

The Nutty Professor

written by Joseph Houlihan | February 25, 2015



The campus novel is generally a stage for the careering intrigues of petit bourgeoisie; often to hilarious and devastating ends (*Stoner*, *Pnin*, *The Groves of Academe*). Yet every once and while, the professors crack and ripple in transgression drifting into zones of aberrance and madness. Here are a few great examples:

1.) *Giles-Goat-Boy* by John Barth, published in 1966 by Doubleday. In this satire, Giles (a boy raised as a goat) comes into conflict with the rigid codes academia and WESAC, the computer overlord of a college campus that covers the universe. In his hero's quest, Giles converts the rational-minded into *Gilesian* iconoclasts and emerges as a Grand Tutor. The text features madcap syllogisms like: "proctoscopy recapitulates hagiography."



Aberrant thinking can take down the computer overlord.

2.) *A Smuggler's Bible* by Joseph McElroy, published in 1966 by Harcourt, Brace & World. In one of McElroy's overlapping narratives, an overpowering professor (Duke) terrorizes his students and his son in waves of excessive id. He shouts his pronouncements at the class "preaching Bakunin or Berdayev at 8 A.M." And his self-control deteriorates: "As Duke stepped cautiously along the rickety dock, he was talking to himself...You can counterattack nightmare two ways. You can blinker yourself and simplify. Or you can bless the whole teeming, tipping world and devour it. But maybe only god does the second. And for God the world may not be a nightmare. How's that? The world as God's nightmare."

3.) *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, published in 1985 by Viking. Jack Gladney, a mild mannered professor of Hitler Studies builds himself into something close to demagogue on the campus of College-on-the-Hill, draping himself in black robes and squinting out of ominous coke bottle glasses. But when his wife's depression mounts, driving her to infidelity and a seedy drug trial, Gladney lashes out in desperate violence: "I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic. The sound snowballed in the white room, adding on reflected waves. I watched blood squirt from the victim's midsection. A delicate arc...He raised his hand and pulled the trigger, shooting me in the wrist. The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed...What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme?"

4.) *Lola. California* by Edie Meidav, published in 2011 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Vic Mahler is a professor of philosophy at UC Berkley in the late 1960s. Tapping into the zeitgeist his classes attract a cultish group of devoted followers, eventually dubbed: "Shaggies." From the podium, Mahler pairs biology and Schopenhauer: "My claim is that we do best when we articulate our own foundational myths, deeper than psychology itself, the very intersection of our will with physical matter's reality principle. In this way we locate...not just the efficiency of our neurons but their endless possibility." Yet as Mahler's teaching gains traction, he becomes increasingly erratic, raging at the world, and the disparity between "what his work suggests" and "the way he leads his life." This rage culminates in an act of violence sentencing him to a Manson-like exile on California's death row.

5.) *Hotel Crystal* by Olivier Rolin, published in 2008 by Dalkey Archive. Tucked inside this collection of errata (catalog of beds a la Georges Perec, remembrances on postcards and hotel stationary), Rolin retells one of the saddest and most scandalous histories of break-down in the professor.

"A pleasing lullaby is indeed what we needed, my old Master Louis Althusser and I, on the night we spent in room 18 of the *Hostellerie de la Mer*... He got it into his head, as he would recall in his posthumous memoirs, to steal an atomic submarine. Through the bathroom transom, one could make out the nearby sodium lights at the Longue Isle base... Whatever the case, he had purchased an officer's uniform in dark blue wool at the Clichy flea market, on which—after referring to the *Larousse Encyclopedia of the Twentieth Century*—he sewed five gold stripes corresponding to the rank of ship's captain... His plan consisted of simply showing up the next day at the entrance to the base and informing the maritime gendarmerie that he was the new commander of the *Redoutable*, appointed at a Council of Ministers that same morning (this detail struck him as tremendously cunning, likely to allay any suspicion)."

Rolin skirts around the famous climax of Althusser's crisis: he strangled his wife to death. But Althusser himself returns to the episode, again and again in his "posthumous memoir," *The Future Lasts Forever*, a strange and revealing work, part satire, part exploration around the construction of madness. Althusser challenges the totalitarian construction of sanity, while simultaneously describing the challenges of psychosis. From inside the walls of a high-security mental hospital Althusser was able to comment on mental institutions and psychiatric pathologizing: "I would like to emphasize the damage done by the very existence of psychiatrist institutions. It is a well-known fact that a number of sick people, suffering from an acute and, therefore, transitory crisis, who are automatically and routinely confined in a psychiatric hospital, can, because of drugs and their confinement, become 'chronic cases', truly mentally ill and incapable of ever leaving the hospital grounds." In this, he echoes the famous argument put forward by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*: our understanding of "insanity" shifts with our understanding of "normalcy." Foucault similarly identifies

the self-fulfilling aspect of a mad diagnosis:

Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage. And the land he will come to is unknown—as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes. He has his truth and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries that cannot belong to him.

Furthermore, madness as microcosm camouflages the institutional character of our society at large. A society that cannot tolerate aberration creates “insanity.”

The campus novel thrives on the construction of larger than life personalities enacting dramas against environments with codes as strict as those in any parlor novel of manners. And it's always a thrill to see transgression against tradition and staid expectations (think Grady Tripp in *Wonder Boys*). But these five novels take transgression further. In the construction of each of the larger-than-life professors, there is evidence of discontinuity and rupture. In *Lola, California*, Vic Mahler comes to represent the terrifying id of 60s counterculture driving him to solipsism and violence. The Duke in *Smuggler's Bible* demonstrates the impossibility of living a unified and rational life in post-modernity; tapping into the same ethos as William Carlos Williams, *Black Mountain*, or the New York School of Poetics that rightly identified schizophrenia as a necessary symptom of the time. These novels are exemplary because they demonstrate the rigidity of our current culture, and the inevitable self-destruction that results from knocking against this rigidity. They highlight one of the sad paradoxes of the reality principle: to survive in post-modernity, you have to become blasé.