Academic Freedom and Tenure: Between Fiction and Reality

IHELG Monograph 02-07

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$5.00
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Perhaps no belief has been more central to academic life than that of academic freedom. In the twentieth century academic freedom became enshrined as the raison d’etre for the professorate. Colleges and universities existed, the thinking went, in large part to enable the search for truth by the faculty. Academic freedom codified the belief about the search for truth. Tenure was the structure that ensured the belief would not be violated.

No less a body than the United States Supreme Court has weighed in on the importance of academic freedom by stating, “our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned” (Keyishian v. Board of Regents, 1967). As a structure, tenure safeguards the freedom of faculty members to speak, write and associate however they choose. In the hallmark statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure, the American Association of University Professors stated in 1940 “Tenure is a means to a certain ends, specifically: “Freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities” (AAUP, 1940). Once a faculty member receives tenure the individual has received a structural safeguard; the individual cannot be subjected to adverse employment conditions, such as dismissal, without proof of cause.

The Supreme Court’s statement that academic freedom is a “transcendent value” assumes that the idea of academic freedom, like the idea of democracy itself, is ageless; it transcends time and is passed down from one generation to the next. A “transcendent value,” however, is always shaped and redefined within emergent social and cultural contexts. Democracy is very different today as a belief and value than in 1776 when women could not vote and African Americans were not considered equal to white
citizens. Similarly, academic freedom and tenure became transcendent in the United States only in the last century. Prior to the twentieth century professors could be fired without proof of cause, and the idea that a central goal of the professorate was to search for truth had not taken hold as a widely held belief. Thus, we benefit in understanding complex ideas such as academic freedom and tenure when we consider the socio-cultural contexts in which they currently reside. How might we consider such contexts?

There are numerous ways one might try to gauge how concepts such as academic freedom and tenure are discussed and defined in the broader public arena. A review of newspaper articles and opinions, for example, sheds light on how one segment of society thinks of the concepts. An analysis of discussions and portrayals on television and in the movies also lends insights into how one mass medium constitutes ideas about academic life. Obviously, any number of communicative vehicles exists with which one might analyze how society in part comes to defining a particular belief.

In this essay I look at how tenure and academic freedom are portrayed in novels about academic life. Novels are helpful for understanding public attitudes about an insular topic such as academic freedom because novels reach mass audiences who are likely to have input into how the larger society shapes academic life. Unlike academic articles in scholarly journals that are read by only a handful of interested scholars, novels have a broad reach. As Janice Rossen has observed, novels “are important because they are widely believed by their readers to constitute an accurate representation of academic life, whether they do so or not” (1993, p. 5). The language is usually not that of the disengaged academic, but rather the author strives to convey ideas in a manner that will be understood by the interested reader.
What do academic novels tell us about academic freedom and tenure? What messages do these novels convey to the broad public? Do the novels hold a mirror up to our academic lives? I attempt to answer these questions by analyzing academic novels that have been written over the last century; I pay particular attention to novels written in the last twenty-five years in order to assess current portrayals of academic life. I begin with a brief discussion about how I define the academic novel, and I then analyze how academic freedom and tenure have been portrayed. I conclude with a concern and a caution, for if literature is one way that transcendent values get shaped, then the seemingly central belief and structure of academic life is at risk.

The Academic Novel

The academic novel has existed as a distinct genre for well over a century. John Lyon’s published The College Novel in America in 1962 and cited over two hundred academic novels; he appended an update in an article published in 1974 that added an additional ninety novels (Lyon, 1974). John Kramer (1981) published an annotated bibliography of 425 novels published between 1828 – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Fanshawe – and 1979. Lisa Johnson (1995) followed up Lyons’ and Kramer’s landmark texts with an article about academic novels published between 1980 and 1994 and listed approximately two hundred additional novels. Thus, between Hawthorne’s first attempt and today one can safely estimate that over six hundred novels have been written about academic life.

