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Dear Committee Members



Synopsis

A Best Book of the Year: NPR and Boston Globe Finally a novel that puts the "pissed" back into "epistolary." Jason Fitger is a beleaguered professor of creative writing and literature at Payne University, a small and not very distinguished liberal arts college in the midwest. His department is facing draconian cuts and squalid quarters, while one floor above them the Economics Department is getting lavishly remodeled offices. His once-promising writing career is in the doldrums, as is his romantic life, in part as the result of his unwise use of his private affairs for his novels. His star (he thinks) student can't catch a break with his brilliant (he thinks) work Accountant in a Bordello, based on Melville's Bartleby. In short, his life is a tale of woe, and the vehicle this droll and inventive novel uses to tell that tale is a series of hilarious letters of recommendation that Fitger is endlessly called upon by his students and colleagues to produce, each one of which is a small masterpiece of high dudgeon, low spirits, and passive-aggressive strategies. We recommend Dear Committee Members to you in the strongest possible terms.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I adore this book. There, I said it! I am an assistant dean at a small college that caters to the technology departments. I am not in one of those departments. I am in General Education where I teach the (lesser desired) English and Humanities. So much of this rang true for me! In fact, I brought it to work and read aloud sections to our faculty and the Dean (both of whom ADORED it and pre-ordered their own copies). As I am certain you've read before, this book is a collection of letters written by a grouchy English/Creative Writing Professor at Payne University (the irony is not

lost on him). Most of the letters of recommendations for students who wish to get jobs, continue their education, or land themselves in the same academic quagmire as the author of the letters has. Through these short pieces, we get a glimpse into Jay's life inside and outside of the college. We come to understand how he became the cantankerous man he is today. Even more importantly, we grow to feel a kind of compassion for his lack of power in a field that is supposed to be all-powerful (we're educating young minds here!). For those you in academia, you will be dumbstruck with how right on this book is. Originally, I thought that I was the only one who had these kinds of dark thoughts and ideas. But this book was a great solace to me. Additionally, it's hilarious! Jay has a fantastic vocabulary that had me looking up words left and right. Not to mention a great sense of humor, and spot-on observations. At only 200 pages, this book packs an enormous punch. I finished it in one sitting and immediately went back and re-read it (that never happens). I cannot say enough about this book! While it is set in academia and will strike a certain note with those on this bumpy road, it is accessible and enjoyable for all. I had my wife read it, who is a manager in hospitality, and she loved it. The dysfunction that is expressed is something that ALL people in any career can really understand and bond with (that one department that gets all of the goodies while the rest "squander"; the incestuous relationships that are founded when you work somewhere for many years; the feeling that management is just not listening to you and might even be playing a trick on you!). I could easily write a 1,500 word essay on how amazing this book is. But I will give you the Cliff/Spark Notes: just read it! You will not be disappointed. If you look at my other reviews, you will see that I RARELY give books five stars. But this one is worth 6 or 7!!

I became aware of this book from a review in "The Chronicle of Higher Education," which recommended it, but with the warnings that (a) the main character is a cliché, drawn from countless academic novels, of the cranky male dinosaur prof with women troubles; and (b) the novel's satire is unsupported by a meaningful vision for academe, its jokes cheapened by not being at the service of a deeper purpose. Neither of these criticisms fit my experience of this book, which chronicles a year in the life of English professor Jason Fitger through his correspondence, mostly letters of recommendations (LORs, as he refers to them). Indeed our hero is a type, recognizable both from literature and from life, of the cantankerous, retrograde English prof who clings to his oldfangled ways even as they plunge him into certain obsolescence. But those of us who have struggled with the online forms on which LORs must currently be submitted will find a freshness to the predicaments described here: e.g., to the way that Fitger's answers to the cookie-cutter questions are cut off by the forms, to his refusal to check the boxes that require him to rank students

by percentages, and ultimately to his insistence on sending them via "the picturesque blue mailbox on the corner, opening its creaking rectangular metal mouth, and dropping the envelope within." This kind of comedy, which Schumacher handles with aplomb, simply would not work with a different, updated protagonist. Also, despite his superannuated ways, Fitger, as it turns out, has not only a soul but a surprisingly sturdy ability to work the system, which together amount to a vision that easily sustains the satire in this novel (even if it does at times border on the sentimental). Threaded throughout the book are his indefatigable efforts to support a talented but tormented student (Darren Browles), his vain hopes of reuniting with his estranged wife (who learns of his infidelity through an unfortunate "reply all" mishap), and his growing, grudging respect for the sociologist "appointed by the university warlords to rule our asylum [the English Dept.] until the inmates exhibit greater pliability and calm." These threads are tied together in a denouement that, while hardly wildly dramatic, exhibits that Fitger is true to his principles, ready to make sacrifices, and will persevere in the face of whatever hardship life throws his way. As an erstwhile member myself of an English Dept., I also found highly satisfying and quite hilarious the many jabs this book takes at the lavish treatment received by the Economics Dept., which resides in the same building as English just upstairs and is undergoing renovation throughout the year of this epistolary narrative. That renovation accelerates the indignities forced upon the literature faculty by poisoning them with venomous fumes, demolishing the fax machine when a portion of the ceiling collapses almost decapitating the English Department's student assistant, and leaching slick and noxious liquids onto the floor of the men's room which abuts Fitger's office. "But never mind: I'm sure our foreshortened life spans will be made worthwhile on the day when the economists in their jewel-encrusted palanquins, are reinstalled in their palazzo over our heads." These are indeed hard times for the humanities. While this novel lacks the heft to qualify as any kind of masterpiece, even a comic one, and while it will probably (hopefully!) feel dated in a relatively short time, it feels really good to be able laugh along with Julie Schumacher and Jason Fitger at the absurdity of the moment in which we find ourselves now.

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