

*Fear and Laughing in  
Campus Literature:  
Contemporary Messages From a  
Comedic Tradition*

KATHERINE REYNOLDS  
*University of South Carolina*

ROBERT SCHWARTZ  
*Florida State University*

BEVERLY BOWER  
*Florida State University*

Twentieth century American literature has presented us with an impressive body of humorous fiction situated in the work and culture of higher education. An examination of some of the most popular and noteworthy texts in this genre reveals important messages that locate such fictional humor as complaint, comedy, and catharsis. However, in its determination to both vent and entertain, this literature generally does not rise to the instrumental levels of pure satire. Rather, it acts more as a wake-up call than a call to arms concerning the peculiarities, sometimes absurdities, of academic life.

La littérature américaine du vingtième siècle nous a présenté une quantité importante de romans humoristiques exploitant le travail et la culture en éducation. Une étude de quelques textes les plus connus et dignes d'attention de ce genre révèle les messages importants qui qualifient cet humour fictif de plainte, comédie et catharsis. Toutefois, dans son double objectif de défoulement et de divertissement, cette littérature ne s'élève pas au niveau instrumental de la satire pure. Il sert plutôt à faire prendre conscience plutôt que de faire un appel aux armes contre les particularités, parfois les absurdités, de la vie académique.

In 1905, Sigmund Freud claimed that the phenomena of wit, comedy, and humor reflected our attempts to regain the euphoria of childhood that is lost as we expand our mental activity. He must have known a thing or two about life in the academy. After confronting the circuitous realities of faculty meetings, departmental politics, search committees and the like, inhabitants of campuses everywhere of course long to regain any euphoria they can get their hands on – childhood included. Freud's notion, therefore, indirectly suggests that those of us who populate the academy should be just about the funniest people on earth – both eager creators and grateful audiences of higher humor.

### *Humor and Superiority*

Theorizing a collective emphasis on “tendency wit,” humor that makes fun of someone or something (including an institution or class), Freud also indicated some general sympathy for a “superiority theory” of humor. Derived from 17<sup>th</sup> century musings of Thomas Hobbes and others, the superiority premise notes that all humor pits winners against losers in situations that are more hostile and ridiculing than warm and fun. The winners and losers may be embedded in the humorous gag or tale, or they may be found in the tellers and receivers of jokes and stories. Superiority theory depends on the notion of a dominant culture and a hapless group of “wannabes” (Gruner, 1977; LaFave, Haddad & Maesen, 1976).

When we examine humorous literature in higher education, we see that it can be categorized into three types, all providing many examples of superiority theory at work. First, and the subject of this article, are humorous academic stories and novels (e.g., *Moo*, *Straight Man*, and *The Groves of Academe*). There are also humorous academic essays (e.g., F.M. Cornford's “Microcosmographia Academica,” Russell Baker's “Grooving With Academe”) which have created a worthy niche in expository writing and often include first person writing of substantial understanding and wit. Finally, we have humorous academic expressions which exist as one-liners in otherwise serious literature or as quick joke-like tales (e.g., the *Reader's Digest* series “Campus Comedy”).

Although this article explores in depth only the first of the types, academic novels and stories, an examination of texts in all three areas demonstrates that superiority theory is alive and well in humorous campus literature. However, clever authors have pushed the concept beyond any simple notion of dominants making merry about or at inferiors.

### *New Twists on Old Punch Lines*

In a comedic twist on superiority theory, much of campus literary humor derives its wit from the surprise discovery of exactly who is the winner and who is the loser – often making for greater fun than the relative positions of superiors and inferiors themselves. Thus, in addition to superiority theory, the notion of “incongruity theory,” set forth by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century analysts, also may shoulder some responsibility for humorous outcomes when readers who expect a predictable outcome are jolted by a sudden reversal of fortunes – or, of the fortunate (Gruner, 1997; Shulz, 1976).

Consider, for example, Mary McCarthy's 1951 novel *The Groves of Academe* as it reveals the plight of professor Henry Mulcahy, a loser of an academic tribesman with a capital L. The only Ph.D. in the literature department of oh-so-progressive Jocelyn College and a well-published Rhodes Scholar and Guggenheim fellow, Mulcahy continues to toil away at the rank of instructor due to a truly unappealing personality (and a not much more appealing wife). For McCarthy, he symbolizes “the victim, here as elsewhere, of that ferocious envy of excellence by mediocrity that is the ruling passion of all systems of jobholders” (p. 12).

