

Photo by Caroline Bomvier/Berkshire Eagle

*Nationally recognized  
English professor  
Bob Bell on why he  
has a great deal yet to  
learn about teaching.*

**By Rob White**

# The Education of an Educator

“To ask about Bell’s contribution to undergraduate education at Williams is just a bit like asking about Michael Jordan’s contribution to NBA basketball.”

So says Rutgers English professor William Dowling of Robert H. Bell, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English. A friend of Bell’s since their days together as Dartmouth undergraduates, Dowling acknowledges his partiality, but many others in their profession concur. In November Bell was chosen by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education as Outstanding Baccalaureate College Professor of the Year.

This national honor comes as no great surprise back home. The Kenan chair Bell occupies at Williams is awarded to a professor “whose enthusiasm for good teaching, breadth of interest and achievement show promise of a creative relationship not only with undergraduates but also with young faculty.” Beyond campus, the American Association of Higher Education named him an Exemplary Teacher in 1994, and in 1998 he received another prestigious national award, the Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teachers.

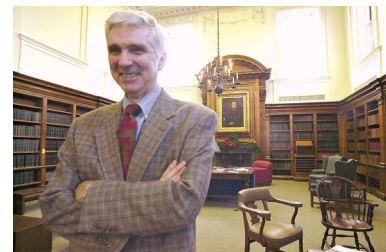
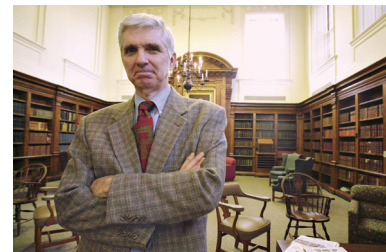
What does the Professor of the Year make of all this? That he has a great deal yet to learn about teaching, and that to do so he must listen more—“charismatic listening,” Bell calls it. His premise is that a professor’s knowledge is only half the battle. Indeed, the more one knows about a subject the harder it is to remember one’s own introduction to

it. Meeting students at that threshold and showing them how to move themselves forward into knowledge is by far the greater challenge.

Bell began working on the battle’s first half in 1951, when he skipped kindergarten. His teacher found out he was already reading fluently and bounced the 5-year-old to first grade. In fourth and fifth grades, during study hall, he read the encyclopedia from Z to A. Raised by a doctor and homemaker, he immersed himself in nonfiction (with heavy emphasis on baseball and his beloved Red Sox) as well as every single Hardy Boys mystery.

He met his first great teachers senior year at Belmont Hill School, near his suburban Boston home. English instructor David Aloian introduced him to close reading and what Bell calls “the allure of language.” Soon he was writing hopelessly sensitive, though possibly therapeutic, poems and stories for the student literary magazine. At the same time his “Kennedyesque” history teacher Fred Calder instilled in him the citizen activism that led Bell to found Dartmouth’s Students for a Democratic Society chapter in 1965.

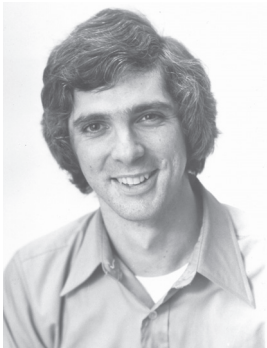
Bell’s vocation came into view the day he and his favorite professor, Peter Bien of Dartmouth’s English department, ambled across campus deep in discussion about James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. When Bien mused, “You know, I get *paid* to do this,” Bell knew where he was headed. Winner of a Danforth Foundation Fellowship for exceptional promise in college teaching, he went directly from Dartmouth to Harvard, where he earned his Ph.D.



Photos by Caroline Bommer/Berkshire Eagle



Bell admits that his first years teaching at Williams were “performance-based.” Photo taken at his home, 1979. Photo by Marcia Johnston Wood '79.



The Professor of the Year—30 years ago—in the Faculty Face Book, 1974.

