Why would anyone honor such an SOB?

By Norman Weinstein

That was the question put to me rather urgently by an economics professor when plans were announced last spring for a university-sponsored year of special events in honor of Ernest Hemingway.

Why indeed?

Universities throughout the world have taken turns honoring famous writers, showering them with honorary degrees if living or naming campus buildings after them if they've gone to their final edited form.

But this university, through its choice of Hemingway as the author of honor, is doing something unique. Hemingway, true, will have a building bearing his name. And a conference drawing together scholars from across the U.S. will be held to discuss his works. But the real excitement gathering here as the "Hemingway Year" approaches involves how special events planned in his name will be used to help generate a new era of intellectual and artistic stimulation both on campus and beyond, both throughout 1986 and in the years ahead.

And this promise has to do with the kind of man and writer Hemingway was. It might seem a curious paradox that an academic institution would go to such lengths to honor an artist who had so little to do with academia. Hemingway was so exclusively the product of experiences never located on campus: wars in Europe and big game hunting in Africa. While universities cultivate images of writers as essentially asocial introverts stooping over typewriter keys in ponderous meditations, Hemingway was the archetypal partygoer, public figure on stage center, extrovert extraordinaire. While educational institutions would enroll the would-be writer into "Creative Writing 101," Hemingway took the course of the autodidact. He fashioned an image of a world class writer while still a youth, read widely and perceptive, and practiced until sometimes, often perfect.

What this university hopes to gain from presenting an enormously broad spectrum of special programming constituting around Hemingway is a sense of how life experiences can be shaped and crafted through the powers of imagination and reason into art.

So the campus will have a number of literary critics from Boston and Los Angeles to offer to the community insights about how Hemingway put his books together. Nothing surprising there. But Boise will also have a visit by two information officers from the U.S.S.R. Embassy to talk about why Hemingway is the most beloved American author among Soviet students. And lest conservatives feel slighted, Lorin Phillipson, contributor to William Buckley's National Review and the author of Freedom Flights, a book about Cubans fleeing Castro's Cuba, will discuss Cuba during the years of Hemingway's residence there.

And just when you think BSU is doing what universities do best — generating talktalktalktalkalktalk — be prepared for the area's first Afro-Cuban jazz/dance concert. Or a workshop on Spanish dance by an internationally acclaimed dancer. Or the chance to study an oriental form of martial meditation.

The complete list of special events is printed elsewhere in this issue of FOCUS.

Suppose you were to attend most or even all of these special events. How might you be changed and how might your understanding of Hemingway be altered?

The impact of attending these events might be imagined in this manner. Your intellect would be challenged, your pet opinions provoked by such nationally recognized figures as George Leonard and Leslie Fiedler. You'll have the chance to be entertained by jazz composer/bassist Charlie Haden and folk singer Nanci Griffith.

But even more significant is that steady attendance at these events will begin to open up new channels of communication between these walnut-shaped hemispheres behind our eyes. This Hemingway Year has been organized not only to educate and entertain but to demonstrate the unity of all areas of knowledge.

All of this involves the willingness to see the learning process in a different manner than you've ever been taught. Hemingway did. All of life was his academy. All of life's high and lows, confusions, and clarities. He forged the language in his books where the freshness and immediacy of everyday living could find an enduring artistic form. That is why the Hemingway Year is not simply a program sponsored by the university English department. Hemingway belongs to all departments of knowledge — and transcends them all at the same time. We are re-educating ourselves through this year honoring Hemingway as to what this whole business of higher education is really about. And we are thrilled to be sharing the fruits of our exploration with Idahoans.

Hemingway would probably laugh at the notion of himself as an educational reformer. He rather para-noidly defended himself against armies of graduate students and professors who knocked on his door and wanted some token of wisdom from the grand old papa of American Letters during his last years in Idaho.

Such mysteries we shroud great artists in! How can we, while honoring their achievements, begin to tap into our own wellsprings of creativity? And how can we begin to see creativity as not soley the domain of the gifted artist but the potential locked within us all? Hemingway found his closest associates not among "intellectuals." He found companionship in Spain, Cuba, France and Idaho among bullfighters, fisherman, shopowners, bartenders. The entire notion of a distinct intellectual class was foreign to him — he found repositories of wisdom and compassion in all kinds of human faces drawn from all walks of life.

As this university reaches out toward the community and region through the Hemingway Year we hope to break down barriers between intellectuals and just plain folks, between academic schools and the proverbial school of hard knocks. No public figure of our century lends himself so well to that cause as Hemingway, beloved author of high-brows and low-brows alike.

The novelist Raymond Carver in a recent New York Times book review of several Hemingway biographies concluded with: "Hemingway did his work, and he'll last." Now its up to us to do ours honoring the artist who so gracefully did his.

See Page 26 for a schedule of Hemingway events.

Norman Weinstein is currently working as a Special Projects Coordinator organizing the special events of the Hemingway Year while teaching in the BSU English Dept. He is the author of several books of poetry and a critical study of one of Hemingway's writing teachers, Gertrude Stein.