

Confessions of a Department Chair

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As Chair of the Creative Writing Department at City University, I never saw my name in print except in the course catalogue. The reason is obvious: I was so far ahead of the publishing world they never understood me. Proud possessor of 7,479 rejection slips, I have shown my superiority so often that my last 5,829 submissions were returned marked “Opened by Mistake” rather than confirming the editor’s malignity by attaching a preprinted rejection slip.

It was not always so. My first sortie into publication was “MacDougal,” a whimsical piece I sent to *Mad Magazine* in 1964, when my genius was still struggling to emerge. Let me share it with you.

*MacDougal was a mighty man,
He took his wee wife to bed,
She slipped ‘neath the covers to give him a thrill,
And blew up his bagpipe instead.*

This brought me my first rejection slip and near expulsion from the University when someone posted it online in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, it was enough to earn the first Master of Fine Arts (“MFA”) degree City University awarded.

“Drivel!” Professor Giles Scudder exploded at my defense of my one poem chapbook. Scudder was a holdover from the days when English professors and students actually knew the difference between a Shakespearean and Spenserian sonnet, and regarded the canon as something to be read and studied rather than excoriated and dismissed. “There’s only one rhyme and the rhythm gives me vertigo.”

“Haven’t you read Randall Jarrell?” I countered.

“Or Philip Larkin?” snapped Dwight Turgeot, Acting Chair of Creative Writing.

Dwight had a MA in teaching remedial reading, a specialty that disqualified him from teaching creative writing himself because it implied MFA candidates were poor readers. If I didn’t receive my degree, he was out of a department and a job.

Of course we had not read Randall Jarrell or Philip Larkin ourselves, but our sally was enough to send the old man into a paroxysm of “harrumphs” and impress and intimidate the other examiners with our

skill at faculty infighting.

“We have to give him the degree or our department will never get off the ground,” Turgeot argued, adopting a less belligerent tone. “We can’t be spending all our time begging the state legislature for money, can we, Giles?”

In academic matters an appeal to self-interest always prevails.

Not only did I get the degree but a position on the adjunct faculty to teach creative writing. What a change from my life as an academic ski bum, moving from department to department looking for something that would stick after my first failed marriage nearly cost me my draft deferment.

Dwight Turgeot was a companion from my undergraduate days and a fellow searcher for the perfect draft deferment. Remedial reading gave him the respite I lacked. Then he showed me some pornographic pictures he was selling for marijuana money, and I recognized one of the participants engaged in senior faculty’s favorite office hours’ pas-time. It was Henri DuMoins, who had parlayed a French accent and a chance encounter with Jean Paul Sartre in the Café de la Paix into becoming Dean of Arts and Sciences.

“How did you get these?” I asked intrigued.

“I went to his office to ask for more time for my dissertation, and the door was open a crack.”

“Dwight, our success is assured,” I congratulated him.

In exchange for what he thought were all the negatives, Professor DuMoins not only excused Dwight from submitting his dissertation but offered him the position of Acting Chair of the new department, as long as he could find someone to staff it.

So thanks to Dean DuMoins’ open door policy, I nurtured my first generation of students on the intricacies of plotting comic books and reverse engineering their favorite TV shows to create characters like Archie Bunker and Tom Brokaw with names selected at random from the phone book. We gloried in metaphors such as “stepping on eggshells” or similes like “sharp as a pin.” Thanks to me, “like” became the most used word in the English language. When it became too taxing to come up with a comparison, I proposed “like whatever” as a universal expression of angst. Enrollment exploded, and with my duplicate set of the DuMoins negatives, I quickly became the highest paid adjunct on the faculty.

Tests were my favorite times. I never read any of their tormented verse or the Raymond Carver inspired ramblings they called fiction, but I always praised them, urging them to continue in the program for the sake of a meaning-starved world. To my amazement they returned semester after semester, taking the same class again and again until I gave them an MFA to get rid of them. Thus I discovered the secret of teach-

ing creative writing: affirmation trumps content.

