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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

Scholar brings English literature to 21st century

Sometimes scholars come from unlikely backgrounds and study unlikely subjects. One such person is Yannick le Boulicaut, a French scholar who specializes in English literature. He is now a professor at the Catholic University of the West in France, where he obtained his bachelor's degree in teaching English and his master's in American literature. He earned his doctorate in English studies from the University of Limoges, also in France. He is now visiting and teaching in some French classes at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Being from France, just how did he become interested in English literature?

"I was born in a very small village in Brittany, a fishing village," said Le Boulicaut. "I didn't go to a very good school. It was a school that when you finished after four years you would become a planter or carpenter." Yet, his teachers saw something special in him.

"The teachers said that maybe I should go to another school, and my parents agreed. But I never had any classes in Latin or Greek, because in high school my idea was to become a teacher in probably French literature or maybe history," he explained. "But when I tried to at college they told me no because I had not had any Latin or Greek."

He then thought about becoming a history teacher, but his lack of knowledge in Latin or Greek also prevented him in pursuing that career. "So they suggested English, and I got my B.A. and M.A. in English," he said. "One day someone told me I should try for my Ph.D., and a professor said I could work with him but it had to be on the writer Joseph Conrad. In those days you didn't have any choice."

That was a momentous circumstance for him. Conrad was a writer who was born in Poland and moved to England when he was already an adult and became a very important writer. Thus, someone who mastered the English language as an adult became a role model for Le Boulicaut.

"The fact is that he was born in Poland and then Poland was invaded by the Russians. When his parents died he escaped and he spent many years in France. Then he had to leave because he didn't have the proper



Photo courtesy of SIUE

Dr. Yannick Le Boulicaut, left, conducts an interview for Segue by Aldemaro Romero Jr.

papers, because his passport was from Russia. He went to England and finally he found a place where he could have a job. He became a sea captain. After 20 years at sea people say he was bored of being a sailor, but he had so many stories to tell. So it is an example of a very good writer in his third language," explained Le Boulicaut.

Conrad's most famous book was "Heart of Darkness," which is set in the Congo. This is such a powerful story that it attracted the interest of filmmakers. Orson Welles

was the first to try to make it into a movie but he couldn't. Then came Francis Ford Coppola with "Apocalypse Now." Le Boulicaut thinks that Conrad is more difficult to bring to the screen than other more conventional authors.

"The basic structure you find usually in Conrad's stories is not a simple linear structure," Le Boulicaut explained. "You keep going back and forth in time. I am teaching 'Heart of Darkness' this year and my students have a hard time because they

are used to stories with a beginning and an end and something in the middle. But here you keep going back and forth, and that is the way I guess he wanted his stories to function."

Le Boulicaut thinks that Conrad wanted the readers to make an effort, to be part of the process of reading. That was something fairly new in those days.

"By the way, there are two possible titles," he said. "There is 'The Heart of Darkness,' which he decided on in the

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original publication, and later on he decided that he would delete the article so the official title nowadays is 'Heart of Darkness,' which I think gives more power to the story. It's not the heart of this darkness over there in Congo, it's 'Heart of Darkness.' It could happen anywhere at any time."

While studying such a classic of literature, Le Boulicaut has recently taken his class into the 21st century online world. "I did a class on literary translation," he said. "It was an experience that I did twice and I was not too happy about it because it was overwhelming. I was probably not well prepared. I wanted to answer all the students who were online with me and it took me hours and hours because their questions were most of the time interesting, so I wanted to give more information."

He says that unlike the United States, online education is not that common in France. "At my university we are talking about it," he said, "but we don't have the software you have here which I think is a tool which is probably interesting. I am probably too old school. I think it has to do with your personality. It has to do with the way you are with your knowledge and with your students. I really believe in passion. I don't try to be passionate. It is the way I am. I have always been passionate about different areas and fields. And I think that is the best way to share your knowledge with your students."

When asked about his impressions of SIUE students, he is clear. "They are not afraid of me as a foreign teacher," he said. "Today I had class twice and students were willing to ask questions and I was really impressed."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.