Millennial Academe: The New Campus Novel

> New academic novels from millennial authors depict a world of demoralized graduate assistants and academics and offer little by way of hope, Jeffrey J. Williams writes.

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A white male professor of English, usually middle-aged, has a bit of a crisis and stumbles through some comic hijinks; a relationship issue spices things up, but things turn out well in the end. That's a long-standing prototype of academic fiction, from Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (https://www.nyrb.com/products/lucky-jim?variant=1094930121) (1954) through Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* (http://www.randomhousebooks.com/books/25715/) (1995) and Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/159157/straight-man-by-richard-russo/) (1997), up to Julie Schumacher's *The Shakespeare Requirement* (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/550580/the-shakespeare-requirement-by-julie-schumacher/) (2018). However, several novels from the millennial generation are telling a different story, one of demoralized graduate assistants, adjuncts and other underemployed academics, often women and not always white. In contrast to the prototype, this new fiction speaks for the diminished academic world of millennial have-nots.

Notably, three well-received novels, Weike Wang's *Chemistry* (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/549723/chemistry-by-weike-wang/) (2017), which won a PEN/Hemingway Award; Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/594502/real-life-by-brandon-taylor/) (2020); and Christine Smallwood's *The Life of the Mind* (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/648096/the-life-of-the-mind-by-christine-smallwood/) (2021), portray the situation of graduate researchers—less students than underlings in a lab—and adjuncts. The protagonists, like their authors, come from the millennial generation, usually defined as those born between 1981 and 1996, and they personify the enforced holding pattern of many in their late 20s and 30s.

The novels recount the difficulties that their protagonists experience in their academic work lives. But the crux is not that they have difficulties—those are a conventional spring of narrative action. Rather, it is that they end in limbo and seem to have little hope of a better future. Their positions stand in sharp contrast to those of their advisers, who are highly successful academics, receiving grants and plaudits and jetting off to give talks, at a remote distance from their advisees' plight.

Chemistry depicts an unnamed graduate student who works in a lab and undergoes a breakdown, breakup and ejection from academe, in turn recovering while tutoring college students and scaling back expectations. In short, poetic paragraphs, it fuses an academic story with one of second-generation Asian American experience, as the protagonist comes to terms with growing up in the wake of her hard-driving parents, immigrants from China.

Real Life likewise portrays a graduate student, Wallace, who works in a biochemistry lab and is largely isolated, particularly as a first-generation college student from the South and a gay Black man. The narrative follows his thinking as he navigates his peer group, goes to the lab and deals with another lab worker who falsely accuses him of ruining her experiment. After Wallace is reprimanded by his adviser, the plot moves toward an ambivalent resolution, as Wallace questions whether to stay in or leave graduate school.

The Life of the Mind returns to the conventional domain of academic fiction—the life of a literature professor—although the protagonist, Dorothy, is a 30-something woman stranded in "adjunct hell." The insult of the job market seems sharper because she has an elite degree (unnamed but a stand-in for Columbia, where Smallwood herself received a Ph.D. before moving to a full-time journalism career). The steps of an academic career no longer hold, and Dorothy hangs on teaching four lower-level courses a semester at "a private university whose list-price tuition was twice her annual earnings."

In some ways, the millennial academic novel is a continuation of the adjunct novel, which emerged in the late 1990s, notably with James Hynes's *Publish and Perish* (https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781429975773/publishandperish) (1997), depicting those thwarted from full-time academic positions. Yet in most adjunct fiction there is a hope of or scheme for getting a better job, whereas these more recent novels seem to give up that possibility. The dominant feeling that runs through them is resignation. They assume the tenuous nature of jobs and relationships in our era of neoliberalism and turn inward, to self-questioning, anxiety and depression. And a good deal of digital media.

In those attributes, they feed into the larger pool of what has been stamped "millennial fiction." Sally Rooney's *Conversations With Friends* (https://hogarthbooks.com/books/conversations-with-friends-tr/conversations-with-friends-hc) (2017) and *Normal People* (https://hogarthbooks.com/books/normal-people-tr) (2018), accounts of unsettled 20-somethings in Ireland, are probably the most well-known examples, but there has been a wave in the U.S. that portrays millennials and their problematic fates, such as Tony Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens* (https://www.harpercollins.com/products/private-citizens-tony-tulathimutte?variant=32122551304226) (2016), Ling Ma's *Severance* (https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374261597/severance) (2018), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/561517/my-year-of-rest-and-relaxation-by-ottessa-moshfegh/) (2018), and Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (https://books.catapult.co/books/fake-accounts/) (2021). They tend to foreground the anxious and isolated condition of the generation, without permanent jobs or stable life trajectories and immersed in the LCD glow of an iPhone. They encompass a diverse range of characters, but while highly educated and culturally progressive, the protagonists tend to be fatalistic and without political recourse.

