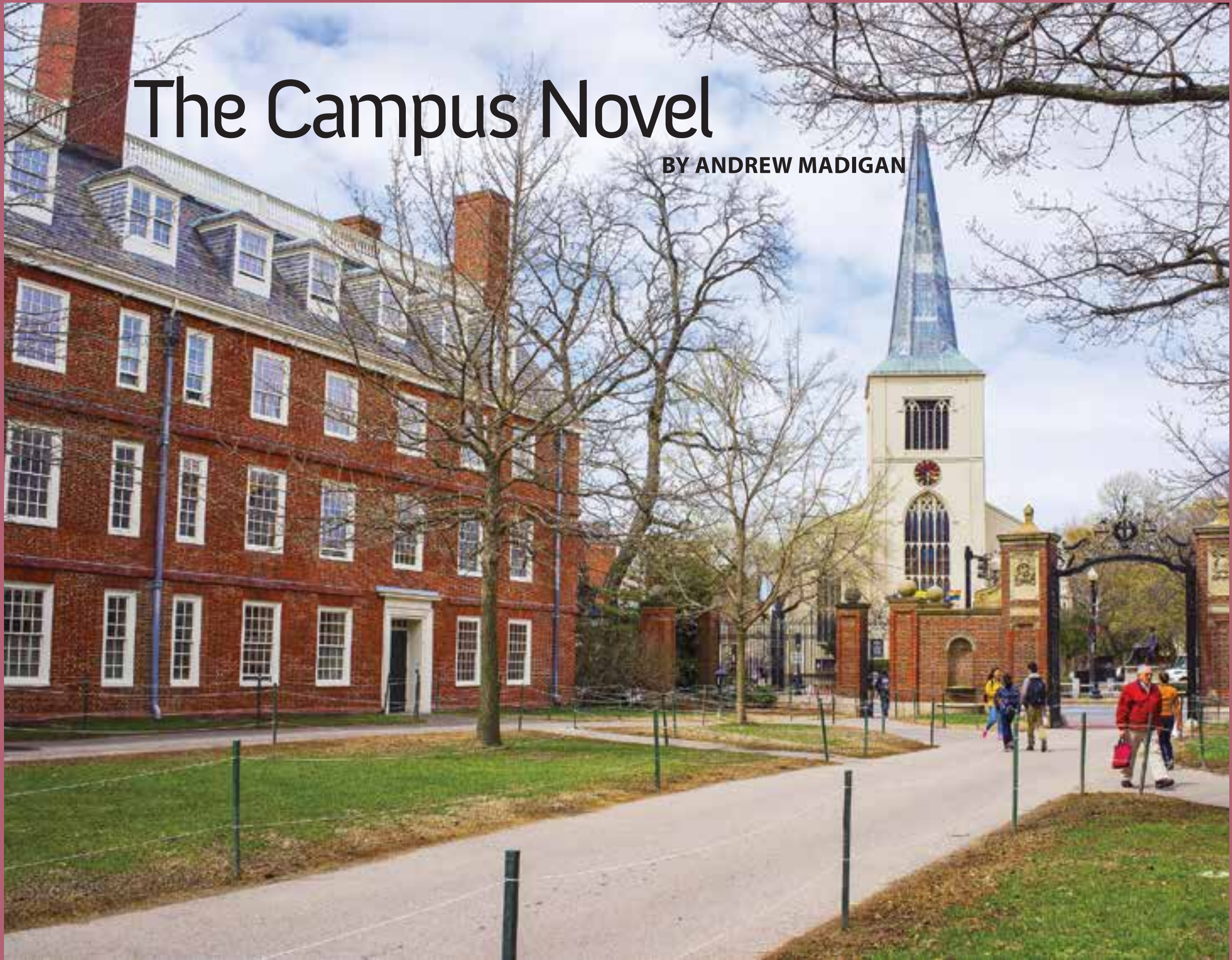
The Campus Novel

BY ANDREW MADIGAN



THE CAMPUS NOVEL is such an enduring, successful form because it adapts so readily to the times. Fashions, trends, and politics evolve, but students are always students and professors are always professors. The form is a mirror of the age, but it also reflects the individual quirks of the writer.

But first, what *is* a campus novel? Wikipedia's definition is both obvious and frustrating in its circularity: "A campus novel, also known as an academic novel, is a novel whose main action is set in and around the campus of a university."

Specialized reference books aren't any more instructive. Blackwell's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* is even more concise: "A novel which has a university campus as its setting." Points for avoiding redundancy, but none for depth.