When we investigate who have penned academic novels we find some of our most well respected authors. In addition to Hawthorne, one finds the work of Thomas Wolfe (1929, 1935, 1939), F. Scott Fitzgerald (1920), Willa Cather (1925), Sinclair Lewis (1925), Wallace Stegner (1941), Mary McCarthy (1952), Vladimir Nabokov

Although individuals who think of themselves as primarily novelists have written the vast majority of these texts, academics from other fields also have contributed to the genre. The economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, the chemistry professor, Carl Djerassi, and the philosopher George Santayana, for example, all have written widely read novels that use the academy as the setting for their books. Some works of academic fiction such as Wonder Boys (1995) by Michael Chabon and David Mamet’s play, Oleanna (1992) also have been made into major motion pictures.

The definition that most scholars have employed of an academic novel is remarkably consistent. “I consider a novel of academic life,” wrote Lyons’ “one in which higher education is treated with seriousness and the main characters are students or professors” (1962, p. xvii). Thus, as Kramer has noted, all academic novels use the college campus as a key component, and the protagonists or key characters are in some way related to academe.

Perhaps not surprisingly, since many of the authors are members of English departments, a significant number of novels have humanities professors in general and English professors in particular as primary protagonists. Harvard University or a similarly prestigious institution where the author employs a pseudonym is often the setting in American novels. Similarly, British novelists have used Cambridge or Oxford
in two-thirds of their academic novels (Carter, 1990, p. 4). As with research in postsecondary education in general, few novels are set at a community college.

Authors of most academic novels have tended to write comedies and use irony as a primary method for expressing a point. John Lyons helpfully points out:

Since the renaissance the literary portrait of the scholar – whether he is a learner or a teacher – shows him as a buffoon to be laughed at or a Faust to be hissed. These roles are related, for one is the comic and the other the tragic handling of the same material. By leading the pit in laughter at the buffoon or pointing to the damnation of a Faust, the artist courts a public that is essentially cut off from the world of the scholar. Either method congratulates the common man on his common sense and holy innocence (1962, p. 3).

As I shall elaborate below, such a portrait, however, not only reflects positively back on the reader, but also frames academic life in a particular manner. If the academic is a buffoon or a rogue, then what are we to make of the beliefs and structures that the academy has developed for itself? Nevertheless, the work of David Lodge (1975, 1984), John L’Heureux (1996), Jane Smiley (1995) and Richard Russo (1997), to name but a few such exemplars, are hilarious portraits where academics are hoisted on their own petard and their petty jealousies, pretensions and fears are revealed.

One shift between the first half and the second half of the twentieth century are the main characters in the text. Initially, the college novel largely had as its focus the trials and tribulations of the student. The novels were to some extent autobiographies of ex-students and they often reflected coming-of-age portraits of young college men.
Perhaps the most significant example of a student-centered novel is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* (1920).

After World War II, and especially over the last two decades we have seen the locus of interest move from what one might call novels of student awakening, disillusionment or maturation to novels concerned with the exploits of the faculty. And as we shall now discuss, there has also been a movement toward the consideration of tenure and away from a concern for academic freedom.

**Novels of Academic Freedom and Tenure**

Obviously, when one writes a text that pertains to the professorate, any number of foci might be used. The novel might use the professor as a way to engage in a discussion about a nation’s psyche such as Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, for example, or as a simple vehicle to develop a romance such as *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend* (1993) by Robert James Waller. One significant purpose of the academic novel that uses the professorate as key figures has been to engage in a discussion about academic freedom and tenure. In the first half of the century, there were more discussions of academic freedom than tenure, but over the last twenty-five years the reverse has been true; relatedly, the idea of “political correctness” also has been highlighted either as an impediment to academic freedom or as a way a professor of one or another group either received tenure or was denied a chance at tenure.

*Novels of Academic Freedom* Robert Herrick’s *Chimes* (1926) is one of the first novels of academic freedom that touches on the problems a professor faces for his pacifist views during World War One. Similarly, in Bernard De Voto’s *We Accept With Pleasure* (1934), a professor actually loses his job because of his views. John Goodrich’s
Cotton Cavalier (1933), T.S. Stribling’s These Bars Are Flesh (1938), and James Thurber and Elliot Nugent’s The Male Animal (1940) also take up considerations of academic freedom from various viewpoints. Goodrich focuses on the fight between fundamentalists and scientists; Stribling’s book is a defense of the intellectual conservative, and Thurber and Nugent’s is a defense of the liberal who sees it as his business “to bring what light we can into this muddled world – to try to follow the truth” (1940, p.178).