Teaching how to write a novel was a challenge. I hadn't read one since I had to do a book report on *Look Homeward, Angel* when I was a junior in high school. So we spent weeks dissecting every sentence or at least those my students could remember, since I'd thrown away my copy at the end of the 1963 school year and couldn't find my book report.

Every successful career has its challenges. Mine came when Melanie Craemer, struggling to finish her chapbook (we now required two poems to graduate) asked me, "Have you ever written a novel?"

The class was silent. If I hadn't been on my third cup of coffee, my heart would have stopped.

"Of course I've written a novel," I replied. "I'm using it as my dissertation for a PhD."

The class emitted a whooshing sound of amazement and relief. I, like them, was still struggling to finish a degree. Only Melanie Craemer frowned, pursing her thin little lips as if she'd bitten into something unpleasant.

"What's it about?" she demanded.

My mind was racing. Had she actually read the catalogue and knew City University did not award a PhD in creative writing?

"It's called *Poor Becky*, and it takes feminism to places it has never been before."

"Like where?"

"Sorry, Melanie. You know I can't discuss my work until after my defense."

The appeal to academic process silenced her, but skepticism flashed from her eyes. So I put her in the advanced class and awarded her a MFA for "The Teardrop," an autobiographical poem about finding happiness writing test questions for undergraduates.

"Dwight, it's time to raise the department to the next level," I remarked to Acting Chair (after five years) Turgeot at our graduation reception of white wine and grass.

Thinking I was angling to replace him, he reached for another glass of graduate student (under \$3 a bottle) chardonnay. Like so many department chairs, he was jealous of his faculty's successes.

"Be cool," I soothed him. "I'm thinking we should add a PhD in Creative Writing to our repertoire."

He had to sit down. Great ideas in art and literature often overwhelm lesser intellects.

"What's the business plan?" he asked knowing there had to be something in it for him.

"We get a larger lecture hall and run them through the same stuff our MFAs are getting for another three or four years. Our only additional expenses are the hall and a few more TAs to deal with the overflow."

He waved down an undergrad serving baked cheese puffs and roaches on a plastic tray.

“Man, this thing will be such a cash cow that the Dean will appoint you permanent chair and make me tenure track.”

“You’d need a PhD for that,” he said, the first intelligent observation he’d made that evening.

“Exactly my point. I get class credit for teaching the courses, and you supervise my dissertation.”

“What dissertation?”

“A novel. I call it *Poor Becky*.”

“We’ll talk about it when you have the novel.”

In a public show of collegiality, we both stuffed our pockets with leftover cheese puffs and roaches to celebrate the start of my work on a PhD.

Teaching to a 60 seat classroom in the mornings, I passed my afternoons in office hours encouraging would-be dropouts to stay with the program and writing recommendations for graduating students. They were all the same: “I am privileged to have read her/his work;” “a voice that must be heard;” “raw talent now honed to a razor’s edge;” “an annihilating vision;” or “at last Chekov’s heir.” With recommendations like these, none of them had any trouble finding positions on the adjunct faculties of the finest colleges and universities in the country. My only problem was my novel.

How would I ever find the time? And then I asked my TAs to see some student writing. And there it was: a sentence from this one, a paragraph from that scrambled so I could never be accused of plagiarism, creating characters and images as intoxicating and meaningless as a stream of consciousness novel.

“Who’s on my committee?” I asked Turgeot at a department party celebrating the enrollment of our largest ever MFA class.

“What committee? Have you been fooling around with the coeds? The Dean handles all the sex cases himself.”

Remember this was early ‘80s. We still called them that then.

“My dissertation committee, Dwight. I’ve finished my novel.”

He looked like he had already received his pink slip.

“I’ll talk to some people,” he muttered.

“Who are you thinking about?”

“Scudder, of course, and some new blood like LaClaire DuMoins and Henekin Sisal.”

Only a stern academic demeanor kept me from wincing. Scudder had slipped from being a reluctant colleague to an outright enemy after the Dean gave me the raise he had been dreaming of for 20 years.

