

# InClass

A spotlight on faculty and their work

## Lost in La Mancha

Why a 400-year-old novel remains one of Edward Friedman's—and the world's—favorites. By PAUL KINGSBURY, BA'80

**I**N 2002 THE NORWEGIAN Book Clubs asked 100 of the world's leading writers to name the 10 "best and most central works in world literature." Literary heavyweights from 54 nations weighed in, including Salman Rushdie, Doris Lessing, Norman Mailer, Nadine Gordimer, Milan Kundera, John Irving and Carlos Fuentes.

The book that received the most votes? By a landslide, *Don Quixote*. The 17th-century Spanish novel by Miguel de Cervantes got 50 percent more votes than any other book mentioned.

The poll results were hardly shocking to the world's literati. Next to the Bible, *Don Quixote* is said to be the most published and most translated book in the world, and new printings continue to be published. In the past decade alone, despite more than 20 previous translations, new English versions have been issued by Norton, Penguin and HarperCollins.

*Don Quixote* has never been out of print since it first went on sale in January 1605. An immediate hit, the book was quickly reprinted in Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Italy, with the first English translation coming in 1612. So strong was the demand that Cervantes—who was 58 when it was published and had been an unsuccessful playwright until then—published a popular sequel in 1615, a year before his death. Since then, *Don Quixote* is generally understood to comprise both parts, which

are usually published together.

This year marks *Don Quixote*'s 400th anniversary. In Spain, where the book is venerated, public television has aired documentaries about it, celebrities have read the work aloud for audiences, and the government has even offered tax breaks to companies sponsoring *Don Quixote* events. In Venezuela, president Hugo Chavez printed 1 million copies at government expense to be handed out free

man, who organized the Vanderbilt *Quixote* symposium. "It's the Shakespeare of Spanish literature and of the Hispanic tradition," says the Vanderbilt professor of Spanish and comparative literature, a specialist on the Golden Age of Spanish literature from 1550 to 1700, as well as an acknowledged *Quixote* expert. "It's experimental, it's very full and rich and engaging. You never can quite get a grasp of it. It's also very, very funny."

Now 57, Friedman has been teaching it for more than 25 years and has read it more times than he can count—since he reads it anew each time he teaches a *Quixote* class, generally once a year. And yet he continues to find new things in it.

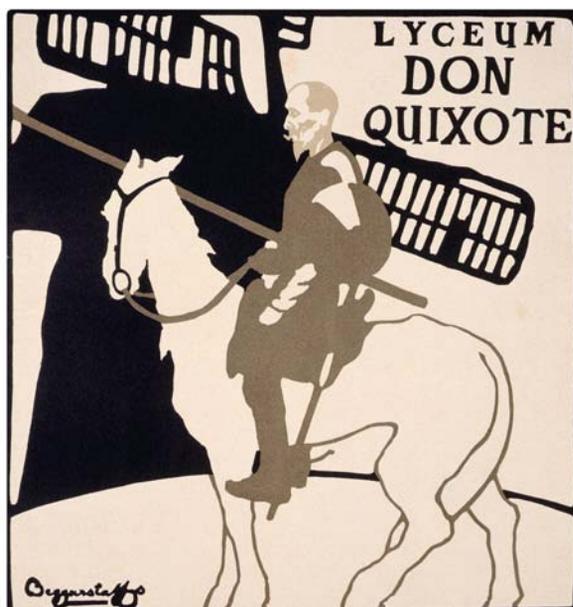
"People like me, who get to work on *Don Quixote* and teach it and hear people talk about it a lot, tend to idealize the text," he admits. "Because we sort of see everything there. And some would say that we see what we want to see. But I think it is there."

Friedman readily admits to being an unabashed fan of the book. He served as president of the Cervantes Society from 2001 to 2004. As he discusses *Don Quixote*, he talks about it

in a way that is both thought provoking and down-to-earth. He also radiates a genuine enthusiasm for his subject, combined with a welcoming manner.