Bell arrived in Williamstown in 1972, doctoral thesis in hand, practically pinching himself to make sure it was all true. For three decades since, he has introduced thousands of students to the full literary monte—from Shakespeare to Austen, Yeats to Joyce, Eliot (T.S.) to Eliot (George)—and to a host of “non-canonical” authors as well. This spring he’s teaching an upper-level course on contemporary writers John Barth and David Foster Wallace. And next fall, in collaboration with music professor W. Anthony Sheppard, he’ll offer a course on Bob Dylan and the Beatles.

Bell admits that his first years teaching at Williams were “performance-based.” His enthusiasm for the subject, his humor and his youth made it easy for him to engage students. But he realized that in order to recreate for students his own experience of self discovery and intellectual passion he needed to subordinate himself, allowing students to make their own way. Gradually evolving into a less theatrical teacher, he focused more than ever on the material and on his students’ perceptions. Marcia Johnston Wood ’79, now a clinical psychologist in Portland, Ore., recalls, “By carefully verbalizing each step and method in his own reading of poetry and by soliciting students’ participation at every level of the process, [Bell] made you feel that he was continually learning along with you.”

Bell also impresses students with his respect for them. “He wants to know how his students experience life,” says Heather Brubaker ’03, and he occasionally “pauses to solicit a class’s advice on topics like suggested summer reading for his high school-age daughters.” (Bob and his wife, Professor of English Ilona Bell, have two daughters, Kaitlin, now 21, and Amanda, 18).

Certainly this approach makes for a comfortably collegial and stimulating classroom. Associate Professor of Geosciences Ronadh Cox, who once sat in on Bell’s Modernism seminar, remembers that “each and every individual contributed, even those who were extremely shy. Bob himself did not do much talking, but by the end of each meeting I

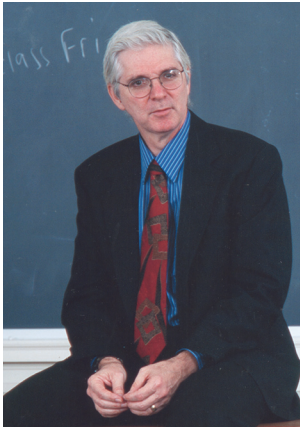
realized that he had managed to get the students to make the points that he wanted to come out of the discussion.”

And students work harder and learn more in the climate Bell fosters. “Bob’s popularity has nothing to do with coziness,” says his colleague Stephen Fix, the Robert G. Scott ’68 Professor of English. “He expects students to be prepared, though he’s never out to embarrass them. His is a powerful combination of warmth and toughness and candor.” Or, as Bell put it in a Nov. 18 *USA Today* article on his Professor of the Year award, “I can be more demanding by being more personal.”

While growing as a teacher, Bell has been active on the scholarly front, contributing frequently to academic journals from the *American Scholar* to the *Milton Quarterly*. He’s edited *Critical Essays on Kingsley Amis* (1998), contributed to *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth Century Short Story* (2001) and co-written the forthcoming *Reader’s Guide to David Foster Wallace’s “Infinite Jest.”* He’s also published essays on Shakespeare, Boswell and Joyce as well as several pieces on teaching.

His “big book” came mid-career, with *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in “Ulysses”* (Cornell University Press, 1991). An exploration of Joyce’s comic vision, *Jocoserious* earned acclaim from the exquisitely discerning community of Joyce scholars. The book, according to the *Review of English Studies*, “deserves a place on the shelf along with [the] classics of *Ulysses* criticism. ... It has absorbed what they have to teach and, correcting the tendency they share to be over-serious about Joyce’s meanings, moves easily to another level of sophistication.”

The accolades relieved Bell of the mild “what if?” burden that might shadow any young professor who chose to teach at Williams rather than, say, Harvard. “Since *Jocoserious Joyce*,” he says, “I have found myself more inclined than ever, in some sense freer, to define myself as what I essentially am, an undergraduate teacher. Though I write constantly, my highest priority is teaching.”



