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Betty Krasne
Mercy College

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Telling Tales Out of School: Academic Novels and Memoirs by Women

Betty Krasne
Mercy College

The following article has some of the attributes of a relic. It was originally written for the old *Forum for Honors*, shortly before its demise. Therefore, the books and issues it discusses take on a different perspective now that the reborn *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* has offered to publish those articles stranded by the former publication's termination.

However, perhaps the topic of gender and the academic novel is more, rather than less, in the news these days. In an article published 21 October 2000, the "Arts and Ideas" section of *The New York Times* devoted the better part of a page to the academic novel, under the heading "Satire in the Ivory Tower Gets Rough," and cutely subtitled, "You Can't Make an Academic Spoof Without Breaking a Few Eggheads"(B9). The writer, Sarah Boxer, starts out with the observation "Once upon a time, the world of academic satire seemed to be a British protectorate." Although she dates the American tradition from Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952) and mentions Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), her point is that nothing much was going on until 2000, when three well known writers came out with novels set in the academy: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Francine Prose. The article I originally wrote for the *Forum* traces a different history, and so I have let it stand as Part II of this piece. My argument back in the mid-nineties was that those of us paying attention to what goes on in higher education can learn more than we may want to know by reading the academic novels and memoirs of women writers. In fact, the powerhouse list on which Boxer focuses in a sense goes to the heart of my argument about gender.

But to fast forward, I too have had occasion to look at some more recent work. A sabbatical in 1998-99 enabled me to spend time

researching and writing a family memoir focused on the theme of education. In the process of doing background reading in memoirs, I again came across that subspecies, the academic memoir. Two in particular, both appearing in 1999, make a neat pair of bookends: *In Plato's Cave* by Alvin Kernan and *My Kitchen Wars* by Betty Fussell. A discussion of these works is the substance of Part III.

The question of what all this has to do with Honors education is another matter. That connection is based not on research but on eyeballing general meetings, regional meetings, and committee meetings from my days in NCHC, and on observing the population of Honors Programs, our own and others, over the years. Readers will thus be asked to overlook the lack of scholarly data on representation by gender in Honors education, though I hope some will respond by supplying statistics.

II

After years marked by political conflicts over legislative ideas on affirmative action, it is worth remembering that women have been noteworthy beneficiaries of affirmative action policies, both written and unwritten. Not only do we have women's sports claiming a share of media attention, but we have an increased statistical awareness of representation by gender in many aspects of education. It is possible to chart changes in salaries and numbers of people by gender at each level in any given academic field. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* periodically devotes space to gender issues, and *Academe* has numerous articles and statistics on topics related to gender. The July/August 1995 issue, for instance, commemorating the 75th year of women's suffrage, looked at the relationship between women, higher education, and the suffrage movement. The need for research, the quantity of data, are results of a climate of affirmative action, and pressure for change results from the information revealed by the research.

I am not aware of any research that demonstrates whether or not Honors Programs have been directly affected by responses to affirmative action, but it has been my impression that more women than men now seem to run programs, and more females than males generally participate. Naturally there have been changes over time; for instance, the founders of the group that has become NCHC were predominantly male, and certain programs arising out of schools or departments with a heavy emphasis on

fields in which women are notably underrepresented have Honors Programs that are more heavily male, but from surveying honors assemblies it would appear that there are somewhat more females than males participating in Honors Programs across the country. Why this should be so is an interesting question for research. But what started me thinking about gender distribution in academe was a novel about the academy written by a woman. There have been a number of such publications, but this one received more notice than most.

Since novels by women are bound to reflect a different picture from those by men, reading books by women writers reminds one that males and females experience higher education differently. Thus a novel by a woman which locates itself in the academy is part of a tradition of its own. The novel which set off this train of thought was *Moo* by Jane Smiley. This is not to say that Smiley composed a book such as Marge Piercy or Erica Jong were turning out in the seventies, a feminist tract, or an exposé of sexploitation, but her work takes its place along with previous works by women which have a college or university as their setting. These novels and memoirs form a subset because they give us a particular perspective on women's educational experience, in the process telling us a good deal about the nature of our higher education system.

The tradition of women writing about life in the academy has been in a state of change ever since the women's movement of the sixties gave new impetus to writing by women. The academic milieu in which women writers were operating is depicted in some detail by Diana Trilling in the first volume of her autobiography where she describes Radcliffe, Harvard, and Columbia as she saw them from the second world war to the time of her husband's death in 1975.