"[Friedman] just has a gift for capturing your imagination," says colleague Victoria

*continued on page 84*



© CORBIS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

to the public. And across the world the book has sparked new academic publications and conferences, including a November 2004 symposium at Vanderbilt's Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities.

All of this continuing attention for the book comes as no surprise to Edward Fried-



**Edward Friedman**  
has been teaching  
*Don Quixote* for  
25 years.

**In Class** *continued from page 28*

Burrus, associate professor of Spanish. “He’s passionate about the field and about his teaching. He’s not one of those researchers whose intellectual curiosity is reserved just for himself. He wants to talk with other people and wants others to be as excited as he is.”

Friedman’s undergraduate Spanish classes on *Don Quixote* routinely fill up with 20 or more students, despite the novel’s daunting length of around 1,000 pages and the requirement, of course, to read it in Spanish.

“His *Quixote* course has been extremely popular. He really does want to guide students through it and make them love it as much as he does. And it works. The students are just thrilled with him and thrilled with the *Quixote*,” adds Burrus, who calls Friedman “certainly one of the most important figures in the United States in Golden Age Spanish literature.”

Friedman’s interest in Spanish literature dates back to his undergraduate days at the University of Virginia, followed by graduate work at Johns Hopkins, where he earned his Ph.D. He has been a professor of Spanish for more than 30 years now, having spent stints at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, Arizona State and Indiana University before arriving at Vanderbilt in 2000. Along the way he has written some 300 scholarly articles and reviews, and has authored several books, including two popular college textbooks on Spanish literature (one of them has long been used at Vanderbilt). When the Signet Classics paperback edition of *Don Quixote*, translated by Walter Starkie, was reissued in 2001 it included a new, user-friendly introduction by Friedman, which is well worth reading as a quick primer on *Don Quixote*.

The basic outline of *Don Quixote* is widely known—even to those who have never read it. *Don Quixote* tells the story of an elderly aristocrat who loses touch with reality after reading too many romanticized books about fearless knights and fair maidens. He sallies forth to right wrongs and rescue the oppressed, equipped with homemade helmet and armor, an old broken-down horse, and a good-natured, simple-minded peasant named Sancho Panza, who agrees to go along with the charade as his squire, because for all Sancho knows, Quixote might not be crazy after all.

This much is common knowledge, for Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have become pervasively iconic figures, celebrated in famous paintings by Picasso and Dali, in opera, ballet, musical theater, and in a 1972 Hollywood movie. Thanks to the book, the phrase “tilting at windmills” is understood across the Western world as shorthand for wasting one’s time fighting an imaginary foe or wrong. Likewise, we have the word “quixotic,” meaning “idealistically impractical.” So powerful is the symbolism of the notoriously erring knight-errant that we all feel we know him intuitively.

And yet the idealistic mission of Don Quixote is only one aspect of the book. Those who know only the musical theater production “Man of La Mancha” and its famous theme song, “The Impossible Dream,” know only a faint, romanticized outline of the story. As Friedman is quick to point out, the book has lasted and remained a world favorite not simply because Cervantes created unforgettable characters, but perhaps even more so because of the way in which Cervantes chose to tell his tale.

“One of the key elements of the *Quixote*,” says Friedman, “is that Cervantes is playing around with the idea of ‘fiction’ and ‘history.’ His work is clearly a fiction, but it’s claiming to be a true history. . . .

“Cervantes is really asking us to analyze how we construct stories and, by extension, history, and how we move from viewing something to perceiving it, and then to expressing it.”

