

UNIVERSITIES

WHAT MAKES A TEACHER GREAT

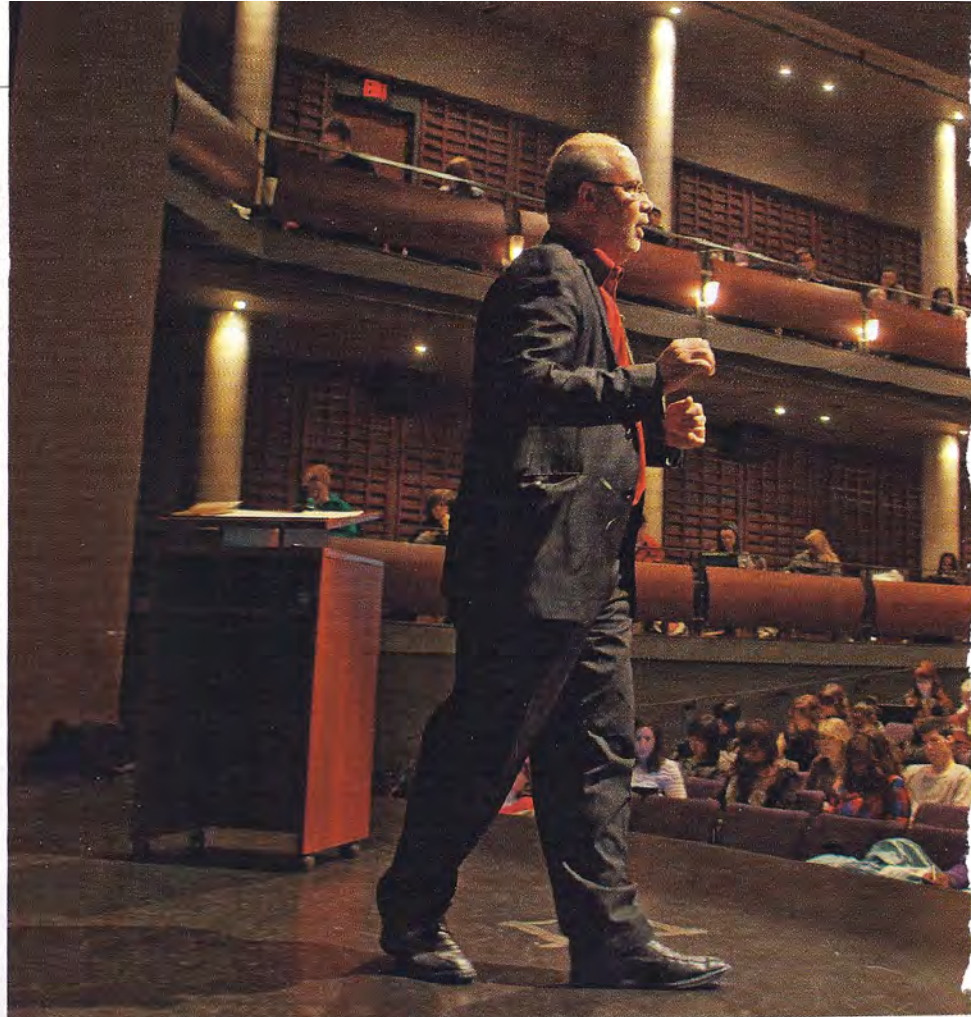
You can engage a room of 500 students: know the material cold, and know how to share it

IN 1986, to recognize the importance of university teaching, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and 3M Canada created the 3M National Teaching Fellowships. Since 2006, Maclean's has proudly been the program's media sponsor. Here, we announce this year's 10 winners, as well as profile one of them, English professor Nick Mount.

IT IS A rare warm day in what has proven to be a punishingly cold Toronto winter. It is a Friday afternoon—a Friday afternoon before a long weekend. In essence, it is the sort of afternoon for which the playing of hooky was invented. So why is Nick Mount standing on a stage before a sea of first-year students—hundreds of them, piled like waves up the sloping floor of a University of Toronto lecture theatre? “I’m actually,” admits Mount, “shocked you’re here.” He spends the next two hours reminding the class of 450 students why they are.