In her memoir she points out that she "had not been sent to college to prepare for an independent life, either emotional or financial" (77-78). In fact, her acceptance into Radcliffe was met with anything but pleasure on the part of her family. But they need not have worried because, according to Trilling, what the college specialized in was training in comportment, civility, and the proprieties (71-72). Trilling, who graduated from college in 1925 and spent almost all of her life in the world of the university, has much to say about the ways in which that institution—and others connected with it—was never user-friendly for women. She remarks, as so many of her generation have noted, that

> *In common with so many college women even today, I graduated from college wholly lacking in the professional definition which one finds in virtually any man of similar ability and training. I was competent, I think, as the Harvard men alongside of whom I studied at the Fogg. But I could not imagine myself in the important positions which they naturally looked to and eventually held. (76-77)*

Trilling's intellectual capacity and vague professional aspirations were not only at war with the bourgeois values of her middle-class family. Her abilities, it turned out—surprisingly—also put her at odds with the academic community in which her marriage to Lionel Trilling, a Columbia University teacher, placed her. Because, as she remarks, "Lionel's dissertation director cautioned the young members of the English Department against the dangers of intruding parenthood into their academic careers..." (412), women were looked upon as not even a necessary evil. When, after many years of marriage, and after her husband had long finished his studies, she finally gave birth to a child (their only one), she tells how a more senior member of her husband's department "turned his eyes away from the infant's carriage lest he have to recognize that biology had been in process" (412). When Trilling describes her own attempts to write, she sounds like Jane Austen speaking about the conditions under which she wrote: "I worked in the living- room in the midst of family traffic...largely by improving my concentration, I learned to work at my living-room desk, whatever might be going on around me" (417). Trilling tells of being sent to Europe by the Ford Foundation in 1967; the only female member of the group, she was excluded from after-dinner discussions, "and in 1967 no male member of the company protested my exclusion" (132).

This, then, was the atmosphere prevailing when women in the late sixties and seventies, the Marge Piercys and Erica Jongs, began to write what might be called novels of complaint. A sampling of the next wave, novels of the eighties that were somewhat less specifically focused on grievances, nevertheless still shows an emphasis on women's second class role in the academy. In Amanda Cross's *Death In A Tenured Position* (1981), a mystery story she dedicated to May Sarton, Cross's narrator, the detective Kate Fansler, specifically notes the role of her predecessors when she remarks, "The women I don't defend are those who came along in the seventies sneering at the woman's movement but reaping the reward

other women had won for them" (54). The novel is set at Harvard, which is no more hospitable to women than Columbia was to Diana Trilling decades earlier. This should come as no surprise to those who know that Amanda Cross is the pseudonym of Carolyn G. Heilbrun. Heilbrun was at Columbia when it was under pressure to broaden its faculty representation of women, and eventually she became the Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities Emerita. She is also the author of a work entitled *Writing a Woman's Life,* a title suggesting, as Virginia Woolf had prophesied some years earlier, that the how and what of writing have a strong gender connection.

When inviting Kate, the protagonist of *Death In A Tenured Position*, to come up to Cambridge, one of the other women in the novel tells her, "I'll send you a nice fat packet about women at Harvard. It's a particularly depressing collection of materials" (25). The plot of Cross's work revolves around the idea that the Harvard English Department has been made an offer it can't refuse: a million dollars on the condition it hire its first woman professor who, this being a murder mystery, quite shortly ends up dead. The author has nothing good to say about the college, the department, or most of its members. Her rhetoric may occasionally make fun of "those awful women's libbers" (27), but her target is sexism in the institution, summed up when the narrator is given an attic room at the Harvard Faculty Club, which strongly resembles a servant's quarter in which nothing works, and she notes, "Harvard's general attitudes toward women were not badly represented by this room" (27).

The department chairman grudgingly acknowledges, "Most of our best students are women; that's true everywhere in graduate studies... so it seems only right that they should have at least one representative of their sex on the faculty of the department. And then, of course, I was glad that Janet [the first woman professor] wasn't a real feminist...." (128). But by and large the feeling of the faculty is summed up by the chairman's reminiscence about this (literally) short-lived professor: "Of course, given a choice, I'd have chosen not to have a woman professor in the department. It's bound to cause problems" (128). It's safe to say that self-esteem for women whose paths cross the university is not an issue; it doesn't seem to exist as a possibility.

Across the way, but in the same decade, Rebecca Goldstein's *The Mind Body Problem* (1985) takes on the Princeton establishment. In this

case the narrator is married to a brilliant mathematician. Again, the narrator, like Kate Fansler, is portrayed as highly educated, yet this only serves to put her at odds with both her own middle-class background and the rarefied sphere of her spouse, who is given to spacey musings, hence the "mind body problem." The protagonist is as much a fictional third wheel in this eighties novel as Trilling was in her husband's academic world several decades earlier, although the effect here is often hilarious and considerably more involved with female sexuality, not to be confused with sexual harassment.

