

Reflective Teaching

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Dear Committee Members: A Novel



Schumacher, Julie
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Book Review

Tags: academic life | faculty well-being | vocation of teaching

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Non-academics who pick up Julie Schumacher's epistolary novel *Dear Committee Members* might assume that they are encountering a parody of academic life. Schumacher's academic readers, however, will wonder whether she sneaked into their own inboxes and printed the choicest items. The novel consists of letters penned by Jason Fitger, a disenchanting and mediocre professor of creative writing and literature in the underfunded English department of Payne University, a less-than-top-tier teaching college. Through his correspondence, Fitger both details and demonstrates most of the mundane (but annoying) challenges and bad behavior of academic life.

Fitger writes letters of reference for students he cannot remember, students he can remember all too well for their lackluster performance, and spectacular students whose career choices are dramatically below (their professor's assessment of) their capabilities. His frustration at having to write letters is made worse by the combination of technology and bureaucracy that has come to characterize online letters of recommendation - Fitger is out of patience with online form submissions, whose character limits will not let him expound as he sees fit and that log him off or cut him off mid word. He often opts instead to send a letter by mail, certain that the institution will, of course, accept a letter postmarked (rather than electronically submitted) on the due date.

Fitger's letters chronicle what are now tropes in the writing about academia - for instance, the crumbling but inhabited humanities building, though in *Dear Committee Members* the insult is compounded because, as Fitger's exasperated letters detail, not only are the English department's digs shabby by comparison to the social sciences, but are being made worse through constant construction as the floor above is renovated for the Economics department.

Throughout these letters one gets a sense of the failures of Fitger's own life. It becomes clear, for instance, that within the administration are both his ex-wife and the (now ex-) lover for whom he left her, and his letters to each intertwine their personal histories with campus politics. Similarly, letters to graduate school friends in the world of creative writing mix advocacy for students with hints of relationships between those successful or not and laments for Fitger's own squandered promise.

While in no way derivative, *Dear Committee Members* joins the ranks of academic novels such as *Moo*, *Straight Man*, and *Wonder Boys*. Schumacher, herself a professor of creative writing and literature, knows what she is talking about, and she deploys humor to excellent effect, waltzing the reader through an at best underwhelming professor's correspondence, revealing much along the way about the personalities and practices of Fitger and his fellow academics.

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