THE GRADUATE STUDENT NOVEL:
A NEW SUBGENRE OF UNIVERSITY FICTION

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A NEW SUBGENRE IN UNIVERSITY FICTION

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DEDICATION

I am so grateful to the people in my life who have stuck with me throughout this long journey. In particular, I would like to thank my mom, Christy Lueck, for showing consistent interest in my writing, even when she did not understand what I was talking about; and my husband, Timothy Brown, for making meals, keeping the house habitable, and generally helping me survive. I am also extremely appreciative of the unwavering support of the rest of my family and all my friends and colleagues.

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THE GRAD STUDENT NOVEL:
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ABSTRACT

This study examines novels with graduate student protagonists, referred to as graduate student novels or grad novels, and argues that such novels should be considered distinct from others about university experiences. It builds on previous scholarship that distinguishes between novels about professors and about undergraduates as academic and campus novels, respectively. Through the consideration of several grad novels, three common elements are identified as characteristic of the subgenre: a grad student protagonist who is introduced at a moment of stasis in their research or academic progress; the intervention of fate which dramatically impacts the protagonist’s story, and a conclusion that alludes to or explicitly depicts a kind of success in academia.

The recognizable characteristics that illustrate the major differences, also provide helpful avenues toward examinations of the image of graduate scholarship produced by grad novels and different issues related to higher education.

The initial stasis is examined as allegorical for the recently identified developmental stage of the quarter life and the quarter life crisis. The significance of fate and the protagonists’ lack of agency is discussed alongside considerations of anti-intellectual sentiments. And the fictional academic success is read in comparison with academic quit lit written by scholars leaving academia. This dissertation considers the graduate novel as capable of being read both as an allegory and as representative of the actual experiences of scholars-in-training. It concludes with a contemplation of the potential alternative interpretations of readers inside and outside of academia.
“Divisions of rank vary in significance from institution to institution and within the departments of any single institution. The only distinction of absolute importance is of course that between teachers and students—and no other distinction works as powerfully in the cause of self-dramatization.”

- Benjamin DeMott, “How to Write a College Novel,” p. 70

INTRODUCTION

Jeffrey Williams’s “The Rise of the Academic Novel” identified two different types of novels about higher education. Williams uses “campus novel” to refer to “novels that center on students,” and “academic novel” for “those that center on professors” (561). Elaine Showalter makes a similar claim in Faculty Towers: “In the university, I think there are two stories—those of the faculty and those of the students” (121). Merritt Moseley further contends, “Postgraduate students are rarely at the heart of academic novels; instead, they figure more often as oddly intermediate characters, alike enough to undergraduates to be set off from their professors, different enough from undergraduates for affairs with faculty members without the opprobrium that attaches to entanglements with undergraduates” (“Types” 105). Starting roughly thirty years ago, however, more novels have started to place postgraduate students “at the heart” of their action¹. Rather than grouping such novels with either of the previously established subgenres, this dissertation argues that the grad student novel should be considered distinct from campus or academic novels.

¹ Based on John E. Kramer’s annotated bibliographies: The American College Novel and Academe in Mystery and Detective Fiction and a search of New York Times book reviews with phrases like “postgraduate” or “graduate student” as keywords.
Under the all-encompassing category of “university novels” or “university fiction,” academic novels, campus novels, and grad student novels maintain noticeable differences that support the individual groupings. As Williams explains, campus novels “revolve around campus life and present young adult comedies or dramas, most frequently coming-of-age narratives” and academic novels “portray adult predicaments in marriage and home as well as the workplace, most familiarly yielding mid-life crisis plots” (561-2). Grad novels, alternatively, concentrate on the complicated identity of an individual who is both teacher and student. This indistinct position makes grad novel plots especially useful for depicting the somewhat recently acknowledged developmental stage of the quarter-life crisis. This representation is considered in Chapter 1 with a focus on the highly visible experiences of the Millennial generation, but also with an argument that the quarter-life stage emerged as a unique period of life (for certain social and economic classes) several generations earlier than the term’s originators suggest.

Along with plot-based life-stage differences identified by Williams, grad novels can also be differentiated from other university fiction by what I call the grad novel formula. The grad student formula is made up of three identifiable elements: a protagonist who begins the novel “stuck” in some way; who is dramatically affected by an intervention of fate; and who ends the novel with academic success. These formulaic elements were ascertained through the reading of a wide variety of novels that centered on a graduate student’s scholarly experiences. In the following chapters I discuss several of these novels in conjunction with the grad novel formula and different aspects of the portrayal of graduate study these texts present.
The novels examined in this dissertation were chosen for several reasons. My first qualification was, unsurprisingly, that the protagonist was engaged in postgraduate study. I limited the type of study to PhD programs\(^2\), with the exception of one novel whose protagonist is working towards a terminal MFA. I excluded books with graduate student protagonists whose story did not directly relate to their identity as a graduate student. For instance, the main character of *Marathon Man*, by William Golding, is a postgraduate history student, but the novel’s plot is primarily concerned with his identity as a runner and his relationships with his brother and father. John Irving’s *The Water Method Man*, which features a grad student protagonist whose story is about his adolescence, his future marriage, and his urinary tract disorder, was also excluded for this reason. And, with the exception of George Stewart’s *Doctor’s Oral*, published in 1939, none of the texts were published prior to 2000\(^3\). Stewart’s novel provides evidence of an historically consistent vision of graduate study in fiction, and also helps support my claim of the quarter-life stage’s earlier existence.

By reading so many grad novels alongside criticism of other forms of university fiction, I noticed a few important differences between the ways the subgenres portray academic life. Literary examination of campus and academic novels tend to highlight ways in which scholarly characters are maligned. Considering the 17th-century text *The First and Best Part of Scoggins Iests*, Mortimer Proctor observes the “ridicule heaped on the want of even common sense in the university clerk.” Proctor points out that this is particularly well illustrated when the college “freshman […] who, poaching rabbits with

\(^2\) Susan Choi’s *My Education* does not specify the degree its protagonist is working towards, but provides a few context clues to suggest she is a PhD student.

\(^3\) A *Jealous Ghost* by A. N. Wilson is the oldest, published in 2005.
his fellows, cried ‘Ecce cuniculi multi!’ when he saw their prey, and as the frightened rabbits ran off was astonished to reflect that they should have understood Latin” (19). Writing about university fiction published two centuries later, David Lodge comments, “Intellectuals are seen as fairly sinister figures, bohemian and nonconformist, treasonable clerks whose heartless celebrations pose a threat to the unreflective pieties of ordinary life” or as “pathetically ineffectual characters—crumpled figures of fun pursuing their ludicrous abstractions at a remote distance from the bustle of daily life” (Eagleton 93). Scholarship on university fiction often reveals hostility towards the characters inside the academic world. Graduate student novels, alternatively, tend to focus hostility towards the institution rather than its inhabitants.

The tropes of the scholar-fool or intellectual villain, so common to academic and campus novels, generally reinforce the anti-intellectual beliefs of readers from outside academia. Grad student novels distinguish themselves from the other two categories by creating academic characters with whom nonacademic readers might easily relate. The second element of the formula, the intervention of fate, humanizes the protagonists and dispels stereotypes of scholars’ inadaptability, obsession with power and control, and inability to experience a world outside of books and schedules. Rather than pointing to the individuals within academia, grad novels tend to criticize—if they criticize anything—the institution itself. Readers are persuaded to distrust the value and benefit of scholarship or the system of graduate instruction rather than distrusting the scholars as individuals.

Along with the tendency to satirize academic characters, campus and academic novels often suggest that happiness can only exist outside a university setting. The
subtitle of Marta Lysik’s article, “Escape, Change, and Return in Contemporary Academic Novels, Or Why I Read Campus Novels, But Probably Shouldn’t,” refers to the depressing image the texts so often convey of academia and why such negativity might damage Lysik’s view of herself and her profession.

In the article she reviews several university novels which present the academic life as a contradiction to a happy one. With regards to Tolstoy Lied, by Rachel Kadish, Lysik discusses how the experiences of professor protagonist, Tracy Farber, support this notion. In the novel, “people in academia, [Tracy’s] colleagues, nearly break her wonderful spirit.” She finds friendship and love outside the university, and she eventually discovers freedom through “decisions of letting go.” According to Lysik, “Tracy achieves happiness, but the suggestion that one must choose between happiness and success in academia” is an inescapable detail she, as a professor herself, cannot overlook (114-5).

George Watson similarly notes of campus novels, “it is common enough for the hero of a Victorian novel […] to spend a chapter or two in an ancient seat of learning, sometimes idling, or falling in debt or in love, before he leaves for the world that really counts” (36). According to Watson, examination of campus novels leads to “the central assumption […] nobody but a complete muff would bother with a university at all, except as a swift passage from school to real life, and that anyone who remains in one is an existential failure” (37). Leslie Fiedler further notes, characters “who represent the final horror of academic life are not the defeated intellectuals who fled the campus or died on it, but those who have adapted to the demands of the university and stayed in the classroom” (54). There is a common propensity among novels about both professors and undergraduates to imply—if not explicitly argue—that academia is not a place for
fulfillment or happiness. The common theme of finding success and happiness at the end of grad student novels, considered in Chapter 3, thus provides another rationale for an additional, separate classification.

Along with “grad student novel,” the majority of the texts examined in this dissertation would likely fall into another classification as well: the classification of genre fiction. They exhibit characteristics of conventional forms of detective, adventure, romance, and science-fiction. They are not aimed at an academic readership despite their academic context. Critics writing on university fiction often quote Fiedler’s claim that “the college novel […] is an innately vulgar form” (48). And John Lyons similarly laments, “the novel of academic life has fostered no Fielding, Flaubert, or Tolstoy” (xv). Lyons concludes his lengthy examination of university fiction claiming, “Those novelists who have succeeded in making the student something other than a callow youth and the professor other than a wicked or bumbling bore are few indeed” (186). As Lyons points out, “Even professors have a tendency to present the professor as a befuddled, chalk-covered, impotent half-man” (xiv). And Sanford Pinsker explains this tendency asking, “Which self-respecting lit. professor hasn’t though—either out loud or in private—about knocking off a tale of the assorted troubles at his or her version of Eyesore U?” (440).

While there is a sense that academics who enjoy reading these types of university fiction can easily “see the satire as directed towards one’s own enemies within the profession rather than against oneself as a possible offender” (Rossen 185). Readers outside academia, however, might not have such readily available exceptions for these caricatures.
In the final chapter I consider three grad novels, whose writers—in my opinion—would be accepted in Lyons’s “few.” Each is written by a professor of creative writing and grapples with questions concerning the role of the university in its students’ experiences. They question how knowledge is attained and what is truly important in the world of academia. I suggest that the change of focus, from professor or undergraduate to graduate student, allows the professorial author some distance from their protagonists’ point of view while still focusing on issues in the realm of advanced scholarship. This distance might explain the authors’ divergence from so many literary academic and campus novels in the novels’ presentation of academia. I am also interested, however, in how these texts differ from the others discussed in this dissertation and what that suggests about intended audience and the conception of literariness.

The number of graduate students outside of fiction—literary or otherwise—has been steadily increasing. Despite troubling career prospects and many publicized complaints about the system currently in place, graduate enrollment in U.S. universities has had an historically consistent increase over the years. The increasing numbers could explain the more frequent appearance of graduate student protagonists in university fiction. Williams argues that “academe is no longer a marginal place and academic fiction is no longer strange or quirky but common” (573). As graduate school becomes a more common experience, it makes sense that grad student characters would become more common as well. This dissertation is interested in the growing visibility of grad student protagonists and the ways their novels distinguish themselves from novels about

\[^{4}\text{According to the Report on Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities: 2014, “the number of doctorates awarded each year shows a strong upward trend over time—average annual growth of 3.4% punctuated by brief periods of slow growth and even decline” (2).}\]
professors and undergraduate students. The recognizable characteristics that illustrate the major differences, also provide helpful avenues toward examinations of the image of graduate scholarship produced by grad novels and different issues related to higher education.
“That was the way of the graduate students all the way through the University—bright nearly all of them or they wouldn’t have got even where they were—brilliant a lot of them. There they were, sandwiched between undergraduates and the faculty. The undergraduates mostly had money from home, and even if they hadn’t, they were just kids. It didn’t hurt a kid to do dirty work and be kicked around for a few years; maybe it was good for him. But he […] was twenty-eight; at twenty-eight a man ought to be working at something that he was fit to do.”

- George R. Stewart, Doctor’s Oral, pp. 23-4

CHAPTER 1: Starting Stuck

The first identifiable feature in the grad novel formula is that the novels begin with the protagonists “stuck” in some way. They might suffer from writers’ block in the midst of their dissertation. They might have encountered some obstacle in their research. They might be unable to find their footing in their first few days of graduate school. In some way, they are unable to move forward in their studies. While many actual graduate students might identify with the situation, it can alternatively be understood as the start of an allegory for a recently defined life stage.

According to Williams, university fiction grew in popularity due to the form’s ability to speak to more general experiences than those of only academics. He notes, “the campus novel grafted with the bildungsroman and became a prime theater of coming of age [and] the academic novel has grafted with the mid-life crisis novel, the marriage novel, and the professional-work novel to become a prime theater of middle-class experience” (562). In the familiar academic structure that “is an advantage for both author and reader” (Moseley, “Intro” 17), a graduate student—simultaneously a student
and a teacher in many situations—provides a convenient template for presentations of what psychologists Joan Atwood and Corrine Scholtz have identified as the quarter-life stage. More specifically, grad novels provide a “prime theater” of the quarter-life crisis.

A quarter-life crisis occurs “somewhere between leaving adolescence and two decades before the ‘mid-life crisis’” (Atwood & Scholtz 234). It results from the stress that comes at the age when people are “not children anymore…and also not quite adult. You may call yourself an adult (as will others), but deep down inside you are petrified because you don’t feel like one” (Pattee 220). According to Atwood and Scholtz, the quarter-life stage extends “from approximately 18-29 years of age and sometimes later,” and its emergence “is believed to be the result of several social, historic and economic factors that occurred post WWII” (233). As the authors explain, “[p]ost WWII society [held] easy access to goals, but what could be problematic in this society [was] the commitment to the goals in the first place and the resulting gratification or lack thereof when those goals [were] finally achieved” (235-236). Atwood and Scholtz cite theorists Robbins and Wilner who, in 2001, suggested “a crisis of the quarter-life as occurring somewhere between leaving adolescence and two decades before the ‘mid-life crisis” (234). By examining other scholars and including citations from sources published as early as 1968, Atwood and Scholtz establish that the stage they seek to define has been discernable for multiple generations despite its more recent identification.

While the quarter-life development stage may have emerged long before the Millennial generation reached legal adulthood, the Great Recession, beginning in 2007,

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5 Erikson, E. H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis.* Norton, 1968. – This article also references older publications, but this is the earliest in Atwood and Scholtz’s reference list to refer to an emergent life stage.
brought its existence into the spotlight. Along with sociologists, economists, and historians, the phenomenon also caught the attention of novelists. The most recent addition to bookstore categories is “New Adult,” which first appeared in 2009. A competition sponsored by St. Martin’s Press in November 2009 solicited “great, new, cutting edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA [Young Adult] and appeal to an adult audience […] a sort of ‘older YA’ or ‘new adult’” (Jae-Jones).

Situating itself among other categories, its most important signifier “is not necessarily the age of the protagonist but the tone and content” (Stewart 3). The editorial assistant who promoted the contest, S. Jae-Jones, described the “transitory state of the developing adult psyche rather wryly as ‘the quarter-life crisis, as succinct a summation of the appeal of the new adult category as is yet available’” (4). Jae-Jones’s description may be wry, but it also suggests that readers (and the writers entering the contest) will understand what she means without further explanation of what such a crisis might entail.

The contest itself was unsuccessful in its original goal; “by 2011, St. Martin’s Press had failed to publish any material generated by the contest,” but several authors adopted the New Adult descriptor “and found success by self-publishing in the new genre.” The popularity of these novels attracted “attention from the mainstream publishing world and motivated the establishment of lines and imprints dedicated to the new genre” (Pattee 219). Writer and editor s.e. smith explains the category’s appeal as the result of “‘Millennials [being] trapped in a form of enforced childhood. They can’t fully spread their wings because their feathers have been clipped, and consequently, they’re going through many of the same issues faced by […] teen protagonists’” (smith para. 6). smith may be correct in explaining the creation of New Adult fiction as a
moniker, but George R. Stewart’s grad student novel provides evidence that Millennials are not the first to struggle with the concept of adulthood.

Stewart’s novel, Doctor’s Oral, was published in 1939 and is likely one of the first novels to fit the requirements for the grad novel classification. As such, it is interesting to consider how it relates to a formula developed based on contemporary grad novels. Comparing it with two recent texts, War of the Encyclopaedists (2015) and Save Your Own (2006), the similarities are surprising and lead to three primary considerations. First, that the quarter-life developmental stage began appearing earlier than Atwood and Scholtz have argued and therefore stems from something other than the end of World War II. Second, that grad students have provided models for the quarter-life crisis for more than three quarters of a century. And third, that the grad novel formula may speak to more than just the current historical and economic moment.

As previously mentioned, the first element of the grad novel formula is the sense that the protagonist is caught in some way that prohibits their progress in academia. If, as university novelist David Lodge explains, “the university is a kind of microcosm of society at large” (169), then this stasis represents a stalling of development towards complete development. Being trapped in graduate school—unable to move forward and with seemingly no way completely back—is analogous to being “trapped in an enforced childhood.” Other writers and critics have also suggested that the popularity of basing novels in university settings stems from useful and widely-recognized aspects of

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*Kramer’s annotated bibliographies include two earlier examples—*Bertram Cope’s Year* by Henry Blake Fuller (1919) and *We are Betrayed* by Vardis Fisher (1935). Clarissa Cushman’s novel, *The Other Brother*, was also published in 1939. There were also two detective novels—*Murder at Cambridge* by Richard Wilson Webb (1933) and *Harvard has a Homicide* by Timothy Fuller (1937)—but their descriptions suggest they would not meet my criteria as their plots seem to take them away from their scholarly identities.
university life that conveniently establish structures that symbolize larger, less tangible concepts. The grad novel benefits similarly provide such a symbol for attaining adulthood: attaining a degree—or at least making significant progress towards one—is a clearly-discriminable marker for the otherwise more difficult-to-define transition from adolescence to adulthood.

**LIFE ON HOLD**

*Doctor’s Oral* follows doctoral student Joe Grantland on the day of his oral examination. Passing this exam is a prerequisite for Joe to continue on to dissertation work, but it is also crucial for Joe’s future beyond graduate school. A few days earlier, Joe received a telegram with the offer of a junior instructor position. The telegram informed Joe that he had been hired—contingent on his passing the exam. Reviewing the telegram on the morning of his oral, Joe asserts, “It made the examination seem so much more important. A few days ago it had been a matter of pride and prestige […] Now all at once, everything, his whole future, had come to depend upon his passing” (21). Initially, this claim might seem hyperbolic, but then Joe learns that his girlfriend is pregnant. Comforting her when she tearfully shares the news he says, “Say, Jule, if I pass this examination, you know, I’ll have a pretty good job—say, will you marry me then? We could have the kid” (42). The conditional emphasizes that the exam results will now affect someone else’s future as well.

Joe feels as if his life has been on hold up to this point. He earned a “Bachelor of arts, Master of arts […]—for six years […] he’d been doing menial jobs—paging in the Library, […] waiting on tables, reading Freshman papers. To be sure, he’d been a Temporary Instructor for his two years; that was a little more dignified, but lots of work
and little pay” (23). He feels that at his age, “at twenty-eight in a decently managed world, he could be doing something worth doing” (24). The concept of adulthood Joe holds does not match the experience he lives. People at the quarter-life stage understand this inner-conflict, and the Recession created an economic condition leading to additional causes of and outcry about this situation.

Atwood and Scholtz point to the close of World War II as the catalyst for the quarter-life stage emerging as a distinct period of development. In his rebuke of university fiction, however, Leslie Fiedler indicates an argument for setting its start earlier. Fiedler points to the Great Depression as the catalyst for the category’s growth. He argues, “It was not just in search of security (which in any event they did not find) that the children of the Depression turned to colleges, but also in pursuit of the long-delayed adulthood of American culture” (61). Fiedler’s argument suggests that the increase in enrollment for higher education started before the GI Bill came into effect.

Parallels between two major economic disasters—the Depression of the 1920s and the Recession of the late 2000s—are easy to draw, and it makes sense that both could be involved in first the conception and then detection of a particular developmental identity. Fiedler’s connection of such a state to higher education, however, might also explain the convenience of using graduate education to represent the experience of a quarter-life crisis.

The authors of War of the Encyclopaedists, Christopher Robinson and Gavin Kovite, utilize the pursuit of a graduate degree to illustrate a protagonist’s “existential crisis.” The novel centers around best friends Mickey Montauk and Halifax Corderoy, a pair of best friends who intended to move to Boston together to attend graduate
programs, “Coderoy at Boston University and Montauk at Harvard” (15), until Montauk’s Army National Guard unit was assigned a deployment to Iraq. The two keep in touch by editing a Wikipedia page they created as undergraduates, and their contrasting entries, and the shifting narrative between their experiences, further the idea that graduate school is not the “real” world.

Readers are told that the “seeds of Corderoy’s existential crisis were planted during his first class” (73). The class discussion turns to the question of practical knowledge vs. knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Listening to his professor and classmates Corderoy thinks, “Montauk was preparing for war,” something that “had real risks, real consequences—and here Corderoy was, talking about fucking books” (76). In that first class the professor asks if his Literary Criticism course is a waste of time. Corderoy is asked to explain his assertion that it is. He says it is a waste of time ‘Because…we produce nothing consumed by the world outside of academia, and the opportunity cost of applying our intellects to something that’s basically useless, aside from whatever personal satisfaction we get from it, when we could be building rockets or curing cancer. I mean, we can’t all by physicists, but at least we could be building tables or filming amateur pornography or something that would actually get used by other humans!’ (75)

Rather than taking offense, the professor agrees saying, “we, as English professors have, over time, ensured our own usefulness by creating texts so dense with inclusive language that only a member of the elect can decipher them7” (75). The conversation illustrates one

7 This seems like a prime example of anti-intellectualism in a subgenre I have claimed generally purports to alleviate such concepts. I believe the sentiment is countered with the professor’s comical self-deprecation (a sense of acknowledging that this may be how others view his profession) and with his concluding remarks: “Is it a waste of time? […] chances are you’re not
of the ways Corderoy is “stuck.” In an earlier scene, Montauk meets Corderoy at the airport before his flight to Boston. Corderoy expresses feelings of inadequacy with regards to their different paths: “I’m just going to school. You’re going to war. I should be seeing you off” (31). The unexpected change of plans caused by Montauk’s deployment orders forces Corderoy to consider his own priorities and his place in the world.