Back at Harvard, in Anne Bernay's *Professor Romeo* (1989), sexual harassment is the name of the game, as the title might suggest. Rumor has it the book is a *roman a clef* and the professor, who gets his comeuppance at the end, was indeed let go. In any event, the author does a meticulous job of showing how the protagonist thinks and operates. Her portrayal anatomizes the by now all too familiar story of how professorial power can be sexually corrupting.

By the time the nineties arrive, the sexual games, the gender politics have taken another turn. In such books as Cathleen Schine's *Rameau's Niece* (1993), Ann Beattie's *Another You* (1995), and Smiley's *Moo*, all set in places centered on higher education, the attitudes are more subtle, the games people play more complex. Schine's protagonist, Margaret, starts out speaking of herself in the old self-deprecating tone of the women who saw themselves as academic groupies: "Margaret mused on her own self-absorption. If people expected anything of me, I resent them and feel incompetent and ill at ease. And yet I expect so much, and if I don't get it, I feel only contempt. I'm sort of an asshole, she thought" (34). Though a scholar and writer in her own right, she reflects about herself in the negative-speak of previous academic wives: "Sometimes she felt as small and aloof as a spider, hanging by its thread. No ground beneath its several feet, nor water. But at least a spider could spin a web, a frail sticky gathering place for stray passersby" (66). However, Margaret turns out to be quite a web spinner in her own right. Convinced that her professor husband must be having an affair with one of his nubile young students, she stages a preemptive strike by committing adultery, only to find out that her ever loving husband has done no such thing.

Similarly, in Beattie's novel a male professor chastises himself for thinking about kissing one of his students while, unbeknownst to him, his wife, a real estate broker, is romping *in flagrante* around the houses she is

supposed to be selling. Thus by the nineties, in the twists and turns of the plot, students as well as faculty, wives as well as husbands, young as well as old are not what they may seem, are interchangeably good and guilty, used and users.

Speaking of Jane Smiley's novel *Moo*, Alison Lurie remarked in *The New York Times* that "the novel is less concerned with fights over tenure and multicultural curriculums than it is with a mining controversy and the fate of a huge pig" (*28*).* Well...for those in academe, *Moo* is to the college scene what *Primary Colors* was to the election scene: an insiders romp through a thoroughly fallible institution and an introduction to its cast of highly imperfect types. True, the novel is not a seamless send-up of academics in the David Lodge style. True, the hog and the mines are not unimportant facets of an almost ridiculously complex plot. But more to the point, they are mere plot devices on which this send-up of the big university, more particularly the big mid-western university, is hung.

If this sounds as though I liked *Moo* and would recommend it, the answer is "yes" and "no." For a reader coming off of *A Thousand Acres, Moo* comes as a shock. While the course of Smiley's previous work had already shown great variety by the time she came to write *A Thousand Acres,* the high acclaim—National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize—given that novel overshadowed her previous work. She seemed to dawn upon the national literary scene as a new, prize-winning author. And although there were some critics who chafed at the author's schematic references to Shakespeare, with remarks about how her use of "King Lear" resulted in "a rather pretentious, overblown tale that often lapses into phony, archaic language" (Kakutani), the general opinion was that *A Thousand Acres* was masterfully done. The author has the power to create characters with such strong force fields that they distort any lines with which they come into contact—land, family, friends—in ways that inevitably lead to tragedy. And who is able to write tragedy in this era of high cynicism? But whereas

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* Lurie's cool response may be retribution for the mixed reaction to her 1984 novel. From her first novel, *Love and Friendship*, to *Foreign Affairs*, she had taken professors and their natural habitats as subject, but one critic had noted that the characters in the latter novel were "unappealing" and the "contrivances labored." Unlike the sympathetic characters in Smiley's work, Lurie tended toward "stinging" portrayals.

tragedy in the classical sense involves characters who occupy a heroic dimension above and beyond us, the cast of *A Thousand Acres* are out of the tradition of writing about small-town USA. The magnetic field the author creates does not transport us to dramatically far off times and places. The America she presents seems to be around the corner from yesterday, a corner we recognize but cannot see around. Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, maybe even Thornton Wilder are names that come to mind... and going down that road landed us in Peyton Place.