Although it is difficult to find any sympathy with the self-absorbed, bumbling Mulcahy, the phrase “dumb like a fox” applies well. He only briefly flinches when he receives a letter of termination from President Maynard Hoar, just long enough to dream up a hoax that will turn the tables on the accepted academic balance of power. He revokes the principles of superiority to capture the higher ground (although not exactly the high road) by inventing for himself a communist party membership, by inventing for the college president a working relationship with the FBI, and by inventing for his wife a life-threatening heart condition that will surely kill her if she has to leave yet one more campus. Mulcahy broadcasts these fictions

among colleagues eager to swallow tales of wrongdoing about the President they love to hate. It is apparent that his firing will be protested as an affront to academic freedom at an institution founded on unbounded liberalism and as a display of inhumane treatment at a college steeped in the pretense of collegiality. It also is apparent that his firing was probably a very good idea. Much merry bumbling, the most inept of it by the highest level faculty and administrators, ensues in the name of academic politics; and the ideal of victim victorious carries the day – just about when we begin to see Mulcahy as less the victim and more the low impact, high arrogance academic that he is. Too late: By the time we chuckle through the final paragraph, President Hoar is out; Mulcahy is back in.

### *Laughing on the Inside*

The combination of superiority theory (winners v. losers) and incongruity theory (the unexpected) is particularly appropriate for academic literature when we consider its endogenous nature. The campus novel, especially, is an insider item – generally written by academics, about academics, and indeed probably mostly for academics. These authors want it to be true that the faculty can be the winners in the face of powerful, but essentially clueless, deans, provosts, presidents, and trustees. And these authors want to entertain all readers, certainly, but would prefer to do so while also getting in a few licks at misplaced priorities and misguided policies in the academic corridors of power. Like politics, all campus humor is local; and it can get so local as to be derived from specific situations at specific campuses. Mary McCarthy no doubt took great enjoyment in the opportunity to lob “zingers” at a thinly veiled Sarah Lawrence College, its eminent President Harold Taylor, and others; and real life individuals on campus probably had just as much fun trying to decide if McCarthy really meant to implicate specific or composite venues and characters. More recently, Jane Smiley's colleagues at Iowa State undoubtedly read *Moo* (1995) with a sense of disquieting familiarity.

The authors who provide our most clever examples of higher education as a breeding ground for the superiority theory of humor are those who can twist our comedic sentiments so far that we

come back to where we started in the winner/loser or big guy/little guy dilemma. This happens when the little guy proves to be just that – little. Think weasel. Think self promotion. Think protected by some big guys. Joyce Carol Oates managed this type of comedic twist in “A Descriptive Catalogue,” collected in her 1975 book, *The Hungry Ghosts: Seven Allusive Comedies*. The story, brimming with eccentric characters and witty events, was likely inspired by Oates’ experiences and observations as a faculty member at University of Windsor (Johnson, 1998).

The narrative introduces Ron Blass, poet and tenured associate professor productively published in the PTA newsletter, the local paper (book reviews), and even a few little-known journals like *Druids Choice*, *Hearse* and *Rejects*. Regular readings of his poems at the local pub and nearby middle schools add fodder to a bulging resume. Blass, however, is a genuinely nice guy, kind to students, colleagues, and his wife. Not so, however, Reynold Mason, a truly brilliant young writer and abrasive personality who, in his tenure decision year, finds it necessary to point out to his department chair the numerous and shocking instances of word for word plagiarism he has found in Blass’s published work. An open and shut case is brought to the ever present appropriate college committee, chaired by the Dean. While committee members find that their friendly colleague Blass has indeed published many passages and entire poems identical to those penned earlier by other poets, the members, of course, demure when it comes to a finding of plagiarism. Plagiarism, after all, is a legal term and the law is a funny thing, one member maintains. Another claims that in essence, “life plagiarizes life” (p. 100); and another asserts that careful scrutiny shows the everything ever written may be somehow “traced back to primary sources” (p. 99). Oates treats her readers to a comedy of faculty manners that concludes with the nice guy (a plagiarizing good old boy) finishing first and the not-so-nice guy (a scholar with scruples who never really fit in anyway) finished completely on that particular campus. Or was it the nice guy who finished last? Readers are left to puzzle.