The 1950’s saw two prominent examples of academic freedom. Mary McCarthy’s The Groves of Academe (1952) uses farce and irony as a way to highlight the interconnection between academic freedom and tenure and the frequent bastardization of the academy by the pretensions and jealousies of intellectuals. The anti-hero of the book is Henry Mulcahy, an English professor at a progressive liberal arts college who learns his contract will not be renewed. Although the college president is a liberal who has resisted the McCarthy-ite witch hunts, Mulcahy suggests that his non-reappointment is due to his Communist leanings. Mulcahy rouses the faculty to support him and makes his case an example of someone’s academic freedom being destroyed; the president reappoints Mulcahy.

The only problem is that Mulcahy has never been a Communist and he has concocted the entire story in order to be reappointed. When the president, who thinks of himself as a liberal, discovers the truth about Mulcahy and Mulcahy finds out that the president knows the truth, Mulcahy confronts the president and threatens to reveal “to the whole world the true story of a professional liberal: a story of personal molestation,
spying, surveillance, corruption of students by faculty stool-pigeons” (1992, p. 299). The president resigns and Mulcahy remains as a professor.

Although the novel has numerous humorous scenes and the story is told with a light touch, the underlying current of the text is quite serious. McCarthy, a liberal herself, sought to expose the shallowness of liberalism and progressivism. Henry Mulcahy understands the nobility of the idea of academic freedom but uses it merely as a way to secure a job for life. The rest of the faculty are too preoccupied by their own daily trials and tribulations to confront Mulcahy, and the president knows that he has been beaten at what has essentially become a political chess game. Thus, the novel demonstrates how academic freedom may be used to exemplify how a noble idea might be manipulated and destroyed not simply by external agents such as Joseph McCarthy’s witch hunts, but also by those who are supposed to be its protectors. Tenure has become not a structure to protect the ideal but one that corrupts it.

May Sarton’s Faithful Are The Wounds (1955) uses the suicide of a politically liberal professor to draw a different conclusion. The hero of the novel is Edward Cavan, again an English Professor, but this time the setting is Harvard University. The novel is a series of flashbacks told by his friends who try to understand how such a popular teacher and brilliant thinker could have committed suicide. In some respects, Cavan is the stereotype of the engaged liberal on the 1950s. He supports Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party; he helps organize a teachers’ union; he participates in the socialist movement and works on behalf of the Spanish Loyalists.

Cavan believes in the ideal of the engaged intellectual. Rather than think of the university as a retreat from society and tenure as a sinecure for lifetime employment in a
monastery, Cavan argues that academic freedom requires the professorate to become engaged with the outside world. However, to Cavan’s friends the clarity with which they had seen the 1940s is no longer so evident. The distinction between Fascists and Loyalists has begun to blur. Cavan becomes depressed at what he perceives as his friends’ retreat from engagement. Sarton suggests that Cavan’s suicide has as much to do with his disappointment at what he sees as his friends’ desertion from noble ideals as with the failure of the movement.

The novel is a nuanced understanding of the interior dilemmas of an engaged intellectual. As with any text, over time a variety of new interpretations are possible that enable the book to remain relevant and provocative. Cavan saw the professorate, for example, as moral arbiters, leaders, and provocateurs; by inference, Sarton suggests such a role is precisely what the academic should be. With the rise of postmodernism, there are certainly interpreters who will not make Cavan a hero, but point out that such a role for the intellectual is precisely what has created problems rather than solutions.

Similarly, one need not be a literary deconstructionist to suspect that Cavan is a closeted gay professor who is in love not simply with ideas, but also with his married best friend, Damon. Cavan never dates a woman; he quarrels with Damon and then throws himself under a train. In the end, it is Damon who provides a ringing defense of Cavan before a Senate committee that seeks to discredit liberal professors in general and Edward Cavan in particular. And too, May Sarton was a closeted lesbian who frequently populated her novels with closeted homosexuals.