However, Smiley's rich prose in *A Thousand Acres* was able to make even an extended evocation of a farm drainage system a memorable reading experience. Through her cast of characters, people readers come to know intensely, the author was able ultimately to tie together a series of trendy issues—sexual abuse, environmental pollution, farm economy—that could easily have fallen over the edge into clichés. Perhaps Smiley's ability to render the whole of farm and small town life—the church suppers and the swimming hole, the town shops and the rotation of crops, the homestead and the price of grain—should have prepared a reader for *Moo* with its Dickensian cast of hundreds, its numerous locations, and its convoluted plot. But these attributes are carried so far in *Moo* that the novel produces no characters with whom one can feel any engagement, no situation into which one can be absorbed before one is pulled on to the next scenario.

But if the book was not satisfying as a novel, or as a novel by the author of *A Thousand Acres*, it is of interest in another respect, as previously suggested. This is a big novel about academe: the people, the place, the system; and it is by a woman, thus weighing in as a kind of ultimate update on the tradition, combining and bringing to the fore elements to be seen in Schine and Beattie.

In the mid-nineties, equality more nearly reigns in the glimpses a reader has of the institution which is the stage for the characters' actions and in the individual relationships enacted against this background. In the personal relationships, it is hard for both characters and readers to tell pursued from pursuer, used from user, object from objectifier. Characters shift as both genders try on a variety of roles. *Moo* suggests men may be nurturers, women can be seducers; men may want to marry and settle down, women may want to hit the road; men may be into cooking or growing things, women may have political and technical know-how. Then again, characters may discard roles or be found to have only been playing at certain parts or

have thought they were in charge only to find out their opposite number was playing an entirely different game than they were. If power is the name of the game, and power is the ability to make things happen, then the university world portrayed in *Moo* is an equal opportunity employer in terms of gender.

The fact that much has changed in the portrayal of the college scene by women is good news, but historically the picture which memoirs and novels by women have painted of higher educational institutions is troubling. As educators we can't fail to notice a legacy which indicates that, for women, self-esteem and success in the academy have historically been at odds. If Honors Programs have a preponderance of women, then they have an extraordinary opportunity to help create and maintain an atmosphere of equality in which self-esteem is not a gender issue. Who knows, maybe at this very moment the next Pulitzer Prize winning novel set in academe is a germ in the head of a talented honors student.

III

Not so surprisingly, the two memoirs published in 1999 of life in the community that makes up higher education—*In Plato's Cave* by Alvin Kernan and *My Kitchen Wars* by Betty Fussell—have a number of common elements despite their interesting differences that stem from gender. To begin at the beginning, becoming a college professor is viewed by both these writers as an improvement in social status, an improvement that had as a point of departure World War II.

It was the disruption of the prewar, depression era order of the world and the GI Bill that made it possible for two young people from backgrounds constricted by finances and geography to make it east into the academic 'Establishment.' Kernan came back from the war to "the snows of Saratoga, Wyoming, population 650" (1), a stand-in for "Winesburg and Gopher Prairie" (2), to end up at Columbia, Williams, and Yale with a doctoral degree and a professorship. He made it out, literally, in "a decrepit blue 1936 Chrysler..." prone to "wearing out brake linings like Kleenex..." (3). Similarly, post World War II life enabled a young woman from a fanatically puritanical lower-middle-class family in the west to meet and marry a young man from an entirely different background. Fussell's grandparents, the Harpers, had run a chicken "ranch," which failed, but her family stayed on in the one-room garage that had become home "on the wrong side of

Riverside, in a cluster of shanties hard by the cement plant..." (15). Unlike the California of golden dreams, it was "bleak and desolate with grit and dust..." (15), and it was also unlike the California of the man who would remove her from the dust. Paul Fussell came back from the war to his Pasadena family, which also had a vacation house on the Pacific coast. When Betty Harper finally left home, her father gave her a $25 war bond that she cashed in for $18.75. Marriage to Paul Fussell in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was working on his Ph.D., brought a lot of sterling silver and Waring blenders. The former they sold; the latter they used to mix drinks.

This suggests two other, perhaps interconnected, aspects of life about which both these writers give a clear picture: the extraordinary amount of heavy drinking that was a part of the teaching scene and the poverty line at which young academics lived. In both cases the writers tell about making do on the GI bill and very little else. Tenement living and macaroni and tuna casseroles were the style of life. In his first job as an Instructor at Yale, Kernan's salary was $3,500, "too low to qualify for a mortgage on houses that were being bought by truck drivers and factory workers" (83). The dilapidated row house he, his wife and child moved into had an ancient gas water heater that eventually melted down and a coke furnace that "pumped enormous amounts of dust and sulfur up the ducts that ran through the old chimneys and fireplaces..." (83). Also in Connecticut, but starting out at Connecticut College for Women, Paul Fussell earned $2,700 as an Instructor while his wife was paid $800 as an Assistant Instructor. They were given an apartment where "The kitchen at the rear had a fold-down shelf that doubled as a kitchen table and had to be folded up in order to open the oven door. The living room doubled as a dining room and the bedroom doubled as a study..." (85). There were years of struggle for both couples before they arrived at their Yale and Princeton successes.

