THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

**THE CHRONICLE REVIEW**

# The Joke's Over

## Academics are too scared to laugh.

Tim Foley for The Chronicle Review

*By Andrew Kay* | MARCH 14, 2018

✔ PREMIUM

In the beginning there was Kingsley Amis. Stranded in Swansea after World War II, employed as a lecturer at the University of Wales — a gig he feared he'd never escape — Amis vented his anti-academic spleen in *Lucky Jim*, an overnight sensation that vaulted him to the vanguard of British fiction. Jim, his protagonist, is a young lush of a lecturer, a forerunner of today's contingent faculty member, who lives in dread of his position's being terminated. Toiling wretchedly under the supervision of one Professor Welch, a hoary coot so self-involved that his head may as well reside up his own grizzled arse, Jim finds solace in Guinness. His hangovers — "his mouth had been used as a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its mausoleum" — have become legendary. The novel ends like some macho academic daydream: Tapped to deliver a public lecture on "Merrie England," Jim becomes so sloshed beforehand that he collapses halfway through and is promptly fired — but not before stealing away the voluptuous girlfriend of Welch's smug son, with whom he strolls into the sunset in the closing sentences.

Academic satire was, officially, a thing. The 1950s brought forth a bevy of these books: Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* offered an unsparing vivisection of liberal-arts colleges, of the internecine squabbles that can poison departments and entire campuses. (Actually, McCarthy's novel was published before Amis's, but for reasons likely connected to gender — and perhaps the louder, more rambunctious nature of Amis's book — *Lucky Jim* made an even bigger splash and has generally stood as the genre's prototype.) There was Randall Jarrell's *Pictures From an Institution*, a series of serrated character sketches drawn from an imaginary women's college; and, less caustically, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*, a sweetly touching portrait of a Russian émigré-professor adrift in postwar America.

The 1970s and '80s saw the publication of David Lodge's beloved Campus Trilogy — equal parts satire and farce — but the 1990s and very early 2000s were the true golden age of academic satire. There was, above all, Richard Russo's *Straight Man*. Russo! That delightful, humane chronicler of life among small-town Americans, back before city-dwelling journalists began writing of them as fetishistically and fantastically as if they were Oompa Loompas. *Straight Man*'s protagonist, a wisecracking creative-writing professor at a dreary university in the Pennsylvania Rust Belt, expresses his resigned disdain for a particularly inept colleague about whom nothing is to be done: "There are lots of dull teachers. You can't make them all deans."

Nor was academic satire a man's game by any means: A number of the best ones, beyond McCarthy's *Groves*, were written by women, though their protagonists still tended to be men. Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* concerns yet another male creative-writing professor at a second-tier college, a midlist novelist who indulges in an affair with a student, only to discover she's far more guileful than he initially reckoned. Jane Smiley's *Moo* is different, a novel of Dickensian scope and no single protagonist, whose theme, Smiley explained, is how academe "is not cut off from the world, but is constantly contaminating the world."

The rules of the game, to the extent there were any, took shape roughly as these writers laid them down: At an often depressing provincial university on the edge of things (the English Midlands, the American Midwest or Rust Belt), a bumbling faculty member, usually male and young to middle-aged, contends with some combination of job insecurity, horniness, poverty, and the indifference or outright hostility of his narcissistic, manipulative colleagues, whose appetites for power, fame, and illicit nookie far outweigh their investment in "the life of the mind." The novel hurtles toward some crisis, whereupon our hero may lose consciousness, waking to find himself unemployed or, in one or two cases, miserably tenured. (Promotion at a bleak college like his, *Straight Man*'s narrator confides to us, "is a little like being proclaimed the winner in a shit-eating contest.")