The topic today is the Chris Ware graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. The course is Literature for Our Time, a primer that encompasses all of *Corrigan*, Virginia Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness *To the Lighthouse*, and Toronto novelist Andrew Pyper’s literary noir *The Killing Circle*. Mount’s close reading of *Corrigan*, an anti-hero parable of fathers and sons that ends ambiguously with a Superman figure swooping angel-like upon the protagonist and carrying him away, is as careful in its attentions as Mount had been with either Woolf or Vladimir Nabokov’s dense, disturbing *Lolita*.

Suddenly, Mount projects a garish image onto a large screen above him: it is the cover of another comic book, *Smooth 'n' Natural*, a clever homage to the blaxploitation B movies of the 1970s. It is uproariously funny. Mount identifies its creator—he is a student, Brian McLachlan, sitting in the hall, totally surprised that Mount knows who he is or what he does. “Did I just embarrass the hell out of you?” asks



On the mount: “There’s lots of myths that they’re the ‘digital generation.’ That’s a load of s-t.”

Mount, who on the contrary, with a magician’s trick, has suddenly summoned the spirit of his theme—Literature for Our Time, the way poetry and fiction *really* do respond to the world—and housed that spirit in the shape of one of his own students.

“It’s something I learned from Northrop Frye,” says Mount, an expert in 19th-century Canadian romance novels, referring to Frye, the world-renowned U of T literary theorist. “Frye says that romance is the genre that’s best at revealing the wishes of a society—and its fears. An experimental avant-garde novel by some guy wearing a beanie in a café in Yorkville is about *his* anxieties. But if you read a popular novel, romance or genre fiction up against the culture of their time, they can have really interesting things to say about what that culture worried about, what it hoped for, what kind of heroes it wanted.”

Each Friday, Mount, who’s 47, favours grey stubble over full beard and pairs dark suits with wine-coloured, open-necked shirts, steps onto that stage and holds that mirror up to his 450 students. Somehow—through humour, knowing asides, but above all through a grasp of the material so complete and fluid that it tends to conceal the dozens of hours of prep

he dedicates to each lecture—Mount makes the experience intimate. “It’s like I’m just talking to a friend about the book I’ve just finished,” says 18-year-old Alisa Lurie.

It’s not just that he’s passionate about the material (he’s been known to choke up describing how the poet Sylvia Plath placed mugs of milk in her children’s cribs before committing suicide), or that he knows the material cold. These are the basics. Mount recalls that one of his own profs—Patrick Grant, back at the University of Victoria—“broke every rule in the good teacher’s rule book. He read from dusty notes that were clearly 10 years old, he never made eye contact. And I learned more in that class than any other in undergraduate because the guy knew his stuff. And he knew how to share it.”

But how to share it with hundreds of students at the same time? Alan Bewell, chair of U of T’s English department, says it’s this facility that catapults Mount into the ranks of Canada’s great teachers today—particularly his work on the expansive Literature for Our Time. “It’s a lot easier to have real impact on students when you have a small class,” Bewell says. “That’s where Nick’s incredibly successful. So many students see this as the course



that shaped their educational career. Not many teachers can do that. He is showing us a way to make large courses that have an impact on undergraduates.”

After winning a string of awards—he picked up the coveted President’s Teaching Award at U of T two years ago and has been a finalist in TVO’s Best Lecturer Competition—Mount has been named a 3M fellow. Awards are nice. But Mount’s pioneering approach to big classes may be crucial given the crisis facing Canada’s post-secondary institutions. According to figures released last month by the Council of Ontario Universities, the number of high school students applying to Ontario’s 20 universities this year has increased 2.4 per cent over 2010, to 383,403—a staggering 49 per cent more than in 2000. Across Canada, the number of full-time students has risen 57 per cent in the last 15 years, according to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

Despite that growth, university funding has remained more or less static over the same period. The situation amounts to a “witches’ brew” of “escalating costs, declin-

ing public investment, rising enrolments, [and] proportionately declining faculty complements,” write Pierre Zundel and Patrick Deane, the presidents of the University of Sudbury and McMaster University respectively, in a recent *University Affairs* magazine piece headlined, “It’s time to transform undergraduate education.” Whatever shape that education takes, large classes are almost certainly here to stay. What Mount proves each Friday is that you *can* engage a room of 500 students—a trick that combines great teaching with a talent for digging up resources.

Mount himself is almost sheepish about the 3M distinction. “If you get the right teacher, and I believe I’m one of those teachers, a large class can be very effective,” he says. “In a perfect world, we wouldn’t have those classes. But even if the government were to decide tomorrow that we’re going to radically increase post-secondary funding, we have convinced society that you have to go to university to live a full and complete life. I don’t think that’s true. But it’s worked. Just because of the sheer numbers of students we deal with now, we need to figure out a way to do better with large classes.”

