



BOOK REVIEWS: Small Campus Depiction is Spot On

Review by Jim Sernoe

Richard Russo, *Straight Man*. Random House, 2007.

An attempted coup against a department chair, male professors running around with their female undergrads, faculty members jockeying to see who will be the next dean, students who think they are far more talented than they really are, and colleagues who have hated each other for 20 years – these are just a fraction of what fills Hank Devereaux's days.

Richard Russo's "Straight Man" follows Devereaux's life over the course of a week or so. He is the interim chair of the English Department at the fictional West Central Pennsylvania University, located in the fictional town of Railton.

But don't let the made-up place fool you: Russo's depiction of life at a small campus is spot on.

Hank became interim chair not because he wanted to be chair, but because he seemed to be the sane choice among a bunch of strange faculty (among others, the passive husband whose attractive wife, also a faculty member, is having an affair with a younger, non-tenured faculty member; the obnoxious poet; the drunken, over-the-hill professor who should have retired 20 years ago; and the guy who hasn't spoken to Hank in 20 years except to insult him). He does his best to navigate the intra-department politicking over substantive issues like budgets, curriculum and an ongoing faculty search as well as petty issues like classroom assignments. His navigation techniques include humor, self-deprecation and an immature streak, some of which are used effectively, some of which blow up on him.

The basic plot: the state legislature has threatened severe budget cuts, which in turn has created not only talk of faculty layoffs, but also maneuvering all over

campus by every constituency. When Hank can't get a solid answer from the administration, he threatens to kill a duck from the campus pond each day until the administration levels with everyone. Of course the moment he threatens the duck is caught on tape and broadcast by the local television station.

More than any plot, it's Russo's understanding of how so many campuses work that really registered with me. He makes it clear that whom you play racquetball with and whom you're seen eating dinner with at the one upscale restaurant in town matter. He discusses Hank's friendships with the former chair, who is now the dean, and a department chair across campus, both of which matter. He knows that student crushes on faculty, how we hire adjuncts, and that any attention from local media all matter.

You wouldn't think a novel about life at a small university would make me laugh out loud, but it did. The situations Russo describes really do happen to all of us, and reading about myself and my colleagues made me laugh more than once.

I put off reading this book for a year. A friend had given it to me and insisted that I read it, but a novel about a department chair at a small university was just too close to reality. I was happy reading Dave Barry's compilations and a book about baseball's minor leagues.

Once I started reading, I could not put it down. If you're like me and read to escape reality, read this book anyway.

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Textbook for Navigating Today's Journalism

Review by Emily Menke

Lorrie Lynch, *Exploring Journalism and the Media*. Cengage, 2013.

Teaching modern-day journalism is a difficult task. In the midst of profound technological and sociological change, the media landscape continues to shift and evolve, challenging journalism educators and practitioners alike. Lorrie Lynch does not shy away from this challenge in her textbook, *Exploring Journalism and the Media*.

In its second edition, the textbook provides a comprehensive overview of the journalistic process, the role of journalism and the essential skills needed for the field. Updated from its original release in 2009, the book now contains timely information about the increasing importance of technology in journalism and the role of digital storytelling.

Lynch, whose career spans newspaper reporting, communications consultation and teaching at American University, provides a multidisciplinary insight into the modern-day tools needed to teach journalism. At close to 500 pages long, this resource provides invaluable training material for both journalism students and teachers.

The textbook's strongest quality is its variety, with a commendable balance between assignments, activities and readings. By interspersing critical questions alongside the information, students are provided with ample opportunity to reflect on what they have been reading. Particular attention is paid to the interactive and multimedia elements, including what she calls an Engagement Tracker to monitor student progress in the course.

The practical application of these skills is illustrated in each, with testimonies from people working in various journalistic fields. These testimonies help showcase the job diversity in journalism and the media and also the accessibility of these roles.

Another ambitious task was attempting to define today's journalist, which allowed Lynch to examine the convergence of modern and traditional roles of the journalist, creating a compelling argument for her definition of "new century journalist."

One area that could benefit from more attention

is perhaps the theoretical aspects of the course. Consolidating journalism history, law and ethics into a single chapter meant these areas are looked at in less detail than other areas in the textbook.

Additional detail could also be given to certain areas of journalism. Considering the importance and appeal of investigative reporting in particular, there should be scope (and demand) to discuss it for longer than two pages. Seeking testimonies from investigative reporters would also have made for compelling reading.

While much of its content is intended for a North American audience, the resources and assessments are of relevance and interest for journalists across the world. Using a mix of theory and practical application, Lorrie Lynch's *Exploring Journalism and the Media* is an powerful guidebook for students navigating this new era of journalism.

Emily Menkes is an investigative journalism, researcher and practitioner currently based at Massey University in New Zealand. She is one of the founding members of the New Zealand Centre for Investigative Journalism.

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