Alternatively, Gillian Cormier-Brandenburg, the protagonist of Save Your Own, has long known her place in the world thanks to her parents’ explicitly voiced expectations. Gillian’s parents, two “peerless scientists,” arguably sent their child into a quarter-life crisis by denying her a childhood. They hypothesized that their daughter would ascend naturally and quite rapidly to the highest level of cognitive functioning as long as […] she was set completely free in a stimulating, unobstructed environment. It was only the modern culture of childhood (exemplified by Disney characters, didactic stories that mixed fantasy and reality, wading pools, birthday parties, […] and Goodnight Moon) that made children helpless and irrational. (42)

Gillian’s identity crisis comes not from the confusing transition of childhood to adulthood, but the confusing transition of an imposed, superficial adulthood into an adulthood recognized by people outside her nuclear family.

At the start of the novel, Gillian receives a letter informing her that “the Zephyr Foundation Fellowship that funds [her] monthly stipend will be revoked” and that, if she

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going to be Aristotle. But I offer you this to ponder: the search for human meaning—what could be more important?—must happen through intellectual investigation that is not tethered to empirical knowledge or scientific progress” (79).
wants to continue in her program at Harvard Divinity School, her “tuition and fees for the spring semester are payable in full by the first of the year.” Gillian had already spent four years in graduate school and “had less than one hundred dollars in [her] checking account, and no savings” (3). Without the fellowship, she will not be able to continue working towards her degree.

Gillian receives an annual phone call from her parents on her birthday. The call occurs shortly after she receives her warning, and her parents unsurprisingly ask about her progress on her dissertation. When she responds that she is “not quite” finished, her father warns, “Well, you’d better get a move on. […] We agreed that you would finish in January so you could spend the spring interviewing at universities and start your first job in the fall” (43). When Gillian hangs up, she berates herself for “persist[ing] in half-truths and evasions.” She maintains that a “really mature person would simply have reported the facts”, but she then admits to herself she “was not a mature person yet.”. At 26 years of age Gillian feels “as if [her] entire life was a juvenile farce”; one she’d not be able to escape after losing her fellowship (45).

Joe, Corderoy, and Gillian all have preconceived notions of what it means to be an adult, and each feels he or she is failing to meet those expectations. As a life stage, the quarter-life is largely defined by what it is not, which suggests there are no expectations to meet. By starting stuck, grad novel protagonists demonstrate this unclear position\(^8\) as they struggle to define themselves. Joe Grantland questions his life decisions thinking, “there wasn’t much incentive to finish your degree when they, the ones who had finished,

\(^8\) The attainment of a degree provides the clear designation of symbolically reaching adulthood for the protagonists. Being stalled in progress toward this attainment means they are not advancing towards that objective, but their station as a graduate student also places them apart from those not seeking it.
just stood around in lines and kept on working at close to nothing an hour” (25). Hal Corderoy’s experiences in Boston, attempting be a graduate student and to also have a life outside his studies, have led him to the conclusion that “the universe was indifferent to [his] fortunes” (119). And Gillian can only describe herself in negatives: “I am not writing a book. I am not learning anything […] And I am not attractive either” (111). It makes sense that this confusing life stage could feel a connection with a struggling graduate student’s story. While the quarter-life stage is not constrained to a specific generation, the protagonists’ stuck start is particularly apt for Millennials.

CONCEPTIONS OF ADULTHOOD

In 2016, The American Dialect Society nominated the verb “adult” for the Most Creative Word of 2015. Its first definition, according to *American Speech*, is to “Behave in an adult manner; engage in activities associated with adulthood” (Zimmer et al. 83). The journal also notes that this definition can be conjugated into a noun: “adulting, vbl.n. Behavior or activity associated with being an adult” (84). The linguists behind the award trace this usage to a Tweet from 2008—the first full year of the Great Recession, and the same year Atwood and Scholtz proposed the “new developmental stage called the quarter-life” (233) in the June issue of *Contemporary Family Therapy*. The quarter-life crisis is not unique to the Millennial generation, but Millennials have provided unprecedently visible indications of the life stage. In doing so they called attention to the previously overlooked stage, and also garnered attack from other generations and even from their own.

The Millennial Generation, which has also been referred to as the “Burnout Generation” or the “Me Generation,” is often viewed negatively. According to a survey
conducted by the Pew Research Center, the majority of the American population that fits the defined age-group prefers to identify with one of the adjoining generations—most popularly, Generation X (“Most Millennials”). This same study found that, compared to samplings from three other generational cohorts, Millennials “stand out in their willingness to ascribe negative stereotypes to their own generation” (Steinmetz para. 7).

Coining the newest definition for the word “adult” is just one illustration of Millennials’ self-deprecation and promotion of their negative image.

By using words like “adulting” to describe actions like “doing your own taxes, buying your first lawnmower, staying in on a Friday, being someone’s boss or getting super pumped about home appliances […] they] create distance between [themselves] and what are implied to be actual adults who are adulting 100% of the time and therefore have little reason to acknowledge it” (Steinmetz para. 7-8). It inherently implies that the behavior is rare and that generally, whomever it is ascribed to, does not usually behave or act like an adult. Adulting is often used to describe its user, and the word can express “the speaker’s insecurity at so rarely finding themselves in an adult posture well into their 30s” (para. 9). Like the protagonists discussed above, Millennials using this word feel they are not truly adults because actions and choices are more significant determinants than age.

Millennials have arguably been ‘stuck from the start’ as so many entered, or were about to enter, the workforce at the start of the Great Recession. In 2008, someone born in the middle of the Millennial generation was 19 years old. They had just made it past the age of legal adulthood to enter what some economists argue was “the worst financial crisis in global history, including the Great Depression” (Egan). The Recession created a
number of hurdles for Millennials, including high amounts of debt due to the relatively new existence of student loans. They were entering the workforce of a crippled economy with historically high rates of debt for individuals in their age range.

Without secure job prospects, Millennials began putting off some of the events that act as traditional signifiers of adulthood. In 2008, according to Atwood and Scholtz, “eighteen million 20-34 year olds live[d] with their parents.” They explain this number’s significance stating, “[i]n the 1930s, only 25% of those who left home returned. In the mid-1980’s, this figure rose to 40% and today [2008], it is as high as 60%” (238). Due to a variety of changing and influential social and economic elements, Atwood and Scholtz suggest that “benchmarks used by traditional developmental theorists may no longer be relevant in a post-modern society nor may they occur at the ages previously described” (240). All these observations explain the identification of the quarter-life stage at that moment in history when Millennials entered it, but Atwood and Scholtz also maintain that it had appeared in earlier generations.

Not Just Millennials

Atwood and Scholtz attribute development of the life stage to increased opportunities available to young people after the end of WWII. With the option to

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9 Although the first publicly-funded student loan is recorded from the 1950s, the 2000s provided unique student-loan-related problems: “The rising cost of higher education has greatly surpassed the general cost of living expenses and medical expenses. While the U.S. Government has made it easier for anyone to attend college with the various student loan programs currently available, they have also helped fuel the rising cost of higher education by lending too easily” (Wadia para. 7). More individuals began to rely on loans under the belief that they would attain jobs after graduation and would be able to pay them off.

10 The quarter-life stage was and continues to be experienced most commonly by individuals in the middle- and upper-income brackets. The identity-crisis inherently connected to the stage implies a level of privilege in that the individual must have some expectation of multiple options of lifestyles to experience it.
choose and the resulting fear of choosing the wrong thing. As social theorist Barry Schwartz explains in *The Paradox of Choice*, the inevitable inability to know for certain the results of each potential choice is what ultimately causes anxiety. If we don’t know what *would* have been, there’s always the question of what *might* have been. This may have been the situation individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 encountered after the war, but for Millennials, and for contemporary readers of *Doctor’s Oral*, it seems like a lack of opportunity can be just as anxiety-inducing.

The second feature of the grad novel formula is the intervention of fate. It refers to something that happens *to* the protagonist that helps them to eventually get un-stuck. It is an element of the story that pushes the plot forward but is not within the protagonist’s control. For Gillian, her lack of agency is illustrated through her advisor’s suggestion she work at a halfway house to support her project’s research focus, the threat of losing her fellowship without evidence of substantial progress, and the moment the fellowship is fully rescinded. Out of Corderoy’s control are: George W. Bush winning the 2004 presidential election, his girlfriend’s decision to terminate her pregnancy, and the IED that puts his best friend in a wheelchair. For Joe, the unpredictable dispositions of his committee members and their own experiences on the day of his oral exam impact the result more significantly than anything Joe says or does.

Joe had been prepped for the exam by a student who had been in the program a few years longer than himself. Pat has supported several other students in their exam preparations but had never taken the exam himself. Readers are told:

Pat had no doubt but that he could pass the oral any time, if he just got around to doing it; he had coached a lot of people for it, and most of them knew much less
than he did, and a good many of them had passed. But in some way he just never got around to taking it. What with the world as it was—dictators, depression and recession and obsession, and the trouble in Spain—you just seemed to lose interest. (66-7)

Pat is an interesting contradiction in ideologies as someone who feels graduate study is not pragmatic considering everything happening in the world around him, but also feels no desire to leave the program, through either graduation or voluntary exit. His complicated thoughts on the process of examination also adds to the suggestion that Joe’s exam results are not completely based on his own efforts.

Pat exhibits his skepticism on the morning of Joe’s exam. Pat meets Joe for breakfast and asks, “What’s actually going to determine whether you pass? How much you know? Naturally not. How much they think you know. And that may be more or less than what you know” (56). Considering the seven professors on the exam committee, Pat provides his appraisal on two of its members: Dr. “Brice […] You’re doing your thesis under him; so he’ll back you, if he can. But if you start doing too badly, he’ll turn against you worst of the all; that’s the way it always is” (59-60); and Dr. Kendrick: “he and Brice hate each other like nobody’s business.” Pat sees the animosity as influential for Joe’s exam. It is good if Joe can get them to waste time on “campus politics or something” (61), but could be bad if they chose to vote against each other regardless of Joe’s work.

One of the members was added at the last minute and “was quite unknown” (101). Joe feels the addition is “a cold-blooded way to do things, just as if you were picking a juryman out of a panel by lot” (101-102). From the students’ perspectives, the process is
“hardly fair; maybe [one’s] whole life would be determined by the way his mind and
tongue worked during two or three hours” (30), and it was “[s]even professors, well-paid,
smug, well-fed bastards, all ganging up on one man. Seven on one, one after another,
give [sic] him no rest” (119). Thinking of the helplessness he feels, Joe imagines running
away into the “open country; he could keep going. Out there, would be real things—crops
and cows, and men who spat brown and had muscles” (12). Running away would give
him the agency he feels he lacks in his academic setting. As a graduate student, so much
of his future depends upon his professors and he feels as if he were set up for failure.

The background stories of the committee’s day up to the exam, most of which Joe
is never made aware, further illustrate the role of chance in Joe’s future—the exam score
will affect him financially due to the job offer and personally because of his girlfriend’s
pregnancy. About halfway through the text, the novel shifts perspectives and begins to
follow the professors who make up Joe’s exam committee. One professor “had long since
realized that if he was to use his mind for matters which he considered important, he must
not clog it with useless information” (144) and so “mentally noted the hour, place, and
nature of the examination […] But what actual student he might find there seemed to him
a detail which need not clog his mind” (145). Another, who “knew that he had no classes
that afternoon,” made himself comfortable in his study and then promptly fell asleep
(138). Roughly fifteen minutes into exam time, when the department secretary calls to
remind him, he insists “he was held up by some quite unexpected and important
University business, but that he was just going out to get into his car when [she] called”
(155). Along with the anxiety Joe feels while waiting for the exam to begin, he worries
that the professor “would arrive in a hurried and flustered state of mind, irritated a little
by suspecting that his colleagues knew he had forgotten. The others would be irritated at having had to wait, and the candidate might be the one to take the effects of all that irritation” (156). The young professor, Dr. Webb, who had been added last minute, had spent not a little of his free time at planning some questions he would bring up and imagining the skillful way he would lead the candidate from point to point displaying the candidate’s knowledge or ignorance and at the same time showing his own command of his field, his ability as an examiner, and in short his general capacity. He was due […] a promotion, and it was not every day that he had a chance to perform before four senior members of his department. (179)

It is Webb’s first time sitting on an exam committee and he feels as if he were being assessed as well11. When another examiner asks, during the break, how he thinks Joe is doing, “he hedged. ‘Well, you can’t tell just yet’”, and then feels embarrassed about his desire that his vote correspond with the others: “The culprits, not the judges, became comrades; the heretics who were burned, not the Grand Inquisitors who condemned them” (188). Throughout the novel, Joe compares his exam with the experience of a defendant in a hostile trial and Webb’s ruminations suggest that the examiners—in some way at least—share this conception. If Joe is on trial, his destiny is largely in the hands of the defense attorney and the jury.

11 Readers know that Joe is twenty-eight years old and, while Dr. Webb’s age is not specified, his youthfulness is suggested through comparisons between Webb and the other professors. I only assume he is not younger or the same age as Joe as that is never suggested. Based on his characterization throughout the novel, being older than one of his examiners is something Joe would likely note in one of his many anxious thoughts regarding himself opposed to the panel. Stewart draws comparisons between Dr. Webb and Joe in a way that seems to emphasize the ongoing confusion related to young adulthood. Webb is likely not much older than Joe and his own insecurities might illustrate that the confusing is not exclusive to a specific generation.
Achieving Adulthood

The final aspect of the grad novel formula is the protagonist achieving some sort of success in academia. This success is often largely due to the previously discussed interaction of fate. Fictionalized portrayals of academic success are particularly interesting due to current depictions of higher education in the world outside of fiction. Writing from 2016, Laura McKenna cites the Survey of Earned Doctorates which “finds that many newly minted Ph.D.s complete school after nearly 10 years of studies with significant debt and without the promise of a job.” Despite this, “graduate programs are producing more Ph.D.s than ever before” (para. 2). The state of postgraduate education in reality vs. fiction is considered in depth in Chapter 4, but the endings of the three novels discussed in this chapter also provide insight into the quarter-life population of their respective times.

Reading trends in the 1930s can at first seem quite erratic. Among the best-selling books at the time of their publication were The Maltese Falcon (1930) by Dashiell Hammett, The Good Earth (1931) by Pearl S. Buck, Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell 1936), How to Win Friends and Influence People (1936) by Dale Carnegie and Leon Shimkin, and The Joy of Cooking (1931) by Irma S. Rombauer (Temple). The titles include a genre-defining crime novel, a controversial historical fiction featuring an early 20th century Chinese village, a historical romance set in a romanticized version of the Reconstruction Era, a text considered the first self-help book, and a cookbook with a

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12 The Maltese Falcon had seven printings in 1930 (LA Times Archives); The Good Earth was the “bestselling novel of 1931 and 1932” (Temple para. 6); Gone with the Wind “became a bestseller despite costing $3.00, a then-exorbitant price for a book” (para. 11); How to Win Friends went through “some 17 printings in its first year” (para. 15); The Joy of Cooking was initially self-published but caught the attention of the “Bobbs-Merrill Company, quickly becoming a bestseller” (para. 8)
“conversational style, practical recipes, and storytelling,” respectively (para. 7). Despite obvious differences, all of these books share an important concept: each one, in some way, transports the reader to a different time or situation, or imply the reader’s ability to make positive changes to their lives through their own actions. The lack of agency that is so repetitively part of grad novels might reflect negatively on the level of confidence readers and writers maintain for the institution of higher education, but there is also a kind of hopefulness in its consistency. In a time when fate seems to have plotted against you—entering the workforce in a collapsing economy, for instance—there is hope in the idea that continued desire to reach an objective can so frequently result in a change of fortune.

Despite the many external factors working against Joe, *Doctor’s Oral* meets the grad novel formula’s feature ending as Joe passes his exam and spends the evening celebrating with friends and planning the future with his girlfriend. Also in accordance with the formula, however, the success is partially due to external factors as well.

Readers witness the discussion among the professors that takes place once Joe has left the room. The first to vote is Prof. Martiness who votes no. The second, Miss Holtby, votes to pass: “Not brilliant of course, not even good, possibly doubtful. But on the whole I vote to pass” (222). Joe’s thesis advisor Prof. Brice votes for a failing score. Dr. Kendrick, fulfilling Pat’s earlier prediction, votes to pass thinking, “Brice’s own ego betrayed him; he had turned upon his own candidate feeling that candidate did not help the picture of Brice as a great scholar” (232). Prof. Richards responds that he is “definitely doubtful. Tentatively I vote yes, but I’d like to hear more opinions” (223). Dr.

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13 This is how the character’s name appears in the novel. The others are either Prof., Dr., or simply referred to by their last names.
Webb, nervous at the close vote and his own inexperience in assessing, votes for Joe to fail. The deciding voter, Prof. Angle, becomes Joe’s champion and is able to undo at least some of the negative conceptions the other professors’ responses might incite.

During the exam Prof. Martiness quizzes Joe on a line from Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” and its associated painting. Joe confidently states that there are three lilies in both the poem and painting, but Martiness presses, “You’re sure, though, it’s three lilies?” When Joe responds, “Why, I believe so,” Martiness remarks, “Three—well, let that pass” (198). Throughout the course of the exam Martiness returns to the number of lilies so often that Prof. Angle begins to wonder, “What devil’s brew was this anyway? By this time Angle himself was not exactly sure how many lilies there were” (199). On his final questioning—“Just a moment, Mr. Grantland. There were three lilies? You’re sure?”—Joe feels “he must have been wrong; Martiness was charitably giving him a last chance to redeem himself. ‘Well, no—no,’ he stammered. ‘No, I’m not sure. When I think of it now, I think it wasn’t three lilies; it seems to me it was five’” (202). Joe’s change of answer, from the correct “three” to the incorrect “five,” is significant in Martiness’s vote to fail. When it seems he may be swaying Dr. Richards, Prof. Angle steps in:

“Mr. Martiness,” Angle spoke up quickly, forgetting to use either the Christian name or the professorial prefix. “Mr. Martiness,” he had spoken out before he really knew what his words were to be, “I might say, yes, let me say—I grant your contention. Certainly a man should be sure of his knowledge. But what have we here? A young man whose training—and we have trained him—has led him to believe that his professors are omniscient. He is conditioned, not exactly as a
private soldier is conditioned that his officers must always be followed—but almost so. He is, moreover, at the present time, necessarily nervous in a nervous and uncertain condition. You lay a trap for him, and very skillfully. Nevertheless, for four or five times Mr. Grantland maintains his own opinion. You are impressed by his final yielding; I, on the contrary, am much impressed that under the circumstances he maintained himself so long.” (233-234)

The third person narrator closes the section saying, “Yes, Grantland had passed, partly because of his acquired learning for which he was presumably being tested, partly on account of his own personal character. Most of all, on account of the reaction of his own personality with the far-reaching heredities and environments which had produced the personalities of his examiners. And why not? Professors were human beings” (239). Angle’s quick and empathetic response combined with the narrator’s reminder that academics are only human help readers to sympathize with Joe without completely vilifying the committee. Dr. Angle provides the alternative example of an affable academic for the familiarly negative portrait provided by Dr. Martiness. Regardless of the professors’ portrayals, however, most significant of this scene is Joe’s only partial responsibility for his passing score.

Gillian’s authoritative position in the halfway house provides her with a level of agency she finds uncomfortably unfamiliar. When her initial interviewer suggests she will be “an excellent role model” for the women in the house, Gillian thinks, “Me? A role model? I was too surprised to blush” (24). She worries about her ability to perform the duties expected of her as a supervisor: “I didn’t know how not to let people play the radio. Was one supposed to plead, cajole, tease? Should I ask politely or issue ultimatums
from on high? And what if the residents ignored me?” (14). Her first confrontation with one of the residents only furthers her self-doubt. After one of her directives is ignored, Gillian notes,

it seemed I had gotten myself into a situation where I would have to dispense a punishment. If Gretchen [Gillian’s supervisor] was right, this punishment would serve as a message to all the women. It would be saying something (although I could not imagine what) about me. […] I broke into a sweat of performance anxiety. Surely there is some book or study that can guide me, I thought. (30)

Falling into a stereotypical image of an academic, Gillian initially seeks to learn through study rather than experience. When she is unable to rely on the authority and expertise of someone else, however, she succeeds at Responsibility House while her lost fellowship suggests she failed in her academic studies.

Despite her insecurities, Gillian finds, “the residents seemed to like me. They took to calling me the Professor. I told them I had not earned the title yet, but they replied they were giving it to me ahead of schedule. They said I deserved it for actually reading the heavy books they saw stacked on the desk in the office” (21). The women of Responsibility House see Gillian as a leader and imbue her with the authoritative title based on her actions and behaviors in the house. When she officially loses her fellowship, Gillian feels as if her life is over. But her work with the women helps her move forward and eventually she, like Joe and other grad novel protagonists, finds success in academia.

Gillian’s advisor had given her one month to complete a chapter that would impress upon the fellowship committee she deserved to remain a recipient. After reading
through the chapter she submits, and consulting the other committee members, Dr. Trubow calls Gillian into his office. He tells her she has lost the scholarship and explains,

“No university would hire you. Whoever heard of a religious studies professor who treats religion as a mental illness?”

“Literary critics do things like that all the time. They proudly problematize inherited truths.”

“And look where they’re at. The laughingstock of academe. They can’t even understand each other.” (61)

In that moment, Gillian tells readers,

A tremor of rage passed through me. ‘This is totally unjust and irresponsible on your part, Dean Trubow. I’m a fourth-year student. I have three and a half years of my life tied up in this. You may not realize it, but you… […]—‘you are destroying my entire life!’ (61-2)

Losing her fellowship provides Gillian with perspective, however, and leads to the intervention of fate that ultimately leads her to success.

The dissertation Gillian wanted to write for her divinity school doctorate was on a “secular religion [that] would render wars, slaughter, and tribal prejudices completely unnecessary” (6). She is looking for examples of secular conversion, which is why her advisor suggested she work in a halfway house. Gillian’s stuckness is largely due to her inability to find examples on secular conversion on which she can base her project.

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14 This scene illustrates a critique that J.A. Sutherland notes in “Campus Writers”: “where the university novel is concerned ‘university’ tends to mean the English department, traditionally the quietest and most self-engrossed corner of the university” (81). The scene can be read as anti-anti-intellectual in that the characters are acknowledging certain prejudices people hold against academics but attributing it to only one department; ‘It’s not us, it’s them, and we understand and will laugh along with you.’
Trubow suggests she may be able to find subjects for her study at Responsibility House. After she loses the fellowship, Gillian shifts her focus from seeking an example of secular conversion to working with the women in the house. Her new commitment is largely due to the revelation the women help her to reach.

When Gillian loses her fellowship, her strange behavior at the house the next day concerns the women. When they ask if she’s ok she struggles “to think of something dire and dreadful that was happening in [her] life, something that would explain [her] behavior. Of course! How odd that I’d almost forgotten. I tried to look scourged and mournful. ‘It’s nothing, really…It’s just that… my funding might be cut!’” (126). As she continues to talk about it with the women, her actual situation becomes clearer, and perhaps her initial forgetfulness can be attributed to a shift in her priorities.