Tenure track instructor LaClaire DuMoins, our Dean’s daughter, taught a course on “Feminism as a Liberal Art” featuring film clips of

Susan Sontag, Gloria Steinem, Jackie Kennedy, and home movies of herself as a child. At last count three students had enrolled in as many years. Due to a serious misinterpretation of “MacDougal” as a parody of the feminist vision, she despised me. Even worse was Henekin Sisal, an avowed communist, who reviled me for finding my students jobs in an exploitative academic environment.

“Just be sure we have someone from Psychology,” I cautioned, almost choking up. “This is deeply personal for me.”

What was deeply personal was my desire to become department chair. Never known for his skill in psychoanalysis, Dwight misread this as a sign of weakness. Perhaps, he thought, having exposed my inner child in *Poor Becky*, I would need psychological support to get through failing my defense. Naturally he chose Lenwick Belaire, PsyD, Chair of the Psychology Department, who had a reputation for so traumatizing his undergraduates that they would sign on for a MS to have any hope of recovery.

Dr. Belaire and I had formed a therapeutic alliance over drinks at the faculty club after I told him how many of my students were breaking down in class. Fortunately for us, they were covered for counseling under the University Health Plan. Belaire, who had been experiencing difficulty placing his students in anything other than fast food, saw an opportunity. We would station a psych graduate student or two outside my classroom and one inside for acute cases. Whenever an MFA student suffered a breakdown, they would enroll them in counseling. Within a semester, his MS students had practices any PsyD would envy.

Ms. DuMoins presented a distinct challenge.

“Let’s have coffee, LaClaire,” I suggested after a particularly difficult faculty meeting in which she had screamed herself hoarse demanding equal pay for male and female faculty, regardless of the number of students in their classes.

She looked as if I had asked her to fornicate in the corridor.

“Feminism is an integral part of creative writing, dear,” I continued.

“I have not gone out for coffee with a man since, since . . .”

“Please, LaClaire, I just want to be friends. Look, I so admire your work I’d like to make your course a prerequisite for our MFA degree, if it’s alright with you.”

Even a feminist can compromise with a male dominated system. By making her course a prerequisite, she was assured of enough students to be appointed assistant professor and acquire tenure.

Henekin Sisal, like so many would-be oppressed colonials born in Santa Monica, was more difficult. I wouldn’t have known him without the Che Guavera T-shirt, so little time did he spend on campus. Rather than pine away in an empty classroom, he concentrated on urging university libraries to buy Xerox copies of his mimeographed doctoral

thesis, *A Marxist Analysis of State University Funding*. When that effort failed, he obtained money from a liberal not-for-profit to send copies to state legislatures. The response from Iowa is worth a separate essay.

Instead of the startle reflex grimace with which LaClaire greeted me, he fixed me with a stare colder than Stalin's. Intrigue was the only way to reach him, so I slipped him a message written in lemon juice on a paper cocktail napkin at a faculty reception. Of course he recoiled at my touch, but when I interjected "The Battle for Algiers" into a lively discussion of "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," he sniffed the napkin, realized it contained a secret message, and took out his lighter to read it.

We met as planned at a McDonalds near the campus. Once I got him over speaking Russian, our negotiations proceeded rapidly. I would assign his thesis as a first year MFA requirement if he would approve my dissertation. As soon as he realized this would excuse him from reading it, he agreed.

Academic jealousy is nearly impossible to contain. A week before my defense, Dwight Turgeot announced he had asked Cambridge Doyle, author of 27 wildly successful romance novels under the pseudonym "Karla Sweetheart" and head of the rival creative writing department at State University to be visiting scholar on my committee. As a published author, he would be invulnerable to the argument that I was too far ahead of the literary world to be published.

Lesser men would have concluded they were doomed, but in academia certain death often offers hope for a joyful resurrection. I was copying my standard letter of recommendation for a graduating student when I saw he had spent a year in Doyle's program before transferring to mine.

"How many students in our program started at State?" I asked when he dropped by to pick up his letter.

"Nearly everyone who starts at State transfers here."

"Why?"

"Your program is more fun, has less work, and everyone who graduates gets a job."

"So how many are still with Professor Doyle?"

"Maybe five or six who can't leave without losing their scholarships."

