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Tessa McWatt, *Higher Ed*. Random House Canada and Scribe UK, 2015. (£14.99 paperback) Pp 304. ISBN 1925228045.

Tessa McWatt's *Higher Ed* is a different kind of academic novel, one which artfully counters the most familiar objections to that sub-genre. Commentators who disdain the academic novel (usually academics themselves) may object that it is too inward-looking; that it focusses too much on the trivial problems of a privileged clerisy cocooned in an elite ivory tower; that it usually consists of a text created by an English professor to be taught by other English professors in English departments at other universities; that it relies too heavily on a small collection of *topoi*, particularly the professor-student affair; or that it replicates in fiction the class and race homogeneity of many modern universities. We may remember J. A. Sutherland's diagnosis of "in-group jokiness, a sense of shared jests among a coterie" (80); or George Watson's weary complaint: "there is a world elsewhere" (35).

Tessa McWatt, who like Watson and Sutherland is a don, examines higher education (though her title may incorporate a pun as well – one of the main characters is Ed; as he is made redundant, there may be a need to hire Ed). But the differences from the mainstream academic novel give her book its freshness.

Consider the setting. Traditionally academic novels are set in a very small wedge of the world of higher education. Ian Carter notes that of about 200 British university novels published between 1945 and 1988, over 50% were set at Oxford, nearly 75% Oxford or Cambridge (4). Carter believes, in a vigorous, pardonable overstatement, that almost all British university novels tell one of three stories: "how an undergraduate at Oxford (usually) or Cambridge came to wisdom; how a don at Oxford (usually) or Cambridge was stabbed in the back physically or professionally, sometimes surviving to rule his college; and how rotten life was as student or teacher outside Oxford and Cambridge" (15).

A similar focus on "elite" institutions characterizes the American academic novel, with about 12% of the 648 novels in John Kramer's 2009 bibliography set at Harvard and about a quarter of college novels taking place at one of six Ivy League universities (Anderson 109). Though this is not as single-minded as the British focus on Oxbridge – the US has never had a system where two smallish universities were considered so central and consumingly interesting as England – it is still strikingly unrepresentative. Kramer found eight college novels set at Bennington College (enrollment under 700 undergraduates).

The British picture has changed over the years, with Oxbridge as default location giving way (to some extent) to novels set in redbrick universities (David Lodge's University of Rummidge is such a university, as are the universities in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and Malcolm Bradbury's *Eating People Is Wrong*); then to the so-called "white tile" universities, those creations of the 1960s such as the Universities of Sussex or East Anglia or York, in one of which Bradbury sets *The History Man*. Lodge's *Thinks* is set at the (imaginary) white tile University of Gloucester.

The binary system that distinguished between universities (no matter what material they were made of) and polytechnics – which was abolished in 1992, when all the polytechnics became universities – was also a class division, inscribed in the few novels that paid any attention to the poly. The best of these is Howard Jacobson's *Coming From Behind*, in which Sefton Goldberg is a Cambridge graduate teaching at the Polytechnic in Wrotesley, and desperate to escape. His Wrotesley is a grotesque panorama of indifferent and brutish students, inadequate colleagues, a malevolent administration, and a fixed opposition to the life of the mind. Its idea of useful efficiencies is to twin the English Department (which cannot be called that, for ideological reasons) with the local football team and assign its lecturers rooms in the bowels of the stadium.

These locales have less to do with geography than with rank. When Jim Dixon wonders, about his supervisor and *bête noire*, how he could have become professor of history, "even at a place like this?" he registers the low status of his university; earlier he has imagined wistfully that his conversation with the professor was almost like talking about history "in the way history might be talked about in Oxford and Cambridge quadrangles" (10).

McWatt, who teaches at the University of East London, formerly the Polytechnic of East London, sets her novel at Thames Gateway University, a fictional former-poly also in East London. There is no pretense that the students or staff are unjustly displaced from their rightful quadrangles at Oxford; but the prevailing tone is of pluckiness combined with sadness. Her students are more likely to be older, working class, and in fact working, than a comparable cohort at Oxbridge or probably even East Anglia; they are much more likely to be minorities or immigrants; they are undoubtedly less well-prepared for advanced academic study than they might be, but for the most part they are hard-working, curious and ambitious and the limited glances we are afforded of the teaching they receive shows that their lecturers are also well-intentioned and disciplined,

uncontaminated by the sort of contempt for his job that in Sefton Goldberg is both hilarious and despicable.