Then, suddenly, satirical academic novels began to trail off. With a few notable exceptions, the genre largely vanished around the turn of the century. What happened? One answer is that academe's devastation since the late 1990s has rendered it too grim and vulnerable a target for satirists. The gutting of public universities by right-wing politicians, the brute transformation of colleges into exploitative institutions that run on adjunct and graduate-student labor — these changes have resulted in a landscape so desolate it hardly seems worth mocking.

Another reason might be the precipitate decline of English departments, their tumble from being the academy's House Lannister 25 years ago — a dignified dynasty — to its House Greyjoy, a frozen island outpost. The fact is that academic satires almost invariably took place in English departments. (*Lucky Jim*, set in a history department, is an exception.) Small wonder: By the 1980s and '90s, when high theory came to dominate, many literature scholars had become walking embodiments of the kinds of contradictions that make satirists salivate — guardians of a tradition ranging from *Beowulf* to Byatt, yet possessed of a strangely bellicose attitude toward the very works to which they'd dedicated their lives; stunningly adept at theorizing about sex, markedly less so at having it.

When people speak (usually vaguely) about the rise of high theory, often what they're referring to is a set of approaches to literary interpretation — Marxist, say, or Foucaultian — that share a basic premise: Works of literature should be viewed with suspicion. Neither reservoirs of enduring meaning nor monuments of beauty to be savored, they are sites of cunning concealment, of buried, sordid assumptions about politics and culture that it's up to the critic to unearth.

Hand-in-hand with suspicious reading came the theory-brandishing rock star, so often housed in an English department — a figure who wielded unprecedented might in literary studies, and who became a major player in the culture wars, shaping the way many ordinary people thought about gender, sexuality, even the nature of truth itself. Such rethinking made the celebrity theorists ripe for satire, since many of them adopted a coolly nihilistic and omniscient pose, using theory to cut down and humiliate their quaintly humanistic counterparts (as Paul de Man famously did Walter Jackson Bate). James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale*, published in 2001, one of the last academic satires from the genre's golden age, mocks this phenomenon through one Anthony Pescecane, a swaggering mafioso of an English-department chair who presides over his colleagues like a don. Invited onto *Politically Incorrect With Bill Maher*, Pescecane insists, "It's not about truth anymore, Bill. It's not about beauty. It's about the etiology of *powah*."

The point was that English professors had gotten too big for their britches, bloated with a hubris borne out of a newfound sense that critics, and not literary artists themselves, were now the focal point of the interpretive enterprise. Novelists — many of whom taught creative writing in English departments and thus had front-row seats for all this — obligingly rushed in, taking turns administering to the profession a series of Swiftian enemas meant to return it to basic decency.

Hynes's book concerns a "visiting adjunct lecturer" who, after getting fired, loses his fingertip in a freak accident — only to discover that the maimed digit gives him the power to make others do his bidding. In other words, it crystallizes a revenge fantasy of contingent academics everywhere. In hindsight, the book's ingenious synthesis of the comic and gothic was a warning signal that the genre to which it belonged was endangered: *The Lecturer's Tale* opens onto an academic world that, even by 2001, was ceasing to be funny. It was becoming fodder for horror.

Academics aren't laughing anymore; they're despondent, angry, afraid. The disappearance of tenure-track jobs, paired with the vulnerability felt even by some of the tenured, has brought on a prevailing mood of humorlessness — as if, contrary to the bromide that jokes are a coping mechanism best suited to dark times, laughter were a luxury requiring a measure of security. You could make fun of English departments in the '90s because their faculty members enjoyed some power, prestige, comfort — and because it was widely understood that whatever poppycock certain professors were getting up to, English was among the most versatile and worthwhile of majors; that the study of literature was soul-irrigating and equipped one to see through the rhetoric of the very politicians who were already scheming to stunt it.

When English declined, though, academic satire dwindled with it. Much of the clout that English departments had once enjoyed migrated to disciplines like engineering, computer science, and (that holiest of holies!) neuroscience. (Did we actually have a March for Science last April, or was *that* satire?) Poetry got bartered for TED talks, Wordsworth and Auden for that new high priest of cultural wisdom, the cocksure white guy in bad jeans and a headset holding forth on "innovation" and "biotech."