Generation Gaps

The idea of generations often prompts academic suspicion. Some complain that, defined by birth date, they're no better than horoscopes. Indeed, popular generational thinking is often overly mechanical and too sweeping. See, for instance, William Strauss and Neil Howe's theory of four

generational archetypes (https://books.google.com/books?id=c92-60DIXOUC&vq=generational+archetypes&source=gbs_navlinks_s) recurring through the course of American history. However, the sociologist Judith Burnett provides a useful distinction (https://www.routledge.com/Generations-The-Time-Machine-in-Theory-and-Practice/Burnett/p/book/9780367602703) between contemporary "consumer generations," shaped by the pace of consumer capitalism since World War II, and the traditional sense of a genealogical lineage. And most theorists note the effect of new media and technology on contemporary generations, speeding up the experience of social and cultural change.

Other sociologists note that several historical shifts have shaped modern generations. One is the rise of institutions like standardized high school and college, which were uncommon a century ago, and establish uniform age groups outside the family. Think of when you first developed your tastes in clothing, music or politics—probably in high school or college, and from friends or media around you. Theorists also note the standardization of the "life course," as generations now remain relatively intact, with little early mortality, unlike previous eras. Thus, rather than on a 25-year metronome, one might see generations as a shorthand for the ways that we are formed in time by our contemporary culture.

To see it another way, generations are one factor among others in shaping identity. After all, factors such as gender or race often evince overly sweeping or dubious generalizations, but almost all agree that race and gender shape our identities. Making the case for generations, the sociologists June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner (https://books.google.com/books?id=effFQgAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:ISBN0335208517), drawing on consumer studies, conclude that "generational audiences appear to be as important as social class or ethnic divisions or even more so."

The literary critic Raymond Williams postulated that particular eras have a "structure of feeling (https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100538488)," infused by the political economy and culture. One could see the millennial generation as those formed by the structure of feeling of neoliberalism. Indeed, they constitute the first contemporary generation that has no collective memory of cheap higher education, plentiful union jobs with pensions, reasonably priced housing or an assured middle-class life course. All of these were commonplaces 50 years ago when the baby boomers came of age, during the crest of liberal social policies and the postwar welfare state.

One unflattering image of the millennials is that they exhibit narcissistic characteristics, according to long-term surveys of high school and college students that Jean Twenge reports in her book *Generation Me* (http://www.jeantwenge.com/generation-me-book-by-dr-jean-twenge/) (2006). At the same time, she more sympathetically points out the parallel rise in anxiety and depression, in part because of the pressures of their insecure social world and the relentless presence of new media. In addition, probably in response to that insecurity, millennials tend to have more progressive social and political views (https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/), assuming diversity as a good, taking a more positive stance toward differences in gender and sexuality, and voting leftward.

They are the first generation in a century that has experienced such a steep chasm of inequality, seemingly at their expense. (Millennials hold much less wealth (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/millennials-have-just-3-of-us-wealth-boomers-at-their-age-had-21/) than boomers did at their age.) That downward path might be one reason for the recent spike of postapocalyptic fiction. For instance, *Severance* imagines a world when corporations shut down and malls empty, and *The Life of the Mind* nods to the genre, as Dorothy is teaching a course called Writing Apocalypse. While not quite postapocalyptic, this wave of academic fiction portrays a world where little remains, the characters reduced to texting while the American dream of advancement through higher education fades.

The Normalization of Inequality

Their advisers come from a different academic world. They take the role neither of the demanding Socratic professor, for instance, the one that John Houseman plays in *The Paper Chase* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070509/) (1973), nor the friendly, engaging lecturer that Barbra Streisand plays in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117057/) (1996), but they are largely removed from students and teaching. If anything, they are bosses, commanders of an academic enterprise and rarely present. For instance, in *Chemistry* the adviser, in his one appearance, suggests that the protagonist come in on weekends and holidays to keep up. In *Real Life*, the adviser castigates Wallace for problems with some slides and questions whether he has the desire to remain in the lab. In addition, in *Private Citizens* one of the four protagonists, Henrik, is a biomechanical engineering Ph.D. student and his adviser cuts off his funding, suggesting he get a job landscaping while keeping up with his work in the lab.

The Life of the Mind offers the fullest portrait of an adviser, as Dorothy encounters her at a conference and they go for drinks. Dorothy is flattered by her attention and wants her approval but resents her blitheness and her favoring of other students. She muses, “No one of Dorothy’s generation would ever accrue the kind of power Judith had … The problem wasn’t the fall of the old system, it was that the new system had not arisen. Dorothy was like a janitor in the temple who continued to sweep because she had nowhere else to be but who had lost her belief in the essential sanctity of the enterprise.”

In truth, a new system has arisen, of a rarified tier of haves and a populous army of have-nots working as adjuncts or graduate students. But the passage encapsulates the tendency toward fatalism of this fiction. In another passage, Dorothy cites the literary theorist Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism,” which identifies the toxic condition of maintaining “fantasies and aspirations of ‘the good life,’ [despite] how those aspirations injured” those holding them. That results in “stuckness,” which defines an all-too-common millennial feeling.

