November 9, 2006–January 15, 2007
Thomas Cooper Library
University of South Carolina

A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
G E O R G E V.
H I G G I N S

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Exhibition and catalogue by Jeffrey Makala.
Introduction by Matthew J. Bruccoli.
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Massachusetts’ Best Novelist*

“Higgins is the great classical novelist of the late twentieth century in America.”
—Lord Gowrie

“Higgins achieves effects outside the scope of my other living novelists. He is a writer of genius.”
—Julian Symons

These sound judgments by British authorities reinforce the recognition that George V. Higgins was a great writer who was greatly underrated and misjudged at home. The misleading and condescending labels “crime writer” and “detective writer” dependably angered him. He did not write category fiction. George held the patent on personal and professional pride:

“Whenever a writer is classified, no matter what the classification, there is a corresponding diminution of his or her access to the community of serious readers, and a commensurate reduction as well not only in prospective income but also in essential critical regard.” (“Rounding Up the Usual Suspects,” 1986)

He strenuously insisted that he did not write crime novels: he wrote novels of social history (as did his master, John O’Hara) that included characters who were in trouble with the law and characters who were not. His work was character-driven; he created character through speech. George never wrote a whodunit: the closest he came to this genre was *The Agent*, his 25th published novel.
Another slander that lazy critics applied to George was that he wrote too much; whatever that is supposed to mean, it is meant to be damaging. The dopes also alleged he wrote too fast. How the hell did they know about his working habits? The evidence—a resource that interferes with dazzling critical insights—preserved in the Higgins Archive in the Thomas Cooper Library at the University of South Carolina documents George’s claim that he “worked like a horse.” He was a compulsive rewriter and ruthless self-editor. He protected his prose from the tampering of incompetent editors: “We are surrounded by nitwits, Matt. It is not a good idea to consider how much time we spend correcting the results of their idiocy” (May 17, 1993). George was a professional. He took his work and his duty to his genius personally. He took everything personally. He was afraid not to write. On October 22, 1996, George wrote me his credo about the profession of authorship:

… tomorrow what I don’t get done today, will not exist. Something like it probably will, because I will at least have made a few notes. It may even be better, but it won’t be the same thing.

……

When someone condescendingly counsels me to write less, in the evident opinion what I write then will be better—thus making me sure that I’ve already written so much he’s been able to make time to read but one book of it, Coyle, most likely, and is therefore filled with guilt that he wants
to lay on me—I know I am listening to someone who has no idea what the hell he’s talking about. If I wrote less, all that would result would be a smaller quantity of work, not better work, and I would lose lots of stories.

And so would deserving readers.

Related to the canard about George’s over-production is the misapprehension about his technique: the construction of character and narrative through speech. Lazy critics who regarded George’s reliance on speech as a form of authorial self-indulgence did not understand that his characters’ speech is always under his control: “I write dialogue in order to make something from it—a story.” The Higgins narrative technique concealed the author. Speech is character is action. George explicated this process in a 1987 interview:

*A Matter of Crime*: You have said that the structural use of speech in your novels is intended to replace the omniscient author with the omniscient reader. Would you expand on that?

Higgins: I don’t know how my stories are going to come out. I build them the way I used to build a trial, a criminal trial. The witnesses come along, and each recites what portion of reality he knows about: what he happened to observe, what he happened to do, what he happened to hear. I don’t change
their testimony, as it were. At the end of a book, or at the end of a trial, either one, you then call upon the jury to reach its own moral decision, its own ethical judgments about the way the characters have behaved. I don’t do that for them. I give them all the evidence I know about, all the evidence I’ve “heard” or “seen” and present it on the page and let the reader decide what the morality was. I don’t want to make any judgments for the reader. That’s the reader’s job. I think reading is a participatory sport.

Literary historians of necessity cling to the belief that great writers and great books achieve their just standings in the long run—often a too-long run. This process can be accelerated by the availability of the documentary evidence to support reappraisal: the drafts; the rewrites and revisions; the correspondence; the periodical appearances; the editorial material. The resurrection process for George V. Higgins will necessarily rely on the material in this exhibition and the rest of it at the Thomas Cooper Library. It is not virtual literary history or virtual literary biography: it is the real George V. Higgins in flagrante scribendum—which is how he died. Writing.