To help the family along, both Susan Kernan and Betty Fussell followed the common practice of women: doing secretarial work for their husbands and getting similar work in academic offices. But among the men, as Kernan points out, family neglect was endemic. At the same time as they had to take extra jobs to survive, they were struggling to teach, to write and publish so they would be promoted. Alcohol and sexual affairs, he suggests in general, and Fussell supports with particulars, kept faculty from feeling too harshly the conditions of their lives. Despite these significant similarities,

the reactions of Alvin Kernan and Betty Fussell to the expectations and pressures of academe show some interesting differences.

The early reactions of these two writers is a measure of things to come. When Kernan arrives at Williams to complete his undergraduate degree, disillusionment follows: he feels he has landed in F. Scott Fitzgerald land. What counted, he points out, was "family, money, looks, athletic ability, personality. Only very rarely intellect or good nature. Never virtue" (12). Over in Cambridge, on the other hand, Fussell is exhilarated by the opportunity to get a degree from Radcliffe. For her the intellectual stimulation represented a precious opportunity because she felt she was "desperately catching up" (224), even if it meant doing her own academic work in addition to cooking, keeping house, and typing her husband's work.

The differences continue in their early teaching positions. Kernan portrays the faculty at Yale as an assemblage of dotty alcoholics and the students as another species of being. In his estimation students regarded the faculty as "servants hired by their fathers at low wages to give them culture, to teach them how to write, and to expose them to the small amount of literary polish required by their station in life" (88). But over at Connecticut College For Women, Fussell is entranced to be in the company of some great women professors, such as Rosamond Tuve and Suzanne Langer.

> *These women had done their graduate work before the war, at Oxford or Tübingen or the Sorbonne, and had chosen monastic service over marriage and the family....No American university would hire them, certainly none of the Eastern Ivy chain, so they turned their women's colleges into secular monasteries....They were brilliant women whose scholarship was as formidable as their intelligence. (86-87)*

Though she gave birth to a baby, officially named after Shakespeare's Rosalind but called after Joyce's "Baby Tuckoo," she manages to go on with her studies, while continuing to help her husband with his work.

History is on Fussell's side. As the seventies evolve, she eventually comes to see herself as playing George Eliot's Dorothea to her Casauban in *Middlemarch*. With that realization, by the eighties she is ready to get herself a small apartment in Greenwich Village and a job—a room of her own and a pay check of her own—because, she says, "I yearned to

create something permanent, something concrete, to have something to show at the end of a few decades' hard work. Instead of making a loaf of bread that might keep for a week, I wanted to make a book that would last for years. I wanted a longer shelf life" (203).

It is later in their lives that the divergence in their feelings about the academic life becomes most stark. For Kernan, it was downhill all the way with education from the sixties on. He takes a position at Princeton, interviews for several presidencies, but increasingly feels he is out of tune with the times. In one of his last comments on classroom teaching, he tells of the undergraduate in his Shakespeare course who "complimented me, he thought, by saying at the end of term that I had made the plays sound sufficiently interesting that he hoped that he would have time to read them someday" (240-241). For Betty Fussell, the eighties and nineties are when she is finally hitting her stride as a writer, able to enjoy "my new continent of freedom" (230).

In a sense, their titles tell it all. Kernan's book is played out in hallowed halls where increasing democratization sheds ever longer shadows. It is a tale of culture wars over intellectual history. Fussell's work is also about a war, but in this case, because the warrior is a woman, the battleground is the family kitchen and the fight, considerably less abstract, is for a room of her own. While *In Plato's Cave* reads like a eulogy for the last great era of higher education, *My Kitchen Wars* is written in praise of a new era.

Coming back, then, with these memoirs written on the threshold of the twenty-first century, to the question of gender and Honors education, we see a different scene, perhaps a different need than in the books with which I started this article. Unfortunately, gender may still be a factor in the halls of academe, but not in the way earlier narratives indicated. Now it could well be that it is the males among us who need support to believe that humanities education has a meaningful role for them. As grants, careers, jobs, in other words money, has drifted away from the humanities, perhaps the humanities have been left as a level playing field because no one very much cares any more. The job of Honors education may be to make the humanities meaningful regardless of gender.

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The author may be contacted at:

Department of Literature, Language, and Communication
Maher Hall
Mercy College
555 Broadway
Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

e-mail: bkrasne@earthlink.net

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