Indeed, throughout the two parts of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes seems to delight in playing games with the reader about the nature of storytelling, truth and history. Early in Book 1, for example, Cervantes suggests that he is not the author of *Don Quixote* but merely someone who is recounting a translation of Don Quixote’s story written by an otherwise unknown Arab historian. Book 2 gains considerable storytelling complexity because Cervantes had an unusual problem after the publication of his runaway best seller: A rival author wrote a popular, counterfeit sequel to *Don Quixote*. Cervantes cleverly dealt with the problem of the competing sequel by making Quixote, Sancho and other characters in the tale fully aware not only of Cervantes’ Book 1 but also the false sequel. And so the two famous lunatics go tramping across Spain,

finding themselves constantly compared to the books about them and having to debate which stories are true and which aren’t.

“When you get this false sequel, it allows the literary games to become more complex,” Friedman explains. “Cervantes is closing the gap between art and life. In other words, life comes into the fiction, the fiction goes out into the real world, and then goes back into the fiction. . . .

“Cervantes in a way is saying: The novel can do all these things. It can tell a story. It can make you feel for the protagonist. It can give you a picture of what society was like at the time. It can also focus at the same time on the inner workings of literature and the creation of a literary text. It’s that process-product-product-process dialectic that I find fascinating.”

For such reasons, *Don Quixote* often is referred to as the first modern novel. In many ways it established, for the first time, a standard of storytelling complexity for future novelists to reckon with. Writers who followed Cervantes—from Laurence Sterne to Kurt Vonnegut—could not help but be influenced by his breaking down of the “fourth wall,” allowing readers to see the puppeteer pulling the characters’ strings and winking at them from behind the curtain.

But even though *Don Quixote* was revolutionary in its multilayered points of view and its blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction, Friedman notes that it did not appear in a vacuum. There were antecedents in fiction, such as idealistic pastoral novels and chivalric romances, and the picaresque novels—that is, tales of lower classes and anti-heroes, often told in the first person.

“There really was a tremendously rich narrative tradition in Europe,” he says, “and certainly in Spain before the realistic novels in England and France of the 18th and 19th centuries.”

Friedman’s teaching and research interests—which include Golden Age Spanish drama and the picaresque tales—often have focused on the connections between the literary precursors to Cervantes, particularly picaresque books, and books that were influenced by Cervantes. To that end, he is currently at work on a book-length study called *Cervantes in the Middle*. In it he discusses the ways in which picaresque tales influenced

*Don Quixote* and then, in turn, ways in which both the picaresque and *Don Quixote* influenced two modern Spanish writers who followed, Benito Perez Galdos and Miguel de Unamuno.

“One of the things I’m looking at is that from the moment realism became a strain in narrative writing, it seems to have been accompanied by what can be called ‘metafiction’ or self-consciousness—that is, the literature that talks about its process of writing and its relationship to the reader,” says Friedman. “It’s not the suspension of disbelief as is typical of realism, but is more the opposite of it. So if we associate realism with hiding its conventions and trying to make you pretend that its conventions aren’t there, this other kind of literature, metafiction, is really doing the opposite. It’s throwing those conventions in your face. I’m suggesting that this self-consciousness has been part of the realistic tradition in fiction from the very beginning.”

Eager to enlist more readers for *Don Quixote*, Friedman mentions several translations as being good, including Walter Starkie’s and recent versions by Edith Grossman and John Rutherford. But he fully understands that despite its reputation as a great work, *Don Quixote* “is not the easiest text in the world to get into.” He notes that when an 18th-century English translation was recently reissued, “some of the reviewers said that *Don Quixote* remains deadly to readers. So not everyone shares my enthusiasm.”

Still, he adds, “That’s why I love doing it in class, because I feel I can give people a little bit of the ammunition they need to get fired up and get into it. And once you get into it, I think it can really work for you.

“You’ve probably had classes and read certain texts that didn’t just entertain you but had an impact on future reading and in your way of thinking about the world. If any novel can do that to you, *Don Quixote* can. You’re never going to read a novel again that isn’t impacted by your reading of *Don Quixote*.”

And if someone needs to read it in class or prefaced by a good introduction to gain the necessary momentum, that’s fine with Edward Friedman. “It helps keep those of us in universities in business,” he says with a smile that suggests he thoroughly enjoys the business he’s chosen.