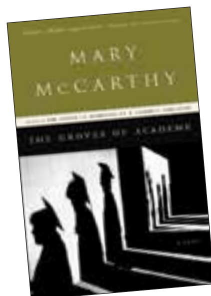
Let's step back. Universities have long played a central role in literature. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a student. That's why he whines so much and doesn't crack a book. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov is, delightfully, an "ex-student"—a specific and respected status in 19th-century Russia. (Today we use the term "dropout.") Arkady, in Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, is a recent college graduate; like Raskolnikov, he knows a lot about books but nothing about life. Faust is a scholar, both in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's and Christopher Marlowe's plays.

In the last century, novels such as C. P. Snow's *The Masters* (1951) and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) featured academic settings, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) deal with students (a subgenre called the "varsity novel"). Scholars, however, generally date the "campus novel"—that focusing on faculty and administration—to the publication of Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* in 1952.

Why don't these pre-1952 works "count"? That's easy. The definitions are wrong. The campus novel, as we know and enjoy it today, isn't just a matter of setting. It's primarily a function of tone, plot, characterization, and underly-

ing themes. Early academic novels portray campus life as idyllic, tragic, melancholy, elegiac, sentimental, or solemn. Moreover, in works such as *Faust* and *Hamlet,* academia is peripheral to the story.

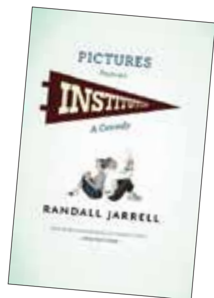
THE PARADIGM SHIFTED with *The Groves of Academe*. On the surface, it's a rather flat, uneventful survey of campus life, documented with anthropological detail. Lurking just beneath the surface, however, is a sharp critique of academia, social mores, and contemporaneous values. Academia is held up to scorn and ridicule. Today, this what we talk about when we talk about the campus novel.



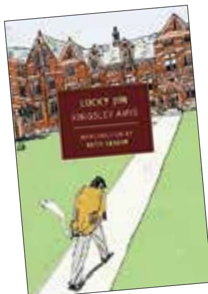
There are exceptions, of course. But compare *The Groves of Academe* to *The Masters*. Set at Cambridge in 1937, Snow's novel isn't a fun romp or a satiric take on the university; it's a grim examination of life in the shadows of the Third Reich. Clearly, Snow and McCarthy live in different neighborhoods.

The Groves of Academe was instrumental in shaping the basic tropes of the campus novel. McCarthy's work is a thinly disguised memoir of her own teaching experience. The main character, Henry Mulcahy, is a hapless instructor whose contract won't be renewed. McCarthy skewers his character and, by extension, the entire sphere of academia. Her novel depicts a world that appears to be high-minded, virtuous, and honest but is, in reality, plagued by arrogance, self-interest, duplicity, and petty squabbles.

In *Pictures from an Institution: A Comedy* (1954), Randall Jarrell portrays the same college that served as a model for McCarthy. His version, though more lighthearted, comic, and witty, is equally satiric. McCarthy and Jarrell were colleagues and frenemies. Both novels are romans à clef that reveal the foibles and failings of teachers at a college that, for legal reasons, is definitely not Sarah Lawrence.



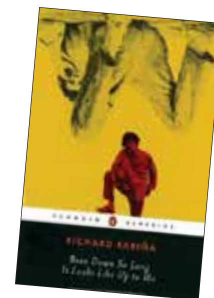
That same year, Kingsley Amis transported the campus novel to England with *Lucky Jim*. Conveniently, Amis discovered that he didn't have to change much. Professors were schmucks over there, too, and administrators were tight-pursed, vindictive pencil pushers. Like Mulcahy, the titular Jim is a fledging instructor of medieval studies who might not get his position renewed. Amis's comedy is more slapstick than his American counterparts', but he's tilting at the same windmills—careerism, pretension, and malicious infighting.



Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* (1957) envisions a world that's almost entirely absurd and degenerate, perhaps in part because of what the title character calls the "Hitler war." *Pnin* is one of Nabokov's most accessible and enjoyable works, which suggests how accommodating the campus novel can be. That's the crux of the matter—this form is ideal for instigating light comedy and shaping memorable characters, while also enabling delightfully vicious attacks and acerbic satire. Sometimes we overlook how incisive campus novels are because of how gentle and fun they appear to be.

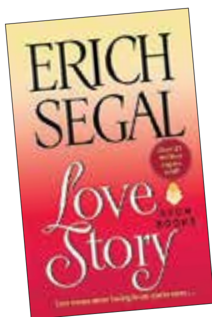
In 1965, rock stars looked wholesome and tidy. John Williams published *Stoner* this year. While it's not a genuine campus novel—grim, dour, concerned almost exclusively with a professor's extracurricular life—it does reveal something about the genre. The main character, William Stoner, teaches at a small Midwestern college until his death in the late 1950s. The novel has an old-fashioned feel, perhaps because it was set in the past and Williams wanted the style to reflect the content. There's no comedy here, no sex, drugs, or rock 'n roll. That would soon change.

