

Hershel Parker
1935-2026

Hershel Parker, an American university professor distinguished for his two-volume biography of Herman Melville, has died at his home in Morro Bay on June 19, 2026, at the age of ninety.

The son of Lloyd and Martha Costner Parker, he once described himself as “a Depression Okie, born near Comanche late in 1935,” to parents whose ancestors go back to England, Scotland, Germany, and the Choctaw and Cherokee nations. The family were poor, often itinerant, his schooling disrupted with each move. Essentially self-taught, he dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade to take a job as a railroad telegrapher. At one point early on while reading Shakespeare, he “resolved not to leave a passage until I thought I understood it,” a discipline he carried through the remainder of his long life as critic and scholar. After taking correspondence courses from three universities, he graduated from Lamar University with highest honors, earning a Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship to Northwestern University, where he studied with the eminent Melville scholar Harrison Hayford, under whose guidance he earned an MA and a Ph.D.

Parker’s first major scholarly work was as Associate General Editor on *The Writings of Herman Melville*, a massive undertaking funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities to provide definitive texts of Melville’s works along with extensive background notes and historical introductions. It was published by Northwestern University Press and took more than fifty years to complete. Parker co-edited the first thirteen volumes and served as General Editor of the final two. He also edited or co-edited Norton Critical Editions of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence Man*, beloved by students and teachers for their corrected texts and ancillary materials, including illustrations, maps, engravings, diagrams, background and source materials. Parker also edited the first ever one-volume edition of Melville’s complete poetry, *Herman Melville: Complete Poems*, published by the Library of America in 2019.

In 1984 Parker wrote *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Northwestern University Press), a groundbreaking work that set new standards for the theory and the practice of textual criticism. Although controversial on publication, the book has come to be regarded as a classic of literary theory and practical criticism; its principles, particularly its insistence upon research into authorial intention and the history of the texts and revisions, are now widely employed across a variety of literary studies, including biblical, classic, medieval, and modern literature, and so acknowledged by the writers of these studies.

Since the sixties Parker had been researching what became his magnum opus: *Herman Melville: A Biography, Vol. 1, 1819-1851* and *Vol. 2, 1851-1891*, published in 1996 and 2002 respectively (Johns Hopkins University Press). The first volume was one of two finalists for the 1997 Pulitzer Prize in Biography; and each volume won the highest award in its category from the Association of American Publishers. “Parker’s first magisterial volume of his projected two-volume work casts every earlier biography into

shadows,” wrote *Library Journal*; and it called the second volume a “definitive work” that, “together with the first volume, is essential for every library.” Harrison Hayford has called “Hershel Parker, quite simply, the most important Melville scholar of all time.”

Parker’s teaching career included stints at the University of Illinois (Urbana), Northwestern University, the University of Southern California, and finally as the H. Fletcher Brown Professor of American Literature at the University of Delaware. He reached many more students through his work as editor of the 1820-1865 section of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

In 1998 Parker retired from teaching and moved with his wife to Morro Bay. There he gloried in his daily beach run, and reveled in the beautiful views, clean air and perfect weather. And there he completed his last works on Melville and began researching and publishing on American history. In 2024, he published *An Okie’s Racial Reckonings*, his last book, in which he examines his ancestors’ history on race.

Several of his books are available at the Morro Bay Public Library.

Hershel Parker is survived by his wife of 46 years, Heddy Ann Richter, two daughters from an earlier marriage, Alison Parker and Sabrina Parker, and four grandchildren.