Meanwhile, right-wing politicians and writers have exploited the waning fortunes of high theory in order to poison the electorate against higher education. *Moo* prophesies this phenomenon through a dumb-as-a-donkey, budget-slashing state governor who proclaims of academics, "They're all closet deconstructionists out there. We're going to get rid of them, one and all." For satirists to make fun of English or any other humanistic discipline, then, would mean aligning themselves with this current of hostility, and with the larger wave of anti-intellectualism now coursing through the country.

Most satire relies on hyperbole: The satirist holds a ludicrously distorted mirror up to reality, exaggerating the flaws of individuals and systems and so (ideally) shocking them into reform. But what happens when reality outpaces satire, or at least grows so outlandish that a would-be jester has to sprint just to keep up?

Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members*, published in 2014, exposes an academy that all but lampoons itself, and whose actuality is scarcely the stuff of satire at all; it's the stuff of dystopian heartbreak. The novel consists entirely of letters of recommendation written by one Jason Fitger, a professor of English and creative writing at a second-tier school in the Midwest aptly named Payne University. A third of Fitger's department colleagues are woebegone adjuncts. The department's faculty members are so dysfunctional that Fitger keeps a log in which he rates their meetings according to level of trauma (the highest rating, 5, denotes "at least one nervous breakdown and/or immediate referral to the crisis center"). Meanwhile the economics department, housed above English, is receiving a pricey makeover into a pimped-out VIP wing. Late in the novel, Fitger's protégé, a grad student who can't find work or a publisher for his book, commits suicide. Schumacher's novel can feel, then, like a eulogy for academic satire.

But one campus phenomenon that *Dear Committee Members* doesn't account for is the rising tide of outrage that threatens to engulf nearly any attempt, whether humorous or serious, to voice critique in or of academe. Any satirist at work now has to reckon with the creepy culture of mutual surveillance, from left and right, taking hold at many colleges: the "bias-response teams" that have arisen on certain campuses, or websites like Professor Watchlist, which documents "the specific incidents and names of professors that advance a radical agenda in lecture halls."
Surveillance culture is itself fodder for satire, but since so many satirists of academe are employed by universities, to make fun of it could mean taking upon oneself considerable risk. Humor can hardly hope to take root in an environment where, as the

English comedy writer Ian Martin has put it, "Everyone patrols the boundaries of their own jokes and opinions now. If they do go over the line, there's a great mass of outrage starlings ready to swoop down and Hitchcock them."

And swoop they will. Witness the satirical piece that appeared in this publication last June, "To My Student, on the Death of Her Grandmother(s)," by Shannon Reed, a visiting lecturer in the English department at the University of Pittsburgh and a humor writer with bylines in *McSweeney's* and *The New Yorker*. This piece is an imaginary email written by a deranged professor to an undergraduate who has asked for an extension on her final project because her grandmother has died. The professor grants the student's request under the condition that she perform a series of ludicrous tasks, such as adhering to Victorian mourning rites — remaining chaste for the ensuing year, wearing black clothing the following semester, gray or violet the semester after that.

What ensued was one of those tidal waves of orgiastic, amygdala-driven wrath now favored among internet users crusading for empathy. Hundreds of people, many of whom accessed it through Twitter, condemned the piece; to scroll through the 311 comments they left can feel like striding through the cemetery of satire itself. They accused Reed of student-shaming, of "sadistic public mockery from a position of power." They excoriated her as a "bitch" and a "sociopath." By the day's end she'd been threatened with violence. Many users read it as a real-life email from an actual professor to her student; others got that it was a joke and still found it barbarously distasteful, an instance of an authority figure punching down.

