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Review Essay

Campus Life Revealed: Tracking Down the Rich Resources of American Collegiate Fiction

The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography,
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Anyone who has ever attended a PowerPoint presentation about campus finances at a Board of Trustees meeting will be tempted to conclude that university budget reports are the paramount works of fiction in higher education because they often stretch credibility. This cynical yet limited impression needs to be tempered with the reminder that, in fact, we also are heirs to a rich tradition of thoughtful, perceptive writing about higher education. John E. Kramer's *The American College Novel* (2004) itself may not be "great literature"—but it certainly is a great guide to the great and not-so-great fiction about American colleges and universities. For scholars who wish to understand the portrayal of American higher education in popular culture it is a prodigious, indispensable resource. This second edition, an update to his 1981 book, reviews 648 academic novels published through 2002, adding 223 novels to the 425 he annotated in the first edition. The book's annotations are divided almost evenly by student- and staff-centered novels (319 of the former, 329 of the latter). Kramer's purpose in compiling this annotated collection is twofold: for those who enjoy reading college novels for pleasure and for scholars who use college novels as a tool for understanding how higher education is perceived in American

culture and as part of the serious, systematic analysis of higher education. This essay primarily focuses on how to utilize the book for the latter purpose.

The criteria for inclusion in Kramer's universe of "college novels" are that the novel must be a "full-length work of fiction that incorporates an American institution of higher education as a crucial part of its total setting and include among its principal characters graduate or undergraduate students, faculty members, administrators, and/or other college or university personnel" (p. v). However, not all novels meeting these general criteria are included. He excludes eight specific types of fictional works: anthologies of short stories; novels intended for juveniles; mysteries; science-fiction and horror novels; novels that deal exclusively with intercollegiate athletics; novels set at medical schools and military academies; novels in which the protagonists, even if students or professors, are depicted primarily in settings other than at academic institutions; and novels that are primarily about sexual themes. One wonders how many total novels these exclusions might come to, except for mysteries, which are treated in another anthology by Kramer, *Academe in Mystery and Detective Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Kramer, 2000), a similarly organized set of annotations that deals exclusively with mystery novels set in colleges and universities. This second edition includes 486 "college mystery" novels published between 1910 and 1999 and updates his 1983 volume on this sub-genre (Kramer & Kramer, 1983).

Before turning to the book's strengths and shortcomings it is worthwhile to evaluate why one should read or study college novels in the first place. The common answer is that we can learn about the complexities of academic life through fictional portrayals. Are these portrayals trustworthy? Authors of college novels are often academics, steeped in academic culture and values. They are participant-observers who have seen the good, the bad, the ugly. They may have axes to grind or grudges to air, but even a sardonic view of higher education by an insider is still an informed view. As one academic department chair has explained, "I learned the most about being a department chairman not from the campus orientation or from what other administrators told me, but from reading two academic novels: Richard Russo's *Straight Man* . . . and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*" (Baron, 2004, p. C1). And whenever we are faced with the absurdities of academic life we can smile wryly and think, "This would go great in an academic novel."

A regular contention about why we should read or study academic fiction is based on the belief that the public bases its conception of higher education, at least in part, on the fictional portrayals of campus life in

novels. One might read an absurd or fabulist tale and ask, “Is this really what goes on?” This is not an insignificant question given that the vast majority of the nation’s students are educated in public institutions—funded by taxpayer dollars.

The general contention that the public bases its conception of higher education on college novels seems reasonable but is, as of yet, an untested claim. No study, as far as we are aware, definitively examines the source of public perception of higher education. Other plausible sources for popular perception extend to television programs, including documentaries, exposés, and entertainment shows; the news media, on television, in print, and online; movies; popular magazines; and, of course, anecdotal stories and accounts told by word-of-mouth. Most likely, public perception of the academy is based on a combination of these factors—with inordinate imagery coming from coverage of big-time college sports. Furthermore, it is worth asking who the main readers of college novels are. Is it mainly academics themselves, students, parents of students or future students, legislators? A reasonable guess is that most readers of such novels are those who already have some connection to higher education. Do they read them for pure enjoyment or to gain some measure of understanding of the academic environment? If the readers of college novels are indeed the participants in college life, another explanation is they read them as a form of catharsis and release (Reynolds, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000).

