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Campus criticism and creative writing: perfect partners?

Abstract:

This paper considers selected texts dealing with creative writing and literary studies in the academy, including Michael Wilding's *Academia nuts* (2002) and Elaine Showalter's historical overview-cum-personal take *Faculty towers: The academic novel and its discontents* (2005), noting that the 'ivory tower' has come to be regarded as a 'tragic tower' (Showalter), or at least a faulty one, by some novelists and professors of English; that is, as a site of loss, disappointment and disaffection, which, far from being exclusive and 'above' worldly matters has become depressingly mired in and marred by them. Such views may be justifiable; certainly they appear conventional, but perhaps it is time to change, or at least challenge, the narrative. Australia does not have a tradition of the academic novel comparable with that of England or America, but postgraduate and teacher-writers may be well placed to create one. If the university now helps create the writer, might not the writer also help create the university? The contemporary mass education system, fomented by ideals of progressive education, cultural pluralism and equal opportunity, is an extraordinary experiment in which creative writing programs play a part and the potential for aesthetic, historical and critical investigation within and about it seems boundless.

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Literary academic Joseph Epstein, who came late to academe and is now retired, wonders why there is so much disappointment amongst his tenured colleagues. As far as he knows, ‘no one has ever done a study of the unhappiness of academics’. Anthropologists might be best placed to conduct a study, he muses, ‘using methods long ago devised for investigating a culture from the outside in.’ Novelists at present suffice; some are outsiders and some insiders, but they consistently portray the university as a paradoxical place, desirable and deplorable, hothouse and mad house.

According to William Tierney, the academic novel has ‘existed as a distinct genre for well over a century (2004: 163), though in the decades after the Second World War contributions markedly increased, in line with the considerable expansion and transformation of higher education. However, Michelle Britt argues that the academic novel has been neither ‘extensively researched nor critically examined’ (2003: 7) and Robert Scott similarly claims that there has been little ‘scholarly attention’ devoted to the academic novel (Scott 2004: 81). Mortimer Proctor’s *The English university novel* (1957) and John Lyon’s *The college novel in America* (1962) are regarded as foundational works, along with Lyon’s supplementary article in 1974 that added 90 novels to the 200 he had previously discussed (Britt 2003; Leuschner 2006b; Tierney 2004). Lisa Johnson also contributed details on another 200 or so novels in 1995 (Tierney 2004: 163). In 2003, John Kramer published a revised and expanded edition of his 1981 publication, *The American college novel, an annotated bibliography*, and it refers to 648 novels published up to 2002.¹ These works focus mostly on American or English novels in which institutions of higher education are ‘a crucial part’ of the ‘total setting’ (Kramer, cited by Anderson & Thelin 2004: 106).

Tierney notes that ‘[r]elatively few scholars of higher education have used the academic novel as a research tool for understanding higher education’ (2004: 164). Anderson and Thelin question why anyone should read or study academic novels and point to the usual answer, which is that ‘we can learn about the complexities of academic life through fictional portrayals’ (2004: 107). Likewise, Tierney claims that the academic novel ‘tells us about ourselves: a good novel can be a mirror to our lives’ (2002: 162). For Janice Rossen, academic novels are important because ‘they are widely believed by their readers to constitute an accurate representation of academic life, whether they do or not’ (cited by Tierney 2002: 162). There’s the rub, of course, because although novels may offer pleasure and valuable insights, novelists are not obligated to be truth-tellers; quite the contrary. Given that billions of taxpayer dollars are expended on higher education, not to mention the dreams and aspirations of millions of people, it seems the academic novel may deserve closer scrutiny.

Diane Bjorklund argues that academic novels provide a means for us to ‘to be reflexive about our discipline’; she examined eighty that feature sociologists as major characters, and finds that the ‘vast majority’ of the portraits are ‘unfavourable’ and ‘discredit the sociological enterprise’ (2001: 24). The novels contain criticisms specific to sociologists but are not limited to these. This is unsurprising, because negative depiction of academics is a key feature of the

genre. Bjorklund considers the academic novel to be potentially educative, but also frustratingly limited due to the preponderance of ‘stereotypical and exaggerated’ portraits which, she asserts, ‘have us wrong in many ways’ (37-38).

A brief and preliminary enquiry into the academic novel, this paper presumes that novels might usefully illuminate what academics do and how we are perceived, as well as the circumstances and reputation of higher education generally, although fiction, and perhaps especially that which makes no claim to realism², is necessarily limited as a rhetorical, historical or sociological resource.