In a counseling session following Gillian’s announcement of the lost fellowship, one of the women asks her what she means by “funding.” Gillian explains “how the Zephyr Foundation Fellowship had made it possible for [her] to attend graduate school for three years without [her] parents’ help. It included tuition and a fee waiver […] and provided [her] with a small stipend.” The woman responds, “That’s cool […] I never heard of anyone getting paid to go to school” (126). The woman’s perspective helps both Gillian and the reader to consider what she gained from the experience as opposed to what she lost. Her introduction to Responsibility House and the women who live there was initiated by her scholarly endeavors. They also provide her with a sense of purpose she had not previously known, and even to her eventual academic success.

Once her focus moves from her academic work to her work at Responsibility House, Gillian notices the changes she can help make to improve the house and the
experiences of those who live in it. Her talents in leading and supervising the residents help her rise to the highest position at Responsibility House. She spends an unspecified number of years as the head supervisor and is responsible for a number of important changes to the program the women complete. At some point later in her life, we are told, Gillian “applied to Harvard’s Department of Psychology.” She tells readers, “My tenure at Responsibility House helped my application, I’m sure, as did a generous letter of recommendation written by Dean Trubow from the Divinity School” (277). By the end of the novel, Gillian is a full-time professor and is frequently sought to give presentations at conferences and other universities. She tells readers the changes she made at Responsibility House are still in effect and she gains confidence from disproving those who underestimate her upon first meeting.

The end of The War of the Encyclopaedists presents a less obvious version of success in academia. At its conclusion, Corderoy has left his graduate program and is in an undefined relationship with the woman he had been dating at the start of the novel. Corderoy nearly leaves his program with incompletes in all his courses. He has moved in with his ex-girlfriend because he has nowhere else to go and then gets her pregnant. And it is at her apartment that he learns that a Jeep Montauk had been riding in had run over a land mine. All of these events, along with participation in a well-paid but lengthy medical study, unexpectedly lead to his successful conclusion.

In many ways, Corderoy would not be considered successful at the end of the novel. He is successful, however, in that he becomes a quarter-life individual who is not going through a crisis. The other protagonists, having moved past being “stuck,” would arguably be moving out of the quarter-life stage. If the stage is determined by an
individual’s failure to fully meet the requirements of either adolescence or adulthood, movement towards academic success depicts a movement towards adulthood. Corderoy is still firmly in the quarter-life stage at the end of the novel, but by accepting his mutable situation he has moved past the crisis.

Corderoy’s ending can be read as a success in academia as he eventually completes his essays and earns full credit for the classes he had nearly dropped. These credits will be important because he pledges to return to complete the program: “I’m gonna go back. I just need to earn the money” (377). Somewhat ironically, nearly failing out of graduate school was the catalyst Corderoy needed to confirm his commitment to academia and the pursuit of his degree.

When his sort-of-ex-girlfriend, with whom he is sleeping, tells Corderoy of her pregnancy and her indecision regarding her plans, he is initially terrified. He eventually becomes comfortable with the uncertainty and realizes, “[s]ometimes you have to jump in the river with all your clothes on […] when you don’t know what to do. You might as well go big, do something drastic.” His ex wonders how anyone can know what they want in that kind of situation, until after they have already made the decision; “You can’t, I guess” (378), Corderoy concludes. And this seems to be the main point of the novel. Corderoy had to accept that his future was largely unknowable. After ten days spent in a sense-deprivation medical experiment, he seems to feel that unknowability is the better option. Corderoy finally embraces the undefinable nature of his identity and contends people in the quarter-life stage are “[f]ools, all of us. Glorious fools born into a vacuum of need, told we could be anything, flailing in a sea of possibility, thinking it a curse, having to design our lives from scratch, forever skeptical of what we create, forever
revising, no idea of who we are or what we will make of ourselves” (427). Indeed, the very nature of terms like “quarter-life” illustrate this skepticism and our desire to define the indefinable.

**Biology vs. Sociology**

The concept of ‘childhood’ as we know it today did not exist, according to Neil Postman, until the middle of the fifteenth century. “[C]hildhood,” Postman argues, “is a social artifact, not a biological category” (xi). He credits the creation of the printing press for this artifact’s creation arguing, “the press created a new symbolic world that required, in its turn, a new conception of adulthood. The new adulthood, by definition, excluded children. And as children were expelled from the adult world it became necessary to find another world for them to inhabit” (20). Prior to the printing press and the spread of literacy, “everyone shared the same information environment and therefore lived in the same intellectual world […] From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement. From print onward, the young would have to become adults” (36). The identification of childhood initiated the idea that there were certain subjects, actions, experiences, language that were not appropriate for everyone. As a social artifact, it delineated specific steps or benchmarks one had to reach to move from one life stage to the next.

Unlike childhood, recognition of ‘adolescence’ developed around behavior and biology. Doctors Brittany Allen and Helen Waterman explain adolescence as a time of “many physical, sexual, cognitive, social, emotional” changes (para. 2). According to Atwood and Scholtz, “[t]he concept of adolescence became current in the very early 20th century with the publication of a book by G. Stanley Hall (1904). This was the first
discussion in which adolescence was described as applicable to a specific time period and as having a distinct set of behaviors” (233). The authors continue, “[p]rior to the creation of this distinction, children entered the work force at young ages and there was no stage that represented a waiting period. Eventually, it was this ‘waiting period’ that came to be seen as a separate stage of life.” This new stage “represented a time of anomie because neither the norms of childhood nor the norms of adulthood were applicable” (234). Allen and Waterman divide adolescence into three sub-stages: early, middle, and late. Early adolescence begins at or around age 10. Late adolescence is defined as lasting until “21…and beyond” (para. 13). The ellipses and imprecise designation implied by “beyond” elucidates the fact that this life stage’s conclusion is not, like its start, determined objectively through biology. This means that moving past this stage requires similar symbolic achievement to that which separates children from adults. As that achievement becomes more difficult to clearly establish, words like “adulting” are used to emphasize the complicatedly nebulous position of individuals who are no longer biologically adolescent, but also not quite symbolically adult.

Previously discussed studies established that Millennials dislike being categorized as Millennials, are apt to denigrate their own generation and favor others, and are noticeably stalled in reaching traditional rites of adulthood. Another survey maintains that Millennials currently hold the undesirable title of ‘the loneliest generation’ (Ballard). According to researchers, Millennials are “more likely than older generations to report that they have no acquaintances, no friends, no close friends, and no best friends”.15

15 These were presented as separate questions on a likert scale for participants from different generational cohorts. These results come from totaling the responses from each cohort. More Millennials reported the lowest response for each of these categories than any other generations’ representatives.
Grad novel readers who have experienced graduate school for themselves will likely understand why novels about grad students might speak to the self-effacing, solitary, and imposter-syndrome-suffering Millennial generation. But even Millennial readers without the real-life experience of graduate school can empathize with protagonists who feel trapped by their own life decisions, the instability of their professional opportunities, and their anxiety they will not measure up to the expectations of others.

The existence of a novel like *Doctor’s Oral*, and its publication in 1939, supports the argument that the problems faced and exemplified by the Millennial generation are not unique. It suggests the quarter-life stage may reach back even further in time than Atwood and Scholtz contend. And it introduces the graduate student as a kind of archetypal character for emulating this stage of development. All of this also suggests that the grad-student-novel-subgenre is more likely to continue than to pass as a temporary publishing trend. As the quarter-life stage continues to reveal and define itself, novels targeted at its audience will continue to appear as well. The familiar portrait of the in-between-status of graduate students provides writers a convenient template. They are able to establish identity confusion by simply selecting a campus setting and focusing on the least definitive persona.
Can something be created in language independently of the people who use the language?

[…] I wonder for a moment about this idea, that something could emerge within language—an accident, or mistake, perhaps—and the users of that language would then have to deal with the consequences of this new world being part of their system of signification.

- Scarlett Thomas, The End of Mr. Y pp. 31-2

CHAPTER 2: The Intervention of Fate

The second common feature of grad student novels is their plots’ reliance on the intervention of fate or the actions of other people to further the protagonist’s progress. Grad novels often use luck, chance, or the thoughts or presence of another character to “unstick” their protagonists from their starting points. As Frances Kelly describes it, “In contemporary imaginaries of the doctorate there is the presence of the other to rational Enlightenment knowledge and charisma, luck and chance are part of the research method as it is popularly understood” (Idea 14). Kelly’s observation equates the intervention of fate with any other element of a scholar’s intentional training.

For non-academic readers, the significance of chance in grad students’ success reduces the differences between those within and those outside of academia. It is somewhat similar to the way popular television shows promote the conception of academic characters as misfits outside of academia in order to make them “likable”. Characters like Ross Gellar from Friends, Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes from BBC’s Sherlock, Temperance Brennan and Zack Addy from Bones, and many of the characters from The Big Bang Theory\(^{16}\) are made “likable” by exhibiting a level of social deficiency.

\(^{16}\) In The Idea of the PhD, Frances Kelly discusses several of these characters and the contribution of their eccentricity to what she calls the “PhD imaginary,” or the way PhD holders are imagined.
Writers of these characters offset their exceptional scholarly aptitude with comedically high levels of social ineptitude, a lack of self-awareness, and/or physical clumsiness. These qualities are meant to be endearing and suggest a kind of cost for high intelligence: while such characters may be able to quickly deduce the solution to an otherwise unsolvable mystery or produce results that could impact scholars around the world, they cannot easily navigate life outside of academia or among individuals who are not of a similarly exceptional, scholarly intelligence. The identifiable aspect of fate playing such a crucial role for grad novel protagonists creates a similar leveling. If the protagonists’ success comes from chance, the success could be achieved by anyone.

The intervention of fate is a notable element of each grad novel discussed in this dissertation, but Elizabeth Kostova’s *The Historian* and *The End of Mr. Y* by Scarlett Thomas are unique in their use of fate to convey a form of anti-intellectualism. Both novels convey the message that knowledge is dangerous, and one seeks an extensive amount of it at their own peril. As Robert Cross argues, “Americans have a history of being suspicious of intellect and of believing that common sense is more reliable than learning, that ‘nature’ is a better guide than training, and that practical experience in the ‘school of hard knocks’ is more valuable than formal education” (19). These ideas can lead to a distrust of academics and the institutions of academia. The other grad novels discussed in this dissertation can be interpreted in a way that seeks to lessen this distrust by revealing the scholars to be fallible humans who also occasionally need help from actors outside of academia. *The Historian* and *Mr. Y*, alternatively, use fate in a more literal sense of the word and present Faustian implications of danger behind any ambitious pursuit of knowledge.
Similar warnings exist in academic novels like Don Delillo’s *White Noise* and campus novels like Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall*\(^{17}\), but turning to grad student experience allows for a character’s potential change of direction. The path for undergraduates is less clearly defined than someone actively seeking a graduate degree, and professors have already obtained obvious status as scholars. Graduate students are committing themselves to many years of focused study with the objective—presumably—of becoming professional scholars and using their training in some meaningful way. As anti-intellectual texts, *The Historian* and *Mr. Y* present the danger of academic life as a trap grad student protagonists might be able to avoid. These novels also present specific actions the protagonists take that simultaneously confirms their statuses and destines as academics.

There are a variety of reasons for suspicion towards academia. Northrop Frye argues, “The anti-intellectual trend which is so deeply rooted in American life is linked to a tendency in American education to emphasize experience at the expense of knowledge” (152). John Lyons similarly observes a proliferation of American novels that involve “an essentially romantic and pastoral rejection of the sophisticated bumptiousness and Godless analysis of the academy” (xv). Lyons maintains that, even novels that “seem to view the undergraduate’s life as a golden one [convey] recurrent suspicion of the values of the closeted educational process” (23). Based on his own experiences reading

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\(^{17}\) Among other themes, *White Noise* depicts several consequences of characters’ fascination with and fear of death. Overthinking the concept of his own mortality, protagonist Jack Gladney accepts a pseudo-academic experiment which hypothesizes he can overcome his obsession by killing someone. *Decline and Fall* follows undergraduate student Paul Pennyfeather through a path of misadventures that both begin and end with Paul beginning work on a theology degree. It is set up in a way that suggests scholars are trapped in a cycle of poor decisions. Multiple times in the novel Paul likens school to a prison and “reflects that all of his academic training has admirably fitted him for […] life in a prison cell” (Rossen 24).
university fiction, DeMott maintains, “the professor is [written as] a man who, offered an opportunity to act out his life in terms of generally accepted American values, has opted out” (72). All these hypotheses—formed by academics—point to three primary issues: an idea that scholarly work is not “real” work; non-academics’ feelings that they are intentionally kept from knowing what occurs in higher education; and a belief that there is something inherently different between academics and everyone else.

Although *Mr. Y* is written by a British author, these potential views are not restricted to the U.S. In his lengthy examination of *The English University Novel*, Mortimer Proctor explains that many satirical British texts about higher education are a product of “the value of a liberal education as against a practical, or ‘useful,’ one” (192, emphasis added). There is a notion that people who view knowledge as an end in itself—as writers like Thorstein Veblen insists a scholar must—necessarily view practical knowledge as detrimental to scholarship and the mind of an academic. It views scholarship as inaction and argues real learning comes from doing, “ignor[ing] the fact that thinking is also doing” (Frye 152). Along with an “influx in the universities of the [British] working class,” Hobsbaum maintains, “more searching questions were asked. When the dons withdraw from the world and the students deaden themselves at the academic grind, what, in the way of education, is going on?” (25). Cynicism towards academia and those who exist within it is not uniquely American.

The three previously posed hypotheses do not describe the anti-intellectualism evident in *The Historian* and *Mr. Y*. There is no character foil with whom the reader might contrast the protagonist and the form of their labor. All of the motivations for characters’ actions are made clear so any non-academic reader would not be confused
about why things occur as they do or why the characters make the choices they make. And because of this understanding, it is possible to relate to the protagonists: *what would I do if I were in their situation?* For the protagonists of *The Historian* and *Mr. Y*—Paul and Paul’s advisor Rossi (during his graduate studies) and Ariel Manto, respectively—anti-intellectualism is based on fear of the institution of academia rather than the lives lived within it. For these characters, scholarship is a trap and knowledge is the bait. Their humanizing tragic flaw is the consistent desire to learn more.

Based on initial characteristics of the formula, it might at first seem as if it does not apply to *The Historian* or *Mr. Y*. None of the protagonists are stuck in terms of their research; rather than chance, the stories of each seem preordained; and—for *Mr. Y*—Ariel is dead at the end. If we consider interpretations which might allow for the identification of the formula, however, several subtle arguments become clear. The first element (starting stuck) illustrates concerns about the advisor’s role in the process of graduate education. The second (intervention of fate) establishes the concept of inevitable danger for individuals who follow the path of scholarship and conceptualizes fate as destiny rather than luck. Consideration of the final element leads to questions about what can be considered success from the perspective of a scholar. When applied to these novels, consideration of the grad novel formula calls attention to what might be less obvious critiques of academia.

**Scholarly Supervision in Grad Novels**

At the beginning of both novels, Paul and Ariel—and Rossi, at the start of his grad student narrative—conform to the formula’s initial element if we accept that being “stuck” can refer to problems unrelated to problems in the characters’ research. Unlike
most of the other grad novel protagonists, all three are engaged in their research topics, are in good standing in their programs, and are not at a loss for materials, results, or motivation. The obstacle in Rossi’s way is his own refusal to leave any scholarly puzzle unfinished. At the point when Rossi’s tale about his time as a doctoral student begins, he has suddenly become distracted by a text that mysteriously appeared among his things and which has no relation to his dissertation topic. For Paul and Ariel, the obstacle is the absence of their mentors. The dissertation advisors of both characters have mysteriously vanished\textsuperscript{18}, and searching for them takes up part of the protagonists’ stories and all of their focus. All three are stuck due to things that occurred to them, and that were out of their control. Unlike the other graduate students who are stuck because graduate school is difficult and can be a struggle for anyone, readers sense that Ariel, Paul, and Rossi were somehow destined to encounter their obstacles.

Paul had been making consistent progress on his dissertation before his advisor, Rossi, disappeared. He is forced to abandon his work on “Dutch mercantilism in the seventeenth century” (283) as a new research topic becomes crucial in the search for his mentor. After Paul discovers a text that matches the one that distracted Rossi, he comes to understand that Rossi’s tenacious research is intrinsically connected with his disappearance. Paul becomes engulfed in the very topic that distracted Rossi and so is less concerned with completing his dissertation. Readers eventually learn that the texts both Paul and Rossi discovered among their research materials were set as bait that leads

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\textsuperscript{18} The absence of academic advisors is a frequent aspect of grad novels but, based on my reading, most of the others that include this aspect also include a separate issue related to the grad student’s research. Additionally, the absence is not usually a primary aspect of the plot. For some, like Gowers’ \textit{The Twisted Heart}, Willig’s \textit{Secret History}, and Greig’s \textit{Prudencia Hart}, the complete lack of the protagonists’ advisor is not even specifically acknowledged; they simply do not appear in the stories.
to an around-the-world hunt for Dracula, who is shown to be both active and dangerous centuries after his supposed death. In a very literal sense, Paul and Rossi are lured into the inauspicious realm of scholarship by their own inquisitive natures.

Ariel’s narrative begins when she is in the first year of her doctoral program and her advisor’s absence leaves her questioning her place in grad school. In what is the first of many scenes where Ariel’s life is dramatically influenced by something beyond her own control, Ariel meets Professor Saul Burlem at an academic conference. She strikes up a conversation with Burlem regarding the paper he presented and her interests as they relate to his topic. When he asks if she’s considered graduate school she tells him, “I think I’m probably going to apply to do theoretical physics” (21). As she is describing her plan to study thought experiments, “Burlem interrupt[s] and sa[y]s: ‘Don’t do that. Fuck theoretical physics. Come and do a Ph.D. with me’” (22). He persuades her by ensuring her acceptance and an assistantship to aid with expenses. He suggests she can still study thought experiments in conjunction with texts like the one he had discussed in his presentation.

Ariel accepts Burlem’s offer and enters the program. Shortly after her arrival however, Burlem disappears. Ariel observes,

everyone seems to assume I’ll just carry on my research and it’s no big deal for me that he isn’t around. Of course, he’s the reason I came to the department at all: He’s the only person in the world who has done serious research on one of my main subjects: the nineteenth-century writer Thomas E. Lumas. Without Burlem,

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19 This is the first moment in chronological time. It is presented in a flashback and, as the book is organized, there are several other such moments prior.
I’m not really sure why I am here. (6)
During their initial meeting, Ariel tells Burlem her desire “to be able to actually understand things like relativity, and Schrödinger’s cat, and that [she] wanted to revive the dear old ether” (21). She enters a literature PhD program, rather than one for theoretical physics, only because Burlem insisted it would be more interesting to connect “experiments of the mind […] with] novels and poetry” (23). Literature was not her initially intended course of study.

Even before Burlem’s disappearance, however, Ariel faces obstacles to her progress. Burlem’s conference paper was about the legend of a curse tied to a novel by Lumas. Ariel is interested in the writer and, in her application, proposes a project on Lumas’s work and Erasmus Darwin’s Zoonomia. Once in the program, however, she finds that Burlem “seemed to have gone cold on the idea of Lumas […] He also persuaded me to leave out Zoonomia […] and begin later. […] I had no idea what was wrong with him, but I went along with it all. And then, a week later, he was gone” (24). Burlem’s his sudden “coldness” toward Ariel’s proposed project foreshadows the danger she will face and also adds further complication to the expectations and role of an advisor in a graduate student’s training.

In a way, Burlem was attempting to protect Ariel by keeping specific knowledge from her. Burlem comes into possession of a recipe for an addictive substance which often leads to the death of anyone who consumes it and is coveted to the point where certain individuals are willing to kill to obtain it form themselves. Before disappearing, Burlem hides the recipe in the pages of Zoonomia as he finds he cannot bring himself to destroy such significant information. His directive to begin with work published after
Zoonomia was intended to keep Ariel from discovering the recipe and attracting the same
danger he was running from to herself. While his intention was to keep his advisee safe,
the act also serves to establish Burlem as a kind of keeper of knowledge: he is able to
decide what information is appropriate for his student, and what should be concealed. It is
an extreme example, but it is difficult to overlook in the context of scholarly mentorship.

In “Supervision Satirized,” Kelly outlines three recurring tropes “in the recent
literature on postgraduate research: the authoritative figure of the supervisor, the
alienated student, who is often not fully rounded as a character or coherent as a subject,
and the project that does not proceed in a linear fashion, or is not complete” (380). As
with the initial conceptions of the grad novel formula, none of these descriptions seems to
fit the advisors in The Historian and Mr. Y unless we specifically look for them to do so.
While they are not examples of authoritative and demanding supervisors who expect their
students to follow their instructions without question, Rossi and Burlem are authorities in
that their words, actions, and choices drastically influence the course of their advisee’s
lives. Ariel and Paul are both established to have solid relationships with and respect for
Burlem and Rossi, but they are alienated in that they have literally lost their advisors and
are thus disconnected from their training. Because the disappearances start at the
beginning of each book, neither grad student has really developed as a character. And
both students’ projects become sidelined in favor of alternative research rather than
progressing steadily from start to finish. Instead of illustrating the distinct differences
between advisor and advisee Kelly defines, the presentation of these novels’ advisor
characters calls attention to the cyclical process of academia: professors training students
to become professors. This cycle also implies the inescapability of a scholar’s destiny.
According to Kelly, “we can examine satirical representations of supervision as images, however distorted, that promote reflection on the roles that students and supervisors take up and the practices that each engages in” (381). Neither of these advisor-advisee relationships are satirical, but the authors’ depictions of scholarly supervision can still lead to reflective questions. For Paul, Rossi’s disappearance “had suddenly made [them] almost equals” (73). Paul takes up Rossi’s research on the whereabouts of Dracula and does so without the physical guidance of an advisor. He has literally taken Rossi’s spot in terms of the scholarly work, and the non-physical guidance he receives comes from letters Rossi wrote as a graduate student himself. Similar to Paul and Rossi’s interchangeable roles, Ariel and Burlem make the same mistakes and face the same dangers, suggesting a kind of equalizing between the two. The choice Ariel makes in the end, which will be discussed in more detail later, might ultimately imply she has surpassed her supervisor, depending upon how one defines a scholar. What do these representations suggest about student and supervisor roles? From what is shown in the novels, both Ariel and Paul seem to learn more from their advisors by doing, by following in their figurative and literal footsteps. What does it mean when the student repeats the mistakes of the advisor? *The Historian* and *Mr. Y* do not provide definitive answers to these questions, but the repetition does suggest that scholarly pursuits inevitably lead to the same outcomes. By choosing to train as a scholar, grad students chose to inherit their predecessors’ experiences.