Nevertheless, the central tenet of Sarton’s novel remains clear. As satirical and humorous as The Groves of Academe is, Faithful Are The Wounds is deadly serious.
Indeed, it is one of the few academic novels that is humorless. At the end of the novel May Sarton has Cavan’s friend, Damon, appear before the Senate committee that is investigating subversives in the academy. She has him say what is one of the most quoted passages in any academic novel. A Senator has launched an attack on Cavan’s patriotism and his friend replies:

I have come to the conclusion . . . that although Edward Cavan may have been wrong in his belief that Communists and Socialists could and should work together, in the essence of his belief he was right and many of us were wrong. . . . That belief was that the intellectual must stand on the frontier of freedom of thought, especially in such times as these when the frontier is being narrowed down every day. He feared — and we know how rightly — the increasing apathy and retreat of the American people before such encroachments of fundamental civil rights as are represented by this committee. (1997, p. 279).

Here, then, is a novel written at the beginning of the 1950s that offers a ringing endorsement for a traditional notion of academic freedom. Academic freedom enables the intellectual to stand “on the frontier of freedom of thought.” Indeed, academic freedom is not simply a privilege of the intellectual; it is an obligation. Tenure is a structure that supports a noble ideal.

Though one may quarrel with a novel that now seems at times melodramatic and antiquated, what perhaps is most surprising is that in the half century since it has been written virtually no other academic novel has come close to focusing so intently and seriously on the idea of academic freedom. True, Bernard Malamud’s A New Life (1961) takes up a discussion of academic freedom, but not as centrally as in Sarton’s
book. Although one or another text over the last century may touch on the idea of academic freedom, the focus has shifted. The central ideal of the academy – academic freedom - has become peripheral and the structure that has been developed to protect that ideal – tenure - has become central.

**Novels of Tenure** When one reads novels of academic life written over the last twenty-five years, one of the immediate impressions any reader will get is of the importance of tenure. It seems as if a major preoccupation of the faculty is getting tenure, the consequences of getting tenure and the ramifications of not getting it, how one might lose tenure and what happens when one loses it. Because most novels remain populated by faculty in the humanities and social sciences - and especially in English departments - publishing papers and novels are portrayed as the key to tenure.

Similarly, because most novels take place at research universities, publications remain the academic coin of the realm. Indeed, even in novels that are not set at research universities, but instead are at regional state universities, publications are paramount. A reader might reasonably deduce from these novels that the major professional concern of academics revolves around job security since there is little discussion of why one wants tenure other than to guarantee gainful employment.

Blaire French’s *The Ticking Tenure Clock* (1998) uses tenure as the central focus of the text. She begins by summarizing what to her is any academic’s idea about tenure: “What happens at the end of six years is that the senior members in my department vote on whether they think I show great promise as a scholar. If the answer is yes, I win a lifetime membership, all expenses paid, as a university professor” (1998, p. 1). In Theodore Weesner’s book, *Novemberfest* (1994), tenure is a subject that the protagonist...
and his wife have agreed to keep private and not speak about in front of their daughter. His problem, like the heroine in French’s book, is that he hasn’t published enough. When he complains to his dean that he is a good teacher and teaching should count for something, the dean counters, “You are a proven teacher; your evaluations are among the highest in the college. … But as you know the guidelines state that at least one book is required for tenure, especially for a literature professor” (1994, p. 10).

The lack of publications is not the only hurdle to tenure; indeed, publications appear to be a minor obstacle when compared to political intrigue. The major problem for junior faculty is the senior faculty, and occasionally administrators. French’s protagonist thinks of full professors as “whales” and her relationship with them is clear: “My mission was to get tenure, and until I got it I would roll over in all conflict with whales. I was willing to endure six years of submissiveness in return for a lifetime of freedom” (1998, p. 17). Nowhere in French’s book do we meet any whale who has a semblance of a conscience.