Unlike the vast majority of academic novels, *Higher Ed* contains no English lecturers. It has a very large and heterogeneous cast of characters, quite a few of them unconnected with higher ed; but among the staff of Thames Gateway, the most important two are Robin, a lecturer in film studies, and Francine, a middle-aged administrator in the office of Quality Assurance and Advancement. The latter thinks defensively – almost everyone is defensive in this novel and has ample reason to be – “Surely Quality Assurance and Enhancement is key to any university” (2). Her one friend at the university is Patricia, a lecturer in Anthropology; her main professional relationship is with Lawrence, the head of Quality Assurance, with whom she sleeps in a nervous attempt to keep her job.

This is the new bureaucratized university, operating under neoliberal principles. Robin reflects that

These departmental meetings are more frequent, the days for his research less so. His head is filled with jargon: *research income*; *collaborative partners*; *knowledge transfer*; *impact*. These are the terms that govern all of them these days, and those who rarely showed up for meetings when he first started at this university now attend regularly. . . . “There’s an initiative towards practice-based programmes as the key to our students being better prepared for employment,” Richard [department head, or “line manager”] says, and Robin doesn’t disagree or make much of this. The other theorists hum with indignation: the closing of courses will mean a streamlining of outlooks, a lack of choice and the return to the values of a polytechnic, further marginalizing the students of this underprivileged borough, when once widening participation – a university graduate in every home – was the key goal. Knowledge for its own sake. (37-8)

The irony here is that demanding that students be prepared for employment may come at the price of lessened employment in the ranks of those who prepare them. Robin is a theorist (his mental references to Deleuze help him to make sense of his life) in a department that is moving towards *film-making*, away from *film-studies*. Robin is terrified of losing his job. Francine is terrified of losing hers; she knows that coming soon is a “round of redundancies” and that they “will affect every sector of the university” (5).

In a further irony, Robin manages to keep his job, but he knows that his ability or promise have little to do with the decision; he is the worst-paid lecturer so it costs less to keep him and make two others redundant. It is a purely economic decision. Francine keeps hers and it seems likely that her ability to do her job (vague and, as she acknowledges, undemanding)

may have less to do with it than her affair with Lawrence. The lecturer who worries least, Patricia, is sacked when the entire Anthropology Department is closed down.

Higher Ed qualifies as one of the “anxiety narratives” Jeffrey Williams has discussed in several recent essays. These, he declares, are frequent features of “the contemporary academic novel” (“Rise” 581). Though precarious employment is not their only worry, McWatt’s academics are certainly anxious, rightly so. Williams comments that “Since the late 1990s, there has been a rising number of American academic novels that have displaced the professor from his customary starring role, focusing instead on those in marginal teaching positions or working in a peripheral realm of the university” (“Unlucky Jim”).

While Robin’s teaching position is full-time, it is peripheral in at least three ways: his precariousness and low pay make him peripheral in his department, a positioning that paradoxically saves his job; his job worries are peripheral to larger issues in his life, sited beyond the university precincts, like impending fatherhood with a woman he does not love; and teaching itself, and the staff who do it, are no longer indisputably the *raison d’être* of a university. Teaching is increasingly peripheral in a profession dedicated to labor force training and maximizing income, throughput, and impact.

