

2012 Thomas Jefferson Award Recipient: Professor Joy Kasson Citation read by Professor Sue Estroff

The Thomas Jefferson Award celebrates a first among equals; one of our colleagues whose qualities of person, scholarly practice and beneficence bring her to our attention; whose attributes we link to the fortunately enigmatic and prodigious Jefferson. He once proclaimed, "Do you want to know who you are? Don't ask. Act! Action will delineate and define you." We know who Joy Kasson is and thus bestow this expression of our gratitude that she is our colleague and admiration for her scholarly reach and her quiet ferocity for learning, remembering, and community.

Professor Kasson received her BA with honors in American History and Literature from Radcliffe College in 1966 [of which she is quite proud—that Radcliffe appears on her C.V. and not Harvard]. She was then awarded both a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and Fulbright Scholar before beginning graduate study. She completed the PhD at Yale University in American Studies in 1972, making her one of the first scholars in the nation to hold a PhD in this new discipline, and then joined our ranks in 1971 as an instructor in the Department English. She persevered during those early years with the grace and dignity we know so well, asserting her rights and intellect as an academic and a professional during a period when women were not expected to go to college, except to earn their M.R.S.

Joy won her first teaching award in 1985, named for Katherine Kennedy Carmichael. Since then she has been recognized with Tanner (1991) and Johnston (2002) awards for teaching, the Bowman and Gordon Gray Chair for Distinguished Teaching (1992-1995), the Max Chapman Family Fellowship (1998) and most recently the inaugural award for mentoring from the Women's Leadership Council (2006). For 4 decades, she has captivated and intellectually nourished her students, our students, and her colleagues. [Well I remember the first time I met Professor Kasson. It was a dissertation committee she chaired for a medical humanities graduate fellow who was teaching medical students in our department—the beachhead for humanities and social science in the school of medicine. I was thrilled to find the breadth of scholarship and intellect, the curiosity and disciplinary trespass, and the pleasure with which Joy Kasson nourished and guided this young scholar. It was then that her gentle demeanor, twinkle in the eye, razor sharp insight, and thoroughly composed direction of the committee made an indelible impression.]

"There is not a sprig of grass that shoots uninteresting to me," declared Thomas Jefferson—a description most befitting Joy Kasson. She reads closely and insightfully the icons of past and present, examines how we shape and visually represent who we are and what we celebrate, and illuminates the innate, often shadowed connections between our heroines and heroes and the sentiments and rhythms of then and now. Joy Kasson has mastered the art of presenting rigorous academic work in a popular fashion that is engaging without descending into platitudes. Joy Kasson is the current Andrew W. Mellon Distinguished Scholar for Carolina Performing Arts and later this fall will deliver the E.M. Adams lecture in the College, and the Program in Humanities and Human Values. She was elected as a

Fellow of the American Antiquarian Society in 2011, and as a member of the Society of American Historians in 2001.

Her stewardship in guiding the fledgling Curriculum in American Studies to national and international recognition and department status in 2008 is a testament to the power of her intellectual creativity and adventure, as well as her wisdom and impatient patience with institutional process. As chair of that Department for the past decade, she took on the toughest job on this campus—leading and building in a time of scarcity. Joy is as foundational and sustaining to the Institute of Arts and Humanities and the National Humanities Center as the buildings within which they reside. [My personal favorite: “The Gilded and Gritty” seminar for high school teachers]. Her reach goes well beyond our landscape to Kings College, the National University of Singapore, the Smithsonian, our undergraduate program in London, and to secondary schools through the National Humanities Faculty in North Carolina, California, Illinois, Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, Kentucky, and Washington. Durham Academy, The Duke Center for Documentary Studies, and Reynolda House Museum are also beneficiaries of Joy Kasson’s guidance and commitment. She has, in Jefferson’s observation, considered herself a kind of public property because she assumes a public trust. She debunks the notion that engaged humanities scholars and scholarship are oxymorons.

One of the best kept secrets of our faculty is the high prevalence of robust and heartfelt citizenship, on and off the campus. There is among us a cultural practice of unassuming, often unannounced, generosity, of commitments made and kept, and of contributions made for their own sake and for the wellbeing of others—not for a line on a CV, or to fulfill personal ambition. Joy Kasson personifies this kind of chronic beneficence. She has served the University of North Carolina Press in various capacities since 1994, most recently as Chair of the Board. The Morehead Foundation, Burch Programs, this council, the Program in Humanities and Human Values, the Johnston Center, and the Ackland have all benefitted from her attention and energy. [During my tenure as faculty chair, I relied upon and was fed by Joy’s presence and rapt attention at every meeting of this council, I have never encountered her on or off campus when she did not lead off with a campus concern, or considered critique of a current controversy.] As a campus citizen she is a passionate and principled advocate for deeply held principles, is legendary for her ability to ask hard questions in a non-confrontational manner, for reminding us of our obligations to each other, and with gentle force, prodding us to be our best selves. She artfully blends diplomacy and directness, commentary that is compassionate and compelling—able to reach even the most skeptical trustee or administrator with her candor and authenticity. Her discrete generosity extends even to saving a colleague from the embarrassment of choosing the wrong fork at an important dinner.

Annie Dillard once observed that “The trick of reason is to get the imagination to seize the actual world—if only from time to time.” She was exhorting us to imagine with our surrounds, not apart from them. To center our senses and sensibilities in the here and now, seasoned with symbols, sentiments, and curiosities. For seizing our actual world in so many ways, we honor Joy Kasson as the recipient of The Thomas Jefferson Award for 2012.

