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Summer Reading: Academic Satire

Heidi Gauder

University of Dayton, hgauder1@udayton.edu

Fred Jenkins

University of Dayton

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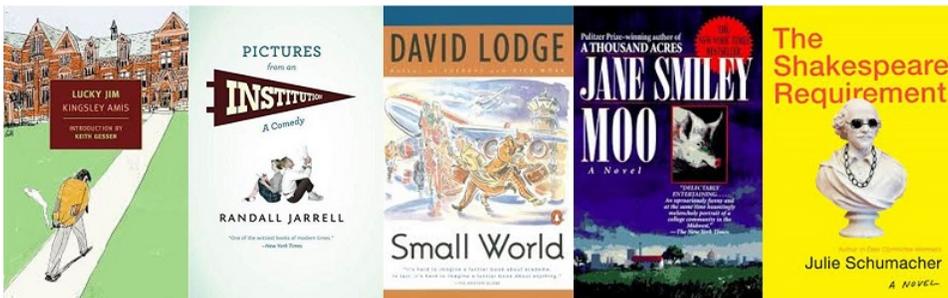
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Summer Reading: Academic Satire

By Heidi Gauder and Fred Jenkins

In his 1889 essay “The Decay of Lying,” Oscar Wilde famously noted, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.” Life may seem absurd — perhaps at its most so when the setting is a college or university. There

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is just something about institutions of higher learning where the stuff of life can often get in the way of academics and learning.

Together, we have 50 years of experience working in an academic setting. We both appreciate satire and how close to the bone it can truly cut. And because satire is nearly as strange as real life, both of us appreciate academic satires in particular. Here is a list of some of our favorite works of academic satire, starting with the best and oldest.

[Lucky Jim](#), by Kingsley Amis, 1954

Kingsley Amis sends up the world of red-brick universities in this 1954 classic, his prize-winning first novel and the beginning of the modern genre of academic satire. Jim Dixon, lecturer in medieval history, endures penury, pretension, publish or perish, and plagiarism before escaping the academy. In a 2002 retrospective on *Lucky Jim*, Christopher Hitchens wrote, “If you can picture Bertie or Jeeves being capable of actual malice, and simultaneously imagine Evelyn Waugh forgetting about original sin, you have the combination of innocence and experience that makes this short romp so imperishable.”

[Pictures from an Institution](#), by Randall Jarrell, 1954

Beneath the unassuming surface of a progressive women’s college lurks a world of intellectual pride and pomposity awaiting devastation by the pens of two brilliant and appalling wits (publisher summary).

The wits are Jarrell, the narrator, and his character Gertrude Johnson (based on Mary McCarthy), who is gathering material for a scathing satirical novel about her colleagues. Nominated for a National Book Award, *Pictures* is the American counterpart to *Lucky Jim* in the development of the genre. In a memorial essay, Jarrell’s friend Robert Lowell wrote, “*Pictures from an Institution*, whatever its fictional oddities, is a unique and serious joke book. How often I’ve met people who keep it by their beds

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or somewhere handy, and read random pages aloud to lighten their hearts.”

***Small World: An Academic Romance*, by David Lodge, 1984**

Philip Swallow, Morris Zapp, Persse McGarrigle and the lovely Angelica are the jet-propelled academics who are on the move, in the air and on the make in David Lodge’s satirical *Small World*. It is a world of glamorous travel and high excitement, where stuffy lecture rooms are swapped for lush corners of the globe, and romance is in the air (publisher summary).

While this is not a *roman à clef*, attentive readers will identify models for a number of characters. Morris Zapp, for example, bears a marked resemblance to Stanley Fish. *Small World* is the sequel to *Changing Places*, in which Lodge invented the game of Humiliation, where academics admit to not having read major literary works, with the most egregious omission winning.

