

# A&M professor successful with novels, fiction stories

Campbell enjoys role as mentor to students

By Tracy Staton  
Reporter

A group of 11 students is seated at a large table in a local restaurant. Since few of them are acquainted, uncertainty lingers in the air. They have been brought together by a man who hopes to cultivate their interest in writing fiction.

Dr. Bob Campbell, associate professor of English at Texas A&M, sits at the center of one side of the table. He plans to start the discussion by talking about rejection slips.

He opens a manila folder, brings out three types of rejection letters, and begins to dissect each phrase.

As he explains the shades of meaning he finds, the students start to relax.

The creative writing teacher has received many such letters since he began his career in 1967, but not all responses to his submissions have been negative; he has published three novels and numerous short stories under the pen name of Ewing Campbell.

His most recent work is an anthology of stories entitled, "Piranesi's Dream."

Several students begin asking questions — about agents, cover letters, thank-you notes — and Campbell answers them eagerly. He enjoys his role as mentor to aspiring writers.

"I like helping young people who are serious about writing, who feel they have something to say," Campbell says. "I enjoy what I am doing and I believe in it — that is, I believe in the end result, which is the writing."

Fortunately, Campbell's attitudes about teaching aren't reflective of his stories.

"I tend to write gloomy fiction," he says. "My work is not sunny and dry."

A contributing factor to the melancholy tone of Campbell's work may be his childhood, which he spent in a city that stifled him. Another factor could be his college education, which was sporadic because of the jobs he had to take to pay for his schooling.

Although he served two years in the Army, no government funds were available to help pay for his education.

He quit school several times to work until he earned enough money to return.

"I took whatever type of work I could get," Campbell says. "I shingled roofs, unloaded boxcars and worked on the docks."

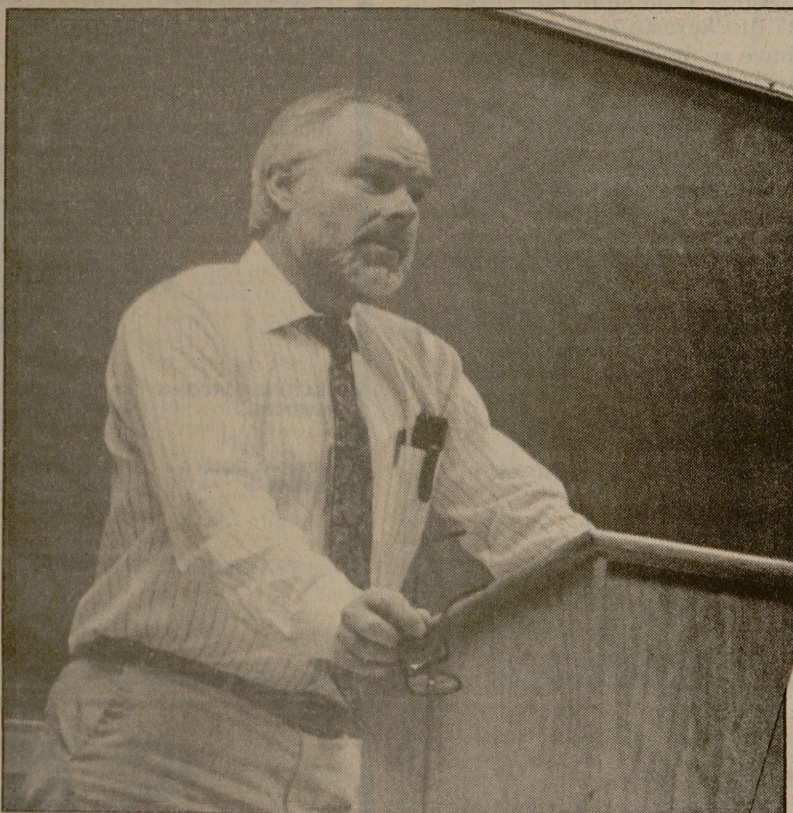
These various jobs appear in his fiction.

One of his novels, "Rincon Trip-tych," uses material from his experiences as a longshoreman in Corpus Christi.

"September Crickets," a short story from "Piranesi's Dream," is set in the hotel Southernaire, where he worked in Hattiesburg.

Campbell's books adorn the shelves of libraries across the state and nation, but not in the Sterling C. Evans Library.

The writer says he is better known



Dr. Bob Campbell lectures his creative-writing class. Photo by Tracy Staton

nationally and internationally than locally.

He cites the Texas literary establishment's emphasis on Texan tradition as the reason for his lack of recognition.

"People in Texas focus only on Texas and don't realize how this single-mindedness looks from the outside," he says. "Texans are so narcissistic that they are unaware how absurd these attitudes are."

These attitudes could be stifling Texas literature, he says.

"The state literary establishment studies Texas writing as if it had no connection with the outside world," he explains. "It makes the writing parochial and incestuous, feeding on itself instead of allowing itself to be influenced by the best international writers."

On a smaller scale, the English department at A&M is guilty of the same type of prejudice, Campbell says.

"We should be encouraging students to take every opportunity they can to expose themselves to important works," he contends. "However, the modern languages department wanted to offer a course on 'Don Quixote' during the spring semester of 1986."

"The English department objected because some people felt the course would be imposing on the department's turf." The department has no specialist on Cervantes (author of 'Quixote') and does not teach the novel as part of any other course.