### *Higher Humor or Simple Satire?*

The literary treatments noted in the McCarthy and Oates works demonstrate a mood or genre that locates humorous academic

literature as an amalgam of satire and comedy. The history leading to this union started as far back as the mockery of academe by Plato in *The Symposium* and Aristophanes in *The Clouds* and continued as biting farce by the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century British satirists. However, if today's campus literary humor were pure satire, it would be aimed fairly exclusively at ridicule and challenge, at exposing complaints and injustices through exaggerated demonstrations of good and evil. While we can see all that in humorous academic texts, including the foregoing examples in this essay, we also see another element at work: comedy. Although analysts of various literary genres offer no clear markers for either satire or comedy, there is some acceptance that the former leans toward social commentary, while the latter gravitates toward playfulness (Gutleben, 1995; Olsen, 1990). Comedy, with its emphasis on entertainment and even sheer silliness, has a way of softening the acerbic reaches of pure satire.

Contemporary North American humor about higher education provides fine examples of this union. It has something to say and does not mind saying it by satirizing people and events; but it also very candidly seeks to entertain – to get that quick chuckle from readers who are on the inside saying, "It's so funny because it's so true," as well as readers who are on the outside saying, "I knew they were a bunch of loonies."

In fact, it is precisely the "loonies" who create the glue for mating comedy and satire, a literary union that depends on memorable characters whose haplessness has a way of taking the sting out of situations that otherwise might be only strident and cynical.

The eccentric characters in literary humor set on college campuses were once most frequently drawn from the student population. Max Shulman saw the possibilities when he penned *Barefoot Boy With Cheek* in 1943 to introduce University of Minnesota freshman Asa Hearthrug and his friends Yetta Samovar, Peggy Orifice, Noblesse Oblige (a Beta Thigh sorority pledge), and Carl Carnage (a football hero and Alpha Cholera frat man). More recently, popular humor about campus emphasizes faculty and administrators, perhaps because of a growing readership of academic insiders who identify with these

individuals and outsiders who enjoy the opportunity to be right about their darkest perceptions of campus life.

For bizarre characters populating recent fiction, recall Dr. Bo Jones, the bovine instructor invented by author Jane Smiley in *Moo* (1995). Jones' seemingly sole academic calling is focused on pushing forward frontiers of knowledge by discovering the outer growth limits of a boar named Earl Butz who is assigned to do nothing but eat for its entire life. "When I die, they're going to say that Dr. Bo Jones found out something about hog," puffs the proud Dr. Bo (p. 5).

For every Dr. Bo, or at least for this one, there is an Elaine Dobbs-Jellinek, a Liberty scarfed, Donna Karan jacketed, Ferragamo pumped vice president of development. When Dr. Bo floats a proposal for turning the aging central campus building, Old Meats (once a high tech training center in the world of slaughtering and carving), into a bovine hall of fame to honor the beef industry, Dobbs-Jellinek gamely tackles the job of chumming for a donor. Explaining to a devastated Dr. Bo that her efforts have netted only an alum interested in perhaps a chicken museum, she is pure development officer charm: "It happens to a lot of proposals. There are good ideas, lots of them, and then there are fundable ideas, fewer of those. Fundable ideas are better ideas. In this case, chickens are fundable, so chickens are a better idea" (p. 245).

Also in *Moo*, zany characters allow for curious twists on superiority and dominance. For example, Loraine Walker, secretary to provost Ivar Harstad, runs the university when she is not running her live-in girlfriend. She funds the library in style by secretly transferring funds from the athletic budget, and she brokers all job transfers and salaries for administrative personnel. Ultimately, she gives us such telling passages as: "The next day Mrs. Walker called the provost into her office ... [where she] demanded, 'Did you read that document I gave you?'" (p. 205).

The characters get more memorable as campus literature writes its way toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Note the latest entry, *Straight Man*, a 1997 novel by Richard Russo, set on and about the campus of West Central Pennsylvania University, a third tier institution aiming downhill on the slippery slope of reputation and resources. There resides William Henry Devereaux, Jr., 50-ish

acting English department chair and one-book wonder who makes the nightly news by threatening to kill a goose on the campus pond each day until he gets a budget for the coming academic year. Eagerly heading an outside search for a new chair, he explains the usual academic reality:

Our search had gone pretty much as expected. In September we were reminded that the position had not yet been funded. In December we were grudgingly permitted to come up with a short list and interview at the convention. In January we were denied permission to bring anyone to campus. In February we were reminded of the hiring freeze. By March all but six of the remaining applicants had either accepted other positions or decided they were better off staying where they were than throwing in with people who were running a search as screwed up as this one. In April we were advised by the dean to narrow our list to three and rank them. There was no need to narrow the list; only three remained out of the original two hundred. (pp. 16-17).