A few years ago, Mount led the committee tasked with designing the multimedia console now used in every U of T class—a cabinet of finely crafted drawers yawning with all the gizmos a prof could ever need, including easy-to-use touch-sensitive computer screens and lecture-sized clocks that can be consulted from halfway across the room. Nor is this gear-head abstraction, technology for its own sake. During Mount’s *Corrigan* lecture, he illustrates the establish-

MOUNT’S PIONEERING APPROACH TO BIG CLASSES IS CRUCIAL TO THE CRISIS IN UNDERGRAD TEACHING

ment’s animosity toward comics by screening a snippet of a *Reefer Madness*-style documentary outlining how they deform children. Later, as students bleed into the aisles during break, Mount plays MP3s he’s carefully selected to complement the lecture. As the course unfolds, the students themselves begin pitching musical accompaniments to the readings, and Mount posts the playlists online. All of it is designed to give students a stake in the proceedings. During a pause from his lecture on T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Mount broadcasts Montreal band Arcade Fire’s *Wasted Hours*, with lines like “Some cities make you lose your head / Endless suburbs stretched out thin and dead” becoming an eerie echo to the 1922 poem’s “heap of broken images, where the sun beats / And the dead tree gives no shelter.”

If such spectacle seems far removed from

the rigours of old academia, or like pandering to an illiterate new age, Mount’s here to correct you. “Students are not dumb, they’re not more illiterate,” Mount, seized with enthusiasm, tells *Maclean’s*. “There’s a lot of myths and bulls--t out there that they’re the ‘digital generation,’ they don’t know how to *think*—that’s a load of s--t. I’ve read first-year essays written by people in the 1940s and ‘50s. They couldn’t spell either.”

Nor is Mount immune to the concern that his class might devolve into burlesque. “One of the dangers of a large class is letting it slip over the edge, from classroom to theatre,” he says. What’s the distinction? “There’s an element of the theatrical in it—there has to be in a room that large,” says Mount. “That element is just simply being aware of the audience’s attention span. I swear to God the reason I’m good at this is when I was in high school I had an attention span of about 15 minutes. That’s what I assume is true of all people.” No matter how prepared he is for a lecture, the story he presents is never fixed. This is what saves him from theatre. “That’s what I want every class to be—a feeling that we are in this together, that it is a process of mutual discovery,” he says. “The whole two hours shouldn’t be that—if it is, the students will and should walk out. ‘Do your homework, professor, you should come here prepared.’ But I’m also capable of allowing that big narrative to be interrupted.”

What’s perhaps most astonishing about Mount’s success as a teacher is how that success interrupted his own narrative. Two decades ago, Mount was a division manager with Woolco, the now-defunct discount department store, where he oversaw a budget of \$10 million and had 30 people reporting to him. Not bad for a guy who was still in his 20s and never finished high school (he blames the gap in his resumé on a misspent youth). Then he met a teacher who changed his life.

Mount’s parents owned a bookstore in working-class Kamloops, B.C., and he grew up reading genre fiction—Louis L’Amour’s frontier novels, the fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien. In his late 20s, when he grew dissatisfied with his job and began looking for something else, it made sense that one thing he’d try would be a night-school English class at Cariboo College, as the Kamloops community college was then called. After his instructor, the noted children’s writer Joan Weir, read his paper on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, she suggested he consider full-time school. Mount left Woolco and enrolled at the University of Victoria.

He soon determined that teaching would

also be his calling. "I kept a little teaching notebook. I was a little weird that way," he says. "I kept notes of the little things I thought worked and the things that didn't." *Don't try to be 18* became a Mount adage after one prof took to borrowing jokes from *The Simpsons* to explain the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. "I already have young, hip friends, I don't

want another one," he says. "I want a professor, somebody who's spent a lot of time thinking seriously about this stuff." *Ask students questions you genuinely don't know the answers to* became another. "It has to be discovery," he says. "As long as that discovery can remain sincere for you, it will remain sincere for the students and real for the students."

