A Legacy That’s Not Quite Quixotic

What should we know about Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote—called by many the first modern novel? Ryan Prendergast, associate professor of Spanish, and his students have a few ideas. He’s the author of Reading, Writing, and Errant Subjects in Inquisitorial Spain (Ashgate, 2011) and teaches the course Don Quixote: The Book, the Myth, the Image. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of Don Quixote’s second volume.

It’s about more than windmills.
While the idea of “tilting at windmills” comes from Don Quixote, Prendergast points out that the memorable account of the character battling windmills in the belief that they’re giants is just one episode early in the massive work. And while windmills have become for most the icon of the novel, they don’t capture its thematic and stylistic complexity.

It was published in two parts, 10 years apart—in 1605 and 1615.
In the intervening decade, someone using the pen name Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda published a “false” sequel to Don Quixote. Cervantes responds to the sequel in Part II and addresses critiques people made about Part I, even incorporating characters who have read the first volume. And while Part I has a good deal of slapstick humor, Part II is more introspective, emotional, and psychologically dark, Prendergast says.

It’s narratively complex.
Prendergast contends that Don Quixote is above all a book about the acts of reading and writing, examining what storytelling is all about. Cervantes even incorporates into Part II a character from the spurious sequel, and makes him swear that the Don Quixote of Cervantes’s Parts I and II is the “real” Don Quixote. The novel “speaks to the writing process and what narrative allows you to do,” Prendergast says.

It’s more than a funny book, treating important social and political issues, too.
While many love the novel for its humorous adventure stories, Don Quixote also takes on such weighty subjects as relations between Catholics and Muslims in 17th-century Spain and Inquisitorial practices.

Sancho Panza is not just a sidekick: comic at times, he’s also the source of profound insights.
Typically treated as Don Quixote’s physical and psychological foil, Sancho is revealed at certain points to be a wiser character.

In 2002, it was voted the best work of fiction of all time.
One hundred authors—including Seamus Heaney, Nadine Gordimer, Carlos Fuentes, Doris Lessing, and Norman Mailer—from 54 countries chose Don Quixote as the top choice among the “best and most central books in world literature” in a survey organized by the Norwegian Nobel Institute and Norwegian Book Clubs. It earned 50 percent more votes from the writers than any other book.

—Kathleen McGarvey

CLASSIC VIEWS: The illustrations of Cervantes (right) and Quixote (left) are from the first deluxe edition of the novel, published in London by Jacob Tonson in 1738. It is the earliest copy of Don Quixote owned by the University and features 69 copperplate engravings.