

# INTO TEMPTATION

## INTERPRETING THE DEVIL'S PACT LEGEND

BY PETER NICHOLS

PHOTO BY LISA GODFREY

If you come into Professor Simon Richter's literature class, you might notice that the windows are covered with dark-blue fabric. "What is he trying to hide?" you might wonder. In e-mails to the course listserv, he addresses the class as pact members. "What pact?"

Rows of students are scribbling in notebooks or tapping on laptops. Their dog-eared volumes of Goethe's *Faust* have lines of text highlighted in yellow and pages marked with thickets of pink, green and purple Post-its. Nothing unusual there.

Richter enters the room and flicks a switch at the podium. A little motor hums to life lowering a big screen. Projected images of demons—some sinister, some silly—then appear. Is this a nightmare? At a screening of *Rosemary's Baby*, one of the films studied by the class, actress Mia Farrow is heard exclaiming, "This is no dream! This is really happening!"

The class is the Devil's Pact in Literature, Music and Film. Several years ago, Richter decided to rename the Faust Legend in Literature, an old German-department staple, working in movies and music as a way of luring students into reading and thinking about substantial works of literature. Enrollments jumped 500 percent.

The retooled course mixes "serious" literature, such as Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*, with pop-culture creations like *The Simpsons* and the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" along with Hollywood star vehicles like *Angel Heart* and art films like Kurosawa's *Ikiru*. Richter points out that Goethe himself drew inspiration from popular puppet

shows about the 16th-century scholar Doktor Faustus, who sold his soul in exchange for knowledge. "We sometimes forget that today's television and movie writers are frequently graduates of Penn or other colleges," he says, "and that great works of literature often have their beginnings in popular culture." His course tracks how the devil's pact legend gets retold and refracted in various artistic media as well as through history and across cultures. In Sherman Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues*, for instance, the class looked at how the legend played out among Native Americans.

Richter is a professor of Germanic languages and literatures, and president of the Goethe Society of North America. A precise and engaging lecturer, he is full of a playful—almost innocent—enthusiasm for his subject despite the diabolical undertones. "This course uses the Faust story and the devil's pact legend to explore what it means to be modern," he explains. In novels, films and songs, the class examines the restless and unmoored self-awareness of the modern individual whose ceaseless striving can yield astonishing progress but also bitter tragedy.

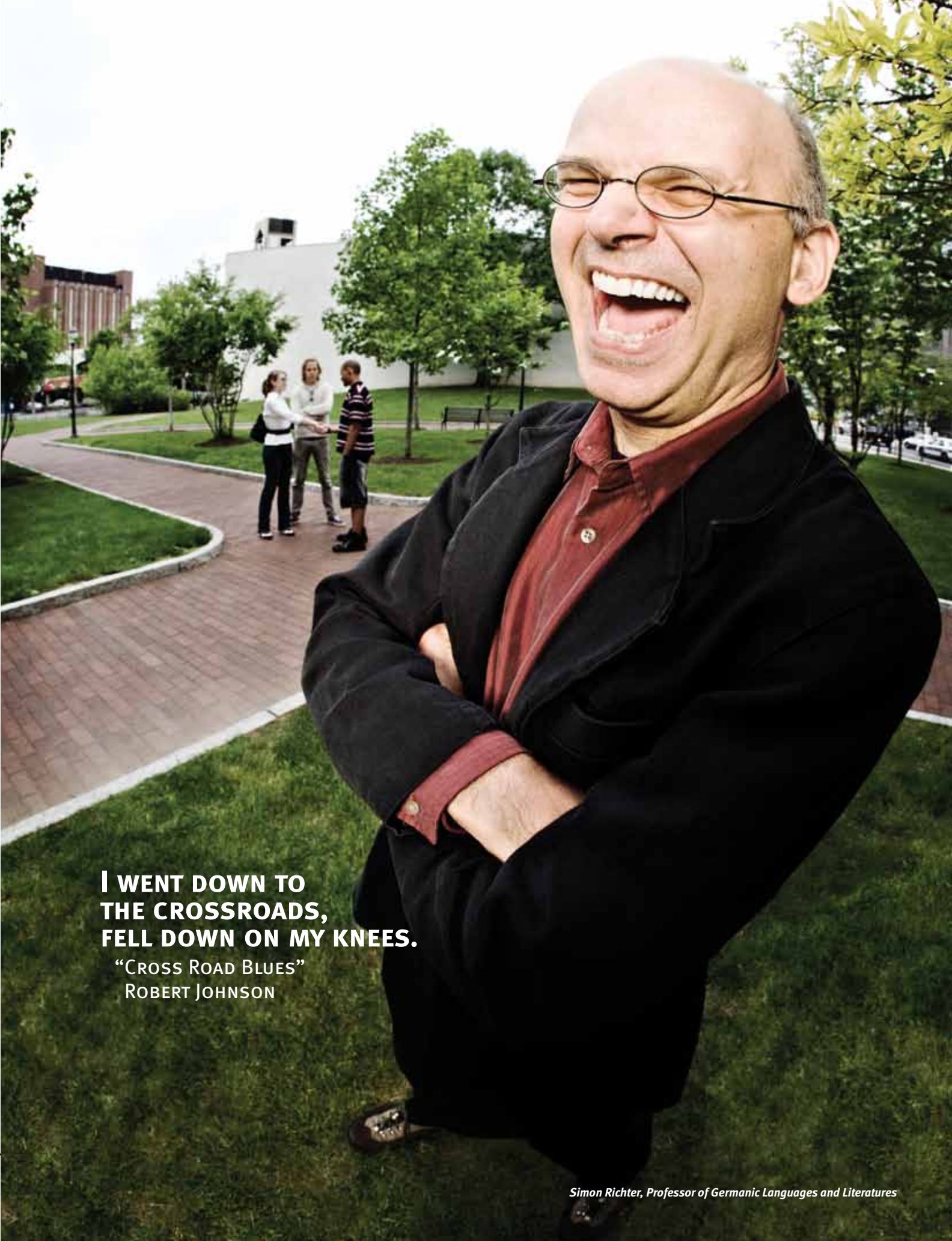
"Another thing the course is doing," Richter confides, "and I'm not too explicit about this with the students, is tempting them to look at the humanities anew. I assume that, by and large, students are not excited about literature. They may have had some bad or just neutral experiences in high school. But I want to tempt them by involving them in the very exciting process of interpretation. I want them to look at literature and works of culture afresh, not in order to win them for graduate study, but just so that the humanities continue to be a part of their lives in a way that's really significant."

Some of the students who unknowingly entered into Richter's diabolical pact now find their souls singed by the experience.

Pre-med science major Derek Mazique reports that the course "really rounded out my undergraduate experience. My education primarily concerned understanding processes of the natural world, but to me, being human is more than being an upright hominid. ... Connecting the dots between Faust adaptations can be tricky, but the more investment you put into it, the richer the Faust relationship becomes—it encourages self-discovery outside of class."

Jose Varela, a freshman in the Huntsman Program in International Studies and Business, observes that the devil's pact legend "sheds light on everyday life." Literature and film are to life, he discovered, as economics is to business. "Through the arts," he says, "concepts are learned and these can be used to better understand application—or life."

"When a class can challenge your assumptions about humanity and indeed your own life," adds pact member Penny Metchev, another Huntsman freshman, "then you know it's worth taking."



**I WENT DOWN TO  
THE CROSSROADS,  
FELL DOWN ON MY KNEES.**

**“CROSS ROAD BLUES”**

**ROBERT JOHNSON**