Kenneth Womack argues that academic novels traditionally helped guide new faculty, partly by showing them how not to behave; they were to instruct as well as entertain, ‘to enhance the culture and sustain the community through a more ethically driven system of higher education’ (cited by Leuschner 2006a: 340). However, Leuschner observes that the role of the campus novel as a ‘corrective’ has diminished, and that ‘contemporary academic fiction offers few positive role models’ (340). The academic is typically portrayed as ‘a buffoon to be laughed at or a Faust to be hissed’ (Lyons, cited by Tierney 2004: 165). By this strategy, an author courts a public that is ‘cut off from the world of the scholar’ (165), and will enjoy feeling superior to it. The portrayal of academics as foolish or morally corruptible or both may provide succour for those who feel that education is a luxury denied to them, or for those who have experienced it and found it wanting, but the consequences for universities (and the humanities in particular) may be considerable. Such portraits draw upon and contribute to pervasive ‘anti-intellectualism’ and can have a ‘profound impact’, especially in a climate of budget crises and calls for accountability (Leuschner 2006a: 349-50).

In ‘Body damage: Dis-figuring the academic in academic fiction’, Leuschner argues that increasingly ‘the academic body’ is being figured ‘as ill or deformed’ (2006a: 340), with personal disability serving also as a social critique (351). He cites David Mitchell’s work on ‘narrative prosthesis’, which posits that disability inaugurates narrative which in turn ‘attempts to resolve the issue ... in terms of cures, fixes, rescues, or, at the most extreme, extermination’ (351). This is interesting in terms of particular characters and contexts, but also in light of suggestions by ‘a contingent of critics’ that the genre of the academic novel is itself ‘in a state of crisis’ or terminal decline as it recycles themes, tropes, and devices (Scott, 2004: 81-82) — as if the malady of academe has somehow infected the literary form devised to treat it.

In her personal take on the academic novel of the past fifty years, *Faculty towers: The academic novel and its discontents*, feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter notes the satirical tendency of campus novels even as she points to their essential ‘seriousness, even sadness’ (2005: 2). The striking concatenation of satire, sadness and seriousness is reinforced by sustained titular references to both *Fawlty Towers*—a hilarious BBC sitcom that ridicules middle-class aspiration, bigotry, duplicity, political correctness and doomed attempts at civility—and Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its discontents*, a study of human instinct and the inevitability of conflict. Showalter implies (but does not expand on the theme) that

we are riven by our biological nature, which has aggression and pursuit of libidinal satisfaction at its core. The university, by this view, seems less a rational arrangement of enlightened human beings than a site of inevitable and perpetual conflict between erotic and destructive instincts and psychic and social mechanisms designed to repress them in the interests of the institution's survival.

The university serves as microcosm in many novels: its ailments, whether framed as tragic or comic, are symptomatic of the broader society—everywhere there is lust for status, sex and power. Part of the problem, of course, is the gap between personal ideals and the everyday reality of academia, which requires workers continuously to evaluate themselves and improve their 'performance'. Where survival of the discipline or department seems continually under threat, struggling to improve one's fitness for the job might seem akin to a patient with an incurable illness maintaining an exercise regime, that is, vital and futile at the same time.

Critics cite the English department as the main setting for the academic novel to date, an observation supported by Kramar, who provides an index listing academic novels according to their disciplinary focus (Anderson & Thelin 2004: 108). English departments are rendered enclaves of pettiness, bickering, self-interest, elitism, delusion, ambition, sexual exploitation, power struggles and Theory wars (which encapsulate all these things).

In a review of Ian McGuire's novel *Incredible Bodies* (2006), John Mullan observes:

The stupidity of clever people is endlessly entertaining. The university department is a perfect container for vanity and petty ambition masquerading as intellectual consequence. English Departments and their staff have proved particularly popular—partly because English lit has been so amusingly susceptible to intellectual fashion, partly because English graduates are more likely than others to write novels. (2006)

In 'Who's afraid of the campus novel?' Aida Edemariam says English Departments continue to provide 'great fodder', but 'one of the more obvious trends has been the rise of novels satirising creative writing courses' (2005). Given the short shrift such courses commonly receive in the media, this seems hardly surprising. The argument goes something like this: creative writing teachers support (or fail to support) their own writing habits at taxpayers' and students' expense by teaching something most writers consider can't be taught. Or this: creative writing courses don't foster originality and instead churn out writers with an institutional style. Or this: creative writing workshops subject novice writers to harsh criticism, sometimes destroying their confidence and unique voice. Or this: there is little likelihood of publication for graduates of creative writing courses or of jobs in publishing or teaching, but universities continue to exploit innocent dreams of authorship to boost enrolment numbers (the over-milked 'cash cow' argument). Or this: the 'writer-teacher', drained and disillusioned and increasingly self-consciousness, suffers writer's block and ends up a teacher-writer or, merely, a teacher.³