*It is possible that I have departed from strict objectivity in my assessment of George V. Higgins because he was my loyal and generous friend for almost twenty years.
The George V. Higgins Archive was acquired by the Thomas Cooper Library in 2003 with the support of Dean John Skvoretz and the cooperation of Loretta Cubberley Higgins, who supplemented the appraisal inventory and let us plunder her home. The vanload of material filled more than 380 boxes. It included authorial typescripts, working drafts, personal and professional correspondence, memorabilia, literary records, printed matter, proofs, clippings, and two computer hard-drives. Higgins’s papers were supplemented by the Bruccoli collection of Higgins publications.

It is not incongruous that the papers of the Homer of Bah-stan are at the University of South Carolina. There was a connection. George visited the University three times. He addressed the Thomas Cooper Society in April 1993; he participated in English department classes, and he met with law school faculty. I arranged a luncheon for him with James Dickey, assuming that they would enjoy each other. Jim reacted with the wariness of a gunfighter who has just learned that another fast gun is in town. But the first encounter of Dean George Terry and George V. Higgins here was an occasion of elective affinity.

—Matthew J. Bruccoli
Jefferies Distinguished Professor Emeritus
A Note on the Exhibition

This exhibition seeks to document the life and works of George V. Higgins. It also provides an introduction to the Higgins archive at Thomas Cooper Library, a comprehensive collection of Higgins’s personal papers and records. As such, what you see here is necessarily incomplete, as the items in these cases can only offer representative examples that demonstrate the depth and range of the entire collection, along with some of its notable highlights.

The arrangement of the items displayed is roughly chronological, beginning with Higgins’s earliest fiction and literary work in college. It concludes with a posthumously published collection of short fiction, with occasional detours along the way. Between those two points are a wide variety of items that document an impressive career as a “scribbler” (Higgins’s own preferred term). George V. Higgins wrote 26 novels, 4 nonfiction titles, scores of short stories, newspaper and feature-length magazine journalism, literary criticism and book reviews, and quite literally hundreds of columns for three major newspapers. This list also does not take into account his parallel careers as a prosecutor, an attorney in private practice, and a professor and teacher of writing and the law.

All these activities are extensively documented in the Higgins archive, the processing of which is nearing completion. A complete finding aid to all component parts of the archive, as well as an electronic version of this exhibition, will be available to all on the Rare Books and Special Collections Web site (www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/rarebook.html) in the coming months. My thanks go to Michael Berry and Eugene McClain, whose work on organizing the archive has helped make this exhibition possible.

—Jeffrey Makala  
Assistant Librarian  
Rare Books and Special Collections
George V. Higgins: A Chronology

November 13, 1939  Born in Brockton, Mass.
1957–1961  Boston College, A.B.
1964–1967  Boston College Law School, J.D.
1967  Legal assistant, Department of the Attorney General, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
1967–1968  Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
1968–1970  Assistant Attorney General, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
1971–1972  Instructor in trial practice, Boston College Law School
1970s  Columnist, Boston Magazine
1972  The Friends of Eddie Coyle
1973  Special Assistant United States Attorney, District of Massachusetts
1973  The Digger's Game
1974  Cogan's Trade
1974–1976  Columnist, Boston Phoenix
1975  City on a Hill
1975  The Friends of Richard Nixon
1976  The Judgment of Deke Hunter
1976–1979  Columnist, Boston Herald-American
1977  Writer in residence, Washington Star
1977  Dreamland
1979  A Year or So with Edgar
1979  Instructor in trial practice, Boston College Law School
1979–1985  Columnist and critic, *Boston Globe*
1980  *Kennedy for the Defense*
1981  *The Rat on Fire*
1982  *The Patriot Game*
1984  *A Choice of Enemies*
1984  *Old Earl Died Pulling Traps*
1984  *Style Versus Substance*
1985  *Penance for Jerry Kennedy*
1986  *Impostors*
1987  *Outlaws*
1988  *The Sins of the Fathers*
1988  Visiting Professor of English, State University of New York at Buffalo
1988  *Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years*
1988–2000  Professor, Special Programs, Metropolitan College, and Creative Writing Program, Department of English, Boston University
1989  *The Progress of the Seasons*
1989  *Trust*
1990  *Victories*
1990  *On Writing*
1991  *The Mandeville Talent*
1992  *Defending Billy Ryan*
1993  *Bomber’s Law*
1995  *Swan Boats at Four*
1996  *Sandra Nichols Found Dead*
1997  *A Change of Gravity*
1998  *The Agent*
November 6, 1999  Death in Milton, Mass.
2000  *At End of Day*
2004  *The Easiest Thing in the World*
Introduction, Early Life and Careers

“The Man Who Made the Ocean Roll.”
*Stylus* [Boston College], May 1960, p. 33–35.

“For Love Is a Feather: A Novelette.”

