

A&M professor speaks of love for Middle Ages

By Ron Pippin
Reporter

Robert Boenig is a Renaissance man in the true spirit of the term. The 40-year-old assistant professor of English at Texas A&M would feel right at home among the poets, musicians, noblemen and knights of the Middle Ages.

However, if he were to return to that time period, he would need to change out of his purple plaid shirt, green silk tie, tan pants and tennis shoes into something more medieval.

But would a real Renaissance man choose Arnold Schwarzenegger as his favorite actor?

"He's my hero," Boenig says. "He's such a throwback to the Middle Ages. If you had to make a movie of Beowulf, Schwarzenegger is the only actor you could cast in that role."

Boenig has been teaching English since 1974, concentrating primarily on the literature of the medieval and Renaissance periods. He began as a teaching assistant at Rutgers University in New Jersey while working on his Ph.D. Boenig says he has been interested in books and literature for as long as he can remember.



Dr. Robert Boenig

"When I was a kid living in Hoboken, N.J., I could see the Empire State Building from my kitchen window," Boenig says. "I remember that famous week in the 1950's when the Million Dollar Movie was showing King Kong seven nights in a row. I watched it every night, and one night I rushed to the kitchen to see if King Kong was really standing on the Empire State Building, swatting down airplanes. That was my first lesson in literature, the difference between real life and a story."

After teaching at Rutgers for seven years, Boenig spent from 1981-1983 as an assistant professor of English at Penn State University. Following a return to Rutgers in 1983 as the associate director of the writing program, he brought his wife Loran and his unique classroom atmosphere to Texas A&M in 1986.

Tressha White, a senior journalism major from Houston, took Boenig's world literature class in the spring of 1986.

"He didn't try to intimidate us like some professors do, but he wanted us to say what we felt if we could support it," White says. "I had a lot of fun in his class. He was always doing neat things to get us involved."

That's the way Boenig wants his classes to be — entertaining, with a lot of class participation. For instance, when Boenig took a position as visiting lecturer in English at Purdue University in 1987, he taught a course on the history of the English language.

"That can be a very dull subject," Boenig says. "One of the things we had to discuss was how the Vikings invaded England and brought a lot of their Norse words into the English language. So I described the invasions as if they were incursions of Viking motorcycle gangs, driving with leather jackets and new words tattooed to their arms and bellies. If people laugh they feel more comfortable. Learning can't happen unless you're comfortable."

Boenig also strives to give his students more than just English.

"I try to give my students a more stereoscopic view," says Boenig. "One of the strengths of English is you have to learn a lot about different things, because authors of different time periods had as their subject their own world and their own outlooks in history, philosophy, art, music and this and that."

Perhaps it was his dedication to learning when he attended college that makes Boenig so thorough in his teaching.

Boenig attended Rutgers as an undergraduate from 1966-1970. He was a Chubb Foundation and Lane Cooper Scholar for four years. He became a

member of Phi Beta Kappa his junior year and graduated summa cum laude.

After his undergraduate work, Boenig attended Princeton Seminary for three years and specialized in Greek.

"I learned how to teach at Princeton Seminary more than anywhere else," he says. "You had to take classes in counseling, psychology, Greek and theology. One of the reasons I entered the Seminary was I didn't want to go straight from college to graduate school in the same discipline."

In 1973, he returned to Rutgers to pursue his doctorate in medieval English literature. In 1974, Boenig received the Walter Russel Graduate Scholarship, and he graduated with his Ph.D. in 1978.

Boenig reads eight languages: Old English, Middle English, Latin, Greek, German, Hebrew, Syriac and, of course, modern English.

"They're all dead languages except German and modern English," Boenig says. "I've learned Hebrew and Syriac, which very few people know and almost no one speaks."

"I've always been interested in things that people aren't interested in. To know something about things that are arcane always appealed to me."

For instance, Boenig is interested in music, but not just ordinary music.

"I build and play musical instruments," he says. "I have a collection of about 50 or 60 instruments — about half of which I made — and most are medieval or Renaissance." Boenig says the lute, which is a medieval instrument resembling a guitar, is his favorite instrument to listen to and play.

"I've also built and played crumhorns, which is a late medieval woodwind," Boenig says. "Its sound can be best described as that of an electric kazoo."

Boenig says he first got interested in

medieval music when he first heard it in 1972.

"I was ready to enter graduate school to study medieval or Renaissance literature," he says. "But my liking for the music is independent of my liking of the literature. All classical orchestra sounds basically alike. If you listen to a consort of Renaissance musicians you hear a wider range of different sounds — comic, serious, pretty, sad, loud and raucous."

Although music plays an important role in Boenig's life, he spends the majority of his spare time writing.

"I am currently working on a mystery novel set in the Middle Ages," Boenig says. "I have about 70 pages written, and I don't have it worked out completely."

Boenig says that other than two or three poems and the mystery novel, his writings are primarily literary criticisms.

"We have to write criticism to survive in this profession," Boenig says with a smirk. "I don't do it to stay alive, but because I can hopefully see things about a work that other people haven't seen before."

Boenig says he believes that too many people write just for the sake of writing.

"There are too many people who want to be writers and poets who have nothing to say at all," Boenig says.

He is the associate editor of *Studia Mystica*, a literary journal devoted to the study of spirituality in the arts. Boenig has written the majority of his criticism on nature and the roles spiritual matters play throughout our lives and literature.

"I'm interested in literature for mystical reasons," he says. "When I read a work it affects me emotionally. Literature is mythical and it helps you understand yourself. The mystical approach to literature gives that myth a reality, and the boundaries between text and personal experience disappear."

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