

Regional

Poets, detectives, literary criticism drive scholar

Charles Berger grew up with books. He said that he doesn't remember a time when he was without them during his childhood in the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. The presence of books led to a passion for reading and love of language, which ultimately led Berger to a career as a university English professor. Today he teaches modern and contemporary poetry, 19th and 20th century British and American literature and critical theory at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"For as long as I can remember, I've always been a devourer of books," he said. "It's been my premier pleasure." Berger said that he distinctly remembers when at the age of 14 he discovered poetry through the works of John Keats. He took that interest in poetry first to the City College of New York and then to Brandeis University. He later earned his Ph.D. in English from Yale.

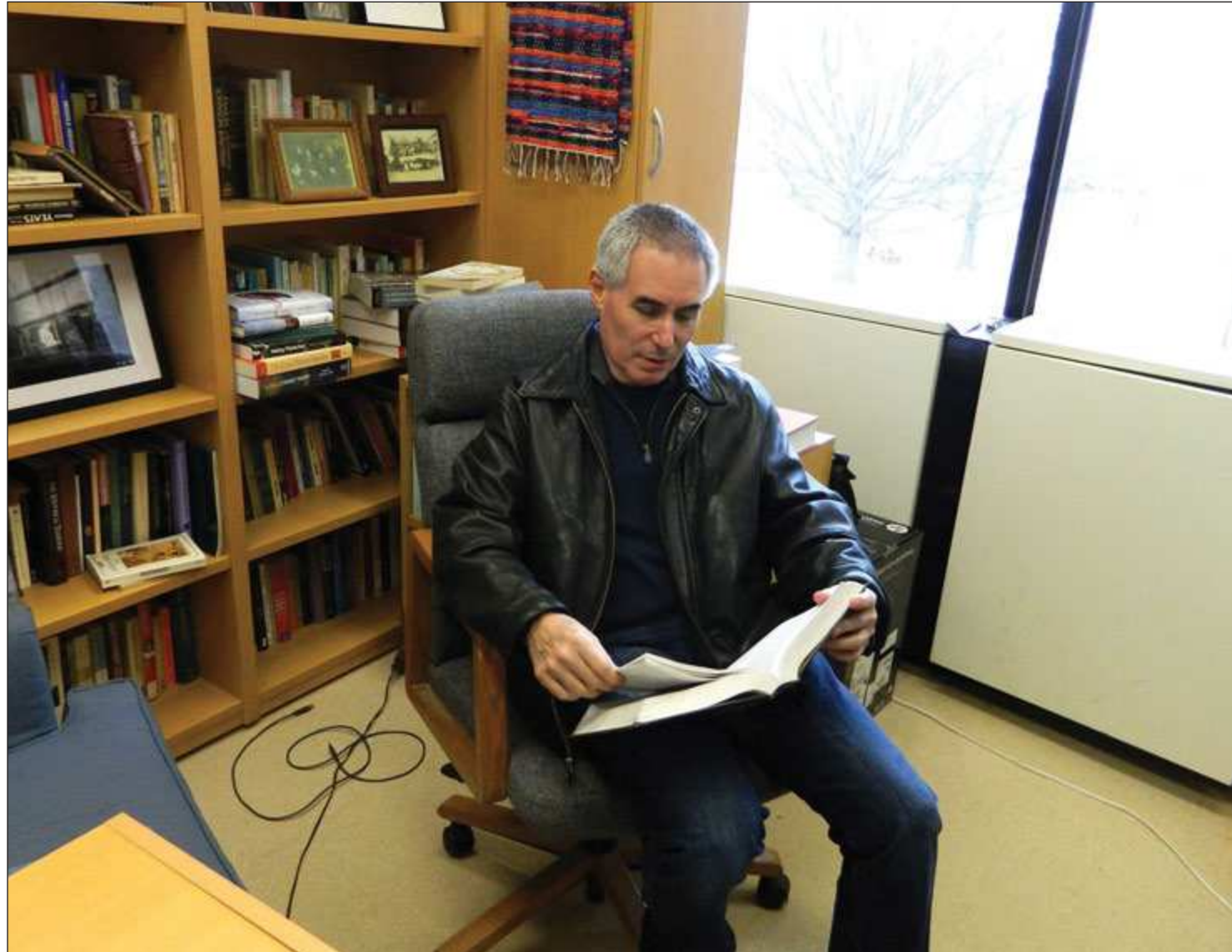
Berger developed his ability to interpret poetry and began publishing articles and essays. The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation soon recognized him when it awarded him one of its very prestigious fellowships. In 2001 Berger came to SIUE from the University of Utah to be the chair of the Department of English Language and Literature.