In James Hynes’ The Lecturer’s Tale (2001), the protagonist, Nelson Humboldt, and his office mate have no chance at tenure until Nelson has an accident walking across campus that magically transforms him. Although the book is a mixture of fantasy and science fiction, the plot remains the same. Nelson will do anything to obtain tenure, and every senior person in his department – again an English department – either humiliates him or ignores him. The senior professor who hired Nelson has not spoken to him in over a year; the department chair cannot remember Nelson’s name. When he enters the faculty lounge for a cup of coffee, everyone acts as if he does not belong there.
In French’s novel a senior professor steals the work of a younger colleague who is thus unable to get his work published. In John L’Heureux’s *The Handmaid of Desire* (1996) – a thinly disguised novel of a fictitious English Department at Stanford University – a senior professor intends to block a junior professor from getting tenure because he doesn’t fit the ideological cast that the senior professor desires. In *The Lecturer’s Tale* the other junior professor does not appear to have a chance of gaining tenure although she publishes a great deal because she does not fit in with any of the senior professors in the department. The consistent theme in academic novels is how one gets along with one’s colleagues supercedes any other aspect in judging whether someone should gain tenure.

Tenure is portrayed as a socializing system that actually does the opposite of what it was designed to do. In John Kenneth Galbraith’s *A Tenured Professor* (1990), one of the “whales” explains tenure’s purpose – this time at Harvard – to an assistant professor:

> Tenure was originally invented to protect radical professors, those who challenged the accepted order. But we don’t have such people anymore at the universities, and the reason is tenure. When the time comes to grant it nowadays, the radicals get screened out. That’s its principal function. It’s a very good system, really” (1990, p. 38).

When the assistant professor suggests that perhaps an assistant professor merely needs to wait until he or she has tenure to challenge the accepted order, the senior professor responds, “By then conformity will be a habit. You’ll no longer be a threat to the peace and comfort of our ivied walls. The system really works” (1990, p. 39).

Similarly, in Michael Chabon’s pleasantly ironic *Wonder Boys* (1995), the English
Professor, Grady Tripp, is driving one of his students away from a party where the student had just shot the dog of the Chancellor. The dog is in the trunk of the car and the student asks Tripp if he is going to tell the Chancellor who killed the dog. Tripp states that he is going to lie because the Chancellor wouldn’t like knowing that a graduate student killed her dog. “I’ll say that I did it,” explains Tripp. The student wonders if Tripp will get in trouble and the professor responds, “No, James. I won’t. I have tenure” (1995). Thus, from the novelists’ perspective, in a mere fifty years tenure has moved from the protector of academic freedom to the protector of the status quo and the enabler of academic hi-jinks.

To be sure, all academic novels are not humorous, and the consequences of not getting tenure are almost always portrayed as a fate equivalent to death. In Novemberfest after the protagonist tells his wife that he will not get tenure, she says, “I have no intention of moving. If you take a job somewhere, I believe we should treat it as a trial separation” (1994, p. 193). In Hynes’ novel when Nelson Humboldt finds out his contract will not be renewed, he also discovers that he will lose his university apartment in a month. The university has paid him so little that he worries that his wife and two children will be thrown out on the streets to starve. In The Ticking Tenure Clock when one of the heroine’s colleagues is denied tenure, he becomes a persona non grata around campus and tells her that he has applied everywhere and cannot even get a part time job.

The other consequences of tenure are that it forces individuals to take short cuts with their research in order to get a publication, and teaching is entirely irrelevant. Carl Djerassi’s Cantor’s Dilemma (1989), for example, nicely demonstrates the pressure a young postdoctoral scholar faces when he tries to replicate an experiment in cancer
research that his mentor has discovered. The text revolves around how far ethically a young scientist will go to guarantee the results of an experiment.

In virtually all novels teaching is not simply unimportant; it is irrelevant. Students are treated as objects, if they are discussed at all, and faculty receive little, if any, delight in teaching. Teaching is an obstacle to getting tenure and the goal is to ignore one’s students. The relationship between Grady Tripp and his student James Leer in Wonder Boys is the exception to the norm. Toward the end of the novel Tripp tells a friend, “My role is to make them do better, to help them think they can do better. With some, they’ll do just a bit better and that’s fine. With others, I hope to get out of the way and help them find their way. That’s what teaching is all about” (1995). Far more common dialogues suggest teachers ignore students, miss classes, and most likely, have affairs with students.

