

# ***Umberto Eco, 84, Best-Selling Academic Who Navigated Two Worlds, Dies***



Umberto Eco in Bologna, Italy, last year. As a semiotician, Mr. Eco studied signs and symbols. Credit...Roberto Serra/Iguana Press, via Getty Images

**By Jonathan Kandell**

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Umberto Eco, an Italian scholar in the arcane field of semiotics who became the author of best-selling novels, notably the blockbuster medieval mystery “The Name of the Rose,” died on Friday at his home in Milan. He was 84. No cause was given.

As a semiotician, Mr. Eco sought to interpret cultures through their signs and symbols — words, religious icons, banners, clothing, musical scores, even cartoons — and published more than 20 nonfiction books on these subjects while teaching at the University of Bologna, Europe’s oldest university.

But rather than segregate his academic life from his popular fiction, Mr. Eco infused his seven novels with many of his scholarly preoccupations.

In bridging these two worlds, he was never more successful than he was with “The Name of the Rose,” his first novel, which was originally published in Europe in 1980. It sold more than 10 million copies in about 30 languages. (A 1986 [Hollywood adaptation](#) directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring Sean Connery received only a lukewarm reception.)

The book is set in a 14th-century Italian monastery where monks are being murdered by their co-religionists bent on concealing a long-lost philosophical treatise by Aristotle. Despite devoting whole chapters to discussions of Christian theology and heresies, Mr. Eco managed to enthrall a mass audience with the book, a rollicking detective thriller.

His subsequent novels — with protagonists like a clairvoyant crusader in the Middle Ages, a shipwrecked adventurer in the 1600s and a 19th-century physicist — also demanded that readers absorb heavy doses of semiotic ruminations along with compelling fictional tales.

Able to deliver lectures in five modern languages, as well as in Latin and classical Greek, Mr. Eco crisscrossed the Atlantic for academic conferences, book tours and celebrity cocktail parties. Impish, bearded and a chain-smoker, he enjoyed bantering over cheap wine with his students late into the night at taverns in Bologna.

He and his German-born wife, Renate Ramge, an architecture and arts teacher, kept apartments in Paris and Milan and a 17th-century manor once owned by the Jesuits in the hills near Rimini, on the Adriatic Sea. They had two children, Stefano, a television producer in Rome, and Carlotta, an architect in Milan.

Umberto Eco was born on Jan. 5, 1932, in Alessandria, an industrial town in the Piedmont region in northwest Italy. His father, Giulio, was an accountant at a metals firm; his mother, Giovanna, was an office worker there.

As a child, Umberto spent hours every day in his grandfather’s cellar, reading through the older man’s eclectic collection of Jules Verne, Marco Polo and Charles Darwin and adventure comics. After World War II, Mr. Eco joined a Catholic youth organization and rose to become its national leader. He resigned in 1954 during protests against the conservative policies of Pope Pius XII. But Mr. Eco maintained a strong attachment to the church, writing his 1956 doctoral thesis at the University of Turin on St. Thomas Aquinas.

He went on to teach philosophy and then semiotics at the University of Bologna. He also gained fame in Italy for his weekly columns on popular culture and politics for L'Espresso, one of the country's leading magazine.

But it was the publication of "The Name of the Rose" that vaulted Mr. Eco to global renown. The monk-detective of the novel, William of Baskerville, was named after one of Sherlock Holmes's cases, "The Hound of the Baskervilles." The novel is narrated by a young novice who accompanies William through his investigation at the murder-prone monastery and acts as a medieval Dr. Watson.

[...]

Mr. Eco received Italy's highest literary award, the Premio Strega; was named a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur by the French government, and was an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

While he continued to make his scholarly peers uncomfortable with his pop culture celebrity, Mr. Eco saw no contradiction in his dual status. "I think of myself as a serious professor who, during the weekend, writes novels," he said.