**Take the Side Road** *continued from page 59*  
Barrington, Mass., named Joan Griswold, who scribbles things in his datebook like, “Happy birthday, Honey Pie!” He likes going on the road with the Rock Bottom Remainers. “It lets me use the word ‘gig,’” he says. “You don’t get to say ‘gig’ much as a writer.”

Blount is profoundly unable to sing, but he’s never let that hinder him from doing it onstage if the setting and the mood are right. In 1990 he attended a performance by a band called Sweethearts of the Bancroft Lounge, which included a singer named Kathi Kamen Goldmark. By day Goldmark is a freelance media escort, and by day or night she’s a good pal of Blount Junior. On this specific evening, he hopped onstage and sang, more or less, what Goldmark characterizes as a “sterling” rendition of “Don’t Mess with My Toot Toot.” A year later, when she decided to create the Rock Bottom Remainers for all the writers who’d ever told her how much they missed playing in the bands of their youth, she invited him. He accepted and has been Remaindered ever since.

The RBR began as a one-shot deal, but the players enjoyed themselves so much they decided to get together once a year and go on the road for a short three- or four-city tour. The personnel have changed over the years. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver no longer participates. Original member Stephen King opted out of this past year’s excursion. Blount missed him. He recalls gigs where some of King’s disciples in the crowd begged for an encore by setting their fingernails on fire. Bruce Springsteen once sat in a club’s greenroom after an RBR performance and told Dave Barry, “Your band’s not too bad. It’s not too good, either. Don’t let it get any better; otherwise you’ll just be another lousy band.”

In a place like Chicago’s House of Blues or the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Remainers are great fun, and collectively they’ve sold a helluva lot more books than Springsteen. Blount serves as master of ceremonies, introducing the rest of the band, and he sings backup, as in “back up from the microphone.” This last tour started in St. Louis and rolled through Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit on a bus that ordinarily transported a minor-league soccer team called the Richmond Kickers. Proceeds from each gig benefit literary programs. Blount likes to amuse himself

on these trips by writing songs. Roger McGuinn, the founder of the Byrds, toured with the Remainers and sang a half-dozen of his hits each night, and he and Blount got some work done on a song titled “I’m an A-Sharp Dude But I B-Flat Broke.”

There was a spell during Blount’s career when magazines paid him to write about musicians like Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Jerry Jeff Walker and Willie Nelson. Those stories were supposed to go toward a book on country music, but when Jimmy Carter won the 1976 presidential election, Blount ended up writing *Crackers* instead, a book that didn’t wait for the first page to start rambling: Its subtitle is *This Whole Many-Angled Thing of Jimmy, More Carters, Ominous Little Animals, Sad Singing Women, My Daddy, and Me*. It came out in 1980, just in time for Carter to lose his reelection bid. The book garnered good reviews but didn’t sell many copies, the fate of most of his titles. His first book of dog verse has sold 150,000 copies, but for that one he only gets 50 cents per book. “If one of my other books sold that much, I’d have a bigger house,” he says. “I would love to have a big payday, but I’m used to this.”

His penultimate major undertaking was a biography of Robert E. Lee for the Penguin Lives series. It took him longer than he’d planned. “To my dismay, every time I read something, there was something else I didn’t know anything about and I’d have to brush up on that. I started out wanting to know more about Lee’s childhood, so I had to read two books about his father, Light-Horse Harry Lee. Then I realized how little I knew about the Civil War, so I started reading endless books about the battle of Chancellorsville.” And Blount kept veering from the path to wander off in some esoteric direction—that straight-line thing. “I found this joke that Lee liked, and pursued that joke at great length. People were appalled. But that was interesting to me because nobody had done that, and it seemed to say something about his mysterious inner nature.”

For a ramblin’ researcher and ramblin’ writer, a book in which the order of business is ramblin’ around a city seems custom made. When Crown Publishers inquired as to whether

*continued on page 86*