My conversation with Professor Doyle was equally enlightening--for him. We were chatting over the worst scotch I had ever experienced at the reception Acting Chair Turgeot arranged for my committee the evening before my defense. Doyle appeared to be experiencing a gag reflex as I approached.

"Cambridge," I began, "I have some really good stuff in my office, if you'd prefer to talk there."

He looked away with the expression of a drowning sailor hope-

lessly searching an empty sea. Apparently he had read all or part of *Poor Becky*.

"We have quite a lot in common," I continued undeterred.

"Such as?" he grimaced, swallowing the rest of his scotch.

"Such as your students. I don't know how long State University can keep you on at your salary if this exodus continues."

He shook so badly I thought he would collapse. Apparently romance novels were not as lucrative as commonly thought.

"I could stop the bleeding if you'd give me a chance," I offered.

He did not speak, but lowered eyes and trembling hands suggested a desire to negotiate.

"I'll talk with the Dean about not accepting any more transfers from State University, as long as there isn't any unpleasantness tomorrow. *Capiche?*"

I left him fiddling with the peanuts as an antidote to the scotch.

My defense, as they say, was a classic. Instead of the usual display of day-old blueberry bagels, little cans of unsweetened orange juice, and lukewarm coffee, I had arranged for mimosas and sazerac cocktails along with Eggs Benedict, Bananas Foster, and Starbucks coffee. Cambridge Doyle was so impressed he whispered a story about his own defense to LaClaire DuMoins, who responded by sharing her fantasies for his next Karla Sweetheart novel.

After everyone had congratulated each other on surviving last night's reception, they sat down across from me at a long polished table. My 1,321 page manuscript, broken down into six more or less equal stacks was piled before them. Usually doctoral candidates feel they are standing before a firing squad. I felt like one of the fabled deans of long ago who used to tell new students at matriculation to look to their right and to their left: one of them would not be there in four years.

Professor Scudder had the first question or rather expletive.

"Incoherent to the point of imbecility!" he exclaimed, turning an even a deeper red than when sipping raw scotch.

Dwight Turgeot leaned back in his chair, pressing his fingers together over his chest. Victory, he thought, was his.

"Another cup of coffee, Professor?" he asked, smiling in triumph.

"That's what you said about *Ulysses*," LaClaire DuMoins began, "because you never understood Molly Bloom."

"I understand a slut when I see one!" the old man retorted.

"Is that why your review of *Ulysses* in *New Victoriana* was cited by Gladys Keeler in *The 100 Worst Reviews of All Time* as a prime example of ignorance confronting genius?"

"Gladys Keeler is a hack!" raged Scudder. "And James Joyce was a pornographer!"

Once your dissertation committee starts arguing about another

author, you are home free.

“Come now, colleagues,” Cambridge Doyle said soothingly to keep them from leaping over the table top onto each other. “*Ulysses* has produced more PhDs in English literature than Shakespeare and Milton combined. We’re sitting on a gold mine here.”

“I was awed by the parody of the democratic process in Dale’s encounter with Louise,” Henekin Sisal said. “The dictatorship of the proletariat has never had a more powerful advocate.”

“Where’s that?” Dwight asked, reaching for the stack of papers before him.

It was impossible to say, since the pages were not numbered. It took Professor Scudder and Acting Chair Turgeot another cup of coffee to figure that out.

“Becky’s dream of her mother birthing her is the best description of separation anxiety I have ever encountered in fiction,” Dr. Belaire interjected just as it appeared Scudder had found something about Dale and Louise that made his jowls tremble. “Only Freud’s psychoanalysis of Anna B approaches it.”

“Shall we take a break?” Dwight suggested, seeing the day turning against him.

With a rush my committee left the room to scream at each other in the hall and fend off Belaire’s psychology grad students trying to build their practices. I took the Acting Chair aside. A candidate for a new degree needed a unanimous panel.

“Dwight, this thing is big enough for both of us,” I reassured him. “What’s old man Scudder’s problem? Doesn’t he want to retire?”

“He’d be out of here like a shot if the state legislature didn’t cut our budget every year.”

“We’ll make so much on the PhD program we can keep him on at full salary after he retires,” I argued. “And give you a raise, too.” No one on the faculty besides me had had a raise since the Nixon administration. “Talk to him for us.”

