

# Remembering Paul Zindel

Don Gallo

**W**e've lost a giant in the field of books for teens. An incredibly talented person. A nutty, fun-loving, kid-loving guy. A brilliant thinker.

*The New York Times* obituary focused on his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Effect of Man-in-the Moon Marigolds*, which was, of course, no small contribution to theater. But they minimized what we in the world of Young Adult Literature know so well: his ability to write novels and stories that teenagers were drawn to, especially the lonely and slightly weird kids just like Paul had been as a teen.

In recent years some educators and librarians were disappointed that Paul's work did not match what they felt was the quality of his earlier works, especially *The Pigman*. Novels about monsters beneath Stonehenge, raptors in the Southwest, and giant rats devouring people around New York Harbor are not the kinds of books most educated adults favor. But Paul was never thinking about educated adults when he redirected his writing. He was thinking about kids—especially those middle school boys—who usually don't like to read, who have never gotten excited by anything they had to read for school, who have never read a book cover to cover. They certainly read *The Doom Stone*, and *Raptor*, and *Rat*. Devoured them (a play on words that Paul would have appreciated). More recently he abandoned the monsters and produced several thrillers about a pair of teenage detectives—the P.C. Hawke Mysteries—a series of rather brief, high interest-easy reading paperback novels ideal for high school readers who might have trouble getting through *The Pigman*.

Paul never lost his touch. He could write for any audience—plays for the Broadway stage, fast-moving adventures for the movies, mini-series for television, picture books for children, and high interest-easy reading novels for reluctant and disabled readers. He always wrote, he said, “for those who need you and are waiting hungrily for any comforting, exciting light.”

I never realized how incredibly brilliant Paul Zindel was until I spent several months interviewing him via e-mail for the Authors4Teens website, an interview that turned out to be the longest and most complete he ever gave anyone, he said. His descriptions of his thinking and writing processes were stunning. No other writer comes close to how Paul created a story.

Another thing about Paul Zindel was his kindness and his humility. Here was a man who helped shape what is today's literature for teens, a man who received just about every major literary award there is, including the ALAN Award for Contributions to Young Adult Literature and the Margaret A. Edwards Award for his lifetime achievements, a man who partied with Hollywood celebrities (Shelley Winters, Walter Matthau, Keanu Reeves, Paul Newman, Paul McCartney, Barbra Streisand) and knew all the important people in the publishing world, but who could also face an auditorium (or cafeteria) filled with several hundred squirming seventh and eighth graders and have them screaming with delight at his antics and his bizarre stories. Then he would chat one-on-one with those same kids—and their teachers and librarians—as if they were the most important individuals in the world. And he loved every minute of it. He loved to tell stories to a live audience as much as he loved to write for them. He loved speaking at schools and conferences. He loved creating. He loved performing.

While the lights have gone out on his zany performances, Paul Zindel will always shine through the many books and memories he left us.

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