

Mary Catherine Montague UA Class of 1980



Mary Catherine Montague, UA Class of 1980, died in November 2007 after a long battle with cancer. Her friends and family have established a memorial fund in her honor, to purchase books for the Ursuline library.

Many bookworms have attended Ursuline over the past century. A select few may have read as many books as Mary did. But I dare say none have read more.

Mary could always be found with a novel tucked into her pile of notebooks and binders. In her free mods between classes, she often could be seen sitting cross-legged on the floor in a quiet corner of the school, working her way through “just one more chapter” before her next class began.

She was an honor student who took several AP classes, achieved a high GPA, and earned National Merit recognition. But on days when other students would be cramming for an English lit exam, she would be confident that she knew her Milton or Dickens well enough, and might just as likely read a Lord Peter Wimsey mystery in the minutes before the test as she would review her class notes. After she finished memorizing her lists and formulas for a biology or chemistry final, she would relax by reading one of her many beloved science fiction books. And while other students would sit in the cafeteria during breaks, paging through *Seventeen* or *Young Miss* to get ideas for a dress for the Sophomore Dance, Mary would more likely be sitting on the floor in the hall by the teachers’ lounge, finding her inspiration in a Georgette Heyer romance.

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She read classics for fun too, as well as obscure books by authors of such peculiar names that I never would have believed they existed had I not seen them written on the paperback spines peering out between the school-issued tomes in Mary's stack of textbooks.

Our friendship pre-dated our years together at Ursuline. She grew up with me in Greenhills. Our dads worked together at GE, our moms occasionally played bridge together, and Mary and I attended Our Lady of the Rosary Elementary School together (where she raced through the Nancy Drew books in the library so quickly that she had to turn to the Hardy Boys, becoming the only girl I knew to work her way through both complete mystery collections).

Always a tomboy, Mary fell out of a tree in 6th grade, and broke both her wrists. Since the casts on her hands curtailed her ability to wield a comb, she decided to lop off her long 1970's-style hair. She liked her new easy-care pixie cut so much that she kept that short hairstyle for the rest of her life.

All those books Mary read peppered her vocabulary. If you're reading this but didn't know her well, you might remember her best for the odd words she often would include in her sentences when she answered a question in class, or the unusual phrases she sometimes would utter that she had picked up from English drawing room comedies from the 1950s. Mary also sang in the Glee Club, participated in the Photography Club, contributed occasional articles to the school newspaper, and was a charter member of UA's short-lived pre-Perestroika Russian Club.

We rode lots of buses together. Almost every day for four years, we sat beside each other on a schoolbus between Greenhills and Blue Ash. We also boarded chartered buses together on Community Learning Week trips to Washington DC, Quebec and Montreal. My other friends and I teasingly kept a running tally of how many novels Mary went through on our long return trip home to Cincinnati from Quebec City. That's actually how I usually picture her in my memory: sitting on a bus and reading a book.

After high school, Mary went to Ohio State, then moved to Texas when her family resettled there. She worked in a number of different libraries and bookstores throughout her 45 years.

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*We'll look back on these days,
When we've grown older and changed our ways,
But we'll always remember the faces and names,
They never change.*

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So went the opening lines of our Class of '80 Ring-Day Song, written by Amy Yasbeck. Looking back on those days at Ursuline, I'm really not too surprised by how my friends turned out.

I probably could have guessed pretty accurately 28 years ago which ones of us would have stayed in Cincinnati, and which of us would have left; who would become the soccer mom, who would be the divorcée; which girl would end up with a houseful of kids, and which would have a houseful of cats. I'm not even surprised that Amy, so talented and pretty and charming at 17 would grow up to be a movie and TV star, or that our classmate Julie Isphording would become Cincinnati's own personal fitness guru. But I never would have imagined that the 14-year-old girl sitting beside me on the bus on my first day at Ursuline, with her big glasses and short hair and sci-fi novel packed in her purse – the only girl I knew going into high school – would be my first friend to die.

I still remember that day in senior year when my group of friends drove up to Canada together, and Mary told us the story of *Jane Eyre* (it had never been assigned to us in English class, but Mary had read it anyway, of course). We all loved the part about the mad wife in the attic. But now looking back through the book, I find myself pausing over the passage where young Jane's best school chum Helen Burns is dying of some ghastly Victorian malady, yet takes time out of her coughing fit to comfort Jane:

“I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day ... my mind is at rest ... by dying young I shall escape great sufferings ... I believe; I have faith: I am going to God.”

– Tracy (Reimer) Neis, Class of 1980

If you would like to help contribute some books to Ursuline in Mary's honor, to benefit the current and future students and readers extraordinaire of the school, please write out your check to “UA Library,” write “Mary Montague Memorial Fund” on the memo line, and mail it to Julie Burwinkel, Ursuline Academy, 5535 Pfeiffer Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45242.