A Scholar’s Destiny

Regarding most of the other grad novels in this dissertation, “the intervention of fate” refers to a particular event that serves as a catalyst towards the end of the story. It
appears when another character points the protagonist toward some experience, objective, or conclusion. It might be a decision made for or suggested to the protagonist. It might be a sudden, unexpected opportunity, or the result of something the character did by mistake. For most of the other grad novel protagonists the intervention of fate is a definable moment, which is not a result of any conscious choice they make, that changes the course of their story. In this sense it is a form of “chance” or “luck” as Kelly noted. In the stories of Paul, Rossi and Ariel, fate does not present as a single moment but as a driving force leading them down paths that have been predetermined. The danger inherent in these paths is what imbues each novel with an underlying sense of anti-intellectualism.

At the start of The Historian, Paul meets with Rossi to discuss his dissertation and brings along the ancient text he found in his library carrel. Paul is interested in Rossi’s thoughts on the book and explains, “someone left it in my carrel by accident, two days ago.” He tells Rossi that he didn’t turn it over to the Rare Books department because he believed it was “someone’s personal possession.” Rossi then cryptically responds, “It is someone’s personal possession. […] It’s yours” (21). Rossi goes on to tell Paul about the book he found: “I found it in my desk when I was a graduate student” (22). As Paul’s advisor, Rossi believes he “owes [Paul] a sort of apology”20 for passing on a scholarly “legacy” to his advisee (23). Despite the apology, Rossi acknowledges the inevitability saying, “Scholarship must go on. For good or evil” (46). He tells Paul he believes this “ghastly trail of scholarship, like so many less awful ones, is merely something one

20 This apology is similar to one Burlem gives Ariel after she finds the recipe and is forced to flee as well. After she finds his hideout, Burlem tells her, “I’m sorry about the book […] I feel responsible” (328). Like Paul, Ariel takes up her advisor’s research and it leads her into danger.
person makes a little progress on, then another, each contributing a bit in his own
lifetime” (45). This description of research does not imply the scholarly ideal of an
endless potential to discover more; instead this process seems more like “the barren
treadmill of study” (Hobsbaum 23). Like a runner on a treadmill, the researcher struggles
and expends energy and effort but makes no real progress towards anything.

Rossi’s grad student experiences are depicted over the course of The Historian
through the letters Rossi wrote long before he was Paul’s advisor. After Paul shows Rossi
the book he found in his carrel, Rossi tells him about the research he produced on
Dracula when he was a graduate student. He tells Paul that he gave up the search, but
Paul assumes, “you kept some information.” Rossi responds, “Of course. Who destroys
any research completely?” (46). The research consists of three maps and a packet of
yellowing letters. Each letter begins, “To my dear and unfortunate successor” in a clear
reference to the recurring nature of scholarly endeavors. The age of the letters, the
indication of the length of time Rossi has kept them, and the salutation at their start
indicate that Rossi knew the legacy would eventually be passed on and so prepared for it.
His maintenance of the research illustrates Rossi’s fastidiousness as a scholar but also,
like Burlem hiding rather than destroying the recipe, the fatal flaw of academics who
cannot let go of a project.

Paul witnesses Rossi’s abduction, which occurs right after the previously
recounted meeting. As he tells the story to his daughter Paul claims, “I left him smiling at
his office door, and as I turned away I was seized by the feeling that I should detain him,
or turn back to talk with him a little longer” but, like a logical scholar, he does not heed
this seemingly “irrational” instinct (60). As he is walking past the building on his way
home, he glances up to Rossi’s window and sees all the light from the room extinguished with an unsettling expediency. Paul again dismisses fear in favor of reason, but admits to his daughter that it “swooped over [him] like a paralysis” (62). Two days later, Paul learns that no one had seen or heard from Rossi since the evening of their meeting. When Paul is told police officers found blood on the desk in Rossi’s office, he begins to believe his advisor’s seemingly irrational claims about Dracula’s existence and takes up the research himself.

Believing that he will find Rossi if he finds Dracula, Paul begins to use the letters and maps to continue Rossi’s work. As Paul begins his research, he notices another graduate student sitting near him in the library and reading about Vlad the Impaler and vampires. Later he wonders, “Why had she been reading about Dracula, at my table of all tables, that evening of all evenings, at my very elbow? […] I was rattled enough by what I read in Rossi’s letters to suspend my disbelief further, to reject the notion of coincidence in favor of something stronger” (128). The woman, Helen, becomes a crucial part of Paul’s search and, eventually, his wife. Paul and Helen have a daughter who grows up to be the narrator of the The Historian. Over the course of the novel, readers learn that Rossi is Helen’s biological father and that, through her mother, Helen is a direct descendant of Vlad Țepeș, the historical figure on whom Stoker’s fictional Dracula is based. This knowledge makes clear the point that Helen’s proximity to Paul had not

21 The novel includes a story in which Rossi meets and falls in love with Helen’s mother in the midst of his hunt for Dracula. He meets her during a research trip to Romania and promises to come back to marry her and bring her to the U.S. As punishment for his continued research, Rossi’s memory is erased so that he returns home without any knowledge of Helen’s mother or the fact that she is pregnant. Helen’s belief that Rossi abandoned her mother is what leads her to the school and to the study of Dracula. She wants revenge through scholarship and knows he’d once started to research Dracula but then moved on. Helen’s research prompts Rossi to return to his own, thus attracting Dracula’s attention again.
been a coincidence, and might even lead to the suggestion that Paul and Helen’s destinies
had been set in the fifteenth century.

Of all the grad novels in this dissertation, the initial intervention of fate in *The End of Mr. Y* is arguably the most dramatic. Ariel enters the PhD program, as already noted, based on her discussion with Burlem. The events of the *Mr. Y* itself, however, begin with a collapsing building. An abandoned railway tunnel that runs under parts of the campus caves in, taking down with it part of the building Ariel parks in. She decides to walk home rather than waiting for a bus, but as she has not yet familiarized herself with the area, she becomes lost. The collapse occurs in January in Great Britain and, to escape the cold, Ariel enters a secondhand bookshop she discovers after losing her way. She asks the woman behind the counter if they have any books by Thomas Lumas because she “always asks this in secondhand bookshops.” She tells readers, “They rarely do have anything by him, and I’ve got most of his books already. But I still ask.” The woman recalls seeing a book called *The End of Mr. Y*22 in a box of unsorted books in the back of the shop, but according to Ariel, “It is impossible to imagine that she actually has a copy up there” (8). *The End of Mr. Y* is the text Burlem presented on at the conference she attended and is said to be cursed.

Ariel claims, “I would probably give away everything I own to obtain a copy of *The End of Mr. Y*, Lumas’s last and most mysterious work. I don’t know what she’s got it confused with, but it’s just absurd to think that she has it. No one has that book” (8). Unsurprisingly for readers (though astonishing for Ariel), the store does have a copy. The

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22 Because there are several quotations where the novel’s characters refer to the embedded narrative by its full title, I will use *Mr. Y* to differentiate between Thomas’s novel and the fictional text that appears within it.
woman apologizes, though, as the shop’s owner has said she can only sell it if Ariel agrees to buy the entire box of books in which it originally came to the store: “the whole box is going to cost £50. So…” (10). In the box Ariel finds “other Lumas books […] a couple of Derrida translations [she didn’t] have, as well as Eureka! by Edgar Allan Poe.” She tells the reader, “I can’t imagine anyone connecting [these books], unless it was for a project similar to my Ph.D. […] It’s as if someone put this box together just to appeal to me” (9). When Ariel agrees to the price the clerk asks her, “Seriously? You’d spend that on a box of books?” (10). Ariel hands over the money without stopping to “consider that this is almost the only money [she has] in the world, and that [she is] not going to be able to afford to eat for the next three weeks.” She explains to the readers, “I don’t actually care about anything apart from being able to walk out of this shop with The End of Mr. Y” (10). The store clerk cannot imagine spending £50 for the box, but for a scholar like Ariel, books are more valuable than anything else.

The crux of the novel—Ariel obtaining a copy of the extremely rare text—is brought about through the collapse of a building and a bad sense of direction. Ariel stays true to a claim she made to Burlem at the conference. While discussing the supposed curse both claim, without hesitation, that they would read it if giving the chance. Ariel has been given the opportunity to read the supposedly cursed book, and she does. While reading, however, she discovers a page has been ripped out. She wonders, “What am I supposed to do now? There is one chapter left […] Do I read it, and disregard the fact that what must be a crucial scene […] is missing? Or…What? What are the other options?” (70). According to Ariel, Lumas “wrote The End of Mr. Y and died the day after it was published, after everyone else who’d had something major to do with the
book (the publisher, the editor, the typesetter) had also died. Thus the rumored curse” (13). She insists she does not believe it, but “some people do believe that if you read [The End of Mr. Y] you die” (9). Ariel decides not to finish the book that evening because “[i]t wouldn’t be right without the missing page” (71). In a sense, this means she has not truly read the book and might therefore avoid the curse. As Ariel’s neighbor Wolfgang observes upon learning about The End of Mr. Y, it contains “the curse of knowledge” (63). Without reading the full text, Ariel has not fully obtained all the knowledge it contains. Of course, Ariel does find the missing page as the result of another seeming act of fate.

After the building collapse, Ariel is forced to share her office with two other grad students whose offices have become inaccessible. This is how she meets Adam, a student in the theology department in need of temporary office space. Like with Paul and Helen, this seemingly random introduction leads to a relationship that becomes very important to Ariel’s story. Before the meeting and development of said relationship, however Ariel resents being forced to share her former sanctuary. While cleaning to make room for her new office mates, her frustration causes her to be “not as careful with the books as [she] usually would be.” Her less-than-carefulness results in a page falling out of one of the books: “the missing page from The End of Mr. Y” (91). The discovery leads Ariel to wonder about causation and everything that has happened to her recently:

I never thought I’d read The End of Mr. Y, and then I found a copy of it in what appeared to be the most improbable of circumstances. I never thought I’d find the missing page, but now here it is. And every one of these events is connected. But not by luck: It’s pure cause and effect. The only piece of luck involved in all of
this was the university starting to collapse and creating the cracks of chaos out of which these things could emerge. (92)

At first this assertion seems groundless, but it turns out to be true. By the end of Mr. Y we understand why the building collapsed. We eventually learn that the collapse was caused by Burlem, another advisor whose choices and actions irreversibly alter the course of his advisee’s life.

INHERENT DANGER IN SCHOLARSHIP

Before moving into the final element of grad novels and how it influences the reading of these texts, I must explain how each illustrates the concept that it is dangerous to seek too much knowledge. The novels’ conclusions do not make sense without this context.

For Ariel, Rossi, and Paul, their problems begin quite literally with books and with the knowledge to which those books eventually lead. Each is driven by a need to understand, and risks their life in order to do so. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson laments, “In life, too often, the scholar errs with mankind and forfeits his privilege” (227). The privilege Emerson refers to here is the privilege to contain multiple identities, to be a “priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier” rather than “suffer[ing] amputation from the trunk” and embracing only one (226). He warns against the scholarly temptation to hide one’s “head like an ostrich in the flowering bushes, peeping into microscopes, and turning rhymes, as a boy whistles to keep his courage up” (238). Although Emerson concedes that, “[a]ction is with the scholar subordinate,” he also maintains that “it is essential. Without it, [the scholar] is not yet a man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth” (233). These quotations illustrate the concern that a
scholar might turn into “a pedant whose studies have ill-equipped him to deal with life” (Lyons 106); that they will turn into the absent-minded academic who has devoted all their time to specialized knowledge to the exclusion of common sense.

The characters in *Mr. Y* and *The Historian* are quite active and would not likely be considered absent-minded. They function well socially and are able to usefully employ their knowledge both as scholars and in their non-academic experiences. Their stories do, however, warn against the potential for a scholar to suffer “amputation from the trunk” and be caught in an existence that is devoted solely to knowledge attainment. At times throughout each novel scholarship is seen to be helpful and is even utilized as a form of protection, but the primary image they present is scholarship as a trap.

Paul’s story, as he tells it to his daughter, starts when Paul “suddenly realized that someone had left a book whose spine [he] had never seen before among [his] own textbooks, which sat on a shelf above my desk. The spine of this new book showed an elegant little dragon, green on pale leather” (13). The one word printed in the middle of the book, “Drakulya,” conjures thoughts of “Bram Stoker’s novel,” “Bela Lugosi hovering over some starlet’s white neck” and the knowledge Paul had of “Vlad Țepeș—the ‘Impaler’—of Wallachia.” Paul finds the text intriguing because, “when you handle books all day long, every new one is a friend and a temptation” (14). Rossi relates a similar compulsion regarding his own book: “I like a puzzle […] So does every scholar worth his salt” (23). Staying too long with one puzzle, however, is dangerous because “anyone who pokes around in history long enough may well go mad” (35-6). These contradictory statements suggests there is a line between lucid scholarship and unhealthy
obsession. *The Historian* and *Mr. Y* seem to argue that the line is easily crossed and, once crossed, cannot be redrawn.

At first, Rossi’s study of the book he found leads nowhere, so he resolves to return to his dissertation topic. In one of his letters he writes, “I knew perfectly well that I had taken it up as a challenge dealt me by fate, in whom, after all, I didn’t even believe, and that I was probably pursuing the elusive and evil word Drakulya back into history out of a sort of scholarly bravado, to prove I could find the historical traces of anything” (88). And although he “didn’t forsee getting even an article out of [the] bloody goose chase,” he tells Paul, “I turned my feet away from the cheering pub—a mistake that has been the downfall of many a poor scholar—and towards Rare Books” (89). Even knowing that his efforts were not likely to add to his academic reputation, Rossi admits he “picked up [the] strange book again, like a man compelled by an addiction” (115). Rossi’s depiction of his turn “away from the cheering pub” both foreshadows Rossi’s troubles and alludes to the temptation of wisdom that leads to “the downfall of many a poor scholar.” In taking up Rossi’s research, Paul makes the same choice of books over beer, and the sentiment here attests the common occurrence of academics making the same “mistake”.

The commonality of such a mistake is further illustrated in *Mr. Y* through the consistent disregard of well-known warnings about the embedded narrative. Through an excerpt of Lumas’ *The End of Mr. Y* readers learn that heedless curiosity is what initially leads Mr. Y to the potion, and eventually the recipe, that creates so much damage. Mr. Y attends a circus show that included a theatrical trick—Pepper’s Ghost—to convey the presence of a spirit on the stage. Mr. Y explains, “I did not then believe in ghosts, and I had no doubt that science and reason were behind the display of phantasmagoria, but I
became frustrated that I could not deduce the method of it” (39). After the show is over, he approaches one of its crew members who correctly guesses Mr. Y’s reason for staying behind. The man, who refers to himself as “the fair-ground doctor,” agrees to explain the trick for two shillings but then offers an alternative experience of knowledge than one in which he simply explains how it was done (40). The doctor tells Mr. Y, “You wish to know the nature of the illusion you just witnessed […] I can show you this, and more. But […] Perhaps you do not have the constitution for the illumination I am about to offer.” Offended by this suggestion Mr. Y replies, “I have two shillings […] Now, do as you promised.” The doctor instructs Mr. Y to lie down and hands him a clear vial of liquid and a card with a dot on it. Mr. Y is told to drink the mixture and then try to concentrate on the black dot. The excerpt concludes with Mr. Y’s ominous claim: “Not for one second did I believe that the mixture would have any effect, nor was I aware that the rest of my life would be altered as a result of drinking it” (41). By drinking the potion Mr. Y learns how Pepper’s Ghost is achieved, but also develops an all-consuming addiction for this new form of knowledge attainment.

The potion allows the eponymous character to enter a space he names the Troposphere, which gives him access to other people’s consciousness. After entering the consciousness of the fair worker to learn about Pepper’s Ghost, he becomes fixated on the idea of what else he could learn. Describing his experience Mr. Y says, “I confess that I almost became lost in this new world, for, given the access to another man’s thoughts, who would not roam endlessly within them?” (54). His time within the Troposphere was not limitless, however, and eventually Mr. Y is returned to his own consciousness in his own body. While obsessing about the experience, Mr. Y “does a good Victorian thing
and starts labelling and classifying the parts of the new world he has encountered.” Along with naming the Troposphere he also names the process of entering someone else’s consciousness: “Telemancy: tele from telos, meaning distant; and mancy from manteia, meaning divination” (59). The act of naming further illustrates Mr. Y’s desire to know and understand everything he can.

After entering the Troposphere once, Mr. Y becomes fixated on finding a way to enter it again. He begins to search for the fair-doctor and, by the end of the book, “Mr. Y is well on his way towards bankruptcy and destitution as the result of his obsession” (65). Mr. Y eventually finds the doctor and gives him the very last of his money in exchange for the recipe. The embedded narrative ends with an Editor’s Note “that explains how he was found, cold and dead, on the floor of his cellar. He had locked himself in and taken his last journey [through the Troposphere] from there. His wife thought he had gone missing, and then discovered the locked cellar door […] He had starved to death” (127). When Ariel tells her neighbor Wolf about the ending he observes, “It’s a good thing you don’t have these ingredients then, isn’t it?” (128). Despite the warnings from both within the book and its legendary history, Wolf knows that Ariel would try the potion if she could. Her friend is happy in his belief that she does not have the ingredients, but his assertion is especially portentous for the reader, who knows she actually does have the ingredients.

Once she has found the missing page, Ariel has the information she needs to reproduce the mixture that sent Mr. Y into the Troposphere. Her knowledge of the recipe is paradoxically troubling, and she wonders “When the concoction fails to have any effect, then what? Then it’s back to real life and real work” (124). For Ariel “[r]eal life is
running out of money, and then food. Real life is having no proper heating. Real life is physical.” Rather than this real life, Ariel insists, “Give me books instead: Give me the invisibility of the contents of books the thoughts, the ideas, the images. Let me become part of a book; I’d give anything for that” (117). Here Ariel exhibits the scholarly tendency Emerson warned against: she wants to retreat into texts rather than interact with the world around her. With echoes to her earlier claim that she “would probably give away everything I own to obtain a copy of *The End of Mr. Y*” (8), Ariel’s assertion that she would choose the intellectual world of books over the physical world of her actual existence is supported by her previous action of spending all of her money when she is given the opportunity. In this way, the beginning of Ariel’s story also emulates the conclusion of Mr. Y’s as both characters illustrate the value they place on knowledge.

Ariel’s first attempt to enter the Troposphere is not successful and, like Rossi, Ariel endeavors to move past the experiment: “I’ll keep the book, but go back to normal. I’ll write something about curses for the magazine. I’ll get on with my Ph.D. A chapter on Lumas about the blurring between fiction and nonfiction, the thought experiment that becomes a physical experiment” (151). Also like Rossi, however, Ariel is unable to give up on the project. She successfully enters the Troposphere on her second try. Despite a sense of futility for Rossi and the numerous warnings for Ariel, their scholarly ambitions drive them to keep searching for answers.

Rossi’s first warning to desist in his research comes at a great loss to the scholar. In the letters Rossi has written to his “unfortunate successor” he writes of his friend “Hedges, a don only ten years older than [Rossi] of whom [he] was extremely fond” (115). One evening Rossi finds Hedges in the hallway near his office: “He opened his
eyes and looked at me. His head listed to one side and half his face looked slack, bluish, but he spoke intelligibly.” Hedges had a message for Rossi: “He said to tell you he will brook no trespasses” (121). And this warning is the last intelligible thing Hedges will ever speak. Readers are told that Hedges suffered a stroke when he was attacked and, a few days later, died after another stroke. Rossi records, “Hedges was attacked only once, not the several times Stoker describes as necessary to infect a living person with the contagion of the undead. I believe he was sacrificed as a mere warning—to me. And to you, as well, unfortunate reader?” (123). Rossi understands his friends death was a warning, but still feels he must continue the research in order to “avenge Hedge’s death” (122). As readers learned prior to this exposition, Rossi did “desist” when he received a clear threat to his own life. He then recorded his experiences in letter form and stored the research away until Paul revealed himself to be the unfortunate successor.

Paul follows a similar trajectory as he begins his own search. Paul’s warning comes in the form of the dead body of the stray cat he had befriended and named Rembrandt. After starting his own research on Dracula, he comes home one night to find Rembrandt with a “broken spine and weirdly flopping head” set “precisely, onto the narrow windowsill” of his apartment (152). In a replication of Rossi’s response to finding Hedges, Paul feels “rage welling under [his] terror” and his “lungs filling with a smoky hate” (153). Also like Rossi, this warning fails to stop him from further research. The analogous warnings further the idea of unending repetition in the world of academia.

Ariel’s explorations into the Troposphere lead to two separate threats. The first is the consequence of removing one’s consciousness from their body. When Ariel comes out of her second experience in the Troposphere, her body makes this consequence clear:
“I feel as if I’ve got the worst flu I’ve ever had. Water. I need lots of water. […] I drink three cups of water and then immediately throw them up. I drink two more and throw up again. I know I need fluid, so I force myself to drink another cup of water, slow sips this time” (197). Glancing at her clock she discovers 21 hours have passed since she took the potion, and her physical body has not moved from the couch. She thinks, “No wonder I feel ill. Is this dehydration? Or is it part of the same madness that means I imagine I can travel through other people’s consciousness?” (198). Being in the Troposphere requires a complete separation of mind and body, which leaves the body vulnerable to threats like dehydration, starvation, or injury.

Ariel discovers this second danger when she unwittingly inhabits Wolf’s consciousness. During the inhabitation, Ariel learns a secret Wolf kept from her and feels extreme guilt at having invaded her friend’s privacy so completely. The episode illustrates another example of dangerous knowledge. Discovering her neighbor’s homosexuality through telemancy rather than his confidence horrifies Ariel and indicates for her the previously unconsidered violation of entering someone else’s mind. The violation of Wolf’s mind is important for Ariel, however, as it provides valuable information. Through Wolf’s consciousness she witnesses his conversation with Adam, who tells Wolf Ariel is in danger. Adam says he had been banging on her door but received no answer. Hearing this makes Ariel nervous thinking about how she “must be in the real world, so zonked out on [her] sofa that [she] can’t even hear the door” (185). Adam’s warning is about two men who beat him in order to learn Ariel’s whereabouts. The men are after the copy of *The End of Mr. Y* and Adam only escaped the vicious
assault by running into a nearby church. It is immediately clear that the men are willing
to kill for the recipe.