Two decades later, Mount is associate chair of the English department at U of T. He cuts a romantic figure. He walks campus in a fedora and, in winter months, a black trench coat. Outside, his students gather around him in knots for informal discussions. When he feels an oft-repeated lecture is getting stale, he rips up his notes to face his students sans net. "He's sort of the ideal prof," says 23-year-old David Topping, a former student who went on to become the long-time editor-in-chief of the well-regarded blog *Torontoist* and is now with the collaborative local news site *OpenFile*. "He's got a way with students, he's friendly, but he's not a pushover either."

In fact, his grit, too, is well known. Somehow, at a university with little tradition of graduate-student-led tutorials, Mount has wrangled money each year to hire 11 Ph.D. students to guide his first-year students through small satellite discussions around the readings. "The only reason I agreed to teach the course is that they were done in conjunction with the tutorials—you need the balance," says Mount. "I cannot do this on my own."

Nick Morwood, a former TA who earned his doctorate last year, says Mount's feat of procurement has everything to do with the way he uses his status at the university to leverage resources. As a popular, award-winning, tenured prof with an administrative position with the department, Mount can shake the money tree. To help pay stipends for the authors that he invites to speak with his first-year students—writers like Pico Iyer, the graphic novelists Chris Ware and Seth, and more recently Newfoundland writer Lisa Moore—he's applied for funding from the Canada Council and other agencies. It's exactly the type of weight Canada's growing class of sessional professors could never muster. "If you don't fund excellence in teaching, you're not going to get it," says Morwood.

But Mount may have identified something else you need for making great teachers. Each Friday, after lecturing, he guides his TAs to a different kind of school—the Bedford Academy, a pub just blocks away—to talk shop. Teacher's shop. The TAs say few other profs invite that kind of informal discussion. A beer, exchanging ideas. Mount's still teaching. **NICHOLAS KÖHLER**

T W I N S

'THERE IS NO NORMAL IN THIS FAMILY'

For the conjoined twins, every checkup is costly and complicated

ON THE LAST day of February, the family of Krista and Tatiana Hogan, Canada's only conjoined twins, piled into a van leased by the provincial government for the journey southwest from Vernon, B.C., to Vancouver for a week-long series of medical appointments for the girls. The trip almost ended in disaster when they were caught in the midst of a multi-vehicle pileup during a blizzard on the mountainous Coquihalla Highway. They narrowly missed hitting a vehicle stopped on the highway during whiteout conditions. Louise McKay, the twins' grandmother, put the van into a skid, stopping sideways on the road. Behind them, a car crashed into a semi-trailer and two pickups slammed into ditches on either side of the van. "God was looking after us," says McKay.

The frequent medical trips to Vancouver, a 900-km round trip, are taking an increasing emotional and economic toll on the family, which subsists largely on social assistance and disability payments from the provincial Social Development Ministry. Money is so tight that they say they're left destitute meeting the extraordinary needs of the 4½-year-old girls—craniopagus twins who are joined at the head and share a bridge between each girl's thalamus, a part of the brain that relays sight and other sensory information.

McKay says the family used much of its March rent money to finance part of its recent trip to Vancouver, where the twins had a series of checkups and tests. They fear they'll face eviction if they don't come up with the month's \$1,750 rent. Adults in the extended family of 14 sometimes go hungry to ensure there is food for the children. "We'll go a couple of days sometimes without eating anything. As long as the kids are fed, we're okay," says McKay, who has diabetes, and who has a small disability pension for an anxiety disorder.

Felicia Simms, the twins' 25-year-old mother,

ZOLTAN KERNWELL

3M Teaching Fellows 2011

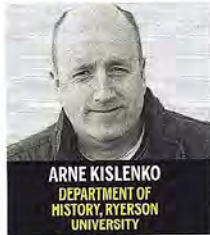
Ten university faculty members are recognized each year for their exceptional contributions to teaching and learning. To read about why undergraduate teaching matters to them, and to see upcoming profiles on all the winners, go to our website at macleans.ca/onecampus.



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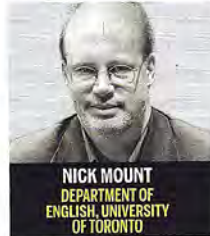
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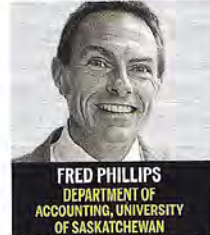
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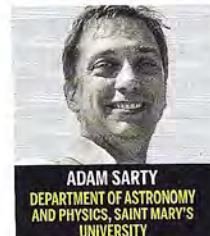
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