Mike Cavanagh was a well-known poet and writer, known for his contributions to the literary world. He was active in the Poweshiek County Democrats and taught history at the University of Iowa. His poetry was published in various journals, including The Iowa Review, The Missouri Review, and The Southern Review. Mike's dissertation, published in 1971, was titled "The Development of the English Novel in the Eighteenth Century." He received his PhD from the University of Iowa in 1972.

Mike was married to Elizabeth, and they had two children, John and Mary. He was also a dedicated teacher and writer, and his work has been widely published and recognized. Mike passed away on December 28, 2017, after a long battle with cancer. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, and their children, John and Mary.
William Michael Cavanagh, 74

Grinnell College from 1971 to 2005. He taught the works of Milton, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bishop, W.B. Yeats, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, W.H. Auden and many more. He loved introducing students to poetry. Thinking that Grinnell needed a poetry writing course, he invented one in the 1970s and taught it until the mid-1990s. He was also the first professor to teach Joyce’s Ulysses, long regarded as too difficult for undergraduates. In addition, Mike now taught in the now-fabled eight-credit humanities courses with Don Smith, Morris Parslow, Beryl Clothfelter, and Catherine Frazier.

On sabbatical in 1978, Mike was the Daniel Kohlsland Professor of Humanities at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. In 1985 and 1991, Mike taught on the Grinnell-in-London program. In London he taught courses about the literature of the two world wars and courses in literature and landscape. He taught Ulysses twice in Dublin, making his students walk almost every inch of the Dublin that Joyce recorded and evoked in his novel. And he made sure they read every page. In the summers of 1997 and 2000 he taught American and Irish poetry at Nanjing University in China. In 2003 he was named the Orville and Mary Patterson Rott Professor of Literature.

Mike’s dissertation for his PhD was about Archibald MacLeish’s poem Conquistador as an allegory of Roosevelt’s New Deal. He later published articles on MacLeish, Seamus Heaney, Dante, Milton, John Crowe Ransom and W.B. Yeats. In 2009, he published a book at Seamus Heaney, Professing Poetry. The scholar Rand Brandes said it was “a book many of us have been waiting for, a book on Heaney’s prose that will enable the next generation of Heaney students and scholars to discover new constellations of Heaney’s universe.” Mike finished a book on Milton in 2016.

In addition to scholarship, Mike devoted the last decades of his career to writing and publishing poetry. He had poems published in journals that included The Sewanee Review, The South Carolina Review, the Free State Review, Aurorean, Rattle, Eclipse, the Heartland Review, The South Dakota Review, Lyrical Iowa, among others. He spent almost two decades teaching himself Dante’s Commedia in Italian. Much of his poetry strives after Dante’s simple style and manner. Mike considered his grandchildren his greatest poems.

Mike was active for the Poweshiek County Democrats. He helped teach reading to 1st graders at Bailey Park elementary school and was a volunteer for Kids Against Hunger. He was a friend of the Drake Library. For many years he managed the Grinnell College Public Events Committee. He brought many renowned performers to Grinnell and he had a ball entertaining them.