If one is to believe that fiction in some way represents reality, then campuses are rife with sexual liaisons between professors and their students. The consequence of these affairs when they are discovered is that the professor loses his tenure. Anne Bernays’ Professor Romeo (1989) has a Harvard psychology professor dismissed for sexual harassment. In Tim O’Brien’s Tomcat in Love (1998), a professor of linguistics loses his tenure for too many sexual liaisons. In The Handmaid of Desire, L’Hereux’s Romeo – an English professor - does not lose his tenure; he has a heart attack and dies. Shortly before he dies he has reason to think back on some of his escapades:

He had screwed a teaching assistant in the library stacks, her behind perched precariously on the O.E.D. He had done it with grad students and undergrads on sofas, in cars, in a decorative haystack, in the shower, the bathtub, on the toilet
seat. He had done it once in a moving taxi. He had done it with a Madonna Wannabe who preferred to watch his performance not in the flesh but in the mirror propped next to her bed” (1996, p. 224).

Gioso Rimanelli’s Accademia (1997) portrays similar sexual encounters for a professor, albeit from not such a wildly ironic viewpoint. David Lodge has two professors exchange institutions for a term in Changing Places (1975); they also end up exchanging wives. The American, Morris Zapp, is famous for having affairs with students. In Blue Angel (2000) Francine Prose has her hero—a composition teacher—have one affair that amounts to a single failed attempt at intercourse in a dorm room, and Ted Swenson ends up being dismissed.

All of these novels are comedies. All of the protagonists except Swenson are unsympathetic characters portrayed as getting what they deserve. Although the students, friends’ wives, other faculty, and assorted secretaries are not portrayed as victims, the professors come across as sexual Lotharios who are driven by their libidos. Indeed, what sets Blue Angel apart from the other novels is that Swenson is in love with his wife and he has studiously avoided any entanglement with his students since he arrived at the university over a decade ago. It also appears that the student seduced him. Thus, in Prose’s case, rather than create a seducer she created a victim who nevertheless had made a mistake and was made to pay the consequences. The individuals who prosecute these professorial Romeos are almost always portrayed as prim and vindictive feminists who have implemented sexual harassment policies. Thus, almost no one is seen as a sympathetic character on campus.
My point here is that the constant portrait of academic life is of sexually ravenous men who may be productive scholars, but are seriously flawed human beings. Since virtually all of the novels are comedies, the men are not made out to be monsters or evil, but they are made to pay the highest price for their transgressions: they lose tenure. Tenure had protected them, and now their cherished gift has been taken from them.

One final point pertains to the current climate on campuses and the implications for tenure. Consistently, the answer in academic novels over the last two decades has been clear: political correctness and affirmative action degrade the meaning of tenure. In Novemberfest the hero who is denied tenure looks for another job. “Most of the listings are accompanied by ‘EOE’ and ‘AA,’ and Glen wonders if reality should compel him to interpret these as ‘White Males Need Not Apply’” (1996, p. 190). In Blue Angel a neighboring college is in an uproar because a professor showed his art history class a slide depicting a classical Greek sculpture of a female nude and uttered “yum” when the students first saw it. He was suspended without pay for creating a chilly climate. In Philip Roth’s The Human Stain the protagonist notices that two students have never shown up in his class and he asks the class if they exist or if they are “spooks.” The missing students turn out to African American and they lodge a complaint; he resigns before he is dismissed. In The Lecturer’s Tale, the department interviews stereotypically drawn politically correct candidates for one position, and a professor bemoans, “They want to teach our children that Africans invented the airplane! ... I ask you! Who’s the Tolstoy of the Zulus? Show me the Shakespeare of the Hottentots, and I’ll put him in my syllabus” (2001, p. 103). The dean in Novemberfest summarizes the issue: “Tenure is an enormous investment for the university. Frankly, and this is off the record, if you were
twenty years younger and … well, neither race nor gender points are in your favor either” (1996, p. 9).

At the best universities race and gender are not the only hurdles for white men to overcome if they happen to be heterosexual as well. In L’Hereux’s novel the following dialogue takes place:

“And what about Concepcion?” Cynthia asked. “Will this affect her tenure? I’ve always liked Concepcion.”