The bulk of those who responded with such hostility were academics themselves. And their responses dramatized a fascinating reality: that people are now bringing a degree of scrutiny to satire that amounts to close reading. Close reading, perhaps literary studies' most powerful gift to academe and the wider world, may be coming back to haunt us — in the form of interpretations that have all the truculent intensity of their high-theoretical forebears but lack the consideration of matters like persona, genre, context, irony, and voice that those prior models rely on.

The response to the piece makes it painfully apparent not merely that academic satire is in a greatly imperiled state, but that its decline is tethered to the story of English departments. Interpretations like those so many made of the "Grandmother" story are not merely close readings; they're *suspicious* readings, adhering to the basic attitude and protocol laid down by the high theorists years ago. Their method is that of unmasking: The reader approaches the text with a wary skepticism and, having located some ideological misstep, drags it triumphantly into the light. The author herself is frisked, cuffed, brought to trial, (very publicly) condemned, then pilloried and leered at by thousands on Twitter.

A knee-jerk, bankrupt version of suspicion has become the default readerly mode on the internet, if not of the public at large. (Can anyone who's taught an intro lit course, and heard a 19-year-old eviscerate Dante or George Eliot after a moment's reflection, doubt this?) Most of its lay practitioners have little of the awareness of literary devices that characterizes responsible interpretation; many lack the capacity to differentiate an author from a speaker. Literary studies, in other words, propagated a blueprint of suspicious reading, only to recede from view, leaving large numbers of people with a formidable interpretative weapon but little sense of how to wield it. The profession's bastard progeny — namely, every schmuck with a Wi-Fi connection — have become our latter-day suspicious critics, casting a cold eye on each new text they encounter, adopting a superior presumption that their duty is detection and exposure. They are a mass of trigger-happy deer hunters without training or a license.

Of course, satire is itself a gesture of suspicion, a vehicle for unmasking hypocrisy and pretension, for exposing the gap between stated ideals and actual behavior. But on the part of its audiences it depends, like all comedy, on some measure of good will and generosity, a willingness to be surprised by punchline or quip. Suspicion might be ideally suited to a political environment saturated with "fake news" and ubiquitous spin, but it's proved far less adept at deciphering the facetious untruths that satirists concoct. Small wonder that, in such a milieu, we've seen academic satire's swoon.

The crisis of academic satire mirrors the larger impasse that satire more generally faces in 2018. Just as the academic satirist has to reckon with a set of conditions grim enough to repel efforts at humor, so the would-be satirist out in the world in 2018 is faced with immensity — a cluster of menaces, from climate change to renewed nuclear fear to whatever AI portends, whose sheer scale can hector him into muteness.

If academe can seem self-satirizing these days, so too can the larger world. In some sense, Trump's election *is* a prank, an obscene and appalling act of large-scale vandalism, like some giant phallus spray-painted across the body politic in the night by half the electorate, which the other half can't, for all its furious efforts, scrub away. How to quip about this? A satirist is pre-empted by reality itself.

And yet popular satirists are producing more sheer tonnage of ridicule than ever before. One reason for this is that social media has democratized satire, making everyone with a Twitter account into a potential source of derisive humor with a sizable audience. Then there's the reality that droves of Americans now get their news in satirical form. The peddlers of that news, along with their late-night brethren, are legion, a veritable anti-Trump, anti-GOP platoon made in the image of Jon Stewart: Colbert, Bee, Oliver, Meyers, Noah, Kimmel. The trouble is that they don't appear to be accomplishing anything, aside from redoubling the self-righteous indignation of their left-leaning viewership — and exerting the same effect on right-leaning viewers, to the extent such viewers ever watch. The captivating difference, then, between academic satire and its nonacademic counterpart is this: Where academic satire has dissipated in the face of various threats to its existence, satire in the world outside universities has responded to its own, analogous crisis in the opposite manner — by creating ever more of itself, as if multiplying furiously to compensate for its own impotence.
But so many Americans still *want* satire to be a sociopolitical difference-maker, which presumably means they want it to serve as rhetoric. Witness *The Atlantic*'s cover story from last May, "Can Satire Save the Republic?" or recent headlines like "Only the

Onion Can Save Us Now" (*Wired*). Is this a naïve hope? Can satire be suasion, and can it thereby hasten social reform?