*Sub Turri of Boston College.*

“Three Stories.”

“All Day Was All There Was.”

“*Arizona Quarterly* Annual Awards.”
*Arizona Quarterly*, 20(1), Spring 1964, p. 4.

Best story, 1963: “All Day Was All There Was,” by George Higgins.

“Witness: Something of a Memoir.”

Father Robert Drinan with George V. Higgins, framed photograph, 1969.

Typed letter, signed, to Leslie Fielder, January 8, 1988, framed photocopy.
[“... I just don’t recall him at all, let alone a ‘traumatic experience.’”]

Boston College *Stylus* staff members, framed photograph, 1961.

George V. Higgins at the wheel of his Sunbeam Alpine, photograph, ca. late 1960s.


Trumpet, with Boston College–lettered case, used by Higgins, ca. 1958–61.
“Dillon Explained That He Was Frightened.”  
North American Review, 255(3), Fall 1970,  
p. 42–45.  

Pre-publication excerpt from Eddie Coyle.

Earliest typescript, corrected,  
81 p., ca. 1970.  
The original title, “Jackie Brown at Twenty-Six,” has been crossed out.

Paul Monash.  
Friends of Eddie Coyle. Based on the Novel by George V. Higgins.  
First draft screenplay typescript, September 30, 1971.

Setting copy, 1971.


Matthew J. and Arlyn Brucetti Collection of George V. Higgins.

First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.


Christopher Lehmann-Haupt.  
“You’re Dead,’ He Explained.”  

Review of The Friends of Eddie Coyle.

John Kronenberger.  
“A Hard-Eyed Prosecutor Wins as a Novelist.”  
Life, May 12, 1972, p. 81.
Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of George V. Higgins.

*Les copains d’Eddie Coyle.*

4 audiocassettes, unabridged, narrated by Mark Hammer.

Introduction by Elmore Leonard.
Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of George V. Higgins.

George V. Higgins, photographs and contact sheet, ca. 1972.


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*The Friends of Eddie Coyle.*

The Early Novels

The Digger’s Game.
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

The Digger’s Game.

First draft screenplay, photocopied typescript, n.d.

Melvin Frank and David Zelag Goodman.
The Digger’s Game. Based on the Novel by George V. Higgins.
First draft screenplay, typescript, December 2, 1974.

The Digger’s Game.
British paperback cover mockup, ca. 1984.

La jugada d’en Digger.

Time and Jackie Cogan.
The earliest version of Cogan’s Trade.

Cogan’s Trade.
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.


Cogan’s Trade.

Cogan’s Trade.

Cogan’s handel.

The Judgment of Deke Hunter.
First UK printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

Dreamland.
First UK printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

A Year Or So With Edgar.
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

The Rat on Fire.
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

The Patriot Game.
Lawyer and Journalist

“Omnicompetence and Omnibus Crime Control: The Policeman as Specialist.”
*Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, (60)1, Spring 1969, p. 113–122.


“The Judge Who Tried Harder: Maximum John and The Undoing of Richard Nixon.”

“The Friends of Richard Nixon.”

*The Friends of Richard Nixon.*

Julia Cameron.

“George V. Higgins Comes to Washington. America’s Premier Crime Novelist Turns His Hard Eye from the Gritty Life of the Boston Underworld to the Corruption and Political Dealing of Washington.”


David Reich.


The Jerry Kennedy Novels

*Kennedy for the Defense.*
Early drafts, chapter 18, corrected and uncorrected typescripts, ca. 1979.

*Kennedy for the Defense.*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

*Kennedy for the Defense.*
Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of George V. Higgins.

Joel Oliansky.
*Kennedy for the Defense.*


*Penance for Jerry Kennedy.*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

*Penance for Jerry Kennedy.*
Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of George V. Higgins.

*Defending Billy Ryan.*

*Defending Billy Ryan.*
Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of George V. Higgins.

*Sandra Nichols Found Dead.*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.
Nonfiction Books

*Style Versus Substance: Boston, Kevin White and the Politics of Illusion.*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.


*The Progress of the Seasons: Forty Years of Baseball In Our Town.*

*The Progress of the Seasons: Forty Years of Baseball In Our Town.*
Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of George V. Higgins.


*On Writing,* author’s proofs, corrected, 1990.

*On Writing: Advice For Those Who Write To Publish (Or Would Like To).*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.


Columnist, Journalist and Reviewer

“A Day Without News is a Day You Miss the Heartbeat of the World.”