“It can’t affect her tenure,” Robbie said. “Not if she’s a lesbian.”

“Are lesbians granted tenure automatically?” Rosalie asked. “Why, I should like to know. Tell us about it, Gill.”

“Well, it’s not automatic,” Robbie said. “But who would have the courage to fire one? Isn’t that right, Gil?” (1996, p. 193).

One arrives at a portrait of the academy that is rife with cultural politics. Heterosexual white men cannot get on the tenure track because of the dominant ethos on campus. Assistant professors recognize immediately what they need to do to gain tenure so they behave like good children in front of senior faculty – seen, and not heard – and they aim for quick publications. Senior professors who are mostly men terrorize younger faculty and spend their time engaging in sexual conquests. When they are discovered, the worst possible scenario occurs: they lose their tenure.

Discussion

If we return to the questions I raised at the introduction of this essay, the answers are sobering. The messages conveyed about academic life are troubling. Rather than important work that Sarton suggested academics do in her novel, one discovers
intellectuals submerged in campus politics and sexual escapades. A concern for academic freedom is nonexistent; indeed, how might one become involved in the search for truth when the campus obsession is either achieving another sexual conquest or finding ways to please one’s colleagues so that they will vote affirmatively for tenure? Tenure has become paramount. Ironically, academic freedom has been replaced as the central totem of the university by tenure. The ultimate goal of academic life, if novels are to be believed, has become what used to be the process to the goal, and the process has become corrupted by personalities, egos, and political correctness.

In part the question turns on if academic novels are to be believed for close representations of reality. Certainly the preoccupation with sex does not seem to mirror research portraits of academic life. Although some research has pointed out concerns about the tenure process, no text conveys the absurdity that gets painted in novels such as *The Ticking Tenure Clock* or *The Lecturer’s Tale*.

At the same time, as mainstream portraits of academe, what gets portrayed is often seen as reality. Fiction becomes reality. The consequences can be quite significant if an organization is connected in any way to public life. Colleges and universities, of course, are centrally connected to a broader public. Academic institutions not only exist for the public good, but they also survive through public support. Either they receive support from the state, or they receive tuition or external funding for the work that they undertake. If the confidence of the consumer – whether that be the state, a foundation or parents – is shaken, then the organization suffers.

I do not wish to overstate my case. Colleges and universities will neither thrive nor fail merely based on what novelists write. Postsecondary institutions are embedded
in a web of socio-cultural contexts, and fiction is but one of them. However, when one analyzes what novelists have to say about academe, there is cause for concern. What might be the implications for different groups with regard to what has been written about academic life?

**Implications for authors** Insofar as most novelists are connected to universities, it would be ironic, as well as absurd, if I were to suggest that they must portray one or another aspect of academic life in a particular way. The essence of academic freedom is that an individual should be able to think, write and speak about his or her particular area of expertise in any manner that he or she sees as fit. Consequently, novelists surely should be encouraged to portray their confreres in any way they see fit.

One also ought not quarrel with narrative technique. In a traditional ethnography one might quarrel with the compression of facts or the occurrence of magical events; novelists, however, have the freedom to play with tempo, events and character. Once one of the academic Romeo’s exploits is discovered, for example, the process to remove tenure usually takes place within a semester’s time. Anyone acquainted with academic life knows that the time to make such a decision is never so quick. In other novels, magical events happen that move into the realm of make-believe. An assistant professor’s finger is cut off, and when it is reconnected, he has the power to change people’s opinions when he touches them. In another novel the heroine collects data, writes a book, and wins a prize that enables her to receive tenure all within a nine-month period. Would that such feats were possible! But novelists have the right, of course, to compress such details in order to make the text more readable and compelling.
However, I encourage those who write fiction also to be versed in the realities of academic life when they speak of larger issues. There is cause for concern when complex issues about academic life are trivialized and run counter to fact. I am troubled when the inability to get on the tenure track or the denial of tenure is linked to a politically correct atmosphere on campus. We know from the careful work of Daryl Smith, for example, that people of color have no lock on tenure-track positions, and that more often than not the reverse is true (2000). When authors consistently point out that white men are denied tenure or cannot get on the tenure-track because people of color are taking their jobs, the authors paint a false picture. At a minimum, the authors are mistaken, and at worst, they mimic the Big Lie of Goebbels where if one repeats a lie often enough it is believed as Truth.