Deveraux's English department colleagues comprise a memorable and not unfamiliar lot. Finny Coomb, who "came out of the closet several years ago, and then went back in again" (p. 19) is an ABD from the University of Pennsylvania who mysteriously managed to receive tenure with nothing in his file but a letter from his dissertation chair claiming there might still be hope. Gracie DuBois, is an aging, plumping, feminist scholar and self-proclaimed poet who once desktop published a rhymed verse and once was actually quite lovely. She is now filing a grievance over the fact that the search is allowed to consider poets, when the department already has a poet – herself. Even the Dean recalls that when DuBois arrived on campus 20 years earlier, "Every man in the college wanted her, except Finny who wanted to *be* her." But Devereaux reminds, "That was then. We're not the men we used to be, and Gracie is twice the woman. But Gracie still wants to be that woman. And, hell, we understand. We'd like to be those men" (p. 16).

And predictably, there are the little guys – absurdly triumphing over their situations to best all holders of rank and tenure. Rachel, for example is Devereaux's secretary who fiddles

with some stories but, in the end, manages to get a book publisher of the prestige and an advance of the size that faculty only dream of. Leo, a dumb hulk of a student who can't write two sentences that make sense but just won't quit, accidentally gets published by a literary journal so prestigious that it is required to carry only incomprehensible stories.

The action in *Straight Man* takes place during one tense week on campus when budget freezes are rumored and personnel cuts are imminent. The strain brings out a bizarre streak in Hank Devereaux, along with bladder problems and suspicions that his wife is wandering. The same strain brings out a determination among his colleagues to recall him as chair, and the predictable politics ensue, complete with sight gags. Gracie throws a spiral notebook at Hank in a meeting, hooking him in the nose with the sharp end of the metal spiral that had worked its way out of the spine. For three days Hank can see nothing out of his left eye past his ballooning left nostril. Recovered by day five, Hank hides in the ceiling crawl space above the departmental offices while a meeting about his recall takes place. But can he get back out of there unseen? Not likely, since the only exit is through the ceiling of the ladies room frequented by the growing presence of Gracie DuBois.

Authors of the endogenous campus novel of humor often are joined in their barbs and jabs by authors of campus novels of drama, mystery, or romance. While these forms may not aim at humor, their authors can't seem to resist the occasional satirical aside or cynical rejoinder. Robert James Waller, author of great commercial success while a faculty member at the University of Northern Iowa (not surprisingly in the business college), provides a succinct example in his romantic novella, *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend*. Only a few paragraphs into the first chapter, he locates his faculty characters at dinner at the Dean's home, where a professor who recently returned from India tells an inquiring faculty wife about cobras.

Professor:       The snake charmer in the marketplace had one  
                          in a basket. The snake's mouth was sewn shut  
                          to keep it from doing any damage;

Wife:             How did it eat?

Professor: It didn't. It eventually dies. Then the snake man goes out and finds another one and sews its mouth shut, too. That's the way it works.

Wife: My God, that's cruel.

Professor: Yeah, working conditions have gone downhill all over. On the other hand, it's pretty much like the university. We just use heavier thread, that's all. (p. 3)

Waller probably felt better than he had in years when that "zinger" appeared on his computer monitor.

### *From Ridicule to Release*

One stream of academic humor demonstrates silly circumstances in which bumbling and ineptness pays off and in which the unschooled and unskilled vanquish the honored and lettered. That stream tells us academicians aren't so high and mighty after all; and authors and readers enjoy getting a chance to take them down a notch from their ivory towers. When McCarthy published *The Groves of Academe*, reviews alternately applauded its delight in sudden reversals of fortune and carped at its failure to find any redeeming qualities in academic life.

Another stream demonstrates the limits of winner v. loser reversals, allowing the powerful at the top to finally carry the day with ludicrous behavior, political bumbling, and dissembling explanations that, nevertheless, cannot be overcome by greater wisdom from the bottom ranks or outside the academy. That stream depicts a wacky system styled to be impervious to improvement and to perpetuate, even amplify, its own neuroses. Either way – when the winners prevail or when the losers manage a surprise win of their own – the action that takes place can be penned as ridiculous, funny, or wry as long as winning and losing characters are able to walk the thin line between ludicrous and predictable. In the novel, as in the academy, the characters and their behavior are the key to institutional believability.