The two men have guns in the “real” world and adolescent sidekicks who can
destroy Ariel’s consciousness inside the Troposphere. When Ariel enters one of the
men’s consciousness she learns they are Ed and Martin, former CIA agents who were
given Lumas’ potion as part of a classified project. Over the course of the project, one of
its supervisors discovered that children with autism were able to enter what the CIA
referred to as MindSpace (Lumas’s Troposphere) more quickly than adult participants.
Once inside MindSpace the children are able to “influence people’s thoughts. They can
change things” (247). When the CIA recruits 100 children with autism to participate in
the project, they are unaware of the primary danger MindSpace or the Troposphere poses.
Through Martin’s consciousness Ariel learns that all of the children died in the
Troposphere: they “simply stayed in the MindSpace too long. No one thought it could kill
you if you got lost in it.” As Martin acknowledges, “Any project that kills a hundred
children can’t go on,” and the project’s end left the two men with a finite supply of the
potion (248). Like Mr. Y, Ed and Martin have become obsessively addicted to entering
the MindSpace. They know the recipe is in the extremely rare novel The End of Mr. Y,
and when they learn Ariel has a copy, they are willing to do whatever they need to get it
from her.

As we learn late in the novel, Burlem disappeared because he was running from
Martin and Ed. Burlem came into possession of The End of Mr. Y from a colleague whose
father owned one of only two copies known to exist. At their meeting she tells Burlem
that she has been receiving insistent offers to purchase the book but has decided to give
the book to Burlem as “it will be of some intellectual value” to him (276). Like Ariel, Burlem tries the potion recipe and discovers that it works. Burlem also, like all the others who accessed the potion, develops a “sensation of needing to go back into the Troposphere […] something of what a drug addict might feel” (280). The feeling convinces Burlem of the potion’s danger.

Just as his friend had claimed, Burlem begins receiving insistent offers for the book once it is in his possession. An intuitive fear prevents Burlem from accepting and so Ed and Martin decide to take the book by force. Burlem uncovers their identities and their plans to use the recipe as what they call “the ultimate weapon” (279). He has visions of “men in blue uniforms” who could “go around and brainwash everyone” and knows he must keep them from finding the recipe. He considers destroying the book but explains his decision to hide it instead saying, “I am a professor of English literature. I couldn’t destroy a book if my life depended on it” (282). When Martin and Ed show up at the English department Burlem decided he “had to get away before the men either […] beat [him] up or—worse—jumped into my mind and took my knowledge” (283). The potential loss of knowledge is far worse, in Burlem’s opinion, than any physical damage Martin and Ed could inflict upon his body.

As we already know, Burlem hides the page with the recipe in his copy of *Zoonomia* and throws the book, along with other books from his office, into a box to be donated to a bookstore. To get out of the building he escapes through the abandoned train tunnels, shifting rubble that was in his way. When Ariel learns this she reflects, “the tunnel collapsing was the reason for everything starting […] if the tunnel hadn’t collapsed [she] wouldn’t have got the book, or found the page. Or maybe [she] would;
maybe [she] would have found those things eventually, anyway” (332). In a less explicit way than Rossi, Burlem passes his unfinished research to his advisee. Both advisors come to regret saving information that turns out to be deadly and places their students in grave danger. The fear again hints at an advisor’s responsibility to protect their advisees from harmful knowledge. That the information reaches the advisees anyway conveys a sense of inevitability that the pursuit of any extensive amount of knowledge will have negative consequences for the pursuer.

The value of information is a major theme of both novels, and both ask the reader to consider how much value should be placed on knowledge. All of the protagonists are willing to risk their lives to attain information because they feel knowledge is worth such a loss. At the end of the novels, Rossi and Ariel are both dead, and Paul has left academia. There are ways, however, to view these endings as fulfilling the grad novel formula. Without the clear examples of academic success in so many other grad novels, it would be easy to overlook the question these texts pose in the end: What does it mean to be a successful scholar?

**WHAT CONSTITUTES SUCCESS IN ACADEMIA?**

As mentioned above, *The Historian* and *Mr. Y* contest there is danger in the pursuit of knowledge, and this is a theme that has long-appeared in literature. Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for scholarly abilities and the time to employ them towards the pursuit. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden for eating from the tree of knowledge. Icarus crashed into the sea when he disregarded warnings and flew too close to the sun. These stories contain traces of the traditional scholarly ideal
and a conception of knowledge—gained through research or experience—is of higher worth than even one’s soul. As Veblen argues,

> University teaching [has] a particular and special purpose—the pursuit of knowledge—it has also a particular and special character, such as to differentiate it from other teaching and at the same time leave it relatively ineffective for other purposes. Its aim is to equip the student for the work of inquiry, not to give him facility in that conduct of affairs that turns such knowledge to practical account.

(12-3)

Scholars who advocate for the impracticality of the highest forms of knowledge believe the “affairs of life, except the affairs of learning, do not touch the interest of the university man as a scholar or scientist” (21). For these academics, true scholars seek knowledge as an end in itself, and any endeavor with a functional goal cannot be considered true scholarship. If this is the definition of true scholarship, then all three protagonists—and Ariel in particular—achieve academic success in the end.

_The Historian_ contains three connected narratives: that of the narrator who records Paul’s telling of the story and the events that occur as he shares it, the story of Paul and Helen’s adventure in search of Rossi and Dracula, and—through letters—Rossi’s story of seeking Dracula as a graduate student. At the time the narrator hears the story, Paul has _chosen_ to leave academia after an unspecified number of years as a history professor. When a friend tells him, “I could have dropped dead when they told me you gave up your life in the academy” to work as a diplomat Paul responds, “We need peace and diplomatic enlightenment, not more research on tiny questions no one else cares about” (57). Paul has moved away from the traditional scholarship he practices
throughout his grad student narrative, but he still values knowledge highly. Paul travels around the world as a diplomat and it is clear from the narrator’s descriptions of their travels that he is insist that she keep up with schoolwork and attain significant understanding of culture and history from the places they visit.

The narrator, in the end, goes on to become a medieval historian. At the conclusion, she receives her own copy of the book that led both her father and Rossi on their hunts for Dracula, which establishes her academic achievements for the reader. Earlier in the novel readers are told Dracula ensures the books “go only to the most promising scholars” (814). And, of course, Rossi completed his degree and became a graduate professor, serving as an advisor to students like Paul. Had this been Rossi’s ending in the novel, it would seem like The Historian follows the grad novel formula fairly well. Paul’s move from academia to diplomacy was by choice, and diplomats tend to highly educated individuals. The narrator alludes to her academic notoriety when describing the conference she attends at the end of the novel. Rossi’s end, however, comes when Paul and Helen drive a stake into his heart after finding him in Dracula’s tomb.

Near the beginning of their search, Paul and Helen encounter a librarian who seems intent on preventing them from conducting research on Dracula. At first the librarian’s motives are unclear, but when Helen mentions Rossi, the librarian becomes furious: “It’s not fair! I should have gone instead […] I did twenty years of research for this!” (214). He continues, “Rossi didn’t want to go. I wanted to. It wasn’t fair. […] I would have gone willingly to serve him” (215). Readers eventually learn that Rossi was abducted in order to serve, eternally, as the librarian for Dracula’s vast collection of texts.
Dracula explains he had been leaving the small books for scholars in order to find the best one “to catalogue [his] library.” He insists Rossi had elected to join him through his tenacious research: “No one has every disregarded my warning twice in a lifetime. You have brought yourself” (815). After Paul and Helen find him, Rossi admits he “had started doing some research again, for an article” because he learned “there was a new scholar at the university writing about” Dracula (799). His decision to keep researching, even after his friend had been killed and after receiving a death threat himself, Rossi proved himself to be a true scholar in Dracula’s opinion. Dracula tells him, “Together we will advance the historian’s work beyond anything the world has ever seen […] You will have what every historian wants: history will be reality to you” (830). Unlike Faust, Rossi does not willingly trade his soul for knowledge, but he nonetheless reflects the qualities of Veblen’s disinterested scholar in a different way.

Most of what we learn of Rossi’s time with Dracula comes from the professor’s notations. Rossi records his experience because, even though he has “no one to whom to write […] and no hope that it will ever be found […] it seems a crime not to attempt to record [his] knowledge while [he is] still able to do so” (802). In a sentiment reminiscent of when he sought historical information despite the understanding it would not lead to academic notoriety, the scholar in Rossi works to record what he learns because he believes it is valuable beyond any attention it might bring him. He furthers the image of himself as a “true” academic through these records. Within the notes Rossi also admits, “I began to itch in spite of myself to open some of those books, to touch the manuscripts in their wooden trays” (812). Although he is sure he will never be able to publish any of the knowledge he obtains from Dracula or his library, he explains, “my curiosity was rising
high in me […] I was speaking with one who had lived through more history than any
historian can presume to study in even a rudimentary way” (815). He decides one of his
last purposes on Earth is “to stay alive long enough to write all I can in this record,
although it will probably crumble to dust unread” (831). The mere possibility that
someone would come across the notes is enough to give meaning to Rossi’s final days.

Though Rossi refuses Dracula’s offer of an eternity of scholarly work, he still
feels a responsibility as a scholar. In a comedic portion of his final notations he writes, “I
discovered today that Napoleon had two of his own generals assassinated during his first
year as emperor, deaths I have never seen chronicled elsewhere” (832). Even after all that
he suffered as a result of scholarship, Rossi is driven to continue “in spite of [him]self.”
He records what he learns so there is at least a possibility of adding to historical
knowledge. Rossi values his immortal soul over knowledge attainment, but even fear of
losing his soul does not diminish his desire for it.

Mr. Y ends with a similarly complicated “success.” By the end of the novel Ariel
and Adam are not professional scholars; they are not even physically alive. It is that
modifier, however, that allows me to argue for the novel’s adherence to this element. The
suggestion that they may still have found a form of scholarly success is the underlying
anti-intellectual sentiment.

Ariel and Adam are both aware of the dangers inherent in entering the
Troposphere. When Adam finds Ariel in the Troposphere, he knows the lengthy search
for her led to his death in the physical world. He had an opportunity to return to his body
before it died but he explains, “I didn’t want to go back there” (371). When Ariel asks
why, he says, “I wanted to know. […] Just to know. I couldn’t go back” (372). Ariel
eventually echoes these sentiments when she decides to stay as well. Adam tries to convince her to go back saying, “you’ve got the potential to become the kind of thinker who can change the world. You could be the next Derrida, or…anything you want.” But Ariel tells him, “I can’t get what I want outside of here, I know that. And I also understand that this is the curse. But I want the knowledge I can find in here” (397). Rather than becoming famous for her knowledge, Ariel wants to obtain more of it. The curse is that desire, to put everything else—including life—after knowledge. This conception of value is a curse, and the role of fate throughout both novels could suggest that all the characters were cursed by their academic objectives.

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN GRAD STUDENT NOVELS

Burlem’s conference paper—the one that led to her entrance into grad school—was about the curse said to come with reading Lumas’s mysterious book. Ariel explains, “Burlem hadn’t then read The End of Mr. Y, but instead talked about the probable invention of the ‘curse’ story.” During the conversation Ariel asks Burlem if he would read the book, even with all his knowledge about the curse:

“Of course,” he said, with his odd smile. “Would you?”

“Absolutely.” (15)

Later Ariel addresses the reader with the same question: “Would you read a cursed book if you had one? If you heard that there was a cursed book out there and you found it in a bookshop, would you spend the last of your money on it? If you heard there was a cursed book out there, would you go searching for it, even if no one thought any copies existed anymore?” (46).
This thought experiment is arguably the novel’s ultimate point. Like most truly hypothetical questions, it is impossible to definitively answer until one is actually in the situation. Then the decision would depend upon the value the individual places on knowledge and the extent to which they believed in curses. The final line of the embedded narrative’s preface is, “It is only as fiction that I wish this work to be considered.” Ariel wonders, “Surely anyone would read a novel as fiction, anyway?” (27). If the book *is* read as fiction, with a firm belief that it contains nothing applicable to the world outside its pages, then reading the book would (according to the curse) mean risking life for the simple purpose of reading the book. Nothing more than that experience would be gained by anyone who risks the veracity of claims that anyone who reads it dies immediately afterward. While life-and-death stakes for the reading of a novel are a bit hyperbolic, the question is ultimately whether one considers knowledge as a means to an end or an end in itself.

In the most traditional conception, a true scholar is only concerned with knowledge for knowledge’s sake. In *The Higher Learning in America* Veblen condemns the belief that a “quest for knowledge [is] rated as meritorious […] only in so far as it has appeared to serve the ends of one or another of the practical interests that have from time to time occupied men’s attention” (7). Veblen insists, “the pragmatic, utilitarian disciplines” are based in “the nature of barbarism” (25). Furthermore, he maintains, “the pursuit of knowledge that occupies the scientists and scholars is not ‘practical’ in the slightest degree” (19). While Veblen makes this assertion in earnest, it is also an academic belief often satirized in university novels.
An oft-quoted line from Kingsley Amis’s academic novel *Lucky Jim* relates to the titular character’s consideration of an upcoming presentation. Jim reflects, “It was the perfect title, in that it crystalized the article’s niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw on non-problems […] The Economic Influence of Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450-1485” (14-15). One on the quotation’s admirers explains its cleverness in illustrating “the brilliant thing about academia: finding some obscure topic which is obscure for a reason, and then write about it convincingly as though you’ve uncovered something that will rock the world to its foundations” (Savage para. 5). University fiction often presents academics as “eccentric, absent-minded sham artists who engage in ersatz intellectual chatter and hide behind a façade of specious culture to preserve their supposed high status” (Salwak 216). These quotations illustrate reasons for non-academics to distrust academics. With grad student novels, suspicion moves from knowledge-seekers to knowledge itself.

By the close of *The End of Mr. Y*, the protagonist has lost himself and all his worldly possessions in his pursuit of the Troposphere. When he finally locates the fair-doctor, he gives the last of his money for the potion’s recipe. He asks the doctor how many others have purchased the recipe. The doctor responds,

You wish to know how valuable is this knowledge you hold in your hand […]

You wish to know how much power you now possess, and how it has been potentially diluted among the rest of the population. Well, I can answer your question quite easily. You are the only person to whom I have sold this recipe. Not everyone is as willing as you were to lie in a tent and imbibe a stranger’s medicine concoction simply for the purpose of knowledge. For pain relief, this is
common. For pleasure, also. But you can rest assured, sir, that you are my only customer to date. (95)

The doctor’s response highlights the risk Mr. Y took in their first meeting. He was offered knowledge for the price of two shillings and complete trust in a person he did not know.

In “Fictions of Academe,” Watson observes that, in many university novels, “academe is something to exorcise: it needs to be lived for a time, but lived in order to demonstrate that it is ultimately unlivable” (41). *The Historian* and *Mr. Y* take this suggestion literally; the only protagonist still alive at the end of the story is the one that got out of academia. Hobsbaum sees a similar, but less extreme message in university fiction; the “thinker […] has to leave—to live ‘out of doors’—and find some way of expressing himself beyond the college gates” (25). Life is what happens outside of academia, according to these sentiments.

Many grad novels use the term “the real world” to describe life outside of higher education, but the protagonists generally find ways to access “the real world” or find elements of it without leaving academia. After specific moments of fate’s intervention, they take control of their academic futures. By implementing fate in the protagonists’ journey, these types of grad novels add a layer of humanity or remove some barrier that might otherwise separate these scholars-in-training from non-academics. For academic readers—particularly graduate students—the role of fate contains a troubling suggestion.

The consistent role of outside forces in grad novel protagonists’ success in academia is worrisome for any reader seeking such success for themselves. The significance of chance ostensibly contends that academic success is somewhat arbitrary
as it is so often luck rather than effort that leads to forward momentum. Current attrition rates for PhD programs and the market graduating students enter can indeed make it seem as if only the gods can control what happens after someone enters graduate school. This absence of agency aligns the seemingly contradictory genre of quit lit with the presentations of graduate experience in grad student novels.
Why had she ever supposed that writing a Ph.D. thesis was a good way of spending her
twenties? This was surely meant to be the liveliest, free-est decade of a woman’s
existence? The responsibilities of adulthood, marriage, children lay in the future. The
constraints of childhood lay behind her. Sometimes she looked despondently around the
reading room of the British Library and asked inwardly—what are we all doing here
when we could be living?

- A.N. Wilson, *A Jealous Ghost*, p. 6

CHAPTER 3: Success in Academia

The last and perhaps most strikingly unique feature of the grad novel formula is
the protagonist’s reaching the end with some kind of success in academia. Throughout
this dissertation I examine eight grad student novels and argue that each can be read to
have such an ending. In this chapter I will examine another text, *A Jealous Ghost* by A.N.
Wilson, which has a conclusion that I argue, despite the dire situation of the protagonist,
also suggests success in academia. Before diving in, however, I would like to provide a
few additional grad novel endings in order to further support my claim of this
consistency.

*The Savage Garden* by Mark Mills: an initially struggling Oxbridge scholar,
Adam Strickland, is given an assignment to study a garden in Italy. Once in Italy and
engrossed in the garden he finds his scholarly interest renewed and solves a generations-
old mystery as well as a more recent mystery. He falls in love, attains invaluable
information for his advisor, and returns to England with everything he needs to complete
his dissertation—including a solicitation to turn one of his chapters into a published
article.
**The Black Hour** by Lori-Rader Day: Nathaniel (Nath) starts off in a rocky, non-romantic relationship with his new advisor. The relationship turns briefly romantic, before reaching a point where Nath considers leaving his program. Like Adam, Nath solves two separate mysteries: one that involved his advisor the year before the novel’s events and another that occurs on campus during the course of the novel. It ends with the platonic student-advisor relationship restored and made even stronger by the novel’s events. Readers learn Nath intends to use the two mysteries he solved in his dissertation on the sociology of violence.

**Stinger Stars** by Paul A. Bussard: Maria de la Cruz begins the novel struggling to convince someone—anyone—that she has found a way to communicate with a previously-undiscovered species. By the end of the novel she has not only earned the right to name the species, but also discovered its regenerative powers can be used to help humans generate or regenerate missing limbs, reverse dementia, and generally heal almost anything.

**The Twisted Heart** by Rebecca Gowers: Kit goes from anti-social, uninspired, and “blocked” PhD candidate to one who has uncovered a secret behind Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and has fallen in love with a professor from a different department.

**The Secret History of the Pink Carnation**: Eloise Kelly begins the novel stuck in her dissertation work. She has been unable to find any information on her subject and worries she will have to change her project to something she’s not interested in. At the end of the novel—which is the first in a series of historical romances—Eloise has uncovered the identity of an English spy, during the war with France in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, who had historically been known only as the Pink Carnation. She
has gained access to a storage-room filled with the Pink Carnation’s correspondence and other previously unexamined artifacts related to British espionage of the time.

_The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart:_ The 2011 ballad features a twenty-eight-year-old PhD student who, in Part One, feels as if she is always on the outside of any community—academic or otherwise. At a conference she is patronized by a recent graduate of her department, gives a clumsy conference speech, and then falls off the stage when she goes to sit after her talk. The ballad ends with a romance forming between Prudencia and the patronizing graduate. The final scene takes place in a pub where conference attendees are drinking and singing karaoke. Prudencia is pulled onto the stage by a professor and she sings with confidence. For the first time she feels she is on the inside rather than left out.

These are, of course, extremely simplified summaries, but here they are meant only to establish the pattern. This aspect of the formula is particularly surprising when we consider the current state of graduate programs with regards to retention and employment. The ending of grad student novels provide an interesting comparison to the phenomenon of ‘quit lit,’ wherein graduate students, instructors, and occasionally even professors publicize their decision to leave academia. The two writing forms present very different views of academia and, rather than considering how they conflict, I am interested in how they agree. In this chapter I will examine A.N. Wilson’s modernization of _The Turn of the Screw_ along with several widely read pieces of quit-lit.

A Jealous Ghost

The protagonist of Wilson’s novel is Sallie Declan, an American working on a DPhil in London. Sallie is writing her thesis on _The Turn of the Screw_ by Henry James,
but disagreements with her advisor’s comments have left her unmotivated to keep writing. Sallie is interested in theory, particularly Jean Baudrillard’s conception of hyperreality. She receives the draft of her first chapter, ‘Metanym and Antonym,’ to see “Professor Helstone had ringed both words with pencil and written beside them, very neatly, ‘Neither word is in my dictionary!’” (51). His comments on her draft and his “ambiguous grunts […] when she had tried to expound on these ideas orally,” led Sally to wonder “whether her supervisor had actually read, or even heard of, Baudrillard’s Simulations” (51-2). Helstone is an historicist and urges Sallie to look into Henry James’ motivations for writing the novella. But this does not meet Sallie’s own vision: “Sallie was not trying to sit down and write some kind of middle-brow biographical criticism. […] She was no more interested in the author of Turn than she was in the ‘fictitious’ group assembled at the commencement of the text to hear ‘Douglas’s narrative’” (53). This assertion is followed with the comment that “Helstone had changed ‘commencement’ to ‘beginning’ and every time she had spoken of Turn, he had added ‘of the Screw’ in his neat pencilled hand […] he seemed not to realise that there was something very deliberate in her truncating, and hence renaming, the text” (53-4). Sallie feels “very badly let down by” her advisor and grieves, “To have crossed the Atlantic, and endured months of loneliness and cold and near collapse for this!” (54). The story begins with Sallie’s interview for a job as a nanny; the job that will both take her away from and resituate her in academia.

Sallie is offered the position. She will be watching two children, Michael who is ten and Frances who is eight. The children’s father, Charles Masters, has to spend several weeks in Hong Kong in his position as an international lawyer. For reasons he doesn’t
explain, Charles insists his “children are supervised […] and the supervision has to be constant” (38). In her interview he tells Sallie, “Well, of course, what they need is […] a mother.” Sallie, who has already exhibited thoughts that will leave readers questioning her sense of reality, takes this to mean, “I need a wife. Will you be their mother?” She thinks, “What did that mean, if not…? Can she have been hearing right? Within twenty minutes he had been proposing marriage to her without actually using the words” (32). This misinterpretation affects all of her thoughts and actions upon arriving in Kent to begin her new job.

The Masters’ estate is called Staverton, and the first person she meets is Gloria, the house manager. Sallie takes an instant dislike to Gloria which she realizes has “a literary explanation. Gloria was so crudely unlike Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper in The Turn of the Screw. Sallie had wanted a homely body, not this tall, self-confident, and, yes, sexy person” (37). As her time at Staverton passes, Sallie often confuses her situation with that of the governess in James’ tale. She refers to Michael and Frances as Miles and Flora, and repeatedly says “Bly” when she means “Staverton.” Sallie’s perception of her experience shifts to resemble the ideas of Baudrillard, and she creates a fantasy world in which she and Charles are engaged.

Committing to her own imaginings, Sallie begins to sleep in the master bedroom—where Charles sleeps when he is there. The first evening she does so she notices a picture of an attractive red-haired woman by the bed. She assumes this must be the children’s mother and wonders if “the woman in the photograph [had] been elevated into the iconic status of saint? If so, no one could compete with her” (63). But Sallie
maintains her wishful thinking telling the picture, “I have one thing you don’t have […] I am alive” (64). It is eventually made clear, however, that this is not true.

