
FANTASY AND REALITY IN UNIVERSITY LIFE:

Some books about universities

by

David Jones

Abel, E.K. (1984). **Terminal Degrees: The job crisis in higher education**, Praeger. £27.95

BAP (1986). **How About Psychology?**, British Psychological Society. £1.00

Gale, A. (1985). **What's Psychology?**, BPS/Arnold. £2.50

Gamson, Z.F. (1984). **Liberating Education**, Jossey-Bass. £16.95

Lowman, J. (1984). **Mastering the Techniques of Teaching**, Jossey-Bass. £97.95

Rogers, C.R. (1969). **Freedom to Learn**, Merrill. 2nd edition, 1986. £9.95

Rowan, J. (1976). **Ordinary Ecstasy**, Routledge and Kegan Paul. £4.95 (2nd edition due 1987).

Wright-Dziech, B. and Weiner, L. (1985). **The Lecherous Professor: Sexual harassment on campus**, Beacon. £8.95

My favourite fantasy about universities is that they are stuffed full of archetypal professors who look like a cross between Shakespeare and Albert Einstein. They live outside the struggle for wealth, power or personal gratification. All-knowing, caring and protective, they exist independently of time. In the university they are always available if you knock on the door, ready to unpack the reality of the world and, with great affection, to repack it again for you in a profound and exciting way. The wisdom is truly brilliant, a jewel set in a world

famous seat of learning. Every university should have one.

Reality is different. Billie Dziech and Linda Weiner in **The Lecherous Professor** write about the reality of sexual harassment experienced by female students in the USA. They interviewed hundreds of staff and students and describe an atmosphere in which females are ogled and leered at, propositioned, ridiculed and overpowered by lecherous teachers who seem to think they are doing them a favour. Four out of five university teachers are over forty years old and students

generally find them coarse and ugly. At LSE the students suggested a female staff member should take on a special advisory role to female undergraduates on the whole issue of sexual harassment. Her office is opposite mine but she is far too guarded to let me know if Dziech and Weiner's book fits Britain. Simon Gray's play **Butley**, like Malcolm Bradbury's **The History Man** suggests that sex has been known in British universities for some time but I don't think we have reached the stage where it creates an atmosphere of daily harassment. Or has it?

Academics, on both sides of the Atlantic, are older than they used to be. They are also working under pressures and constraints which are mainly to do with a decrease of wealth in the real world and a drop off in the size of the student age group. According to Frederick Rudolph, President of the Association of American Colleges, a university is now "a supermarket where students are shoppers and professors are merchants". This harks back to the Chicago sociologists of thirty years ago who studied the professions and pointed out that academics are entrepreneurs competing for cash, prestige and power like anybody else. Occasionally they use underhand methods; plagiarism, playing to the gallery, soft marking, PR, bullshit and anything else that will pull in the cash and get a high student enrolment. When I was an admissions tutor in the 1970's I was always pleased to say that we had

one place for every ten people who applied. What I did not like pointing out was that during this period an increasing proportion of those to whom we offered places (more than 50 per cent) turned them down. Colleges are clearly in competition with one another for suitable students. That is why sixth form and careers teachers' conferences are swooped on by entrepreneurial university and polytechnic admissions staff with handbooks, displays, videos and big smiles. Oxbridge set the pace at these gatherings and usually get the best pitch. The popular degrees these days are the ones with a job at the end. Courses in law, accounting, computers, social work and other practical subjects are oversubscribed. The rest have to be sold.

The British Psychological Society has chosen an earnest image to sell its brand of psychology. It has sponsored two books, **What is Psychology?** by Anthony Gale and **How About Psychology?** written by a BPS committee. They present psychology as a textbook-bound discipline, like biology, in the service of doctors, personnel managers and 'slow learners'. Personally I do not think it will sell until academic psychology grasps personal growth and I am predicting a drop in the number of university students doing psychology. Neither of these books mentions humanistic psychology at all.

Emily Abel in her book **Terminal Degrees: The job crisis in higher**

education paints a bleak picture of the situation faced by an aspiring academic. Universities are keen to take on Ph.D. students if they find their own fees and subsistence. It boosts numbers. Once doctored, the don without a post often becomes a part-time peripatetic teacher, hourly paid and secure only for a year. This is a cheap way of getting teaching done so that permanent staff can try to better their lot by doing research and writing books. (This, in turn, has devalued books, many of which are reasonable journal articles padded out to book length). Even so, according to the Association of University Teachers, academics now have 25% less spending power than fifteen years ago. (The comparable figure in the USA is 16%).

In spite of competition to attract and retain good students, many undergraduates find their courses boring and pointless. Joseph Lowman's **Mastering the Techniques of Teaching** is one of many books which emphasise that academics ought to be taught to teach. His degree courses offer a jumbled cafeteria of unrelated courses which most students find confusing. If academics did a training in how to construct courses and how to teach them, the situation might improve. If it got a shot of the dynamic involvement described in Zelda Gamson's **Liberating Education**, it would become compelling. She seeks ways of validating and empowering students. These are humanistic processes and she incorporates them within the accepted university roles.

The first British university that offers courses which lead to jobs and maintains a grading system which is recognisable to the public at large and gains a reputation for student participation, ebullience and personal growth should clean up in competition with other universities. If the experience of schoolchildren and their teachers is anything to go by, such a university will not emerge. Carl Rogers' book **Freedom to Learn** was part of an influence which made education more humanistic, especially in schools. John Rowan describes the results in his chapter on education in **Ordinary Ecstasy**. That was ten years ago. Since then little seems to have happened.

Perhaps the university world will shrink and the elitist system described by Brothers and Hatch in **Residence and Student Life** (1971) will re-emerge. Pre-1960 sixth form teachers from the few dozen schools that sent students to a handful of universities knew the academics personally and they both knew the students' families. In spite of the fantasies of some politicians I do not think we will be faced with that reality again.

University psychology departments are not in the van of progress and change. Is this because they are all having a great time whilst the rest of the system suffers? Not a bit of it. According to the British Psychological Society there are about six hundred academic psychologists in Britain of whom less than a hundred are professors. Over the last few years the following tragedies befell professors of

psychology and were reported in the press: imprisonment for crime of violence, ritual suicide, hospitalisation for depression. If there is an iceberg under that tip, then distress

is widespread. Emphasis on alcohol is also very apparent. The Academic Psychologist looks like any other profession - crazy.

Reference

Brothers, J. & Hatch, S. (1971) **Residence and Student Life.** London: Wiley.

I am but the embodiment
Of a sheer accident
A ME that could have been
Any other HE or SHE
The repository of past
Or unsuspected worlds
A maze of legacies
I could have been a non-entity
A dessicated sperm amid
The daily hecatomb of human seed
Yet I AM

Too awesome to even contemplate
When trying to equate
My vulnerable selves
The eyes can only surmise
What the mind so jealously conceals
Of those strangers who lurk beneath me
Oh cruel child, oh lovable criminal!
Oh tender swashbuckler!
Are you strangers indeed?

The world would still go on
Without that accidental ME
But there'd doubtless be
A missing link
On the road to Infinity

Albert Russo