A LOT CAN HAPPEN IN A YEAR. By 1966 rock stars had long hair, beards, and striped pants. Social mores were changing, college campuses were starting to foment rebellion, and literature reflected these changes. Consider two novels written during this decisive year: Richard Fariña's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* and John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy.* Fariña was a folksinger, a poet, a novelist, a roustabout, a scenester, and a friend of Thomas Pynchon. He wrote only one work of fiction, and while it's certainly a campus novel—satiric, irreverent, iconoclastic—it's an entirely different animal from its cousins of the 1950s, or even 1965. *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* is filled with lying, cheating, sex, drugs, drunkenness, picaresque thrills, revolution, and feta cheese. *Giles Goat-Boy* is a massive, complex, clever, and challenging postmodern novel about a world-sized university, the Cold War, and a boy raised by goats.



The best-selling novel of 1970, which defined the decade and sold more than 20 million copies, was Erich Segal's

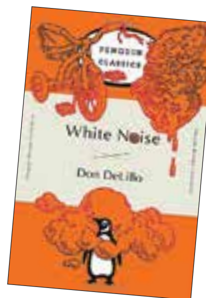
Love Story. Set at Harvard, it's more varsity than campus, but its popularity is revealing. A sad, sappy, slender, and compelling, well, love story, the book was a welcome salve for a culture at war in Vietnam, in its own streets, and with itself. When the pendulum swings too far, it invariably swings back the other way, which is why, in a time of rapid social change, protest, and rebellion, the people elect as their president the conservative Richard Nixon and embrace a comforting romance of the Ivy League. *Love Story* is honestly a good book, if also sentimental and treacly—it was even published on Valentine's Day.



The first installment of David Lodge's Campus Trilogy, *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, was published in 1975. It concerns two professors—an American and a Briton—who exchange jobs for a year. An archetypal campus novel, *Changing Places* isn't a reaction to the times so much as an analysis of it. Lodge examines how the upheavals of the era affect society, marriage, academia, and the individual. Neither the staid uniformity of the past nor the chaos of the present are seen as perfectly healthy or good. He also explores the growth of far-flung academic conferences, an expensive trend underwritten by the rise in air travel; the economic conditions of professors in both countries; and the self-involvement of the Me Decade, an era of ostensible introspection and self-improvement. Lodge packs a decade's worth of entanglements into a single novel.

IN THE 1980S, THE CAMPUS NOVEL found a wide variety of incarnations, but many shared a common worldview. In Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1981), the university is no refuge of critical inquiry. It's a hotbed of greed, ambition, murder, underhandedness, and internecine conflict. Davies also addresses the increasingly bureaucratic, industrial, and rationalized nature of society, which many observers found typical of that decade. He addresses the struggle between our conflicting desires—love, money, knowledge, and art. Davies wrote almost entirely in trilogies, and his works are, on the surface, rather traditional and quaint. However, he was actually a highly experimental, progressive writer. *The Rebel Angels*, for example, deals with alchemy, religion, gypsies, sodomy, and a ribald defrocked priest.

A completely different sort of 1980s novel is Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). This peculiar, deadpan, satiric book involves a professor of Hitler Studies whose colleagues study subjects as arcane and superficial as cereal box "texts." DeLillo lampoons the increasingly abstract, ideological, niche world of the humanities. Beyond the academy, he tackles our emotional and spiritual desensitization in a world dominated by mass-media products, information overload, toxicity, and terror. Similarly, Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) is a chilling black comedy. In this varsity novel, the students of New England's Camden College are dead-eyed hedonists who have sex and drugs instead of thoughts or feelings. Ellis savagely critiques an increasingly dehumanized, shallow, and corporatized society.

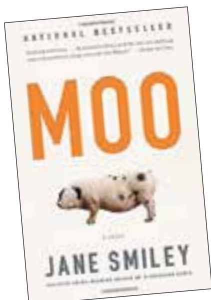


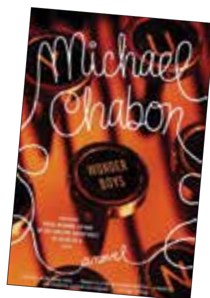
The 1990s saw much carryover from the previous decade. Donna Tartt set her debut novel, *The Secret History* (1992), at Hampden College, another liberal arts institution in New England. She was a student at Bennington with Ellis, with whom she shared creative writing workshops. In a McCarthy-Jarrell dynamic, both writers had a go at the same college. In fact, Jonathan Lethem and Jill Eisenstadt—who attended Bennington at the same time as Tartt and Ellis—would also write campus novels based on Bennington. Tartt's book is a story of intrigue, murder, incest, and ancient Greek ritual; many of the students and professors are genuinely devoted to their work, if perhaps for the wrong reasons. Her vision is bleak and anticomedic.