Sallie begins to see a woman who greatly resembles the subject of the photograph in Mr. Masters’ bedroom. Believing it to be the ghost of the late Mrs. Masters, Sallie refrains from telling either Gloria, the neighbors, or any of the other staff about her sighting. She continues to see the figure, however, occasionally with Michael and Frances. In a conversation with Lucy, the woman who lives with her husband and children in the property closest to Staverton, Sallie learns that Charles’ ex-wife, Rosie, is not dead. Lucy also tells Sallie that Rosie is the reason Charles is so insistent that his children be constantly supervised. Rosie had been having multiple affairs and had become addicted to cocaine. Charles attained full custody of Frances in Michael, and declared Rosie could not see the children unless she committed to a drug rehabilitation program. Knowing Rosie would try to see her children despite the ruling, Charles does not want them unsupervised at any time.

Once Sallie understands that she has not been seeing a ghost, but that Rosie has been sneaking onto the grounds—and is in fact sleeping in Frances’ bedroom—she feels it is her duty to get rid of the woman. She insists, “What was her job, for God’s sake? Why had Charles hired her? […] Charles had hired Sallie to prevent the kids from seeing their mother” (159). Sallie’s mind—connecting her story, *Turn of the Screw*, and her literary theory knowledge—concludes,

Rosie was meant to be dead. One of the important texts of critical theory for her—Todorov? Stanley E. Fish? They were a little muddled right now in her head—said how reading is a creative act, thinking is a creative act. Maybe it was Barthes.
We make our own text. Each reader of a text brings to birth for herself a new book and each thinking person brings to pass a new truth. There’s no such thing as a concrete reality, with us going around like so many recording machines or cameras taking impressions of it. We make reality. For her, the reality had been, ever since she came to Bly, that Rosie was dead. (170-1)

Sallie tragically mistakes Frances’ red hair on her pillow for Rosie’s, and stabs and bludgeons the little girl to death. The novel ends with Sallie in a secure British hospital, not completely coherent about the events or what was real and what had only existed in her imagination.

SUPPOSED SUCCESS

At the end of *A Jealous Ghost*, Sallie has not achieved the same form of obvious success as the protagonists described above. All of her personal possessions have been taken from her, and she feels “they had taken further possession of her by means of narcotics, forcing her to take bigger and bigger doses so that time stood still, and the borderlands between appearance and reality were really impossible to distinguish” (165). Additionally, “Sallie could not read anymore. She was unable to concentrate upon words on the page.” She could not even speak “[b]ecause the psychiatrists and the lawyer and the police had made her utter sentences she no longer believed to be true” (166). It is in this stage of Sallie’s detainment that she receives two in-person visits: one from her mother and one from Professor Helstone.

Her mother begins her visit “like a figure stepping into a dream.” Sallie recalls, “Mom had been her predictable, embarrassing self” (166). As the visit goes on, Sallie’s mother becomes upset by Sallie’s silence: “After about half an hour of it and Sallie not
answering […] Mom had begun to get mad. She’d started to say how she’d flown three thousand miles on money she couldn’t afford to see her daughter and she thought it was no more than common decent courtesy to speak to your own mother when she’d come all that way.” She tells Sallie she will have to move because reporters keep hounding her and writing “killer nanny’s mom stands by her little daughter. And frankly, why did Sallie think she would stand by her if this was all the welcome she was going to get?” (167). In her confused state, Sallie cannot remember which visit came first, but her visit from Professor Helstone is a very different scene.

Her advisor sends Sallie a letter after learning what had happened. According to Sallie, “It was a really sweet letter. It had made her cry. He said he hoped she was getting all the help she required, both medical and legal, and wondered whether, while she was confined in the hospital, she would like to continue with her thesis work” (165). Sallie’s behavior, during Helstone’s visit, is the same as it was with her mother, but her professor’s conduct is strikingly dissimilar:

He had been tongue-tied, sitting there in the room, opposite a table, with the wardress sitting on an upright chair in one corner, listening to what he had to say.

“Obviously, mm, mmm, now could be a time for some more general reading around the subject—perhaps you haven’t had as much time as, mm, mmm, as it were.”

He had brought a plastic shopping bag full of books, which they had allowed him to leave behind for her. J.I.M. Stewart’s *Eight Modern Writers* and *Nostromo*, which she had never read, and some Kipling short stories, and a book called *Henry James and the Ghostly*. (165-6)
Helstone’s ‘mm, mmm’s recall Sallie’s earlier recollection of his “ambiguous grunts” (51) from their in-person discussions over her thesis idea. Those interactions are described only from Sallie’s point of view, and while Helstone will obviously be affected by Sallie’s dramatically altered circumstances, Sallie has also been established as an unreliable source. We see this in her interaction with Charles Masters—the other male authority figure in the text—when his sad musings on his marital situation lead Sallie to believe he is proposing to her. Helstone’s compassion and support is emphasized by Sallie’s visit with her mother. While Sallie’s mother is offended by her daughter’s silence and can only worry about what people think of her, Helstone indicates his willingness to “stand by” Sallie by continuing their scholarly relationship. Sallie wishes she could speak while “he sat there, twiddling his thumbs and looking, pitifully, at her, as he yammered about Henry James and the late Victorian, early-twentieth-century literary scene.” She regrets that she had found it “impossible to speak when Helstone came, even though she was overwhelmed by his desire to be kind” (166).

Sallie’s assessment of this interaction is not shared by all readers. According to Lai-Ming, “The hypocrisy and cynicism in this advice, that Sallie should continue her PhD research during confinement, even though her supervisor is well aware that she will likely never finish it, is pungent” (79). There is no evidence, however, of Sallie’s misinterpretation of Helstone’s visit. The reader’s access to both Sallie’s thoughts and the scene itself provides the same opportunity that demonstrated during her interview with Charles Masters. Additionally, in their discussion about the significance of character witnesses in her trial, Sallie’s lawyer asks, “You say that Professor Helstone would be willing to…” (165). This was apparently expressed in the “really sweet letter” he had sent
prior to his visit. Sallie herself determines “one day, she would be strong enough to stir herself and get down to writing something useful about Turn” (185). She maintains, “There were no more words to say, but maybe one day there would be words to write” (186). Confined to a hospital and potentially facing a lengthy prison sentence, scholarship is the only real possibility Sallie has for finding any kind of success. As Helstone alluded in his letter, Sallie’s confinement will ensure she has time to keep working towards her degree.

**Possibilities for Success**

The trend in academic quit lit suggests that, unlike Sallie, young scholars today feel confined by academia and feel their only possibility for finding any kind of success is to discontinue their work in the field of scholarship. According to Megan Garber, Robert Graves created a trend of publishing “a tale of disillusionment” in 1929 with his memoir *Good-Bye to All That* (para. 1). As she explains, “Graves was surely not the first human to feel betrayed by the world, nor was he the first to turn loss into literature. But something about his book—something about its very particular idea that the best way to deal with disappointment in something was to leave it—resonated with later generations” (para. 2). And for some reason, it has especially resonated with those disillusioned by academia. In an effort to track the growing genre, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* hosts a shared Google Document that allows readers to contribute to its list of examples of academic quit lit. Interest and participation in this project illustrates the proliferation of these articles and their significance for the academic community.

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23 This developing list is accessible here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1OODoiZKeAtiGi3lAONCspryCHWo5Yw9xkQzkRntuMU/edit#gid=0 (Most recently accessed 8 April 2022)
Social media provides contemporary quit lit writers access to large audiences and fast reactions and shares. But the desire to announce one’s departure from academia is not new. As Grant Shreve explains,

a form of ‘quit lit’ [...] actually emerged in the 1970s, the first decade in which the number of new Ph.D.s first outpaced the number of available academic jobs. By 1980, [...] stock types like the itinerant scholar were often invoked alongside anecdotes of Ph.D.s having to take second jobs as taxicab drivers, bartenders or bricklayers. (para. 3)

Though not entirely monopolized by former grad students and professors24, the general definition of quit lit is a “genre of literature made up of columns and op-eds detailing the reasons why scholars – with or without tenure – leave academia” (Coin 708). It seems important that, while this genre continues to grow, protagonists of grad novels so often conclude their stories with academic successes. As one version of publication promotes one idea of entry-level scholars’ opportunities, another promotes a vastly different image.

In her viral blog post “The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind,” Erin Bartram publicly announces and laments her decision to dramatically change professional goals. Bartram explains that, in leaving academia, she feels she has “lost a huge part of my identity, and all of my book learning on identity construction can’t help me now” (para. 31). In her post she questions the value of her extensive scholarly work facetiously asking, “if it were so valuable, then why wouldn’t anyone pay me a stable living wage to do it?” (para. 14). As she considers her path towards a job her “concerned parents will recognize” (para. 18), Bartram states, “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know

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24 Quit lit has also been used in reference to writing about overcoming addictions.
what I’m good for” (para. 27). In a statement that has resonated with countless readers Bartram writes,

I got a PhD in history because I wanted to be a historian. That’s what I am trained to be. I didn’t write a dissertation on 19th century Catholic women to learn the critical thinking skills of history and then go work in insurance. I didn’t spend my twenties earning so little I ended up helping unionize my coworkers because I wanted to be in non-profit work. (para. 19)

And in an effort to perhaps justify her desire to share the emotional and personal feelings her decision has raised, Bartram explains, “It’s become too painful to keep up the façade in public […] and I also need to put it out there so I can extinguish the last ember of hope that somehow this has all been a big mistake and I’m actually the recipient of a newly-created named chair in 19th Century American Lady Studies at Literally Any University-Anywhere” (para. 28). By making her decision public, in other words, Bartram is also confirming it for herself, and adding to a tradition that dates back to the 1970s.

In “‘Quit Lit’ Then and Now,” Shreve distinguishes between two separate “eras” of the form and considers what about the market, higher education, and feelings toward academia has changed—as well as what hasn’t. Shreve notes, “Although the rise of quit lit feels unique to an era shaped by epochal financial crisis and an unprecedented accessibility to publishing venues, this kind of writing by ex-academics is not quite as novel as it appears” (para. 2). Among the earliest such writings is “John T. Harwood’s 1974 article for the AAUP Bulletin, “Nonacademic Job Hunting,” which Shreve describes as “[m]ore gently satiric than incisively critical of the academic profession” interspersing “Haywood’s eminently practical advice about how Ph.D.s ought to go about
securing nonacademic employment with personal stories and a few winking literary
references” (para. 5). Another early example is “a brief article written by a freshly minted
sociology Ph.D. in 1975 for The Berkshire Eagle and headlined, “Is a Ph.D. Worth It?”
According to Shreve25, “The author’s list is all too familiar: the constriction of the labor
market, the apathy of undergraduates, the consumer-centric focus of the modern
university and the pressures to publish” (para. 7). What is not familiar—with regards to
current pieces of quit lit—is the article’s treatment of higher education in general.

Quoting from “Is a Ph.D. Worth It?” Shreve maintains “his conclusion gestures
toward wells of feeling yet untapped. ‘I have no regrets about my decision,’ he writes, but
‘this does not mean I am not bitter […]’ He hastens to add, however, ‘whatever anger I
feel is not directed towards my seven years in graduate school.’” Shreve points to this
addition as “[u]nlike the quit lit of our current moment” because the unnamed author
“explicitly diverts anger away from his home institution in order to absolve it of any
responsibility for his feelings” (para. 8). This sentiment is certainly not the case for pieces
like Wendy Davis’ “This Place is Broken,” Fay H.’s “I Didn’t Want to Lean Out,” or
Alessandra Lopez y Royo’s “Why I’m Quitting the Academy26.” These articles
vehemently condemn academia and its inhospitality.

Even non-quit lit pieces can be seen to disparage the current position for scholars.
In “On ‘Quit Lit’ and Why I Won’t Be Quitting Any Time Soon,” Hagood tells readers,

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25 The web address Shreve provides (newspapers.com/image/55174029) brings up a page which
reads, “The page you tried was not found.” As a result, I have relied on Shreve’s quotations of the
piece.
26 Available, as of 8 Apr. 2022, at https://wendydavis.me/spirallingshape/2013/12/this-place-is-
broken.html, https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/i-didn-t-want-to-lean-out, and
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/why-im-quitting-the-
academy/2006622.article, respectively.
“my brother-in-law gave me a purple Adjunct For Life shirt that I wear with pride” (para. 4). Despite this pride she notes,

I’m approaching an age where it’s no longer cute to have the same level of job stability and earning power that I did as a college graduate. I’m getting to a stage where it was all supposed to have added up to something more quantifiable. My friends who chose sensible professions are now CEOs of whatever it is they do while I need to work several jobs and am CEO of nothing. (para.7)

Hagood explains, “I’ve had to perform that act of letting go of the material realm that many have to learn later in life” (para. 9). She claims, “My whole professional and personal work ends up resembling one long instance of sniffing my baby’s head after being kept up all night, which is to say, allowing my inexplicable passion for details of what I do to propel me through the fact that my job doesn’t look good on paper” (para. 10). Hagood’s post suggests that even scholars who stay in academia must admit to be trapped in some way; those like Hagood simply find ways to accept their confinement.

**GRAD NOVEL ENDINGS VS. QUIT LIT**

How can we reconcile the prevalence of fictional grad student success when those outside literature are so frequently composing very different endings for their own academic careers? I actually see two commonalities, the first of which is a desire for a different kind of graduate experience. In the novels mentioned above and throughout this dissertation, the vast majority of learning occurs outside the seminar room or dissertation process. Even in *Doctor’s Oral*, more than a third of which is devoted to the process of Joe’s examination, the traditionally academic activity of test and assessment serves to invalidate the practice.
The minimal part of scholarship or teaching in grad novels has also been commented upon regarding their campus and academic counterparts. This is generally explained as a necessity to maintain a reader’s attention. As Rossen notes, “scholarly work is essentially a private undertaking, which consists of a scholar alone in the library with his or her books” (186) and is therefore unlikely to be engaging. Additionally, Switaj contends readers must “consider [university novels] as constructed fictional narratives” (18) and notes that, when they “belong to other genres [there are] further limits on what classroom scenes they may include” (21). The general and persuasive point is that novels are meant to entertain, and scenes of someone reading in a library or grading papers is not easily made entertaining. Switaj’s arguments are tellingly concluded on an important point, however: “the classroom is not a space apart, but rather, merely one space in which the process of socialization we call education takes place; actions in the classroom are affected by dynamics outside of them, at least in the imagination, and our pedagogies should talk account of the porousness of all campus walls” (34). And this, I believe, is one way quit-lit and the grad novel formula can correspond.

The work and research and experiences protagonists of grad novels engage in have tangible, noticed-outside-of-academia implications. In The Twisted Heart, Kit links an historical murder to the scene in Oliver in which Bill Sikes kills Nancy. In The Savage Garden and The Black Hour, Adam and Nathan bring murders to justice. In Stinger Stars, Maria basically cures all the illnesses in the world. (Maria’s situation is decidedly hyperbolic, but hopefully still supports my point). Gillian from Save Your Own spends years working with women in a halfway house, improving their situations both during and after their stays. When she returns to academia, she founds a program called “Icarus:
A Foundation for Interdisciplinary Study in the Humanities” which supports “scholars with nontraditional approaches to age-old questions and sometimes publish[es] groundbreaking [sic] books that have been turned down by the usual array of presses” (279). When research is depicted in The Historian—the text that, after Doctor’s Oral, contains the most of such activity—it is aimed at locating Paul’s advisor rather than publication in a peer-reviewed journal. In other words, the work they do as scholars is significant outside of their roles as scholars.

This naturally leads to the question of what knowledge is valued for: practicality or attainment. But it seems important to note that most of these outcomes were not sought to prepare the protagonists for a particular career. Neither Adam nor Nathan conveys any desire to transition into detective work. Gillian’s work with Icarus is distinct from her work as a professor. Paul’s dissertation topic does not change from ‘Dutch Mercantilism’ to ‘Dracula Hunting.’ Joe’s successful examination result will allow him to continue with his degree program, and secured his position as an instructor at a junior college, but it also factors into the decision he and his girlfriend must make regarding her pregnancy. All this suggests humanities PhD programs do not need to transform into programs like those designed for advanced nurses or business professionals. Instead they might do something like Menand suggests when he claims “If every graduate student were required to publish a peer-reviewed article instead of writing thesis, the net result would probably be a plus for scholarship” (152). Such a requirement would give graduate students experience in writing for publication as opposed to an audience of a small group of professors from their institution.
In a similar vein, one of Cassuto’s main critiques in The Graduate School Mess is graduate programs’ practice of “launch[ing] their students into empty scholarly space, equipped with skill sets so specialized and desires so narrow that they can only imagine doing one thing” (9). Cassuto sees the programs’ “failure to prepare students for alternative employment” (209) as one of higher education’s most significant crimes. Menand also argues, “students who spend eight or nine years in graduate school are being seriously overtrained for the jobs that are unavailable. The argument that they need the training to teach undergraduates is belied by the fact that they already teach undergraduates” (152). These arguments are similar to Bartram’s criticism of a community that asks its members “to continue contributing the fruits of their labor which [they] will only consider rigorous enough to cite if they’re published in the most inaccessible and least financially-rewarding ways” (para. 16). And Bartram’s is not the only quit lit piece to support Cassuto’s and Menand’s points. In fact, even anti-quit lit pieces can illustrate their accuracy.

In “On Enjoying Grad School,” Hopper reflects on her anonymous quit lit publication nine years earlier. The primary point of the anonymous piece is publicizing Hopper’s fond memories of graduate despite leaving academia. She writes, “During my decade as a failed scholar, refusing to disavow my love of grad school felt like a kind of necessary if perverse perseverance. It meant: I’m not one of those obnoxious people who believes in academia just because it happened to work out for me. It meant: The years of my youth were not just a means to an end” (para.5). In “Enjoying” Hopper admits to publishing her “obligatory piece of anonymous viral quit lit27 in The Chronicle” (para. 4)

27 While Hopper quotes from her anonymous piece (and says it was published in 2010), she does not reveal its title in “Enjoying.”
without providing her name because of her embarrassment—not of leaving—but of loving her experience in graduate school. She explains the writing of this new piece as the result of a complication to her feelings.

Hopper describes how she gave up on the “tenure-track job market after five years of failure (three years of interviews, two years of nothing) and then spent the next five years in a holding pattern” (para. 3). After this holding pattern, however, Hopper makes the highly uncommon move back into academia. She explains, “I happened to see an appealing job ad on the Facebook page of a friend of a friend—a job in creative writing, a field I’d written a book in but hadn’t trained in, hadn’t been to a conference in, hadn’t even taken a class in since high school—and I applied for it and got it” (para. 6). While likely not her intention, Hopper’s article and her experience rather discredit the time she spent in graduate school. Hopper maintains that her “grad-school years equipped [her] to win a full-tuition scholarship to divinity school; to be a contender for academic administration and residential-life positions, to teach a wide range of students from high school to grad school; to become a freelance journalist […] and to write and publish a nonacademic book” (para. 15). Aside from, perhaps, the scholarship—i.e. additional graduate work—Hopper’s PhD in literature was likely not a prerequisite for these other opportunities. Ironically, graduate school experience is required to compose a quit lit piece. And this brings me to the second commonality between grad novels and quit lit.

**Unexpected Results**

According to Pryal, the designation “quit lit” was “first coined in this context by higher education critic Dr. Rebecca Schuman in *Slate* in October 2013” (para. 2). In her article for *Women in Higher Education*, Pryal argues, “Despite its grimness, Schuman’s
essay\textsuperscript{28} is inspiring as well. She inspired me to write and publish my first nonacademic essay” (para. 4). The publicity articles like Schuman’s attracted, in other words, created new avenues (or perhaps revived old ones) for academics to get published. Pryal’s point is evidenced in the rather ironic effect quit lit can occasionally have on writers. By publicly declaring her departure, Bartram ostensibly believed she was severing all ties to the academic community. Ironically, it connected her more publicly than any academic publication likely would have done. Bartram, whose blog features a prominent “Buy Me a Coffee” button that leads readers to a payment page soliciting an encouraged contribution of $3 per cup\textsuperscript{29}, achieved internet stardom in 2018 with her quit lit piece. The post has been cited in at least fifteen different publications\textsuperscript{30} since it was first shared and led Bartram to author a series of articles for the Chronicle of Higher Education. “The Sublimated Grief” also appeared in one of her articles for The Chronicle under the title “Why Everybody Loses When Someone Leaves Academe”\textsuperscript{31}; versions of both can be obtained through academic databases.

Publishing a piece of quit lit does not definitively remove a scholar from academia. As McKenzie notes in her study of quit-lit, “when leaving occurs, it is not always definitive. Several of my interviewees had ‘left’ academia and the returned; others had voiced their intentions to leave, but remained, as they had been unable to find work

\textsuperscript{28} In this instance Pryal is referring Schuman’s “Thesis Hatement,” rather the Oct. 2013 publication.
\textsuperscript{29} One of the questions on Bartram’s FAQ page refers to this and Bartram responds: “I couldn’t process, and still can’t, that anyone found my writing that meaningful. No matter how much you value your own skills, when the world around you devalues those skills constantly, you internalize some of it.”
\textsuperscript{30} Bartram created a separate page to document and link to the publications that reference her post: http://erinbartram.com/responses-to-that-piece/
\textsuperscript{31} Chronicle of Higher Education vol. 64, no. 24, 2018, p. 15.
elsewhere” (para. 12). Along with the two writers from the 1970s whose work was republished in Shreve’s article, Schuman also achieved success through quit lit, though not by writing it. Her notoriety comes from writing on the phenomenon and from creating her own business: The Dissertation Coach; a prime example of an alternative academic career. This aspect of the quit lit trend reminds me of the “starting stuck” aspect of the grad novel formula. Writers of quit lit are stuck; sometimes, like Bartram, fate intervenes. For many others, however, quitting is the action they can take to unstick themselves.

As Garber notes, the act of producing quit lit is an act that goes beyond quitting. Garber reads quit lit as, though “slightly passive-aggressive[..], declaration[s] of an injustice, of a wrongness, of a problem that begs for correction. It is a boycott of one.” She claims that “‘I quit,’ goes the text. ‘And you should, too,’ goes the subtext” (para. 9). A more positive reading comes from Coin’s suggestion that quit lit is an act of rebellion. According to Coin, “In saying ‘no,’ the rebel reveals the existence of a borderline […] the boundary beyond which self-abuse cannot be tolerated, a borderline beyond with the status quo must change” (715). For grad novel protagonists, such a feeling also often comes right before or immediately after the intervention of fate.