One of Berger's areas of study is a field called critical theory, an area that even Berger said is sometimes difficult to define.

"What we are dealing with is the guiding ideologies or systematic meanings that can have applicability to a wide range of literary texts and cultural texts," he explained. "I like to think of it as kind of a companion to interpretation just as interpretation is a companion to the actual reading and enjoyment of literature."

For example, while interpretation is concerned with the symbolic meaning of the white whale in Melville's classic "Moby Dick," critical theory requires more analysis. It requires one to analyze the patterns of the work and the theories that explain those patterns.

"When we actually think about what we are reading then we are employing some model of interpretation because that guides us to what we focus on,"



Dr. Charles Berger in his office.

Berger said. "You can take a book like 'The Great Gatsby,' for example, which is so central to people's reading experience, to their experience of 20th century literature and culture. Sometimes you can just give yourself to the story, but then when you start looking at the role of the narrator, you think of the narrator as a particular character, you think about a characters who seem to be at the margin of the story, but, when you think about the work more theoretical-

ly, they may move closer to the center." This, according to Berger, is applying critical theory to the literary text. "Every time we read we are practicing critical theory when we stop to think about the meaning of what we have read. It is easy to submerge yourself into a narrative and be carried away by the story and the beauty of the writing, but when you stop to think about the themes and the meaning of the piece, then you are practicing critical theory."

While Berger said that he enjoys critical theory and modern fiction, his scholarly work mainly focuses on poetry.

"My scholarly passion is poetry," he said. "I am a better critic and interpreter of poetry than fiction. I am drawn into the secret corridors of reasoning in poetry. I am fascinated by how to pull out the meaning of a text. I love a play on words." Some of his favorite poets are Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden,

Stephen Hansen College Talk

Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, John Ashbery and Sylvia Plath. "I love writers who use language in surprising and unpredictable ways."

Berger said that he loves teaching poetry, a notoriously difficult topic for many students. "I like how the students react when they are given an assignment to write about poetry," he said. Many students react with fear but then they learn how to "get inside" the poem and see how the meaning expands, Berger explained. As with any other subject there are certain challenges specifically associated with teaching poetry.

"I would say the special challenge is to get students to put aside the question of what the poem means exactly," Berger said. "I tell them over and over again to banish any anxiety you have about what the poem means. Don't let anxiety over understanding the poem in its totality – which is impossible – don't let that anxiety get in the way of enjoying it."

Berger believes that we don't have as many well-known poets today as English and American societies have had in the past. For example, most people have heard of 19th century English poets Shelley, Keats, and Lord Byron. And many people know 20th century American poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, and W.H. Auden. Berger said that the public should read more poetry. Along with "Harry Potter," "The Hunger Games," and "Lord of the Rings," we should be reading poetry as well, he argues. Poetry, he added, enhances our use and enjoyment of language.

In addition to poetry, Berger has a passion for detective fiction. "I like the procedure, the process of how the detective solves the mystery," he said, adding that he gives himself completely over to the narrative and never tries to analyze it. "I never figure out 'who done it,'" he said. "It's sort of a holiday from my more serious scholarly reading."

Photo by Michael Nathe