"I myself very much doubt that satire ever changes anything: It may entertain and cheer people who agree with the position of the satirist, but is highly unlikely to make any difference to its intended targets, other than annoying them," says the Harvard professor Leo Damrosch, a biographer of Swift's who teaches a course called "Wit and Humor." "The greatest satirists — as opposed to mere abusive lampooners — have all been disillusioned idealists," Damrosch says. For the likes of Swift and Mark Twain, satire has been an expression of appalled indignation at the failure of the world to live up to their high hopes for it, not a means of helping the world realize those hopes.

Damrosch's perspective sounded eminently sensible, but I couldn't help thinking of historical instances when satire *had* made an impact, sometimes spectacularly. I thought of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, that massive allegorical dream vision from late-14th-century England, a conservative satire that lays bare the decadence of England's clergy and nobility. *Piers Plowman* became a rallying cry for the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, an uprising of laborers and artisans who, though their politics might have been antithetical to Langland's, were likewise irate with the ruling classes, and found in the satire a chorus for their cause.

What would it take for satire now to achieve such potency? Most current comics appear to think the path to influence lies in abusing people until they grow pliant to the satirist's will. Alec Baldwin's deeply held hope, which drives his impersonations of Trump on *Saturday Night Live*, is that "the constant belittlement might sting [Trump and his staff] into submission." The trick, that is, is to humiliate the opposition into wokeness, or at best stun them into a recognition of their hypocrisy. For Malcolm Gladwell, similarly, satire uses "a comic pretext to land a massive blow."

But what if, in a moment defined by fundamentalist self-certainty on left and right, a more merciful satire turned out to be precisely what we need? Heather LaMarre, a communications professor at Temple University who studies how satire functions in popular culture, emphasizes that, since ancient Rome, there have been two basic categories of satire: Juvenalian, which evokes outrage and disgust, and Horatian, a gentler sort, which disarms through the rewards of merriment. LaMarre believes that in a moment of extreme partisanship like ours, it’s Horatian satire that stands the best chance of changing minds. Indeed, the source of the satire matters, too, since she has found that audiences tend to shut down the moment they see a humorist whose beliefs they know to be antithetical to their own. "Lighthearted satire from an unknown source might be most effective right now," LaMarre says, because of its "power of cutting through the bitter partisan divide and using the power of enjoyment as a heuristic cue in the persuasion process."

What might it mean for satire to harness enjoyment as a means of winning people over? Pondering this question leads to a riddle: To the extent that something is satire, it pinches. But persuasive satire would have to do more than this; it would need to pinch and welcome in the same gesture. Compelling satire, in short, is ridicule that contains within itself the possibility of forgiveness, of reconciliation. It pressures audiences to contemplate their failings but simultaneously uses laughter to subdue and entice them toward better ways of thinking and living.

What would such satire even look like? Well, it might look something like Schumacher’s *Dear Committee Members*. You’ve surely met guys like her main character, Jason Fitger, whether you’re in academe or not: a mansplainer of Himalayan condescension who makes everything about him; a man who, in the "Context of My Acquaintanceship with the Candidate" box of an online recommendation form, writes, "Carole and I slept together — without cohabiting or making promises we would not be able to honor — for almost three years." Though flawed, Fitger is not without good qualities. He is a person of ironclad conviction in the value of literature, and in the end — cruelly, belatedly — is granted at least partial redemption through the death of his protégé, whom he realizes he loved, and whom he comes to see as a singular person, not a narcissistic projection of himself.

