “He was compact and direct and he never hedged.”

Born in Newark, and raised in Irvington, N.J., Krupnick graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard College with a B.A. in American History and Literature in 1962. During his Harvard years, Krupnick took a two-year leave of absence and moved to New York. There, he spent part of his time working at the *New York Post* as a research assistant on the paper’s sports desk. Krupnick also frequented the cafes and bars of Greenwich Village, including the Cedar Bar, where the Abstract Expressionists did their drinking.

“I think his interest in the New York intellectuals was largely autobiographical,” said Lincoln. “He was a smart Jewish kid who went to Harvard at a time when that was still unusual. He hung out in the Village with people with unfashionable and unconventional opinions.” The difference between Krupnick and the intellectuals he wrote about, said Lincoln, was “he didn’t care much about politics. So rather than focus on the politics of the day, he became a critic of the critics.”

Krupnick earned his M.A. (1963) and Ph.D (1968) from Brandeis University. While at Brandeis, Krupnick won a Fulbright scholarship and spent 1965-1966 studying at Darwin College, a newly formed graduate college of the University of Cambridge.

Krupnick’s first full-time teaching job was at Smith College in 1966. He joined the faculty of Boston University, as an assistant professor of English, in 1968, and became a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1974. In 1979 he moved with his family to Chicago so his wife, Jean, could pursue a doctorate in Human Development at the University of

Chicago, while staying near their young son. Krupnick's commute to Milwaukee ended when he joined the faculty of the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1987.

Although he was a literary scholar, Krupnick joined the faculty of the University of Chicago's Divinity School in 1990. At the Divinity School, where he taught classes such as the "Jewish-American Novel," Krupnick was among a small group of literary scholars whose work nearly always intersected with religion, said Rosengarten. "He always pressed his agenda for close reading and the importance of Jewish intellectual life at the Divinity school."

A frequent contributor to magazines and journals, Krupnick was an Associate Editor at the Boston-based journal *Modern Occasions* from 1970 to 1972, under his mentor, Philip Rahv. In 1972 and 1973, he was a fellow for the National Endowment of the Humanities at the Anna Freud Child Therapy Center in London, and in 1983-84 he was a fellow at Chicago's Newberry Library. In 1995, he received an award for literary criticism from the Society of Midland Authors.

Krupnick is survived by his wife, Jean K. Carney, Chicago; his son Joseph Carney Krupnick, Chicago; his mother, Betty Krupnick, Mountain View, Calif.; and two sisters; Elyse Krupnick, Mountain View, Calif., and Janice Krupnick Suzman, Chevy Chase, Md.

A funeral service will be held Sunday, April 6, at 4:30 p.m. at Bond Chapel, adjacent to the Divinity School, 1025 E. 58th Street, on the University of Chicago campus.

<http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/03/030404.krupnick.shtml>