But beyond the instructional staff there are even more peripheral realms, of which Francine’s posting in Quality Assurance is a good example. This is a minor trend in recent academic novels (though Jennifer Dawson’s *Judasland*, published back in 1989, was a fascinating look at Oxford through the eyes of a departmental secretary). And, after all, why shouldn’t a novel about a university concern itself with characters other than the professoriate? The secretaries, accountants, IT technicians work there, too. So, for that matter, do the deans and college presidents. These, at least, have had some love from the academic novelist: Saul Bellow’s *The Dean’s December* and Stringfellow Barr’s *Strictly Academic* are about the “higher” administration, while there is an oddity called *The Man Who Stole a University*, about an authoritarian president (his stealing a university is to be admired). Sam Lipsyte’s *The Ask* is set, as its narrator stipulates, in “what they call a university setting. A bastion of, et cetera” (3). Lipsyte’s Milo Burke is a fundraiser who works “in the development office of a mediocre university in New York City. It was an expensive and strangely obscure institution, named for its syphilitic Whig founder, but we often called it, with what we considered a certain panache, the Mediocre University at New York City” (4).

One might ask – *is* the development office really peripheral? Is Quality Assurance? One of the most melancholy recent academic novels,

Alex Kudera's *Fight for Your Long Day*, which follows a *really* peripheral sojourner in the groves of academe – a man who teaches as an adjunct at four different colleges and finished his day as a security guard at one of them – contains a report on Liberty Tech including the news that

Liberty Tech even employs half-a-dozen well-compensated administrators to oversee the add-ons and incorporate them into the university's five-year strategic plan. In fact, Tech keeps droves of administrators in *all the important fields* – sports marketing, customer service, fundraising – while maintaining one of the worst ratios of tenured faculty to adjuncts on the entire East Coast. With so few tenured professors in English, at least it means Duffy has fewer faces of power to avoid. (80, emphasis added)

The modern university sometimes resembles the combat operations depicted in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* where, during the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade, "the combat men in the squadron discovered themselves dominated by the administration appointed to serve them. They were bullied, insulted, harassed and shoved about all day long by one after another" (110). That is the modern university; hence the modern university novel.

In two other respects McWatt steers her novel outside the generic grooves carved by previous academic fiction. One is the broadly and richly multicultural cast of characters. Robin is a white Briton; but Francine is an American, from Philadelphia; Olivia, the central student represented in the book, is positioned as the child of a white British mother and a black, Guyanan father, though the paternity is questioned – nevertheless she is mixed race; Olivia's roommate is in love with an Italian immigrant, killed on his motorcycle in the beginning of the book, who also exerts a strange fascination on Francine; and Robin's frustrated love affair is with a Polish waitress.

And this is a sign of the outward-looking nature of this novel. Though the academics in it think about academic life – Robin and Francine both worry about their job security, and Robin gives plenty of thought to his students and his teaching – *there is a life elsewhere*. Robin is just as concerned about providing for the baby his former lover is carrying as about the threat to his livelihood; Francine spends time and energy hating her ex, logs onto Soulmates to find a computer-matched mate, worries about her weight, and obsesses about Dario, the dead motorcyclist. Olivia has a final-year project on modern day pauper funerals – as implausible as this seems, for someone studying law, and for Robin, a film theorist, to advise her on – which ramifies beyond the discovery of her lost father Ed at the council offices. Many characters have nothing to do with the university, including Olivia's roommate, the

motorist who killed Dario and the medical student who tried to save him, and Ed. In some ways McWatt's title is defiant, or ironic, since traditional university activities occupy a relatively small corner of her broad canvas.

Higher Ed is an anti-Ivory Tower novel. In the 21st century, it tells us, the university cannot hold itself apart from the minutiae of getting and spending (Thames Gateway has been branded and Costa Coffee and Starbucks loom large in its buildings). The life of the mind is compromised by the demands of post-industrial, globalized neoliberalism. Student lives have a smaller window than before for dedicated learning. Lecturers must justify themselves with the language of impact. Robin tells the committee that interviews him to decide if he can remain in his position that his "'teaching in turn feeds back, via student response, to concepts and ideas, making an interplay between theory and practice that is crucial in contemporary culture.' Each week he is renewed by his interaction with the students, the results he has helped them to achieve in their coursework confirm this crucial exchange" (251). This is the noblest idea anyone expresses in *Higher Ed*; when he is told the department has decided to invest in his future, though, Robin "knows enough about the finances of the university and budget cuts to translate this as, *You're the cheapest of the lot*" (252).

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