My simple point here is that novelists need to know their subjects as well as any ethnographer. The novelist has different tools at his or her disposal, but there are also certain obligations one has to convey social facts so that they do not distort reality – if their objective is to portray reality. All good novelists who utilize some form of realism will conduct as much background research as any good qualitative researcher does. One comes away from reading academic novels with the sense that such background research is not always done. Rather than reach for the hard truths, they have sought the easy laugh.

**Implications for qualitative researchers** Although one might think that I am critical of academic novelists, there is also a great deal to learn from them. In previous work (Tierney, 2000; in press) I have argued that standard representations of reality in qualitative research need to be rethought. One way to think about what we need to do,
what conventions we should keep and what we should adopt is to read in another genre. Simply stated, if one wants to learn how to write in a different style, then one needs to read other styles.

One need not be a positivist to say that qualitative researchers who attempt fiction, drama, plays and performance pieces also need to think about their stance with regard to fact, data, and fiction. Novelists begin from a literary strength when they write an academic novel; they have a sense of how to construct a text, move events along, and create dialogue. What they seem to lack, however, is a sense of the larger picture. For qualitative researchers who attempt fiction, the reverse is true. They often are deeply steeped in the research literature and the subject under study. What they do not know is how to write as elegantly, humorously, or poignantly, as the novelist.

The implications are twofold. First, the novice qualitative researcher who attempts fiction ought to play from his or her strength: use the research literature for developing the portraits that will be painted. Sometimes I have gotten the sense by some who propose a movement away from traditional notions of qualitative research and toward more experimental venues that in order to experiment we must begin at the beginning. I disagree. We ought to utilize our disciplinary knowledge and strengths to develop closer portraits about that which we write.

Second, if I have suggested that novelists ought to steep themselves in the research literature, then qualitative researchers need to work on their writing. Writing seminars, tutorials, workshops and a host of other such activities need to be developed that enable novice writers to learn the craft of writing. We have come a long way from the positivist dissertation or journal article of a generation ago. I am now suggesting we
take the next step, but to do so, we need venues to learn and to critique one another’s writing that occurs relatively rarely today.

**Implications for the faculty** Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the academic novel is not the distortion, but the displacement of academic freedom for tenure, which some might argue is a reality, not a fiction. Social philosophers and the events of the last generation have enabled us to see the weaknesses of Sarton’s hero thinking that the “intellectual must stand on the frontier of freedom of thought” (1995, p.279). If we are to create conditions for empowerment, for example, then the intellectual cannot think of him or her self as in the vanguard where others necessarily follow. Knowledge production is not a linear process where the scientist objectively discovers knowledge and makes its use possible for a desiring public. We know from the intellectual battles of the recent past that knowledge is created, political, and contested. The portrait of the lonely scientist as a hero in the laboratory is as mistaken a picture as any of the portraits that the novelists that I have presented here have drawn.

Nevertheless, our understandings of the role of the intellectual and how knowledge gets created does not abnegate the responsibility of the intellectual and the centrality of academic freedom in the academy. When tenure becomes a goal rather than a structure to preserve the goal, then we have bastardized the meaning of academic life. If academic freedom is little more than a quaint notion from a previous era, then the reason for tenure comes into question insofar as the Supreme Court has pointed out academic freedom’s “transcendent value.”

In a curious way, the reading of academic novels ought to re-instill in the professorate a concern for academic freedom and an awareness of the social obligation
and responsibility that academics have. By a general absence of discussion or concern about academic freedom from these novels, one sees the absurdities that may exist and how they proliferate. To the extent that the academy does not accept its responsibility to be courageous, outspoken, and experimental, then we lessen not simply the academy, but society as well. The challenge is not merely to improve upon a tenure system or to develop accurate representations of academic life, but to ensure that the bonds of academic fellowship and obligation enable the members of the academy to fulfill the responsibilities of the professorate.
References