In *A Jealous Ghost*, for instance, Sallie is restless in her day-to-day life. She feels as if grad school in general is simply a pause: “Postpone, postpone. That was why she, and so many others, were doing first a Masters, then a doctorate” (6). Though she continued to work on her thesis, “[i]t was slow work; she felt no sense of inspiration, and from time to time her interest in the subject flagged and she felt she would be happy if she never read another word of Henry James” (11). Prior to taking the job at Staverton she feels that, “in terms of achievement, of actually doing something with life, she had
hardly advanced at all. She was twenty-seven” and the position with the Masters family is “the first paid employment, apart from casual vacation jobs, for which she had ever applied.” She believes that she’d be “leaving her university world, her library world, for a place where real decisions were made” (1). In Save Your Own, Gillian’s academic achievements come after she has been out of academia for several years. Even in the single day covered by Doctor’s Oral there is a point at which Joe considers leaving. As he speaks with a working man he meets on a pre-examination walk, Joe thinks of the life outside graduate school. He notices, “if he kept on talking glibly […] a few minutes longer, he wouldn’t have to decide; it would be too late” (128) as he would miss his exam. In the ways that Coin believes the study of quit lit uncovers “the causes of quitting academia” (707), and McKenzie suggests it can provide answers “about the current state of academia” (para. 1), grad novels could reveal insights into the priorities and anxieties experienced by people in the quarter-life stage— including those in academia.

32 Quit lit is primarily, if not always, written by academics in the start of their careers. Many cite, as Hagood does, the feeling of being behind in life as one reason to leave.
In the Midwest, wealth meant cows, corn, or biotech: after generations providing America with wheat and milk and poultry, the Midwestern soil had given rise to an industry that built scanners and devices, a harvest of organs, serums, and patches sprung from genetic mash. It was a different kind of agriculture […] but in the end they were doing what people had always done, and the only things that seemed different were meaningless details.

– Brandon Taylor, *Real Life* p. 10

CHAPTER 4: Literary Grad Novels

Most of the novels discussed in this dissertation were written with a general readership in mind. The argument of my first chapter—that novels about grad students can be read as allegorical representations of a specific life stage—does not seem valid if they were intended solely for the academic population on which their plots and attention focus. A number of literary critiques consider university fiction in general to be a “hopelessly middlebrow […] and] innately vulgar form” (Fiedler 48) or simply “deplore the whole genre, and some would like to see the entire subject go away” (Moseley “Introductory” 3). Despite this, many—even some of those in the initial group—believe it to be a genre worth critical examination.

According to Elaine Showalter, “the *Professorroman* has offered a full social history of the university, as well as a spiritual, political, and psychological guide to the profession” (118). Frances Kelly similarly argues that popular conceptions of academics are “found in, and formed by, discourse and representation” of fictional academics in popular culture (6). If the general population’s views on higher education are influenced by such depictions—as considered in chapter three—novels about its inhabitants are
valuable and of critical interest. Just as they might present the life of academia to non-academics, they might also serve to elucidate important aspects for academics themselves. As Mortimer Proctor suggests, the subgenre of university fiction “deserves attention […] because the question to which it was directed, What is a university, is as much in need of an answer as it ever was” (viii). Proctor writes from 1957, but analysis of three contemporary grad student novels; Real Life by Brandon Taylor, My Education by Susan Choi, and All is Forgotten, Nothing is Lost by Lan Samantha Chang; suggests that this question has still not been satisfactorily answered.

Taylor, Choi, and Chang are all graduates of prestigious creative writing programs and currently teach in or direct such programs themselves. With experience on both sides of the workshop table, so to speak, one might expect each to be able to offer an answer to Proctor’s query. That they seem unable or unwilling to do so may be influenced in some way by their places within higher education. The development of institutionalized creative writing programs has created anxiety both within and outside of university communities. Mark McGurl provides an extensive exploration of this anxiety in The Program Era and, as products of said era, Taylor, Choi, and Chang explore it as well in their fiction. McGurl insists his interest lies in “the rise and spread of the creative writing program not as an occasion for praise or lamentation but as an established fact in need of historical interpretation,” but the purpose, value, and effectiveness of such programs are also significant for his argument (27).

33 Taylor and Chang both graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and Choi graduated from Cornell’s creative writing program. Taylor currently teaches in the creative writing program of New York University, Choi teaches fiction writing at Yale, and Chang is the current director of the program from which she graduated.
The Program Era’s argument is “that paying attention to the increasingly intimate relationship between literary production and the practices of higher education is the key to understanding the originality of postwar American literature” (ix). In this chapter I aim to call attention to specific questions raised by the three aforementioned novels, consider how they complicate McGurl’s arguments, and consider how the subgenre of grad student novels is especially suited to these objectives. If we accept Showalter’s assertion about the value of university fiction and Kelly’s further claim that it can influence aspects of the very institution from which it draws inspiration, then these kinds of questions provide scholarly insight even without accompanying answers.

The primary questions I am interested in as they relate to these four texts are: Can creativity be taught and can that teaching be effective in an institutional setting? What is the role of the established professional in the training of apprentices and how much credit does the professional mentor deserve with regards to a former apprentice’s success? What form of knowledge is more valuable or authentic: knowledge gained from experience or knowledge gained from explicit instruction?

Before considering these questions, I will consider each novel as it relates to the grad novel formula that organized the other chapters of this dissertation. While these texts and their authors can be arguably distinguished from the others in terms of a certain hierarchy of craft and reception, the ways in which the texts adhere to the grad novel formula are interesting. Their commonalities help to further establish the distinct subgenre and provide contrast that highlights the ways in which the novels stand out. Noting the aspects of each novel that diverge from the formula leads to thoughts regarding literary tastes and what they might suggest about different audiences.
ADHERENCE TO THE GRAD NOVEL FORMULA

The novels’ focus on graduate students’ experiences is significant because, historically, graduate programs have ostensibly been professional schools and what they do and are should be more apparent at that level of education than anywhere else. In *The Marketplace of Ideas* Louis Menand tracks the educational reforms that instituted grad school as professional school. As noted in the previous chapter, prior to 1869, an undergraduate degree was not required of entrants to law or medical school. One reason for this prerequisite was the belief that “utility should be stressed everywhere in the professional schools but nowhere in the colleges,” which ultimately suggested that “you will learn what you really need to know in graduate school” (49). Unfortunately, according to Leonard Cassuto, although “graduate school is professional school, […] most Ph.D. programs neglect graduate students’ professional development” (4). The questions raised by Taylor, Choi, Chang, and McGurl rather support Cassuto’s claim. Adhering to the primary characteristic of a grad student novel, each can also be seen to follow the formula in some way—even if that way is paradoxical.

STARTING STUCK

The first identifiable characteristic of a grad novel is the static position of the grad protagonist. Readers are often introduced to these characters at a point where their research or general progress of study has halted. Of the three novels of focus here, Taylor’s provides the most obvious example of being “stuck from the start.”

At the beginning of *Real Life* the protagonist discovers the work he has been doing all summer has been suspiciously contaminated. Wallace, a PhD student in biological science, had spent his summer “breeding nematodes, which he found both
boring and difficult” (5). Despite the less-than-favorable process Wallace, “for the first
time in his four years of graduate school, he had begun to feel that he might be at the
edge of something” (7). Readers are told “[h]e had been hopeful this summer. He had
thought, finally, that he was doing something” (8) only to find his work “[c]ontaminated”
at a “level of carnage [that] seemed beyond the scope of mere carelessness. It seemed
entirely unaccidental” (7). Wallace’s lost hopefulness, and that he has not experienced a
great deal of hope throughout his time in grad school, is especially poignant here because
its cause was completely out of Wallace’s control. The seeming purposefulness behind
the contamination suggests that Wallace had been properly executing his boring and
difficult experiment. And the lengthy explanation of the process Wallace must follow to
do so further emphasizes the extent to which this contamination leaves him stuck.

The main focus of the story—a weekend with Wallace’s colleagues and friends—
begins because Wallace feels there is “[n]othing to be done for the contaminated plates or
the dying nematodes […] and he did not have it in him to begin the delicate work
necessary to save the strain if it wasn’t already too far gone, and he wasn’t ready to know
if it was already too late” (8). We learn “[i]t had been a couple of years since [Wallace]
had gone to the lake with his friends” (3, emphasis added) but he decides to go because
“the weight of the work it will take to fix this […] feels impossible in the way only
possible tasks can seem” (68). Aside from the time and effort it will take to redo, it would
feel especially impossible if his work had been sabotaged.

The protagonists of My Education and All is Forgotten are not as overtly stuck at
their beginnings, but the recognizable status is still evident in both texts. My Education’s

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34 Pages 5-6 in Real Life describe the process which includes tracing genetic traits through
multiple generations of nematodes.
protagonist, Regina Gottlieb, is struggling with impostor syndrome. Regina is in her first year of an English graduate program which she entered directly after graduating from college. Looking around one of her seminar rooms she notes, “my classmates constituted a cabal of highly specialized persons […] Dowdy, studious, and translucent as they were they yet somehow held the keys to these cloistered proceedings” (11). While she initially feels “graduate school was my Eden” (3), she comes to realize “[i]n college, my interests had always seemed so clear, but in graduate school the unit of measure had switched abruptly, as if from the yard to the pica, and every effort I made to describe what my specialism was sounded dopily broad” (17). She attempts to explain her misgivings to her professor saying,

“[i]n college I never / read any of the classics, because everyone else that I met had already read them in high school, in their elite private high schools, and dismissed them as very uncool […] It’s like studying art—you have to do life drawing first before you get to ditch that and just do abstraction. I went straight to abstraction and I’ve been faking the rest ever since.” (17-18)

In a telling comment on the world of higher education, rather than acknowledging Regina’s potential knowledge gaps, these “confessions seemed to fill [Professor Brodeur] with admiration” (18) and result in him offering her a teaching assistantship.

While Regina is initially stuck due to self-doubt, Roman Morris from All is Forgotten, Nothing is Lost, begins his story trapped by his own overconfidence. The novel begins at the end of the penultimate semester of Roman’s M.F.A. in Poetry program. After failing initially to get into a workshop with the program’s star poet,

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35 There are contextual hints that Regina is starting a PhD in literature, but the program level—M.A. or PhD—is never specifically stated in the novel.
Miranda Sturgis, Roman has decided not to submit any of his writing in her class planning to “keep his own poems from his classmates [...] until he had assessed how his work would be received” (13). In the very last meeting Roman submits three poems and finds himself “angry that this critique would matter so much to him” (38). He leaves the workshop insisting “[h]e would not be put off course by the remarks of idiots; he would not question himself; he would not defend his motives for writing poetry” (50). All these assertions naturally lead a reader to consider the irony of Roman’s participating in a creative writing program. If he is truly interested in developing as a creative writer, it seems he has chained himself to the start by initially refusing to seek and then refusing to accept the thoughts of other poets.

Once Roman finally decides to share his poetry and seek guidance from Miranda he makes decisions that will keep him stuck even after he graduates. After the last class of the semester, Miranda’s workshop celebrates the end of the semester with a party. Roman attends, drinks too much, and eventually shows up at Miranda’s home asking for help. Though she initially resists, in a scene discussed in detail later, Miranda eventually allows Roman into her home and then into her bed. The professor-student affair is a common occurrence in university novels and they rarely have good outcomes. The relationship between Miranda and Roman is paradoxically responsible—at least in part—both for Roman’s eventual success and for the doubt that leaves him emotionally paralyzed many years after it ends. *All is Forgotten* and *My Education* are unique as grad novels in that substantial portions of both take place after the protagonist leaves graduate school. Despite this, I consider them as examples of the subgenre due to the extents to
which their time in graduate school influences the entire narrative of each protagonist\(^{36}\) and to the identifiable grad novel elements evident in both texts.

INTERVENTION OF FATE

The second feature comment to grad student novels is the intervention of fate\(^{37}\) that significantly impacts the protagonists’ trajectory, and such intervention is evident in all three novels. For Regina, the teaching assistantship she receives with the professor whose course she’d initially intended to drop sets off a series of relationships that continue to impact her fifteen years down the road. The first interaction Regina has with Professor Brodeur is the meeting she initiates to request to withdraw from his course. The two begin the previously described conversation and Brodeur is impressed with Regina’s honesty about why she feels unqualified for his class.

After her admission about only pretending to have read classic literature, Brodeur responds, “I always envied and feared such as you in my own school days. Those with nothing but brilliance.” He asks about Regina’s familiarity with Chaucer and, when she answers, “Nonexistent” he offers her the TA position that had been filled by another grad student whose “plans unexpectedly changed” (18). Regina already has a different work-study job at the university and “there’s a rule against holding two.” Brodeur dismisses this as well as her concerns about her lack of Chaucer knowledge and simply hands her a syllabus saying, “’You see I’m presuming consent. Reassure me’” (19). This episode is preceded by the ominous assertion that dropping the course and leaving the professor’s

\(^{36}\) Several critical discussions of campus novels include texts like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s \textit{This Side of Paradise} and Evelyn Waugh’s \textit{Brideshead Revisited} for similar reasons.

\(^{37}\) As explained in the second chapter, I use “intervention of fate” to refer both to random occurrences as well as the actions of others. The feature of note is that something resulting from events outside the grad student’s control ends up having a dramatic effect on their life.
office prior to this offer “would have saved [Regina] much subsequent grief” (17).

Through her work with Brodeur she becomes acquainted with his wife Martha, another professor at the university. The tumultuous relationship between Martha and Regina eventually leads Regina to stop speaking with her best friend and eventually leave graduate school. The Regina who narrates the story with the perspective of hindsight assumes she’d have avoided these outcomes if the position had never become available.

The seemingly unaccidental contamination of Wallace’s plates are both a hindrance to his progress as well as an example of something beyond his control. Over the course of Real Life it seems as if there is actually very little—particularly in terms of his graduate studies—that is truly within his control. In a particularly jarring confrontation with one of his lab mates, Dana, Wallace is bombarded with a racist and homophobic attack while being accused of misogyny: “You don’t get to define what misogyny is to a woman, asshole. You don’t get to” (95). Perhaps in a different situation this assertion could be true, but its inaccuracy in this instance is especially galling.

Wallace is consistently discriminated against in various ways because of his race. While he is unable to defend himself against Dana’s accusation of misogyny, Wallace also knows “that when you tell white people that something is racist, they hold it up to the light and try to discern if you are telling the truth […] It’s unfair because white people have a vested interest in underestimating racism, its amount, its intensity, its shape, its effects” (97). As Wallace has continuously seen, however, “the point is not fairness. The point is not to be treated fairly or well.” And while the point should be “to get your work done” (96), in Wallace’s experience, getting his work done doesn’t help either.
In a character-defining flashback we see Wallace paralyzed with anxiety regarding his preliminary exams. Rather than preparing, Wallace “spent all [his] time watching old doctor shows on the internet and lying in bed watching the light on the walls change.” He remembers spending “hours wondering what he would do if he failed” (78). Fortunately, Wallace has a friend that forces him to focus. And while this instance illustrates something positive in his graduate school experience, the mentorship he gains from the more advanced student Henrik, it also seems important that the jolt into action comes from an external source; once again Wallace’s future seems to depend on the actions of others.

Starting in late September, once Henrik forces him to get past his fear, Wallace works for “hours every day.” He read “articles every night until the text swam before his eyes. He lost five pounds, then ten pounds, then fifteen pounds” (78). The work seems to pay off when Wallace passes exams but even though he was initially encouraged by the success, his efforts fail to impress his adviser. Simone, the director of Wallace’s lab, is insulting and insensitive even as she imagines her graceful tolerance:

Wallace, that was…frankly, I was embarrassed for you. Had that been another student, it might have gone differently. You might not have passed. But we talked a long time about what was feasible for you, what was reasonable for your abilities, and we decided we’d pass you, but we are going to watch you, Wallace. No more of this. You need to get better. She spoke as if she were bestowing blessings. Bestowing beneficence. Bestowing irrefutable grace. She spoke as though she were saving him. What could he say? What could he do?

Nothing. Except to work. (98)
The exam itself is not described in the text but, based on the account we received of his preparations and considering other depictions of his work ethic, this assessment feels dramatically undeserved. Discounting her offensive rhetoric and reference to what she sees as ‘reasonable for his abilities,’ Simone’s admonishment further illustrates Wallace’s lack of agency. The committee decided to pass him. He did not earn his passing score; it was given to him based on a discussion in which he was not included. It is not clear what “this” is—what there can be no more of—or how he can “get better.” At the very least it shows a complete lack of guidance and support from Simone despite her sense of beneficent grace. Wallace’s takeaway had been the belief that his only option was to work, but his encounter with Dana shows that it is not really an option either.

During the confrontation described earlier, Dana tells him, “I hate you Wallace […] Because you walk around like you’re so important because you spend all your time working. You dump all of your precious little time into this lab, and into all these little dumb experiments that don’t matter” (94). Dana’s outburst apprises Wallace of his impossible situation: “She hates him because his works, but he works only so that people might not hate him and might not rescind his place in the world. He works only so that he might get by in life on whatever he can muster” (98).

The interaction with Dana almost leads to Wallace’s removal from the program and does instigate a difficult conversation with his lab director. Although Dana is the one responsible for the shockingly insensitive claim that “women are the new niggers, the new faggots” (96), it is Wallace the director confronts saying “Dana’s email was…I have never read something so horrible in my life.” She tells him, “I don’t want to ask you to leave the lab, Wallace. But I do really want to encourage you to think about what you
want” (257). Dana’s words and actions show Wallace there is nothing he can do to improve his own situation. Even the answer to the question about what Wallace wants seems out of his control.

Simone’s question regarding what he wants is ultimately the question Wallace struggles with throughout the text. In the first section he notes “[h]e was unhappy, and for the first time in his life, that unhappiness did not seem entirely necessary” (17). Near the end he acknowledges that “to stay in graduate school […] means to accept the futility of his efforts to blend seamlessly with those around him. It is a life spent swimming against the gradient, struggling up the channel of other people’s cruelty” (310). At the same time he feels “to say that there is nothing more than [his studies] meant only that if he should lose it, he might not survive his life” (18). He eventually comes to realize his choices are to “[s]tay here [in graduate school] and suffer, or exit and drown” (310). Dana’s influence and Simone’s inability to be objective also suggest that the choice to suffer or drown may not even be his.

Unlike Wallace, outside forces in Roman’s life ultimately lead him to success, but a lack of agency also leads to negative consequences for the protagonist of All is Forgotten, Nothing is Lost. In his first year out of grad school Roman is awarded a competitive fellowship and publishes a book of poetry. This book wins the fictional “Auguste Detweiler Prize for the most distinguished first book of poetry published in the United States” (99). He is “offered [a teaching] job in Lincoln on the strength of winning the Detweiler” and is “relieved to be employed. He had, after all, no income without working” (100). Roman’s path is much smoother than most creative writers or graduate students and the award plays a definitive role in setting him up for success. While
winning the award secures him a status as “one of many poets who were able to take their living for granted” (25), it also eventually leads to the disintegration of a close friendship and a marriage. When questions arise regarding whether his poems fairly won the Detweiler, the doubt they engender leaves Roman with the imposter syndrome he avoided as a graduate student. His insecurity creates hostility between Roman and his best friend from grad school and an emotional obstacle his marriage cannot overcome.

Roman is in New York to receive the Detweiler Prize when he discovers his former professor and lover was largely responsible for his award. In an issue of Poets & Writers magazine Miranda “revealed that she had been the chair of the jury for that year’s Detweiler.” Realizing that “his impoverished friend [Bernard] must have purchased [the magazine] only because it contained the interview with Miranda”, Roman recognizes many other of her former students will likely do the same. He is distraught with the idea that “[e]veryone from the School would know that he had won the prize because Miranda had chosen him.” He feels “as if she had given him the prize, then taken it away” (120).

“The gut-socking recognition that he owed all of his good fortune to Miranda” (122) leaves Roman with a gnawing self-doubt that eventually leads him to resent Bernard for living what he sees as the “exalted” life of “a true poet” (170). When Roman projects the insecurity he’s developed over several weeks of Bernard living with him and his wife, the resulting incident leads to ten years of silence between the two. A decade after writing to Bernard to cut off communication, Roman receives a request from Bernard informing Roman of his impending death and requesting one last visit. The letter forces Roman to recall that “[n]ot a week passed when Roman did not berate himself for allowing the friendship to end,” but his pride made him unable to “be the first to write”
It is impossible for Roman to definitively determine whether or not Miranda’s role on the Detweiler committee was the only reason for his success. The uncertainty eventually ruins his ability to enjoy that success or the relationships he formed based on his identity as a poet.

The self-doubt the award engendered also affects Roman’s marriage more than a decade after it was won. Roman’s fallout with Bernard deeply impacts his wife, Lucy, who obtained her own M.F.A. in the same cohort and had been close friends with Bernard as well. In a state of depression due to missing Bernard, Roman recognizes what “in a sober person […] could only be a sign of falling into love, or out of love” (169). Discussions between the three during the course of the three months Bernard lived with Roman and Lucy lead to Lucy’s discovery of the affair Roman had with their professor. In her anger at his concealing it for so many years, Lucy asks if what he had with Miranda was “[e]nough of a ‘relationship’ for her to choose [him] for a major prize.” To truly wound him Lucy adds, “Miranda suffered for that prize, I think. I don’t know if she had the same influence after that […] The fact is that her reputation took a turn for the worse” (173). The argument concludes with Lucy’s claim that any positive feedback she’d had for Roman was largely given because “for a woman to praise [his] work is the only way to get [him] to notice her at all” (175). At the beginning of the next section, we learn almost ten years have passed since Lucy and Roman divorced, implying that the marriage ended around the same time that Roman’s friendship with Bernard did.

SUCCESS IN ACADEMIA

Despite the “meaninglessness” of and “how strange, how peculiarly isolated Roman’s” life eventually becomes after his relationships with Lucy and Bernard end, All
is Forgotten does adhere to the grad novel formula in terms of finding success within the world of academia. With Miranda’s guidance Roman develops the poems that result in his fellowship. During that fellowship he wins what “was quite possibly the only award given to a young poet that might be known to the general reader” (117). The Detweiler prize results in the offer for a professorship at a large public university, and he eventually wins a Pulitzer for his third book of poems. His youthful plan “To become a great poet” (35) initially seems to foreshadow the disappointment of unattainable goals, particularly as we’ve been told Roman “gave up a secure salary, a finite list of duties, in exchange for two years in Bonneville, Michigan, and, following this, no clear path” (24). And when his former classmate explains her animosity towards him during their time in the program—“You were the most driven of us. You were so arrogant, so certain of yourself and your future”—it is difficult to read “You turned out to be right, of course” without some irritation that he had (190).

Although Regina leaves graduate school without earning her degree, her story also ends with success in the world of literature. The final section of My Education opens with a scene that recalls readers to lifestyle Regina coveted from her professor and lover during her time as a student. We learn that twelve years after her start as a grad student Regina is a successful novelist with a husband, child, and highly efficient and talented nanny 38. Regina considers it “an underserved fluke, a strange coincidence of passable

38 After supplying several examples in which the nanny, Myrna, illustrates her skills in caring for Regina’s son, Regina admits, “I never felt more like my own impostor than when speaking with [Myrna], but she was the best sitter, by many orders of magnitude, we had ever employed” (214). Regina’s sense of being less maternal than Myrna recalls an interaction she had with Martha’s nanny, Lucia, who deeply resented Martha because “she was not, by her nature, maternal” (103). In another scene Brodeur recounts Lucia telling him “Martha doesn’t nurse often enough, she doesn’t sing Joachim songs, she doesn’t dress him in warm-enough clothes” (125). Martha does not display a sense of embarrassment that Lucia takes better care of her son than she does, but
effort with outside enthusiasm” that she is able to “spend so much more time with [her] child than [other working mothers] could”. And also acknowledges an “awareness of being a fake, a do-nothing, unfairly lounging in leisure unearned” (215). It is likely not the kind of success the Regina of 1992 hoped to achieve through her experience of grad school, but the mirroring of Martha’s life as a working mother suggests a kind of satisfying closure for the protagonist.