While rich in data about academic novels, *The American College Novel* is weaker in its analysis of such novels. The short introduction (six pages plus footnotes) provides an overview of college novels and their potential uses. In it, Kramer provides a few reflections on trends that have appeared in college novels since the publication of the first edition, most notably novels that deal with gay and lesbian and minority characters and themes, which were previously absent in college novels. The second trend is that of “the growing bitterness found in recent novels written by past and present professors” (p. xi). These trends, he declares, cry out for examination because of the descriptions in these new novels of a world that is sometimes unfriendly to minorities. The other forms of analysis present in the book come from the preliminary bifurcation of novels into student- and staff-centered categories and a few indexes along with a “starter list” of 50 notable or significant college novels.

One index lists disciplines (overwhelmingly dominated by English but also including others in the humanities and sciences) and organizational positions. The list of organizational positions is not as helpful since it clumps groups of positions into larger categories; for example, “other administrators” includes deans, provosts, program directors, and vice presidents.

Another index is a list of the colleges and universities represented, even where a fictitious name is used (except where too much speculation is required to pair a novel with an actual campus), allowing the reader or researcher to examine how a particular institution is portrayed in fiction. As might be expected, some institutions are better represented than others, a function of age and prestige. Most of the Ivy League schools are represented (except, surprisingly, Brown and Penn): Harvard is the most ubiquitous institution with 77 novels set at its campus (nearly 12% of the 648 novels); Yale follows with 32, Princeton has 21, Cornell registers 12, Columbia 9, and Dartmouth 3. In all, these six schools account for nearly a quarter of the campus settings of college novels. Only two other schools have more than a dozen depictions, the University of California-Berkeley with 19 and the University of Chicago with 18. And only 14 schools have been used as the setting for more than five novels each, the seven already mentioned plus Iowa (9), Bennington (8), Michigan (8), New York University (8), Illinois (7), Wisconsin (7), Stanford (6), and Texas at Austin (6). Our own research suggests why this is so. First, historic colleges located on the East Coast have advantages of longevity, prestige, and proximity to the editorial offices of leading publishing houses, most of which have been located in New York City and Boston. This social science analysis reinforced the more lyrical explanation presented by Berton Braley in 1923:

It's general knowledge that many a college
That's not very socially smart
Has teams that can crush dear old Harvard to mush
And take Yale and Princeton apart
But gridiron heroes exclusively hail
(in stories) from Harvard or Princeton or Yale!

The undeniable conclusion is that campus novels are overwhelmingly set at private, elite universities or large (and elite) public institutions. Nearly 37% of the annotated novels are set at these 14 schools. But this is just one quick “stab” at the data. That this book is a jumping off point for studies of how college is depicted in one arena of popular culture, novels, is readily evident.

College novels can be employed as a means to understand how a particular profession or discipline is portrayed. Kramer did just this on two occasions. In 1979 he utilized 23 novels (written by English professors or other non-sociologists) to dissect the portrayal of sociologists (Kramer, 1979) and in a 1981 *The Journal of Higher Education* article he examined college presidents, including their apparent vanity, their (in)ability to handle crisis, and their clashes with faculty (the ones writ-

ing these novels!). Similarly, other studies examine the image of the professor (Major, 1998) and the complexity of administrative roles as portrayed through fictional accounts (Pittman & Theilmann, 1986). These studies thus demonstrate the kind of analysis of higher education that is possible with college novels. This kind of research was called for by Thelin and Townsend in 1988 as a means to triangulate our understanding of higher education given that such works can be a “fertile, intriguing source” (p. 185). As has been observed, “It cannot be denied that every aspect of college life described in fiction has its counterpart somewhere in real life, but the discerning reader feels that, while part of the truth has been told, not all of it has. Perhaps it never can be, but certainly the great college novel remains to be written” (Boys, 1946, p. 385). A few of studies have examined particular aspects of college fiction since Thelin and Townsend’s call, one on humor in college novels (Reynolds et al., 2000; Tierney, 2004), and another on academic freedom and tenure (Tierney, 2004). Some recent books, written by literature scholars and often in that discipline’s rarified language, have focused on college fiction (Carter, 1990; Marchalonis, 1995; Rossen, 1993; Showalter, 2005; Siegel, 1989; Womack, 2002).

Thelin and Townsend (1988) reasoned that college novels can serve as a form of historical memory, reminding us of events that may have been recorded in a novel but otherwise forgotten from the historical record. Yet the evidence that researchers use college novels as means to triangulate their studies is less apparent. One notable exception is Malkmus’s use of an nineteenth-century college novel as one of her sources to examine coed life in that era (Malkmus, 2006). Another landmark work that fulfills this potential is Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz’s historical study of undergraduate cultures over three centuries, *Campus Life* (1987). There is clearly more room to heed the call to draw upon the rich data available from college novels, and Kramer’s compendium is most useful as the starting point for implementing such a recommendation. The possible studies or ways that college novels could be used in studying higher education are myriad.