Academics suffer in many campus novels, and writer-academics are no exception. Typically, they are frustrated by external demands and expectations, as well as their inner demons and bodily limitations. Henry Devereaux in Richard Russo's *Straight man* (1997), Ted Swenson in Francine Prose's *Blue angel* (2000), and Grady Tripp in Michael Chabon's *Wonder boys* (2000 [1995]), for example, each deplores aging and his body's—and talent's—deterioration. Finally, these writers save themselves by escaping from academia, whether by choice or not. Grady Tripp nearly dies from heart problems before he is sacked by the head of the English Department, whose wife he has impregnated. Tripp is a big man, unfit, overweight, and a stoner; the novel he's been working on for nearly eight years is massive, incomplete and out of control, like his life. Only by losing his manuscript, entitled 'Wonder Boys', can he find himself a new story, both on the page and in the flesh. Paradoxically, creative freedom and, notably, creative *control*, are only regained when Tripp becomes untenured.

In 'Why we need the campus novel', Connor O'Brien rues the fact that Australian authors don't feel 'compelled to write about university life' and posits that the campus novel is 'culturally important' because it 'both reveals *and* shapes popular attitudes to education'. He claims that 'Australian writers have criminally ignored university life', which 'reflects *and* perpetuates Australian society's "anti-intellectual" bent'. The 'university is dying out,' he adds, and 'nobody is writing about it' (O'Brien 2008: 32)⁴.

Michael Wilding is an exception; he has published both short fiction and novels about campus decline. *Academia nuts* (2002) is a satirical novel about the dying days of the university or, more precisely, the disillusion of several aging male humanities academics, one of whom is a well published novelist and teacher of literature and creative writing. The novel consists, for the most part, of a series of dialogues among the men, many of which are amusing and point to academe's pervasive problems and familiar complaints, sometimes without the need for much exaggeration.

At times, though, the satirist's scorn seems indiscriminate and his sympathies unclear, so that, for example, the characters' contempt for equal opportunity and sexual harassment policies—and for women in general—might attract something less than utter derision. In one exchange, Dr Bee says to the novelist Henry Lancaster, 'As you always say, everything is food to the novelist's imagination. A novel on Mad Cow Disease would seem very apposite to our present situation. Does it infect bulls to (sic), or is it exclusively a disease of equal opportunity' (Wilding 2002: 134). The slippage in the novel between 'equal opportunity' and 'positive discrimination' is too easy; it seems calculated to provoke ambivalence, at the very least, about feminisation of the humanities, which has been, arguably, one of the biggest transformations since the Dawkins reforms. Of course, in the world of *Academia nuts*, such criticism by a female academic might serve as just another example of humourless 'political correctness'; after all, this is *satire*.

Tierney suggests that 'the purpose in reading academic fiction has less to do with proving or disproving the truth of a text; instead the novel might be thought of as a

way to help academics think about how academic life has been structured, defined, and interpreted *in order to create constructive change*' (2004: 164, my emphasis). Presumably, this is to some extent also the purpose in writing such fiction. Wilding is an informer, a former 'insider' — an emeritus professor and an established author. He has produced brutal caricatures, grumpy men who grumble *ad nauseum* about lost privileges (such as unfettered access to the young student body), but although he claims a didactic purpose (Wilding n.d.), there's no real sense in this novel that ridding academia of lazy, egotistical, reactionary misogynists (aided by redundancy 'packages') might actually reduce the problems; instead, purging the old guard, and with them, supposedly, traditional disciplines and scholarly values, guarantees that the university's deterioration will continue unimpeded and (mostly) undocumented.

Kramer perceives 'growing bitterness' (cited by Anderson & Thelin 2004: 108) and Showalter a bleaker tone in recent academic novels (2005: 123), and *Academia nuts* fits these descriptions; the university, with its grotesque or demoralised inmates, is dismal, corrupt, moribund, beyond saving, and all that can be found growing there is mediocrity, inefficiency, and managerialism: 'Now it was just empty lawns. The calm and discretion of an up-market cemetery. Or an empty theme park, waiting for a theme' (2002: 229).

Wilding says he drew on anecdotes from a number of campuses, finding they had a 'generic consistency', and also on 'archetypal patterns' to reveal the 'reality of university life' (Wilding n.d.). Standout examples of the genre, such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), Malcolm Bradbury's *The history man* (1975), and David Lodge's *Small world* (1984) were less influential than two popular British comedy series, *Are you being served?* and *Yes, Prime Minister* (Wilding n.d.). Like Showalter's reference to *Fawlty towers*, these comparisons are suitably bathetic.

