

Regional

Colloquium focuses on books, meaning

Each year, the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville organizes a research colloquium around a universal theme. In the past these topics have included “America,” “Evolution,” and “Space.” These broad themes have, in the past, allowed for multiple research methods and a great variety of scholarly products. This year’s colloquium on “The Book” promises equally diverse approaches. I held a question and answer session with this year’s colloquium organizer Larry LaFond, an associate dean of the College.

Why was this theme selected for this year’s colloquium?

“We had a lot of choices for themes but there were a number of things that kind of coincided here. The department of English language and literature at SIUE declared this year the ‘Year of the Book,’ and they were doing a number of events around that theme and we thought that the book could really be broadly conceived and would make a good colloquium topic.”

Given that “The Book” is a general concept, what kind of angles are going to be covered in this year’s colloquium?

“A variety of presentations will be included, some of them are very traditional but they should be quite interesting. We have a lot of panels on the social sciences, on the humanities, on the natural sciences about some of the most influential books. We are also looking at the future of the book. Is the book even going to be relevant into the electronic era? Some people will be talking about this.”

I find it interesting that in this time and age when bookstores are closing down, when more and more people are reading books in electronic formats that we are talking about “The Book.” It seems like this ancient concept of the book is



Photo courtesy of SIUE

The logo for this year’s Colloquium about “The Book.” Design by Barbara Nwacha.

changing very rapidly.

“Well, the concept of the book has always sort of changed. What do we mean by ‘book’? It’s really an abstract idea. The word book goes back to an ancient Germanic word Buch, Old English Boch and to the word beech, probably because some of the early Indo-European writings would have been carved on beech wood. But also you think about that wood. We’ve had wood covers, woodblock printing that preceded the movable type and that’s a very different type of book than what we have had through most of our years. And books, of course, are going to change and have already changed a lot in our lifetime.”

I think there must be a generational component. I hear older people saying that electronic books are fine but that they still want to feel the

book in their hands. But when you are talking to younger generations, they ask why they need to occupy any space with books when they can read them electronically. Do you think that in some way this generational gap is also going to create a fracture in terms of the type of literature or subjects that are being printed or offered electronically?

“Well, that’s much of a debated topic. Some have said that we have lost our attention spans. Some people now get distracted and bored after reading a blog that is four paragraphs long. It is a real question, however. Is it the way that we consume print or the way that we consume information these days? It is changing the way we process information in our brains.”

These big changes that we are seeing in the book as a concept these days actually are not

really new are they? Books as a product have changed dramatically over time.

“But what do we mean when we say we have a book? It seems like it’s a very simple concept, but it is really remarkably complex. When we talk about a book, I think we are talking about an assembly of words and printed pages of ink and paper, something that is fastened. And yet, that has never quite always been the case. It’s not even necessarily words. We talk about a checkbook, or someone dealing with numbers and, of course, as we already mentioned, they don’t involve ink or pages or fastening at all when you get into the e-book revolution.”

Would you say that in certain ways Gutenberg’s press was an invention that technologically speaking is comparable to the

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

e-book today?

“This is one of the kinds of questions that you only can answer looking back a couple of hundred years. Will the e-book be to printing what the Gutenberg press was to printing in the 1500’s? It may be, but we don’t have enough historical perspective yet.”

Every year for the colloquium, there is a guest speaker. Who will be this year’s speaker?

“Our guest speaker will be David Sedaris. David is a wonderful comedian, but also an author and radio contributor. He writes smart, incisive essays. I recently had the opportunity to read his 1998 book ‘Holiday on Ice.’ That book was also part of the English department’s year of the book. It is a great book. It’s fun to read, but it’s also quite smart in the way that it was written. His writing is largely autobiographical and I think that folks who come out and listen to David will be quite pleased.

How can the audience learn more about the colloquium?

“Our colloquium is on Monday, April 15 and Tuesday, April 16. Information about when the sessions are and where they will be held can be found by ‘Googling’ SIUE & Thinking about The Book.”

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.