Professor Scudder was unmoved.

“Never again!” he screamed.

Then in the most dramatic moment of his career, he raised his arms, gripped his chest, and collapsed. Two of Dr. Belaire’s students were on him before he hit the floor.

“Your insurance card!” one of them yelled, patting the old man down for his wallet.

Professor Scudder groaned.

“We can’t call an ambulance without it,” the other counseled.

Scudder, I fear, was beyond hope or desire of recovery. My committee left him lying there to consider whether they could proceed without him.

“The university only requires five on the committee,” Dwight said acknowledging defeat. “Let’s get on with it.”

So the committee excused me from the room to vote. I spent the time watching Dr. Belaire’s students debate whether they should call an ambulance without Scudder’s insurance card and deciding it was probably unnecessary since he had died.

“University Hospital is a teaching hospital,” the first one said. “They’ll thank us for giving them the body.”

“University Hospital generates enough bodies without our help,” his colleague countered.

They compromised and called the county morgue. It promised a pick up within three hours.

“Should we ice him down?” the first one asked.

“Only if he has another suit for the funeral.”

That settled, it was almost anticlimactic when the conference room door opened and Dwight Turgeot emerged to shake the hand of City University’s first PhD in creative writing, myself. There would be hundreds even thousands more. To celebrate I had my students drag in wash tubs of iced champagne. It was the happiest passing a dissertation party ever held at City University. Even old man Scudder lost his red faced angry look as he lay resting on the floor. One of his former students remarked he was far better as a prop than as a professor.

As a PhD I was awarded a tenured position as assistant professor, allotted a 320 seat lecture hall with 16 TAs, and given the largest raise since the football coach’s contract was renewed. We were flooded with applications for the new PhD program. Anyone could see why. All candidates had to do was register for the same classes they’d already taken for their MFAs so they could cut them all, except for those unlucky 16 TAs. Our success was so great that I was soon promoted to associate and then full professor, generating more free cash flow than the rest of the College of Arts and Sciences combined. No longer did I have to threaten Dean DuMoins with exposure when I wanted the heat turned up or the janitors to make an extra run to carry out pizza boxes after our afternoon snack.

My first PhD lecture assured my success. Before a packed and hushed house I arose, moved unsteadily to the podium (sazerac and marijuana can do that to you in the morning), and delivered my first one word lecture in a trembling nearly inaudible voice: “Foucault.”

I sat down to a silence like that between the heart stopping and death. For a terrible minute I thought I had lost them. Suddenly Henekin Sisal, who had pushed his way into the SRO hall behind a dolly of Xerox copies of his dissertation, cried out: “Foucault! Of course!”

Cries of “Who the hell’s he?” erupted around the room.

“No teacher of any integrity can do more than speak his name,”

Professor Sisal intoned. “To do so would usurp the students’ freedom by exercising a power over them incompatible with knowledge.”

Confused eyes sought mine, much as the confused eyes of his disciples must have sought the Buddha’s the day he received enlightenment. I nodded slowly and then lowered my head onto my outstretched palms. The hall erupted.

“Yes! Of course! Foucault!” they howled, while Sisal passed amongst them collecting \$27.98 plus tax for his tome.

“This is what capitalism has done!” he cried over the din.

After that first lecture, the University posted guards at the door to keep unregistered persons out. Studies have shown the chaotic classroom now the hallmark of American education began with me. Even in an age of podcasts and TED talks, the one word lecture still reigns supreme.

I soon attracted copy cats. Without attribution a well-known TV program copied my format for decades of shouting, shoving, and raving as devoid of intellectual content as any of my classes. Provocation followed by stream of conscious audience participation became the model for talk radio and *Fox News*, where rants are interspersed with uninhibited call-ins. Take an idea, any idea, and run with it. There’s no stopping success.

Not everyone can write like Shakespeare or Karla Sweetheart. Many of my students had low self esteem because they could not write anything. Far better to give them confidence building exercises on cultural theory than assign a literary text that might make their feelings of inadequacy worse.