Whatever the researcher’s question, *The American College Novel* provides the list of college novels along with short annotations, allowing the researcher a starting point for a study. The annotations themselves are descriptive enough to persuade the reader to engage with or avoid a certain novel without spoiling the possible enjoyment of reading it. For the most part, Kramer keeps with description of the novels instead of detailed critiques. However, he does highlight exceptional novels. Those on his list of 50 “starter novels” are indicated as such in their annotation and tend to receive longer and more detailed reviews. Kramer also

includes biographical information about the authors of novels, where it is available, including information about an author's life experiences that relate to college life or that may have otherwise influenced the writing of the novel.

A half century ago literature scholars lamented that the great college novel had yet to be produced and that this genre was generally stocked with novels of inferior quality (Boys, 1946; Carpenter, 1960; Lyons, 1962). (Though one might rightly wonder why Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, winner of the National Book Award, might not qualify.) We are not in a position to argue whether the "great college novel" has since been written, but the cast of authors who have penned a college novel, found in the Author Index, seems to indicate that such a possibility at least exists. Prior to these laments in the middle of the twentieth century, the only authors of note included Nathaniel Hawthorne for *Fanshawe*, of which he tried to later buy up all existing copies so he could destroy them; F. Scott Fitzgerald for *This Side of Paradise*; Stringfellow Barr, known more for his advocacy of reading great books than for his ability to write them; Jonathan Kozol, famous antagonist of American education; and George Santayana, well known as a philosopher but not for his one work of fiction. But since that time major American authors, including recipients of top honors and awards for writing, have added their own college novels to the corpus of this genre (along with many forgotten and forgettable authors). These include John Barth, Saul Bellow, Willa Cather, Michael Chabon, J.M. Coetzee (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003), Don DeLillo, John Knowles, David Lodge, Mary McCarthy, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth, Richard Russo, Jane Smiley, Wallace Stegner, Paul Theroux, John Updike, Carl Van Doren, and Kurt Vonnegut. Even popular authors such as Michael Crichton, Bret Easton Ellis, John Irving, and Irving Stone have added to the genre.

Others who have added a book or two of fiction have made their mark in other areas. For example, Hazard Adams is better known in education circles for his *Academic Tribes*, and among literary critics and scholars for his theoretical contributions, than for his three campus novels. And it is unlikely that many remember, or even know of, John Kenneth Galbraith's novel *A Tenured Professor*, given his fame for contributions to economics.

While this list may seem like a veritable "who's who" of the literary canon, it must be noted that these few prominent authors stand out among the 580 or so who have penned college novels. And the list continues. In the few years since *The American College Novel* was published, other college novels have appeared, most infamous among them,

Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004). Wolfe explained in myriad interviews, on television and in print, how he had researched the book by visiting several campuses and spending time talking to and interviewing students. Ironically, Wolfe's explanation raises more questions—and problems—than it resolves. *I Am Charlotte Simmons* enjoyed the great advantage of high powered promotion and pre-publication reviews in major national newspapers and magazines, along with author Tom Wolfe being a featured guest on numerous television talk shows. For all his claims of campus research, his depictions are superficial and stilted. They pale in comparison to anthropologist Michael Moffat's 1989 ethnography of freshmen dormitory and campus life at Rutgers, *Coming of Age in New Jersey*. The voyeur character of a 70 year-old adult writing at length about the excesses of undergraduate sexual behaviors and bathroom conduct tells less, not more, about the complexities of the contemporary college experiences. Above all, the inordinate attention given Wolfe's novel tends to smother or obscure the more thoughtful, enjoyable college fiction being written and published elsewhere by a new generation of college writers. In sum, the problem is not that there is a lack of intriguing collegiate fiction today. Rather, it is that the odds of authors and audiences finding one another are difficult in light of the domination by a handful of works such as *I Am Charlotte Simmons*.

Fortunately, Kramer's annotated bibliography provides an up-dated Trip Tik for the fantastic voyage of exploring the terrain of college novels. Of course, Kramer's other purpose in writing the book—for the book to serve as a resource for the pure enjoyment of these novels—is also worthwhile. The author notes in the introduction to the 1981 edition an apt reason that sums up why many probably read campus novels: "And, during my fifteen years as a college faculty member, I have taken a great deal of perverse delight in reading fictional accounts of people very much like my administrative overseers, my faculty colleagues, my students, and myself" (Kramer, 1981, p. x). Don't we all!

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