This is what makes the book an authentic Horatian satire with the potential to disarm and move. Its mercy and generosity of vision, even as it mocks, rescue it from replicating the very smugness and narcissism it critiques. As art — dynamic, complex — it imagines its target as a knotted human being capable of growth, and models that growth for readers who resemble him even a little. And it works these effects through abundant humor, however tragic. Instead of embittering audiences, satiric laughter of the Horatian sort can generate a bodily pleasure that relaxes them, thereby priming them for new beliefs they might otherwise resist. New beliefs might not equate to activism, whether in academe or outside it, but to the extent that our actions emanate from our convictions, they're a crucial start.

The year 2014, when *Dear Committee Members* was published, already seems an epoch ago — and changed times surely call for new and distinctive forms of satire. What if we imagine a young writer embarking on a satire of academe now, for all the perils that attend the genre?

I see him in my mind's eye, this writer, seated at his desk and fretting. How to generate laughter without sacrificing clear-eyed institutional critique? How to send up academe without instigating a chain of blow-ups? Without seeming to join in the chorus of anti-intellectual disdain that already besieges it, kicking a thing when it's down?

He resolves that, to ensure the widest audience possible, his satire will be a television show — a show about the tribulations, growing pains, and romances of grad students. In a coup of self-delighted inspiration, he names it *ABD*. He's unsure as yet what it will accomplish beyond entertainment, but he hopes that, through the laughter and pathos it generates, it will establish links of solidarity among the grad students and adjuncts who watch it, and bring new public awareness to their plight.

Our writer decides that, in a departure from tradition, his protagonist will be a woman. In a further departure, *ABD* will take place in a science department. Premise: Sometime in the future, the humanities have been eliminated from universities, which have been retreaded into institutes of science and technology. Most learning happens online. (The discussion of poetry and novels has been relegated to book clubs full of effusive retirees addicted to the term *personification*.)

At one such university, a young female grad student in climatology toils in a lab, more or less anonymously, under an aloof scientist who scarcely knows her name. It turns out science departments are thoroughly driven by the race for money: Most professors receive no university funding, so they rely completely on corporate grants. The grant applications use the words *transformative* and *innovation* with a zeal resembling current literary scholars' use of *radical*.

The protagonist and her supervisor are at work on a study of Iraqi oil fields funded by a grant from Halliburton. The study is meant to shed light on the environmentally benign nature of a practice Halliburton is calling "friendly fracking" at its giant oil field in Majnoon. This isn't what she signed up for, of course; she dreams of a sweeping study of regreening techniques that might dramatically hasten planetary carbon cuts. But the grant determines the research — and besides, her supervisor is a front-runner for this year's Dick B. Cheney Memorial Prize for Transformative Innovation in Middle Eastern Scientific Endeavors.

She gets clumsily hit on by the male grads in her department, brainy hipsters who make a great show of following the Premier League and identify as sapiosexual. They're almost endearing, with their skinny jeans and made-up accents, the way they pronounce *sapio* — except for the subtle ways they talk down to her, the ease with which they interrupt her, the just-perceptible doubt with which they greet her suggestions in the lab.

At night before bed, gazing out the window, she's conscious of some vague absence. Something is missing, some explanatory system, a theory even, to account for the untold instances she feels belittled by her peers. If only there were some body of thought to clarify why her own research and that of her colleagues is so rigidly, preposterously limited: something that spelled out how power determines what's sanctioned as true.

Most, she yearns for some vocabulary to describe the landscape and sky in moments like these, an elevated language to get at the wonder of it all, a mystery that defies measure. The planet might be dying, but in all its intricate vastness it still bears the signature of someone, some author for whom she feels awkwardly compelled to murmur praise, if only she knew how. She doesn't, though, and turns away after a time, flipping the lamp switch and leaving the bedroom dark.

*Andrew Kay is a writer in Madison, Wis.*

*A version of this article appeared in the* March 23, 2018 issue*.*

Copyright © 2018 The Chronicle of Higher Education