Several novels that were part of a literature class Campbell taught during the fall of 1986 were heavily influenced by "Don Quixote," he says.

If his students had studied the novel prior to his class, he says, the course could have been more stimulating.

"The more background a student has, the more knowledge he can bring to a class," he says. "When students are better students, we are better teachers."

In addition to his creative writing course, Campbell teaches freshman composition and literature classes and approaches every class as a learning experience.

"Part of my challenge as a teacher is to learn from my classes," he explains. "I am continually looking for knowledge, especially in my creative writing course, because it is of greater interest to me."

Because he enjoys learning, Campbell sees himself as a student, rather than as a teacher.

"Just as some people see themselves as fat although they are slender," he says, "my self-image is that I am a student instead of a teacher."

He is enacting this self-perception by taking a conversational Spanish course offered at no charge to the University faculty.

"I am just as excited as a young kid," the 4-year-old says with a smile. "My goal is to be fluent in Spanish by the end of the semester."

This goal is not far from Campbell's reach.

He has co-translated a book from Spanish to English and has lived for extended periods in Mexico.

He still visits the country occasionally, traveling most often to a colonial village called San Miguel de Allende.

During one of his trips to the vil-

See Campbell, page 12

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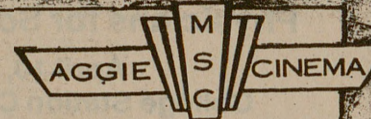
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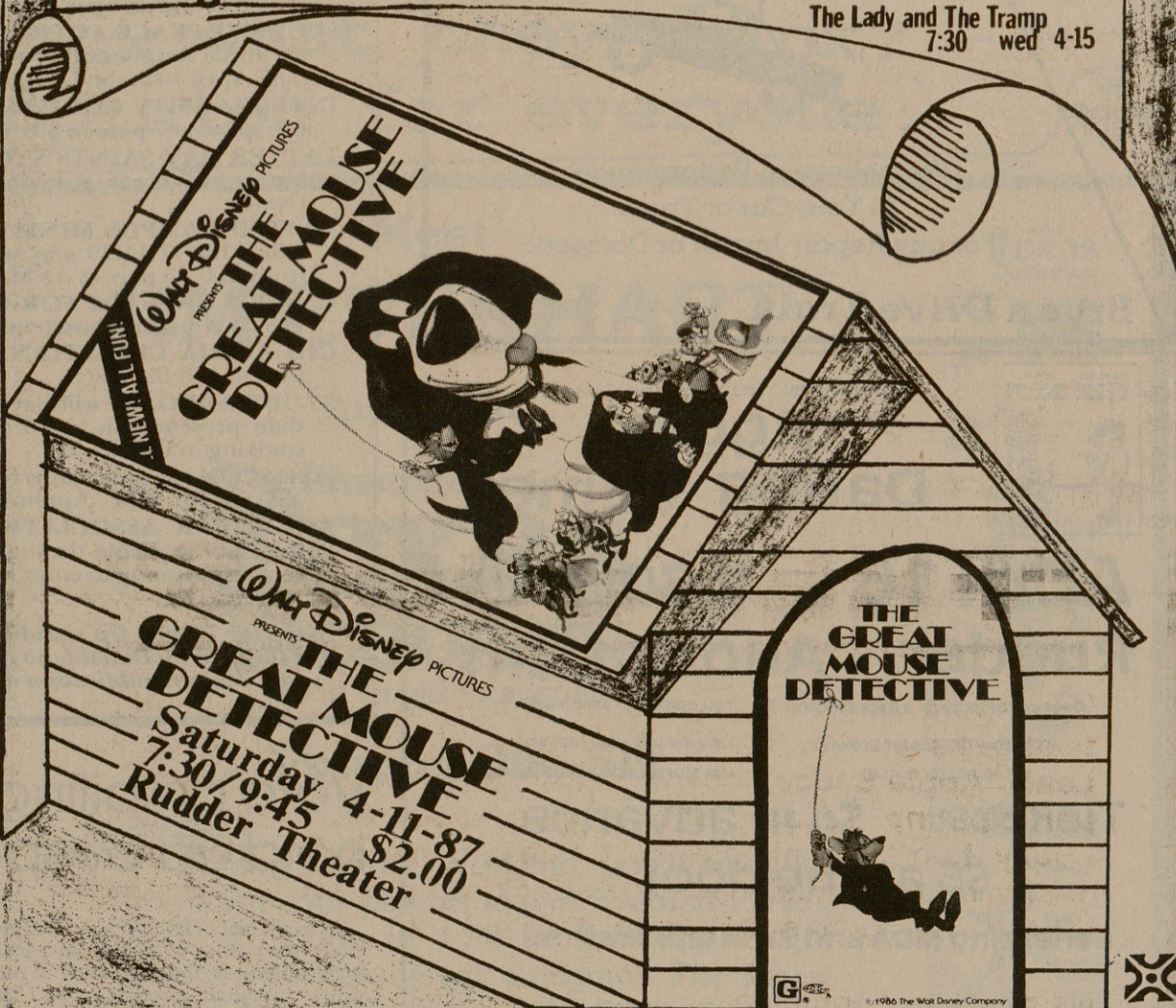


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