

■ Susan Gustafson, 2006

The courses taught by Susan Gustafson, the Karl F. and Bertha A. Fuchs Professor in German, are full of magical and mysterious things: monsters, wizards, aliens, and ghosts. But the true enchantment, she says, lies in the love of learning.

“The very best learning is ultimately the result of a magical, personal excitement about something on the part of the students,” she says.

Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures and a specialist in 18th- to 20th-century German literature, Gustafson uses students’ own curiosity as the fuel that drives her courses.

“I want students to own the class, to follow their inspirations,” she says. In service of that goal, she never assigns paper topics, asking students instead to develop projects of their own conception.

“They follow what they’re passionate about. That’s what we do as scholars.”

Gustafson teaches courses on German literature and culture, comparative literature, and women’s studies. As she guides students through works by Edgar Allan Poe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, and others, she trains them in the scholarly practice of close reading, helping students attune themselves to the significance of the smallest textual details.

“I like to look at minute changes and structural shifts in a text,” she says, asking students to consider where a particular passage leads its reader. And she emphasizes the importance of rereading and rewriting—the process of scholarship.

“At the beginning of my career, I was much more lecture-oriented,” she says. “And I didn’t let students rewrite their essays. But over the years I’ve seen what’s more successful. Unless students are actively engaged in analyzing texts, they’re just wondering, ‘How did you see that?’”

Gustafson’s department is a multidisciplinary one, and her own courses—often informed by theories from other fields, such as gender studies, psychology, and film studies—draw a wide variety of students.

Gustafson credits her students and her own former teachers for her success in teaching, and places her interactions with students at the top of her professional responsibilities.

“Teaching is why we’re here.”

