

Book Review

Scott Johnson, *Campusland* (St. Martin's Press, 2019)

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The front cover of this new college novel blazons a blurb from *Kirkus Reviews* calling it not just “smart and hilarious” but “high-spirited, richly imagined, and brave”. That last adjective is the key. It credits Johnson as the author brave enough to publish the truth about American higher education today. It is not clear that it takes courage to espouse right-wing opinions in the United States of 2019, but Johnson clearly means to be the man who reveals the dark truths that universities—at least the elite universities outside the South—hope you won’t discover.

Johnson sets his story at fictional northeastern Devon University, presented as one of the very elite private universities in the country, a rival to Harvard. Devon’s tuition is \$75,000 a year (the real-life Harvard charged \$46,000 in 2019-20). Devon’s endowment falls short of Harvard’s, which is the largest in the US, though at \$28 billion it is roughly equal to Yale’s.

What is it like at Devon University? Johnson’s book differs from most academic novels, which are usually, in Elaine Showalter’s terms, primarily *Student-romane* or primarily *Professorromane*. *Campusland* divides its focus and even has some time for the administrators.

The main professor (actually an untenured assistant professor) is Eph Russell, who has risen from very humble origins in Alabama to become a specialist in 19th Century American literature teaching at Devon and hopeful of earning tenure. Chief among the students is Lulu Harris, rich, bored, entitled, sexually reckless, uninterested in education yet still enrolled in this exclusive university. A student in Russell’s class, she makes a surprise visit to his office late on a Friday afternoon and tries to seduce him. When he rejects her attentions she takes offense.

That night she attends a fraternity party, has drunken sex with a stranger, falls on her face and blacks her eye. This gives her a chance to accuse Eph Russell of rape. He is already on shaky ground because of an earlier classroom controversy

over the lack of diversity in his assigned texts which has led to demonstrations by African American students.

This is the main plot—the undeserved persecution of nice, well-intentioned, slightly naive Eph Russell—though there are other strands intertwined with it, including a radical child of wealth who is in his seventh year of making trouble at Devon; the Beta Psi fraternity and its quite bestial members; a preposterous group of Anglophile poseurs called the Society of Fellingham; and the thinly sketched English Department, chiefly the other candidate for tenure, who wears neoprene shoes with separate toes and speaks Esperanto, and LGBTQ activist Sophie Blue Feather.

The author comes from the business world and though he is a university graduate (Yale), his outsidership, his ignorance of university life, is a flaw. He believes that a department chair can unilaterally anoint a candidate with tenure; he believes that a newly tenured professor is likely to be handed an endowed chair. He believes that there genuinely is no 19th century American literature by minority authors and has Eph Russell explain this as the result of most of the black people being illiterate. I'm not sure how to explain his presentation of a university building as "one of the largest freestanding stone structures in the world".

In short, *Campusland* reads like the transcript of a conservative, non-academic white man's fever dream of all that has gone wrong in American higher education since the nineteen-sixties. What are some of the issues that outrage him?

—Radical minority students. The Afro-American Cultural Center organizes an occupation of the President's office and presents him with a list of outrageous demands. He ends the occupation by buying the black students off with \$50 million in new initiatives.

—Presidents without principle or courage. Milton Strauss likes to be liked. He initially welcomes the occupiers, or pretends to, choosing to get them out of the administration building only when a wealthy board member insists, and he bribes them to go away. He is complicit in the persecution of Eph Russell in part because he is intimidated by the forceful Dean of Diversity and Inclusion.

—Ruthless diversity initiatives. That dean, Martika Malik-Adams, seeks to have Russell punished for the early row about his class, then goes for him again for his supposed assault on Lulu. She calls him before a stacked tribunal. Much worse, when Lulu withdraws her accusation, admitting she made it all up, Malik-Adams refuses to believe her, suppresses her recantation, and continues the prosecution. When the case against him falls apart, Malik-Adams

leaves to take up a much better position with the entire University of California system, on \$850,000 a year. In pursuit of Russell she is supported by another fanatic, equally unscrupulous, Yolanda Perez. In Johnson's campusland, African-American and Latina folks are the most dangerous mischief-makers (though Eph is supplied with a black girlfriend to show that he is innocent of racial prejudice). The one student shown as working really hard, in good stereotypical fashion, is Lulu's roommate, an Asian named Song.

Other conservative talking points pulled into the mix include the threat to prevent a conservative speaker's appearance on campus; trigger warnings about potentially troubling reading assignments; the failure of any Devon faculty to contribute money to the Donald Trump campaign; and a powerful hostility to fraternities, as exclusive single-sex organizations. (The suggested solution is for one member to "identify as" female.) Even the Palestinians fall under Johnson's critique: "Why do you think the Palestinians don't have a state?" the leader of the campus leftists asks; "Everyone since Jimmy Carter has offered them one, but they just move the goalposts".

Eph Russell survives the attempted railroading and is offered a tenured position at Devon which he refuses in favor of going to work at Samford University—a real institution located in Birmingham, Alabama. Already he can feel a difference. His students are eager and speak up in class, discussing *Huckleberry Finn* without any irritating questions about slavery or objections to Twain's racial epithets. Why, when he holds the door open for a young woman, far from objecting to the act as sexist, she smiles, thanks him, and calls him "Sir". This chapter is called "Where the Skies Are Blue", repurposing a line from Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama".

It is an odd resolution. *Lucky Jim* famously ends with Jim Dixon escaping university life for something better, and other academic novels show their protagonists either leaving the university or being dismissed from employment, but this is different. Johnson's improbable Candide escapes the world—a sophisticated, toxic university in New England—to cultivate his garden in Alabama, where students are "nice" and unchallenging, he and his crusty, salt-of-the-earth father can sip beer and take in God's universe, and the peach crumble is reported to be tasty.

I don't claim that everything is as it should be at America's universities, that there are not excesses resulting from a heightened sensitivity to previously underrepresented populations, that students, even at the most famous colleges, are

all as serious about their educations as they should be. It is not as frictionless to be a heterosexual white male instructor in 2019 as it was for the first four hundred years of higher education in North America. But Johnson's cautionary exhortation relies on a crude psychodrama in which every single character save the protagonist is devious, venal, unscrupulous, or (at best) passively complicit with the worst elements in the university.

When Eph Russell tells his Alabama students that Mark Twain is the fountain-head of the American realistic tradition that runs through Hemingway to "modern writers like Tom Wolfe", they are all too polite to make the obvious response, "Tom Wolfe! How does *he* come into this?" But Wolfe comes into it as another self-consciously "brave" outsider whose 2004 novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* was another "exposé" of higher education, another white man's peevish account of how political correctness and sexual license have made colleges so awful.