



BOOK REVIEWS: Small Campus Depiction is Spot On

By Jim Sernoe

by 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.

Jim Sernoe is a regular contributor to TJMC.
jim.sernoe@msutexas.edu