The 1990s and 2000s also presented topical subject matter. Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* (1993) and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) deal with political correctness. The university is an ideal context for this struggle between freedom of speech and thinking—core values of academia—and political correctness, which, though ostensibly a liberal principle, limits both speech and thought. These novels deal with race, politics, identity, special interest, and the ways

in which these abstractions can be fostered and exploited. South African writer J. M. Coetzee explores similar issues in *Disgrace* (1999), though his novel steps off campus to grapple with fear, bloodshed, and racial enmity in the country at large.

The more traditional campus novel still thrived during this period, in comic, satiric works such as Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (1998), and Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004). Recent campus novels that don't entirely stick to the McCarthy script, or the academy, include Nell Zink's *Mislaid* (2015) and Nathan Hill's *The Nix* (2016). One element that's become more common is to set the story specifically in a creative writing program. We find this in Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* (1995) and Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* (2006).



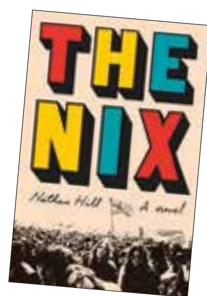


THERE'S A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION that hasn't been addressed: why are so many campus novels satiric? Well, for starters, academia is an easy target. Universities attract, encourage, and, to some extent, *require* eccentricity, and the learning, discovery, and invention that accompany that trait. Some professors may be reluctant to grow up; after all, they are always around college kids, and they rarely leave school.

Here's what David Lodge, author of many classic campus novels, says about the genre:

> "The pursuit of knowledge and truth are set against the actual behaviour and motivations of the people who work in them. … The contrast is perhaps more ironic, more marked, than it would be in any other professional milieu."

Academia is supposed, and claims, to have lofty principles, but this isn't necessarily the case, so satire is the inevitable result. There has always been an element of slapstick in campus novels. *Lucky Jim* is filled with pratfalls and all manner of figurative banana peels. We still find this today in works such as *The Nix*. Students want to laugh at professors, and professors want to laugh at administrators. Our natural inclination is to take anything that's filled with high seriousness, pomposity, or righteousness and take it down a peg.



The campus novel requires satire, in addition to comedy, because our disillusionment with academia, which offers so much hope and possibility, can be quite unsettling. Satire is comedy with an advanced degree, but it's also tragedy with a sense of humor. We need it for a more critical, shrewd assault on the flimsiness of our institutions and the weakness of our principles.

The form has survived for many good reasons. First, comedy and satire will always find an audience. We all want to laugh, especially if, behind the jokes, are critical stabs at a world that's injured us. The genre performs a useful function by keeping watch over the university, one of our most cherished bodies. Academia is sometimes portrayed as hypocritical, its ideals tarnished or nonexistent. Campus novels reveal that critical thinking, neutrality, and the disinterested quest for knowledge are, all too often, comprised of baser motives such as ambition, ideology, insecurity, bitterness, and greed.

Second, the form is universal. Most of us have been exposed to intellectual pretension, grade grubbing, political correctness, Kafkaesque logistics. There's no need to explain what a university is and how it operates—the writer can dive right into the action. Third, the campus is the world in miniature; nothing happens outside a campus that doesn't also happen inside a campus. Moreover, by confining the story to a relatively limited and familiar set of characters, settings, and events, the action remains accessible. Within these ostensible constraints, however, there's variation. Like the sonnet or the detective story, the campus novel offers various permutations, so we get both formula and innovation. As we've seen, the basic structure has remained steady over time, while the individual novels have adapted to the whims and predilections of the author and, of course, the times.

Fourth, the genre has endured because it allows for human conflict—based on race, age, gender, class, and politics—among a large and self-contained body of individuals and groups, each with their own agenda. Students, professors, administrators, researchers, trustees, accrediting bodies, and townspeople all converge on or near a small campus. There's so much room for disputes, gripes, dissent, and comedy—in essence, for storytelling.

Finally, many campus novels are debuts. The authors are fresh from school or at the start of their teaching careers. Academia is the world they inhabit, and the simple truth is that a college campus provides great material for comedy, satire, and sometimes even tragedy. ■

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