I was blessed the leading intellectuals of the day all espoused my theory. About the time I was beginning *Poor Becky*, Edward Said published *Orientalism*, which demonstrated to his satisfaction that any person from a dominant culture who said anything about another culture was seeking to expropriate and exploit it. This disarmed one army of privileged observers and empowered another of ravished victims. Mere mention of Said’s name silenced anyone with a cultural perspective wider than their television screens and gave voice to all the ignorant and oppressed living outside the offender’s zip code.

Most helpful of all was Jacques Derrida, who showed any text could be deconstructed (or destroyed) by assumptions and methods unknown to its author. This produced a sense of intellectual superiority to replace that lost sense of cultural superiority Said had so cruelly taken from my students. Thanks to Derrida, children of the white upper class recovered their sense of mission with consequences we are only beginning to appreciate.

Despite frenetic efforts to make *A Marxist Analysis of State University Funding* relevant to a new generation of students, Henekin Si-

sal found himself increasingly isolated. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, he and a few holdovers hanging onto endowed chairs at Harvard Law School were the only communists left in academia. So he changed his name to Harold Johnson, moved to Nevada, and joined the Alt-Right. His timing could not have been better.

Did I tell you how I finally rid myself of poor Dwight Turgeot? With his pitiful degree, he was not qualified to teach anything in the department he oversaw, and we needed more faculty. Two hours a week in the classroom were so tiresome for me.

“What about a sabbatical, Dwight?” I suggested. “You and the wife and kids deserve a break.”

“I don’t have a wife and kids.”

“Then maybe a stay at one of those places where they put hot stones on your back and feed you organic lettuce and lima beans?”

“I don’t like lima beans.”

That’s when I decided to talk to Dean DuMoins. We invited Dwight to a retirement party without telling him whose it was. Although he treated me like a waiter rushing his table, he accepted the inevitable after the Dean showed him a printout of his retirement account with an extra contribution to leave quietly.

As my MFAs and PhDs graduated, they fanned out across the country to set up creative writing departments of their own. Wildly successful, creative writing became the most profitable discipline in all academia, growing exponentially with each new graduate. Like referral sales, success was not measured by selling a product but by enticing others to join the movement. A degree meant a job meant a new program meant new students and on and on into infinity. Not until the launch of the iPhone did American enterprise enjoy such success. With margins higher than football and basketball, creative writing saved higher education in America at a time when declining enrollments and stunted attention spans threatened our knowledge industry.

The Board of Trustees responded by naming me to the Karla Sweetheart Chair of Creative Writing, handsomely endowed with enough cash and perks to keep me out of the classroom most of the year. My position finally secure, I had a negative burning party with Dean DuMoins.

No tree grows up to the sky. I was beginning to think I would ride the bright wave of success forever, until a voice from the past nearly destroyed me. Some disgruntled student posted LaClaire DuMoins’ ancient interpretation of “MacDougal” as a seduction sonnet on line, and it went viral. Though I had not even leered at a female student or colleague in thirty years, the poem was seen as a confession of suppressed desire.

Then something worse happened that forced me to retire. LaClaire,

now Professor DuMoins, inspired by the reconstruction of William Foster Wallace's posthumous novel from fragments, decided to do the same for me. Locating my original manuscript in University Library's dead storage, she spent five years and two major grants preparing it for publication. After all, if *The Pale King* could be a best-seller, so could *Poor Becky*. Her distrust of men made her a powerful advocate: I had to split the royalties 50-50.

Thus, like Dwight Turgeot, I found myself at a surprise retirement party, where the Dean demonstrated convincingly that I would make more money retired than on salary. Even my critics pretended to accept my defense of my poem as an ironic critique of American exceptionalism to see me go. I only wish Harold Johnson had been there, but his *Breibart* column and appearances on *Fox News* don't leave much time for old friends.

So after 7,479 rejection slips, I not only found a publisher but a place on *The New York Times'* best seller list. Royalties are wonderful, not to mention payments for the film rights LaClaire negotiated. Had I realized this earlier, I might have changed my teaching method. But no regrets; I am successful beyond Harold Johnson né Henekin Sisal's wildest dreams. I have helped bring down a great civilization.