***Moo*, by Jane Smiley, 1995**

Nestled in the heart of the Midwest amid cow pastures and waving fields of grain lies Moo University, a distinguished institution devoted to the art and science of agriculture. Here, in an atmosphere rife with devious plots, mischievous intrigue, lusty liaisons, and academic one-upmanship, “Chairman X” of the horticulture department harbors a secret fantasy to kill the dean; Mrs. Walker, the provost's right hand and campus information queen, knows where all the bodies are buried; Timothy Nonahan, associate professor of English, advocates eavesdropping for his creative writing assignments; and Bob Carlson, a sophomore, feeds and maintains his only friend, a hog named Earl Butz. In this wonderfully written and masterfully plotted novel, Jane Smiley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Thousand Acres*, offers a wickedly funny comedy that is also a darkly poignant slice of life (publisher summary).

***The Shakespeare Requirement*, by Julie Schumacher, 2018**

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune keep hitting beleaguered English professor Jason Fitger right between the eyes. Now is the fall of his discontent, as Fitger, newly appointed chair of the English department of Payne University, takes arms against a sea of troubles personal and institutional: His ex-wife is sleeping with the dean, who must approve whatever modest initiatives he undertakes; the fearsome department secretary, Fran, clearly runs the show (when not taking in rescue parrots and dogs) and holds plenty of secrets she's not sharing; the lavishly funded economics department keeps siphoning off English's meager resources and has taken aim at its remaining office space. And Fitger's attempt to get a mossbacked and antediluvian Shakespeare scholar to retire backfires spectacularly when the press concludes that the Bard is being kicked to the curricular curb. Lord, what fools these mortals be (publisher summary). Readers may also appreciate Schumacher's related work, [Dear Committee Members](#).

More recommendations

The Ms. Mentor column in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) has been recommending academic novels for many years. If you are intrigued by this sub-genre, you might appreciate this list of lists, "[Ms. Mentor's Summer Reading](#)."

— Heidi Gauder is coordinator of research and instruction and a professor in the University Libraries. Fred Jenkins is associate dean for collections and operations in the University of Dayton Libraries and a professor with a joint appointment between the Libraries and the Department of Religious Studies

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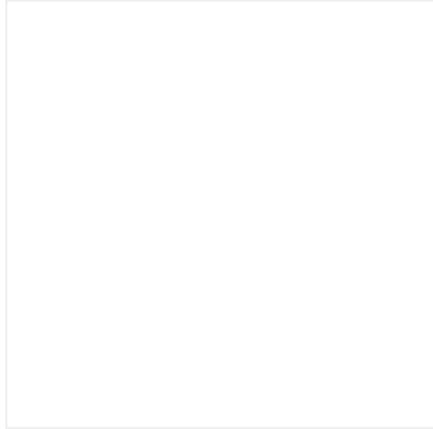
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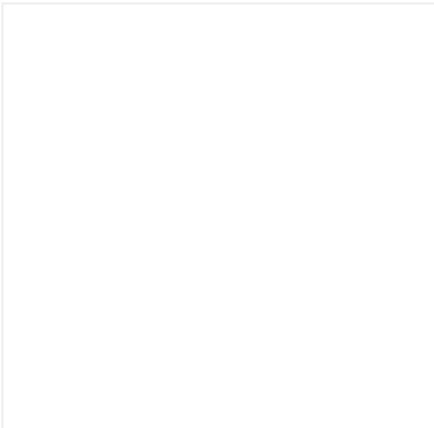
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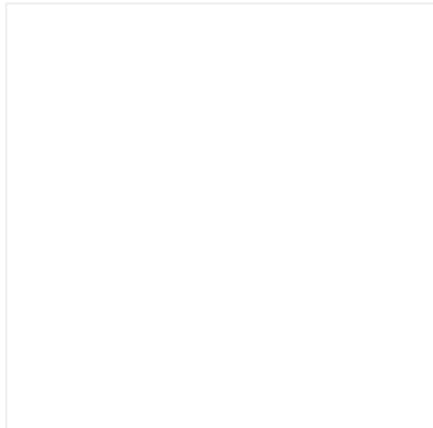
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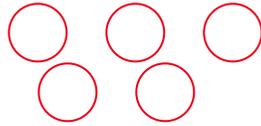
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