There are undoubtedly several messages being broadcast in humorous campus literature, most of them collected under a large

umbrella that could be labeled, absurd, wasteful, ridiculous, silly, unfair, inept, laughable and petty things about people and circumstances in and around the academy. The humor of campus literature is, in large part, the humor of complaint. It exposes the possibility – often the reality – of unlikely outcomes among capricious measures of institutional success and individual contribution.

While complaint is cousin to criticism, and criticism with wit turns satirical, fiction located in academe never strays quite to the reaches of pure satire. Satire uses criticism instrumentally, depicting extremes and drawing caricatures of behaviors and events for a purpose that may range from building coalitions to seeding change. The dominant aim of literary humor of higher education, on the other hand, is only tangentially focused on righting what is seen as wrong. It stops at exposing and ridiculing what is wrong, as if to voice tacit agreement that some things cannot be changed.

When readers of academic humor shake their heads and say, “I don’t believe it,” they are not actually speaking of first-time cognizance. In fact, they *do* believe it, because they have seen it, or something very close to it, on their own campuses. At best they may not believe “it” has spread so widely as to be the stuff of popular literature. That discovery may be as comforting for readers as unveiling foibles and eccentricities is cathartic for writers. Humorous literature about a place called academe is nothing if not release.

#### REFERENCES

- Connery, B.A. & Combe, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Theorizing satire*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Freud, S. (1960). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. New York: Norton. (Original German edition published 1905)
- Gruner, C.R. (1978). *Understanding laughter: The workings of wit and humor*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Gruner, C.R. (1997). *The game of humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Gutleben, C. (1995). English academic satire from the middle ages to postmodernism: Distinguishing the comic from the satiric. In B.A. Connery & K. Combes (Eds.), *Theorizing satire* (pp. 133-150). New York: St. Martin’s Press.

- Johnson, G. (1998). *Invisible writer*. New York: Dutton.
- LaFave, L., Haddad, J. & Maesen, W.A. (1976). Superiority, enhanced self-esteem and perceived incongruity humour theory. In A. Chapman & H.C. Foot (Eds.), *Humour and laughter: Theory, research and applications* (pp. 63-92). New York: John Wiley.
- Martin, W. (1978). The satire and moral vision of Mary McCarthy. In S.B. Cohen (Ed.), *Comic relief: Humor in contemporary American literature* (pp. 187-206). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- McCarthy, M. (1951). *The groves of academe*. New York: Avon.
- Oates, J.C. (1975). *The hungry ghosts: Seven allusive comedies*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press.
- Olsen, L. (1990). *Circus of the mind in motion: Postmodernism and the comic vision*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Rovit, E. (1978). College humor and the modern audience. In S.B. Cohen (Ed.), *Comic relief: Humor in contemporary American literature* (pp. 238-248). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Russo, R. (1997). *Straight man*. New York: Random House.
- Shulman, M. (1943). *Barefoot boy with cheek*. Philadelphia: Blakiston.
- Shulz, T.R. (1976). A cognitive development analysis of humour. In A. Chapman & H.C. Foot (Eds.), *Humour and laughter: Theory, research and applications* (pp. 11-36). New York: John Wiley.
- Smiley, J. (1995). *Moo*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Waller, R. J. (1993). *Slow waltz in Cedar Bend*. New York: Warner Books.

*Katherine Reynolds* is Assistant Professor, College of Education, University of South Carolina. She received a Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the University of Utah. Her teaching, research, and writing emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches, especially drawn from the humanities, in the investigation of historical and philosophical issues in education. Her most recent book is *Visions and Vanities: John Andrew Rice of Black Mountain College* (1998, Louisiana State University Press).

*Robert Schwartz* is Associate Professor, Florida State University, and teaches courses in higher education administration and in college and university student life. His research and publications include studies in the history of higher education, women and minorities in education, and student life. Dr. Schwartz holds a Ph.D. from Indiana University.

*Beverly Bower*, Assistant Professor and community college specialist, is a member of the higher education faculty at Florida State University. Her publication and research interests focus on the mission of the community collect, women in higher education, and "broadcast education." She completed her Ph.D. at Florida State University in the Department of Education Leadership.

