

Introduction:

# Kooky Little Kampus



Charles B. Harris, Focus Editor

If we consider the 1984 publication of William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* as the first shot, our celebrated culture wars have raged now for almost two decades. The battleground's quieter now, but recent potshots at the NEA by George Will seem designed to stoke up hostilities, a role Will performed effectively in the 90s. (In a notorious 1991 *Newsweek* column, for example, Will described Second Lady Lynne Cheney—then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities—as “secretary of domestic defense,” whose adversary, the Modern Language Association, Will deemed more dangerous than any faced by her husband Dick, then Secretary of Defense.)

Because this has been largely a PR war, it's hard to calculate if any lasting damage has been inflicted on the academy or the culture. But reputations have certainly been made, and a new array of right-wing cultural heroes—Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball, Allan Bloom, Will, Cheney, and the ubiquitous Bennett, who has skillfully parlayed his stint as NEH chair into a lucrative, if largely self-appointed, role as America's Moral Ombudsman—has emerged. Interestingly, few academic theorists have achieved the popular fame of their conservative antagonists, although a handful of theoretical terms—*deconstruction*, for example, which turned up in the title of a Woody Allen movie, and which, in a moment of sublime hilarity, a member of the House Impeachment Committee used to describe President Clinton's liberties with the English language—have entered the general vocabulary.

It was only a matter of time before writers began to join in the fun. There's nothing new about the academic novel, which occupies a rather large room in the house of fiction. But not since the 50s gave us such inspired examples of the form as Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* (1952),

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and Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1953), have so many literary takes on academic manners appeared. Starting, perhaps, with David Lodge's satire, *Changing Places* (1975), novelists and playwrights have produced an expanding body of academic portraits, ranging from spoofs such as Smiley's *Moo* (1995) and Russo's *Straight Man* (1997) to Nabokovian burlesques of scholarly discourse such as Lee Siegel's *Love in a Dead Language* (1999) to expressions of outrage such as Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992).

The title of Lodge's sequel to *Changing Places* is *Small World* (1984), an apt description of the contemporary academic world and its opponents. One needn't read very far in the books reviewed in this *ABR* focus to realize that the degrees separating modern culture warriors are few enough to make Kevin Bacon feel like an anchorite.

It's well known, for example, that Morris Zapp, Lodge's peripatetic professor, is not-so-loosely based on Stanley Fish. Long known within university circles as an agent provocateur, Fish entered public consciousness in the 80s when, as newly appointed Chair of the Duke University English department, he recruited a pantheon of academic superstars, rapidly converting a declining department into a high-profile bastion of literary theory—which just as quickly became the *bête noir* of the rabid right (D'Souza devotes an entire chapter castigating the department in *Illiberal Education*). Among Fish's stable of stars was Frank Lentricchia, the notorious “Dirty Harry of contemporary critical theory,” an appellation bestowed by *Village Voice* reviewer Maureen Corrigan when Lentricchia posed for

the cover of one of his books against a graffiti-streaked wall, wearing a striped, open-collared shirt and blue jeans, with his arms folded, in clear imitation of the image of James Dean on the poster for *Rebel without a Cause*. In 1996, however, Lentricchia shocked the literary establishment with his widely discussed article, "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic," publicly renouncing literary theory for a new life of teaching undergraduates and writing novels, the most recent of which is reviewed by R.M. Berry in this focus.

But there's more. Lentricchia is the obvious prototype for Tony Pescecane, the working-class Italian English department Chair in *The Lecturer's Tale*, James Hynes's droll satire of academic foibles reviewed in this focus by Gillen D'Arcy Wood. At the novel's end, Pescecane renounces

literary theory and all its works in a high-profile article in *The New York Times Magazine*, complete with a glossy black-and-white photo of a thick-armed Pescecane in jeans, Yankees jersey, and high-top Converse All-Stars. In the article he committed himself for the rest of his life to teaching undergraduates.... Having given up his role as the Michael Corleone of theory, now he wanted to be the Tony Soprano of pedagogy.

*The New York Times* didn't publish Lentricchia's confession. More appropriately, it appeared in *Lingua Franca*, which is to contemporary academia what *The Dial* was to New England transcendentalism. It was also in the pages of *Lingua Franca* that NYU mathematical physicist Alan Sokal revealed his now legendary academic hoax on the cultural studies journal *Social Text*. In 1994, Sokal submitted a sham article to the journal, in which he reviewed some current topics in physics and mathematics, then drew various tongue-in-cheek cultural, philosophical, and political morals that he felt would appeal to fashionable academic commentators on science who question scientific claims to objectivity. The editors of *Lingua Franca* have gathered the various articles surrounding this debate into a single volume, *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham*

*That Shook the Academy*, which John K. Wilson reviews in this focus.

As Wilson points out, Stanley Fish is among the prominent voices weighing in on the hoax (along with cultural theorist Andrew Ross, who has a cameo role in Hynes's novel)—not, however, from his previous post at Duke University, but from the University of Illinois at Chicago, where, in a move that surprised everyone, he became Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences two years ago. Reprising his Duke performance, Fish has recruited a growing number of academic stars, enticing them to abandon prestigious universities to join him at this formerly undistinguished branch campus located in Chicago's urban center. Among his recent recruits is noted scholar and memoirist Lennard J. Davis, the new Head of UIC's English Department whose debut novel, an academic romp entitled *The Sonnets*, is also reviewed in this focus. To the best of my knowledge, Davis has not yet turned up as a character in anybody else's novel.

Neither has Joanne Dobson, whose academic detective novel is reviewed in this focus by Mary Papke. But like Davis and Lentricchia, Dobson is also a university professor, who finds time to write her Karen Pelletier mysteries while teaching English at Dartmouth. (Another well-known woman writer of detective stories, Amanda Cross, is, in real life, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Professor of English at Columbia University.)

So it's a small world, indeed, a compact cast of dramatis personae writing theory, fending off theory-bashers, engaging in a little theory-bashing of their own in their satirical novels, and occasionally appearing as characters in those novels.

It's all good clean fun, replenishing our stock of literary devices with new comic figures, issues, and settings: incomprehensible deconstructionists, fierce feminists, careerist faculty poets, PC run amok, the Corporate University. What may get lost in all this gamesmanship, however, is the fact that contemporary literary theory, while easily caricatured, really

does produce important intellectual and cultural work. Despite all of its kookiness, the modern university still provides one of the very few spaces in American life where men and women may continue to live *for* rather than *off* ideas. Moreover, the engendering insights of contemporary cultural and literary theory have begun to find their way into the works of such writers as Paul Auster, Curtis White, Carole Maso, Carol de Chellis Hill, Kathy Acker, Doug Rice, Jorie Graham, the L\*A\*N\*G\*U\*A\*G\*E poets, and a host of others. But that's another story. And, perhaps, another *ABR* focus.

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