Epstein jokes that 'to hire a novelist for a university teaching job is turning the fox loose in the hen house. The result—no surprise here—has been feathers everywhere' (2005). Creative writers and courses receive their share of Wilding's ridicule. A chapter entitled 'Writing class', for example, explains that creative writing had been Henry Lancaster's 'salvation' and 'an idea of genius', even though for years he had scorned it: "How can you teach writing?" he would ask" (2002: 126). Easily, he discovers, since it frees him from re-reading literary texts year after year in order to teach them. 'What interested him now was a life of teaching without texts' (127).

Epstein provides an anecdote about a former professor of theatrical literature who 'never referred to university teaching as other than a—or sometimes the—"racket"' (2005). Wilding uses the term in *Academia nuts*. Journalist Lisa Pryor uses it in an antagonistic piece on postgraduate writing courses. The 'creative writing racket', she posits, is a 'pyramid selling scheme whereby teachers pass on their knowledge to students so they can one day become creative writing teachers themselves' (Pryor 2010). And a former head of writing at RMIT, Malcolm King, implies the same, or worse, on the basis that most writing students won't get

writing or teaching jobs: 'Historians will look back at this period in Australia's literary life as the time universities made large amounts of money by becoming dream factories for budding writers ... Too often, the dream has proved an illusion' (King 2009).

But I am looking for a new story, and Mark McGurl provides the basis for one. His fascinating literary history, *The Program Era* (2009), challenges stereotypical commentaries on writing courses and, although his study is confined to the US, some observations are certainly transferable. He teases out the contradictions of higher education institutions, which reside in the 'gap between freedom and necessity': they are anchored in an 'unbeautiful realm of social needs, hemmed in all around by budgets and bureaucracy and demography', on the one hand, and 'the shimmering vision of self-realization-through-learning' on the other. We participate in the system to 'become richer versions of ourselves, however that might be defined' (3). McGurl argues that 'paying attention to the increasingly intimate relation between literary production and the practices of higher education is the key to understanding the originality of postwar literature' and that the creative writing program is 'the most important event in postwar American literary history'. He argues against the discourse of decline, contending that the program era 'has generated a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems that have been explored with tremendous energy—and at times great brilliance—by a vast range of writers who have also been students and teachers' (2009: ix). The university has become, effectively, the biggest patron of literary practice in the US (22), and, due to the healthy growth of undergraduate and postgraduate writing programs over the past couple of decades, the same must surely be true in Australia.

McGurl also provides a fascinating twist on the concept of the academic novel, questioning the degree to which:

all novels aspiring to the honorific status of literature must be considered campus novels of a sort. Beyond the question of a novel's setting, for instance, how might we see the metafictional reflexivity of so much postwar fiction as being related to its production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment? (47-48)

There is another pertinent argument: McGurl claims that 'the implicit subject (or project) of every campus novel is the existential triumph, by satirical objectification...of the writer over the institution that would institutionalize him' (47), so that the act of writing the story becomes a statement or assertion of creative autonomy, and thereby affirms, in some way, what McGurl calls 'systematic creativity' (71). The image of 'system' as 'a gray plane of deathly regularity is ... outdated and impoverished', he argues, 'and bears little relation to the actual vivacity' of a university such as the one he works for, 'in which a huge and diverse populace thrives, and out of which a great deal of interesting fiction...has sprung' (xi).

As a new breed of writer-academics finds its place in our ever-evolving academy, older specimens, Philip Roth's dying animals or Wilding's academia nuts, will

write their obituaries in vain. Australia does not have a tradition of the academic novel comparable with that of England or America, but postgraduates and writer-academics are well placed to create one. Arguably, the other kind of academic novel is already well established—that is, the ‘reflexive prose experiments’ which are, by McGurl’s thesis, ‘testaments to the continuing interest of literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research’ (48). The contemporary higher education system, fomented by ideals of progressive education, cultural pluralism and equal opportunity, is an extraordinary experiment and the potential for literary investigation within and about it seems boundless.

Endnotes

1. Other frequently noted works are Rossen (1993), Womack (2002) and Carter (1990).
2. For an argument against realist critical approaches and treating academic novels as ‘social documents’, see Péter Székely (n.d.).
3. For a useful discussion of complaints against creative writing courses, and tensions and competition among literary ‘scholars, theorists and writers’ and between members of the AWP and writers who are ‘detractors of university programs’, as well as clear arguments in support of programs (and a title that looks forward to Showalter’s reference to Freud), see Fenza (2000).
4. There are, of course, academic characters in Australian fiction, such as Jonathan Crow in Christina Stead’s *For love alone* (1945), and also in poetry, short stories, and plays, and there are also revealing memoirs and nonfiction works, including Tara Brabazon’s *Digital Hemlock* (2002) and Helen Garner’s *The First Stone* (1995).

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