— George Higgins

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“The Column: A day without news is a day you miss the heartbeat of the world

Day before yesterday, the American Newspaper Guild struck the New York Post. The editors, by

This was a matter of staggering indifference to regular readers of the Post. There hasn’t been a strike at the Post since World War II and I doubt if any New York Times or Daily News editor has felt the panic strike all those of them before the Guild went out. I am not at the mercy of the Guild’s position. I have had many

But there is a point at which the strike interferes with the proper conduct of the paper. I wrote a column on the strike and how it would affect the paper. The Post has a very small circulation, but some of the people who subscribe to it are the best customers. They believe that the Post has a higher standard of journalism than any other paper in the country. They are willing to pay more for a Post subscription than they do for any other newspaper.

I think it is a fact of life that the Post is a good newspaper. I have seen some of the Post’s best stories and I have been impressed by the way they have handled them. I believe that the Post is doing a good job.

The strike is a serious matter. The Post has a large staff of reporters and editors and they are doing a good job. They are working hard to keep the Post going. The Post is a good newspaper and I am proud to be associated with it.

George Higgins

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“Ms.—the Greatest Insult to Women Yet.”


“Right On Target, Mother Jones.”


Includes corrected typescript, as submitted.

John Updike to George V. Higgins expressing his appreciation of a recent Higgins column.

Typed postcard, signed, July 30, 1983.

“Stacy Keach’s Toughest Case.”


Higgins reviews a television broadcast of “Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer.”
George V. Higgins at the helm of the *Litigator*, framed photograph, ca. early 1970s.

Malcolm Jones.
“Our Most Underrated Writer.”
Framed review of *Bomber’s Law*.

George V. Higgins at Fenway Park, photograph, 1993

*Time Out*
“Watching the New Detectives—Special Books Issue,”
Higgins as Writing Teacher; Short Fiction and Anthologies

“The Habitats of the Animals: The Progress of the Seasons.”
in Martha Foley, ed.
*The Best American Short Stories 1973.*

“The Hit.”
in William Kittredge and Steven M. Krauzer, eds.
*Great Action Stories.*

“Boston’s Busing Disaster: After Ten Years, The Schools Are More Segregated Than Ever.”

“One-Man Gang: The Outrageous Career of Buddy Cianci, Mayor and Felon.”

“A Case of Chivas Regal.”
in Matthew J. Bruccoli and Richard Layman, eds.
*New Black Mask Quarterly, Number 1.*

“Mother’s Day.”

“Professor Richardson et al.: A New England Education.”

“Field of Broken Dreams.” 

“On Writing—Today in America.” 


“Where I Get My Ideas: A Veteran Novelist Walks You Through The Genesis and Writing of a Short Story To Demonstrate That Writers ‘Must Pay Attention At All Times.’” 

Later Novels

*Outlaws.*
Advanced uncorrected proof, signed copy.
Matthew J. and Arlyn Brucelli Collection of George V. Higgins.

*Impostors.*


*Two Complete Novels by George V. Higgins: Cogan’s Trade and A Choice of Enemies.*
Matthew J. and Arlyn Brucelli Collection of George V. Higgins.

*Bomber’s Law.*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Brucelli.

*A Change of Gravity.*
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Brucelli.
.38 Special and quill pen flags from Higgins’s sailboat Scribbler, ca. 1990s.

“He’s Wanted for Murder, Robbery, Racketeering...”

The Agent.
First printing, inscribed to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

At End of Day.
Literary Lion

James Ross.
_They Don’t Dance Much._
Afterword by George V. Higgins. Inscribed by Higgins to Matthew J. Bruccoli.

Hugo Davenport.
“Novel Choice For the Best of U.S. Books.”
_The Friends of Eddie Coyle_ was named by _Observer_ as one of the top 20 American novels of the twentieth century.

Robert B. Parker.
_Taming A Sea-Horse._
Inscribed copy to George V. Higgins: “George, Nobody does it better, RBP.”

John Snow.
“The Man With the Golden Ear.”

NYPL Literary Lion Medal, 1990.

Brian Doyle.
“My Lunch With George.”

Robert Pinsky to George V. Higgins after reading _Sandra Nichols Found Dead._
Autographed letter, signed, June 13, 1996.

David Mamet.
“The Humble Genre Novel, Sometimes Full of Genius.”

The first sentence reads: “For the past 30 years the greatest novelists writing in English have been genre writers: John le Carré, George Higgins and Patrick O’Brien.”

_The Easiest Thing In the World: The Uncollected Fiction of George V. Higgins._
Matthew J. Bruccoli, ed.
First printing. Gift of Matthew J. Bruccoli.