These novels do not deliver new news about academic labor—we’ve known about the shift toward adjunctification since the 1990s, as recounted in the previous adjunct novel—but they do capture the normalization of inequality and how it feels to be thwarted. They also diagnose that inequality in generational terms. In *Chemistry*, the protagonist remarks on a news story about a graduate student

shooting his adviser: "Authorities blame the grad student who shot him, but grad students around the world blame the adviser."

Yet, despite a renewal of political consciousness in rising generations, evidenced by the recent growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/dsa-growing-during-coronavirus/611599/), millennial-run magazines like *Jacobin* (https://jacobinmag.com/) and various studies from the PEW Research Center (https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/03/01/the-generation-gap-in-american-politics/), these novels project little possibility of action. There are no graduate student or adjunct unions in them and little imagination of labor solidarity. They tend to be immersed in their own individual issues and their conversations with friends. The personal is the individual, and the political is far away.

As a case in point, *The Life of the Mind* articulates the angst of the thwarted professional upper middle class. Dorothy talks about her failed hope, felt more sharply because she sees several friends from graduate school who are better off. But the problem is not impoverishment: indeed, her partner has a high-paying tech job, and they live and socialize among other New York professionals. An enlightened feminist, she worries that her partner pays her therapy bills, but there's little sense that she might join with others to take action in a union or larger politics. Instead, she deals with her envy—which might also be a neoliberal condition, as we have continuous video of better lives.

Brave New University

One place where millennial academic novels seem more progressive is in their assumption of diversity. Though spotlighting the inequitable situation of academic jobs, the adjunct novel tends to represent the frustration of the white male professional. In effect, it translates Susan Faludi's diagnosis of the frustration of the white working class in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (http://susanfaludi.com/stiffed.html) (1999) to professionals.

But there aren't many women in the adjunct novel—except as spouse or love interest. As Marta Lysik, a scholar of academic fiction and creator of the site *Schoolsville*, points out (https://schoolsville.wordpress.com/category/academic-novel/), the academic novel has typically featured "wonder boys" but not "wonder girls." These newer novels put women more prominently at the center, both as professors and underlings, somewhat belatedly representing the shifting demographics of higher ed, which now holds a majority of women as students (https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-university-fall-higher-education-men-women-enrollment-admissions-back-to-school-11630948233?mod=article_inline), especially in the humanities. Women make up about half of all faculty (https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Dec-2020_Data_Snapshot_Women_and_Faculty_of_Color.pdf) and the majority of faculty in part-time positions and full-time non-tenure-track roles.

These millennial novels also suggest a more inclusive picture of sexuality, race and ethnicity. Most academic fiction portrays hetero romance, whereas *Real Life* weaves in Wallace's yearning for a man in his program and their time in bed. And in contrast to the whiteness of traditional academic fiction, these novels feature a number of characters of color, again making them more representative of the composition of contemporary higher ed.

However, this more diverse academic world carries a somewhat bitter irony: diversity has been normalized precisely when jobs seem arranged more like a pyramid scheme than a profession, guild or union. It would be tempting to say that the quality of jobs has declined because of diversity, but I think that confuses effect with cause; rather, Nancy Fraser offers a convincing explanation of the rollback in her analysis of feminism since the 1970s (*New Left Review*, 2009 (https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii56/articles/nancy-fraser-feminism-capitalism-and-the-cunning-of-history)). She argues that feminism won on the front of recognition of rights but was nevertheless assimilated into the "new spirit of neoliberalism." And neoliberal capitalism has been glad to welcome all comers—and pay them less, in gig work rather than secure jobs, with fewer benefits and with the risk transferred to the private individual. After all, from a CFO standpoint, it is financially rational to pay workers low wages and keep them "flexible." But it's not so good for adjuncts and graduate student workers, or finally for sustaining the institution in an equitable way.

The protagonists and their advisers in the new millennial academic novels act out this new spirit as their relation has shifted from teacher/student to boss/worker. That becomes clear especially in shifting a main scene of action to STEM labs. That broadens the range of the academic novel from its typical focus on quirky English departments, but it also underscores the reconfiguration of the university toward "funded research" and the new structure of faculty-managers who get the grants, administer the projects and draw rewards from them, in contrast to the hired help who put agar on slides, teach basic classes and keep the institution going day to day.

One way to think of it is to ask: Who is the beneficiary of higher education? The postwar version of the academic novel suggested that students and professors were the beneficiaries and pointed toward a positive future, whatever their haplessness. They were the recipients of the public good of the university system. This new wave of fiction insinuates that the benefit to a contemporary graduate student is a high-stakes gamble, and they are more likely conscripted to academic service work. A few succeed, like Dorothy's mentor and one of her grad school friends, but they are cast as having special talent or luck. Whereas all the rest fall behind in our brave new university.

Jeffrey J. Williams has written extensively on academic fiction and is finishing a book called Brave New University *in a series he co-edits for Johns Hopkins University Press entitled Critical University Studies. His book* How to Be an Intellectual: Essays on Criticism, Culture, and Higher Education *includes pieces on academic fiction as well as problems such as student debt. He is a professor of literary and cultural studies at Carnegie Mellon University.*

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