Left: In a Shakespeare class in 1998, Bell contemplates Hamlet's dying words: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart / Absent thee from felicity awhile."

He also has devoted considerable time to teaching teachers. In 1994, he founded the Project for Effective Teaching (PET), a mentoring

program for professors in their first three years at Williams. Through discussions, conferences and weekly lunches, PET faculty learn from Bell and from each other approaches and strategies that work best in the classroom.

Bell contends that the techniques of "charismatic listening" are there for any teacher to learn, but his own motivation to hone them is unsurpassed. Says Brubaker, who as an undergraduate worked as Bell's teaching assistant, "After more than 25 years at Williams, a named chair and a position as a faculty mentor, he tirelessly self-critiques his performance in the classroom. He used to review certain classes with me, wanting to discuss the flow, his division of time, which topics of discussion seemed to be most thought-provoking."

A commitment so personal bleeds over into a kind of learning Bell ruefully (but fondly) refers to as "Life 101." According to former student Brooks Fisher '80, who is vice president for learning and development at the software company Intuit, Bell's "great compassion and sensitivity guided us to ... ask the harder questions—not 'What does this mean?' but 'What does this mean to me?'" ■

*Rob White is director of communications for the Department of Alumni Relations and Development at Williams. Bob Bell was honored in Washington, D.C., in November as Outstanding Baccalaureate College Professor of the Year. (Mark Taylor, Williams' Cluett Professor of Humanities and Religion, received the same award in 1995.)*



## BELLSDAY

Though it's about a great many things besides, James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* is about a day—June 16, 1904—in the life of Dublin denizen Leopold Bloom. In keeping with Bob Bell's groundbreaking *Ulysses* scholarship, we offer his own account of a day—Nov. 30, 2004—in his own life in Williamstown, a century and ocean away from Bloomsday.

- 6:30 a.m.** Awake. Check sports pages for disturbing indications that George Steinbrenner '52 wants to poach Pedro.
- 7:00-8:00** Think about Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts."
- 8:30-9:45** Teach English 106, "Modern Poetry" class.
- 9:45-10:15** Converse with two students, then with Pat Malanga, academic assistant, about English department job applications.
- 10:20-12:10 p.m.** Grade and comment on student papers; discuss missing student with Dean Dave Johnson '71; answer e-mail from former students, friends and colleagues about Carnegie award.
- 12:10-1:00** Lunch with my student advisee.
- 1:10-2:00** Arrange PET lunches tomorrow and Wednesday and schedule series of PET events in January and February. Write letter of recommendation for former student.
- 2:00-3:00** Grade more English 106 papers.
- 3:00** Home for nap; decline wife's invitation to help pick up debris in our back yard from yesterday's wind storm. (Wife Ilona Bell is a professor of English at Williams.)
- 3:30** Coffee and second shift. Read and evaluate applications for English department position in "Literature and Philosophy."
- 4:30-5:30** Finish current batch of English 106 papers; more due Wednesday.
- 6:15** Too dark to run outside; listening to The Band, run on treadmill for 42 minutes.
- 7:15** Dinner with Ilona. We discuss women's relative lack of success attaining tenure at research universities, according to *Chronicle of Higher Education*; also discuss possibility of moving stereo speakers from living room into family room to replace 1967 KLH speakers, once cutting edge, gradually obsolete, now defunct; Ilona vetoes idea, urges me to purchase new, smaller speakers.
- 7:45** Tea with Ilona, establishing absurdity of trying to save a few dollars by moving old speakers from living room; shift subject to a book we both read last week, Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World*.
- 8:00** Work on lectures in progress for course next fall on Bob Dylan and the Beatles. Consider assigning a biography of Dylan and wonder how much of that book to incorporate in my lectures. The more I work on these lectures, the more excited I get about the course.
- 11:00** Watch Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* ... and so to bed.