

Prophetic Fiction: Literary Accounts of Woke Academia

I have a very fat file in my computer of crazy things that have happened in my professional life as an academic. Colleagues saying and doing stuff no one outside of academia would believe; encounters with students convinced they knew more about my work than I do; and classes, speakers, and other campus events so bizarre I'm glad I got pictures to prove they actually happened.

I have thought that if I use that file to write a book, it will be a work of nonfiction. It would be a journalistic account of a life in academia, illustrating all the ways the culture of higher education has deteriorated over the time I've lived inside it.

The first book I [read](#) in this genre is Allan Bloom's [The Closing of the American Mind](#), which I read when I myself was an undergraduate student. Since then, the genre has only grown.

Yet, increasingly I think the novelistic parody might well be the only real chance the contemporary writer has to keep up with the acceleration of wokeness. And even there, the risk of being outflanked by reality at the moment of publication is not negligible.

One of the most over-the-top examples I've read is James Hynes' [The Lecturer's Tale](#). I read it at the start of my professorial career, nearly 20 years ago, before I had learned much about the absurdities in my college's own English department. I was quite entertained and, later, occasionally mildly frightened as I learned that some of my colleagues neatly fit the stereotypes Hynes sketched. Here's just one of Hynes' characters:

“But on his first day as a graduate student, at the very first meeting of Introduction to Literary Theory, his instructor—a gaunt and entirely hairless man in severe wire rims, a jacket of herringbone tweed, and a white roll-neck sweater—lifted a paperback edition of Aristotle with two fingers and set it on fire with a silvery Zippo. He dropped it in a wastebasket without a word and watched it burn, and when Nelson got up and opened a window to let out the smoke, he spun with a sharp, jerking motion and barked at Nelson to sit down.

‘Don’t touch that, you!’ the professor said, in a vaguely Gallic accent, and then, to everyone, ‘I want you all to smell that. I want it to penetrate to the back of your nostrils. By the end of the term I want that smell to come to you even in your sleep, to be as familiar to you as the stink of your own pale, oozing bodies.’

This struck Nelson as a little extreme on a September morning in Indiana.

‘For some of you,’ the professor went on, ‘I will be an intellectual terroriste, striking brutally’—and here he lunged at a young woman in the front row, who cringed and clutched her notebook to her bosom—‘ruthlessly and without warning at the foundation of everything you hold dear. But for those of you with the rigor and the intellectual humility to submit to my will, I will be your guerrilla chieftain, teaching you, disciplining you, driving you with a terrible love to do things you did not think possible. Some of you will not survive. ... But some of you I will lead out of the hills and down into the burning metropole.’

He lifted the wastebasket. Aristotle was still smoldering.

‘This is just the first step,’ he said. ‘We will have to destroy literary theory in order to save it.’”

Philip Roth's [*The Human Stain*](#) is another example I found enjoyable. In this one, a renowned older professor of classics finds himself the victim of a professional railroading by his administration. Professor Silk's transgression? Wondering where several students were who had been absent for the first five weeks of the semester:

“Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?”

Later that day he was astonished to be called in by his successor, the new dean of faculty, to address the charge of racism brought against him by the two missing students, who turned out to be black, and who, though absent, had quickly learned of the locution in which he'd publicly raised the question of their absence. Coleman told the dean, 'I was referring to their possibly ectoplasmic character. Isn't that obvious? These two students had not attended a single class. That's all I knew about them. I was using the word in the customary and primary meaning: "spook" as a specter or a ghost. ... Consider the context: Do they exist or are they spooks? The charge of racism is spurious. It is preposterous.'"

Preposterous it is, but it is used to force Silk to retire early.

I just had the opportunity to read a much more recent parody-of-woke novel, not set in the university but featuring comically politically hyper-sensitive characters.

This book, George C. Leef's [*The Awakening of Jennifer Van Arsdale*](#), tells the tale of an uber-progressive writer, Jennifer Van Arsdale. She is assigned to write the biography of the woke female president, Pat Farnsworth. Farnsworth has nearly brought the progressive dream to reality. She has packed the Supreme Court; established free college and a universal basic income; Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico are

states; and triggering pieces of traditional culture such as Mount Rushmore have been eliminated.

During one of several interview sessions, Farnsworth recalls a formative undergraduate moment:

“I had taken an English course with a professor, Cecile Eagleton, who argued that it was a myth that there are two sides to every question. That wasn’t true, she said. People could know what was right from their instincts and sense of fairness. The notion that people should use logic to decide right from wrong was just a tool to privilege the power structure. That resonated with me.”

Our journalist protagonist admires Farnsworth immensely until she has a chance encounter with a leader of an anti-administration group that educates her on the realities of Farnsworth’s politics and her character.

The dialogue is briskly written and carefully skitters along on the boundary that separates satire from real life. The game is a difficult one, though, as I’ve noted. And some of the humor works precisely because the exaggeration is only one or two notches beyond what we can find in today’s news. Indeed, Kamala Harris, should she advance to the presidency at some point, would make for a worthy competitor to Farnsworth.

I have in my files evidence of colleagues straightforwardly telling the rest of the faculty that mere logical, fact-based arguments must be trumped (in the everyday business of a university, I remind you) in some cases by emotion. How far from Farnsworth’s professor’s view of how to determine truth is this?

Reading the above novels has made at least one thing apparent to me: My own professional experiences will need to be considerably augmented for any reader with recent experience in academia to find them approaching the fictional. These

days, parody *is* reality.

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