Taylor’s decision to end his novel with a flashback to Wallace’s grad school orientation allows the text to, in the literal sense, conform to the ending-with-success-in-academia aspect of the grad novel formula. While the chronological order of events ends with uncertainty regarding Wallace’s place in his grad program, the final pages of Real Life portray a protagonist who has overcome many odds to successfully earn a place in a graduate program. The book ends as Wallace is about to enter academia as a PhD student. If we understand acceptance into a program—something not achieved by everyone who applies—to be a form of success, then the sense of hopeful excitement shared amongst the characters on the novel’s last pages depict a form of success in academia.

The scene where the novel’s primary characters meet for the first time is especially poignant because of its optimistic tenor. To further emphasize the difference between the settings for Wallace at the start of the novel—when we see him as a fourth-

Myrna’s ability to supply “her own cure” when Regina is less attentive than she could be to her son’s needs recalls Martha’s inattentiveness to motherly duties while she was in a relationship with Regina.

39 The book’s final sentence reads: “Their laughter rang through the night and through the trees, and on the shore they had left behind, people were eating dinner and laughing and crying and going about things as they always had and always would” (327). The dramatic irony clear to the reader is not in any way reflected in the actions of the characters on the page.
year student, and the final section—where Wallace is excitedly embarking on his graduate studies, the first sentences of each section provide a clear contrast. The first page of the novel begins “It was a cool evening in late summer” (3) and the final section starts “It was an exceptionally hot day in July” (323). After more than three hundred pages of Wallace’s disillusioning experience of graduate school, the novel closes with a dramatically ironic toast:

They popped a bottle of mid-priced champagne. They looked at each other. They smiled.

Lukas cleared his throat. “You know, guys, this is it. This is it. Our life. It starts now.”

[…]“To life,” Emma said, raising her plastic cup. […]

“To life,” they all said, quietly and in their own ways, and the louder, until they were chanting it again and again. To life, they said, imbuing those words with all their hope and all their desires for the future. (327)

From a chronological standpoint, readers know that Wallace struggled through before making his way to the Midwest and graduate school. Although his future—also from a chronological standpoint—in academia is uncertain and perhaps even unlikely based on his actual experiences in the program, the Wallace we see at the end of the novel is “giddy, almost sick with excitement, to be in this place, among these people.” For the Wallace in chapter ten, making it to the orientation “was the accomplishment of a long-held wish, a dream come true” (326). Taylor could have placed this scene at the start of the novel as a kind of prologue to the story of Wallace’s weekend. Instead, it closes out
the text and, because of this ordering, it is possible to argue that *Real Life* ends with its protagonist finding success in academia.

**Diverging from the Formula**

While it is possible to identify all three previously established elements of the graduate student novel in *Real Life*, *My Education*, and *All is Forgotten, Nothing is Lost*, the ways in which they differ from most other grad novels are suggestive of certain expectations of different reading audiences. In his examination of popular literature, *Pulp*, Scott McCracken maintains, “it is not possible to define the audience of a popular text through an analysis of the text on its own, [but] it is possible to identify certain reader constituencies which are attracted to certain kinds of texts” (167). Many of the other novels examined in this dissertation follow both the grad novel formula as well as conventions of different forms of popular genre fiction. They can be easily identified as mysteries, adventure stories, romances, science fiction, or some combination of the like. The three novels discussed in this chapter are less easy to define and exhibit writing techniques valued in creative writing programs. And as McGurl notes, university-based creative writing programs “assume that the student is there to produce literature” (306). Taylor, Choi, and Change are each invested in the world of creative writing programs and likely aim to produce literature themselves. If that is the case, they are aiming for an audience that has had “the time and distance to cultivate an appreciation of high art” (McCracken 37) and perhaps some training to do so as well. If they are aimed at readers who have likely had some experience in higher education, it seems significant that they most obviously deviate from the other texts in their generally negative portrayals of academia.
In *The Program Era* McGurl considers the “conspicuously flourishing genre in the postwar period, the campus novel” (46). From his perspective they are “typically written as satire” and generally focus on “one or another ludicrous dimension of departmental life, and most always portraying literary scholars as the petty, cynical idiots we are” (47). The common assertion that university fiction is usually disparaging of academia, considered in more detail in chapters two and three, is one of my arguments for a separate subgenre for novels about graduate students. After reading any amount of criticism on university fiction or the university novels themselves, it is surprising that grad novels often present largely positive or, at most, neutral depictions of academics and higher education. The previous considerations of how *Real Life, My Education*, and *All is Forgotten* do correspond to grad novel characteristics highlight the differences in how these three novels represent academics and graduate school experience.

Though Roman is somewhat hyperbolically successful in his professional life as an academic—his receipt of the Pulitzer affords him a “new job in California [that] required almost no teaching”—Chang’s presentation of academia includes many of the negative elements highlighted in campus and academic novels. Similarly, Regina’s experiences highlight the commonly satirized themes of infidelity, sexual relationships between professors and students, and a disregard for the formal education aspects of higher ed. From Wallace’s perspective, the supposedly progressive world of academia
supports discriminatory beliefs and actions and contains ostensibly socially-aware individuals who would rather avoid confrontation that take any kind of stand against such beliefs and actions. And while All is Forgotten is the only novel to explicitly focus on a creative writing program, the anxieties McGurl observes in The Program Era are evident in the fiction produced by writers trained in and teaching at institutionalized writing workshops.

**Teaching Creativity in an Institution**

A common question the four texts raise has to do with the idea of innate genius. McGurl describes it in mythical form as “the spiritual privilege derived from the writer’s innate commerce with the muse” (27). Similarly, years after their graduation, Bernard tells Roman, “poetry cannot be taught. All of this instruction of technique is merely superstition, magical thinking—wishful people tinkering over a decision made for them long ago” (160). Bernard believes that no amount of training can lead to quality poetry; and that people are either born to be writers, or they are or not.

The previously discussed scene in which Professor Brodeur offers Regina a teaching assistantship Regina compares her failure to read canonical literature like “Dickens, or Austen, or Brontë” in high school to an art student failing to learn important technical skills before attempting more advanced styles: “you have to do life drawing first before you get to ditch that and just do abstraction. I went straight to abstraction and I’ve been faking it ever since.” Brodeur tells Regina that he had been one of the students who had read the classics in high school and would therefore be the art student with the technical skills: “Elite private schools, private tutors, and an old-fashioned whack on the
ass when you made a mistake. All I had on my side was a tendency toward fearful obedience and a trainable memory.”

It is obvious that Brodeur finds Regina’s untrained talent to be far more impressive than his own hard-earned knowledge: “Waltzing out of college summa cum laude […] and as yet you’ve read practically nothing. I’m terrified what you’ll become once you’ve actually stuck your nose into the books” (18). The idea that formal training will develop her natural intelligence further echoes the Iowa Writers’ Workshop website that maintains, “If one can ‘learn’ to play the violin or to paint, one can ‘learn’ to write, though no processes of externally induced training can ensure that one will do it well” (McGurl 26). By suggesting that talent can be developed as long as some exists in the first place, this statement “cannily […] pay[s] respect to the ‘popular idea of natural individual genius’ while simultaneously supporting the value the workshop can add to an already-gifted writer’s abilities (27).

For Bernard, the value his workshop with Miranda provides is the workshop with Miranda. In a conversation with Roman and Lucy during their time in grad school Bernard raises the question “Can poetry be taught?” Responding to it himself he continues, “I believe that no—not in any conventional sense. […] In fact, I wonder if it may do harm” (65). The harm that Bernard suspects is likely similar to the belief that “the collective pursuit of perfectly crafted, workshopped prose has the effect of eliminating the salutary unpredictability of the students in question, ironically reproducing the machine-made quality of formulaic genre on another, slightly more elevated or rarefied cultural level” (McGurl 26). Instead of benefiting from such a pursuit, Bernard desires the inspiration Matthew Black suggests comes from “the freedom, the companionship,
and the inspiration of the atelier of a master” (115). In Bernard’s opinion, “it’s not important whether [Miranda] pays us mind. It’s more important […] that we are aware of her, that we spend every opportunity to observer her in the most minute ways possible, for it is she who will show us how to live a life of poetry” (Chang 65). As McGurl maintains, “For students, the charismatic presence of the artist in the quadrangle or classroom is ‘inspiring,’ and occasion for emulative desire” (115). This again implies that participating in a formalized writing program is beneficial even if is specific lessons or activities cannot improve writing on their own. Participating in the lessons or activities led by skilled writers provides less tangible instruction to writers-in-training.

One reason Wallace is seemingly unable to prove his abilities despite his efforts has to do with the preconceived perceptions of those around him and what they believe he can do regardless of his actual performance. In another scene between Wallace and Dana—the woman who labeled Wallace a misogynist even as she employed racial and homophobic slurs, and then emailed their lab director about Wallace offending her—readers witness another instance of the director’s failure to see beyond her own biases. Towards the beginning of Dana’s time in the program, Wallace had attempted to stop her from ruining her experiment by using the incorrect materials. Dana rudely refuses Wallace’s help and ends up “staring at her columns, wondering what had gone wrong.” She then presents her failure to Simone as being a result of Wallace’s inattention. Simone asks him, “Did you maybe put the DNA purification reagents in the wrong box when you were doing those simultaneous cleanups?” Before he can respond, Simone concludes, “Wallace, you have to be more careful.” Readers are aware of Dana’s culpability and the fact that Wallace actually tried to save her from the exact problem she encounters.
Simone, however, insists that Dana’s “numbers don’t make sense” (73) unless Wallace made the mistake.

Simone had [Wallace] sort out the reagents again, in front of her […] And when he was done, she made him do it again, just to make sure. […] Simone stood at the end of his bench and watched him sort out the reagents and the columns again and again. He could have done it with his eyes closed. Because he was careful.

“This isn’t to punish you. This is to make you better.” (74)

To Simone, Dana “is gifted, and he is merely Wallace” (96). As illustrated in her interaction with Wallace after his exams, Simone reframes her prejudice, in her own mind, as magnanimous patience and thoughtful instruction. Instead, she functions as a major obstacle towards Wallace’s ability to navigate graduate school.

As Wallace’s supervisor, Simone’s judgements will affect his success within the PhD program as well as in the future, if he stays in academia. Experiences amongst his colleagues and supposed friends, however, further suggest Wallace’s untenable situation in higher education. At a disastrous dinner party, conversation returns to a comment Wallace made about leaving the program. Wallace admits, “I wouldn’t say that I want to leave, but I’ve thought about it, sure.” In response Roman, a grad student in another department, asks, “Why would you do that? I mean, the prospects for…black people, you know?” (160). Roman further contends, “they spent so much money on your training. It seems ungrateful to leave […] I mean, if you don’t feel you can keep up, then for sure, you should go. But they brought you in knowing what your deficiencies were” (161). Roman’s comments mirror Simone’s beliefs that she is supporting Wallace and offering
him preferential treatment based on her own strengths of character. Both are unable—or perhaps simply unwilling—to recognize what their words actually express.

In the silence that follows Roman’s remarks, Wallace, already aware that no one will risk their own comfort to come to his defense, considers what is really being said:

There are gaps in his knowledge about developmental biology, which he has closed steadily over the past few years, through study and coursework. There was also, in those early years, a lack of technical expertise, which he has acquired through practice. But the deficiency to which Roman is alluding is not one of those, not one of the many ways in which people come into graduate school unprepared for its demands, wrong-footed this way and that by its odd rituals and rigors. What Roman is referring to is instead a deficiency of whiteness, a lack of some requisite sameness. This deficiency cannot be overcome. The fact is, no matter how hard he tries or how much he learns or how many skills he masters, he will always be provisional in the eyes of these people, no matter how they might be fond of him or gentle with him. (161-2)

From Wallace’s experience, the things that are taught through coursework material and activities that appear on a syllabus are inadequate on their own; without the innate quality—one which cannot be obtained through any amount of effort—the techniques of his scientific craft cannot provide him with what he needs to find success in its world.

In the acknowledgements section of All is Forgotten Chang writes, “My questions about art and teaching have developed over time in part from listening to conversations, in and out of class” in “a joint poetry-fiction workshop at Stanford University” (207) and “at Iowa and at Warren Wilson College. Over the years, many poets and fiction writers at
these three institutions have helped me explore the issue of how writing can be taught” (207-8). In connection to his considerations of training vs. talent, McGurl is interested in the fact that, “historically, […] a teaching job for writers has been an add-on to what they really do, which is write” (35). The questioning of authenticity, in the form of either natural talent or essential identity, is a common theme throughout the texts. While Taylor’s and Choi’s acknowledgements do not include any similar form of recognition regarding “the issue of how writing can be taught,” specific instances within each reflect some anxiety about what can and cannot be taught.

**Professor vs. Graduate Student**

The anxiety regarding what can and cannot be taught has been acknowledged in traditional academic scholarship as well as the practice of creative writing programs. In “Supervision Satirized” Kelly includes a note which says, “traditional practices of PhD supervision tended to ‘assume autonomy’—in the form of the exemplary figure of the independent scholar” (382). This suggests an imagined ideal similar to that of the natural genius that complicates creative writing. In her examination of fictional accounts of graduate student-advisor relationships, Kelly maintains that “the ‘thousands of education narratives’ which swirl in Western culture create ideas about the purpose of education and expectations about the kinds of students and teachers that we should be” (369).

McGurl offers an example of a nonfictional version of this relationship between two well-known writers: Ken Kesey and Wallace Stegner. Scholars looking in to Kesey’s life have found “well-documented antagonism toward […] Stegner, whom […] Kesey saw as the epitome of academic staidness and convention” (206). Eventually finding himself in the professor’s seat at the workshop table, Kesey wrote to a friend, “I began to appreciate
Wally much more after I had been a teacher” (212). Academic interest in writers’ influences and mentorship illustrates an assumption that the relationship is important. Kelly suggests that, because “fiction is one of the places that resists interpellation by the discourse of a knowledge economy,” it allows authors to “unsettle the ideas about supervision that are theorized in public policies and in the university regulations which govern its practices” (381). Whether or not university fictions are successful (or actually intent) in unsettling these ideas is not clear, but representations of advisor-student relationships in these novels unquestionably provide readers with a sense of “what is essentially a ‘private’ experience of teaching and learning” (368). As such, it seems likely that graduate students could form “expectations about the relationship from encounters with narrative accounts of supervision […] from fictional representations” (370).

As a subgenre, grad novels provide the unique opportunity for writers to explore the experiences of both student and teacher from the perspective of a single character. I discuss the anxiety intrinsically tied to this duality in the first chapter, but its nature also allows readers to consider the relationships between the two identities and the varying expectations of each.

When Brodeur discovers Regina’s “nonexistent” familiarity with Chaucer he decides she will be “perfect” as a teaching assistant for his Chaucer course (18). In her initial meeting with the other TA, however, Regina worries about the “expectation that the teaching assistant has some expertise in the subject.” Laurence, who has been a teaching assistant for Brodeur in the past, insists, “The expectation is enough all by itself. I guarantee you, Regina, even if you never read one page of Chaucer and even if you skip every one of the lectures you’ll do beautifully because they invest you will all your
authority” (22). Doing “beautifully” as an instructor in higher education, according to Laurence and perhaps to Brodeur, has more to do with how the students view said instructor than with any knowledge the instructor can impart to their students.

This idea is further developed when Regina learns to “speed grade.” Initially, Regina falls behind “Brodeur and Lawrence [who] could read, write, and bater at once with the ease of jazz masters [...] while [Regina] had gone mute with the effort.” When she suddenly grasps the speed grading technique, the papers “abruptly changed shape, and popped open like box kites. I realized not what any of them was about, nor if any of them had succeeded in its point, but where my red comments, like dabs of paint, ought to go [...] and what attitude they should convey. It wasn’t reading or writing but music! It didn’t matter at all what I said!” (39). Though “Brodeur had promised to teach [Regina] to speed-grade” (36), his process for “teaching” is simply to provide her with coffee, red pens, and a stack of undergraduate papers. This technique proves to work, however, when Laurence exclaims, “She’s got it!” and Brodeur responds, “Of course she has” (39). At the end of her semester, Regina submits her own course papers assuming they will “not [...] be perused much more closely than [she had] perused eighty-six papers on Chaucer” (44) and are “destined to be skimmed and rewarded the cursory A” (73). After grading so many papers herself, Regina assumes that, learning to grade as graduate students, her professors will take a similar approach in their feedback. Comparing speed grading to “jazz” and “painting” aligns the highly institutional practice of formal evaluation with highly creative artistic endeavors. There is an art to producing the proper “attitude” with the markings, but when the comments don’t “matter at all,” they likely don’t convey much instruction.
Readers do not see examples of Regina’s feedback on writing—neither the feedback she provides, nor the feedback she receives—but this concept of meaningless directives appears in interactions between Wallace and Simone as well. These interactions have been examined earlier in this chapter; it is helpful to recall them here, however, as they maintain a common theme between the three novels. Menand maintains, “Critique is the beginning of correction, it’s true, but the aim of knowledge is not only to recognize limitations. The aim is to transcend them” (120). Here Menand is commenting on higher education’s ability to acknowledge its weaknesses without actually working to implement change. This is especially apparent to Menand in academia’s “production of producers” (105), or the ways graduate students are trained to be professors. The three novels discussed here evince little beyond critique, and even that—what it is an instructor finds fault with—is not apparent.

Miranda Sturgis, as she leads Roman, Bernard, and Lucy’s poetry workshop, is “critical of [her students’] work and dismissive of their hopes […] Such was her teaching that the students at the School had invented a nickname for her critiques: they were called bludgeonings, as in, ‘He’s drunk. He’s just been blundgeoned’” (11). As a writing professor looking back on his time in her workshop Roman feels “[i]f some of her students prospered and flourished, it was almost as if they had managed to flourish despite Miranda” (146). Even Miranda herself acknowledges this idea. After Roman asks her about a particularly harsh and public critique she gave to one of the students’ work Miranda states, “If Shannon is to be a true poet of the kind she wishes to be—a true poet of the avant-garde—she will get over it […] If my reaction stops her, then something else
would have stopped her just the same” (61). These ideas suggest that Miranda would agree with Bernard’s previously discussed views on the teachability of poetry writing.

*All is Forgotten* provides only two minor indications of Roman’s experience as a graduate instructor. In the first instance he compares his work with undergraduates with his students to Miranda’s obligations towards him: “He found little pleasure in teaching but was mindful of his responsibilities. Was not Miranda, likewise, being paid to lavish attention on her students—to nurture the young poets who sought to follow in her footsteps?” (25). In the second Roman considers these responsibilities as an act of “standing before his own group of composition students, insisting with vehemence, despite his own with to remain detached, that they pay attention to the placement of an apostrophe” (71). Both scenes reflect the complicated situation of a graduate instructor and the potentially more complicated situation of a writing teacher. As a poet teaching an introductory writing course to undergraduates, Roman presents the tension McGurl sees between institutions and creativity. Rules regarding punctuation and grammar constrict language to established forms. This relationship is expressed, for McGurl, in “the notably utilitarian term ‘workshop’” (95).

According to McGurl, what is “most obviously germane to an inquiry into” the kinds of programs in which Taylor, Choi, and Chang have each invested significant time and energy, “is the one that saw a discipline concocted as a progressive antidote to conformism instead charged with being an agent of that conformism on the literary aesthetic plane” (71). The “progressive antidote” began in primary education when “various kinds of group activity and hands-on learning” was implemented to provide a “more genuine motive for learning” (87-8). Perhaps the meaningless feedback the novels’
protagonists both give and receive are indications that the most valuable training is not obtained through coursework.

**EXPERIENCE VS. FORMAL INSTRUCTION**

Along with the “romantic conception of the artist as an original genius” (McGurl 26), there is also a long-held belief that “we learn from experience, and from books or sayings of others only as they are related to experience” (87). The titles *My Education* and *Real Life* both elicit thoughts concerning where knowledge comes from. The “real life” of Taylor’s title is a reflection on both the experience Wallace has vs. his expectations, as well as a reference to the conception that the “real world” exists outside academia. In a conversation with his friend Cole, Wallace makes a very analogous comment: “I’d like to live in it—in the world, I mean. I’d like to be out there with a real job, a real life” (132). When Regina tells Laurence that she plans to take a leave of absence from the grad program, the explanation she gives for her decision is strikingly similar: “I just don’t want to do it anymore. Papers, and classes—I’ve been in school since I was four. I want to be in the world” (140). After explaining this to Martha, Martha praises Regina for her decision. Martha tells her, “Graduate study of literature is the catchall for smart, rudderless people who can’t think of what to do with themselves.” She claims, “I always want to say it to my most brilliant students: Get out! Go do something real! But I’m their professor: ironically the most qualified to tell them to get out of this field, and the least able to do so” (147).

In *All is Forgotten*, Roman and Miranda both, at different points in the story, acknowledge that what occurs between them outside the workshop is part of Roman’s “poetic education” (77, 132). And one of his own students, when Roman is a professor of
creative writing, tells him “I’ll be glad to leave school” (149); “I found this to be a somewhat stifling environment for a writer. I think it’s time for me to be in the world” (151). The implication here is that, as a professor within that environment, Roman is not “in the world.” Recalling that these novels are written by current professors illustrates a concern raised by McGurl: “The teacher knows that for the vast majority of her charges the M.F.A. will not in fact function as a professional degree leading to a job but rather as a costly extension of their liberal education. In this sense it is a prolongation of the 'college experience,’” (17). It suggests that such teachers are aware that creative writing programs are not, in fact, the professional schools Menand and Cassuto claim they should be.

The scenes mentioned directly above support George Watson’s argument that, for many writers of university fiction, “academe is something to exorcise; it needs to be lived for a time, but lived in order to demonstrate that it is ultimately unlivable. There is a world elsewhere” (41). What does this commonly seen aspect of university fiction suggest in terms of how academics are viewed by other academics and by non-academic readers? And why, as J.P. Kenyon asks, “do all these novelists, most of them with direct experience of University life from below and above, pillory […] universities this way?” (94).

**Grad Novels and the Image of Higher Education**

In “The Pursuit of Happiness” Marta Lysik wonders, “Why do academic novels not show us as shiny happy people? Why is it suspect to be happy in academe?” She responds to her own questions suggesting, “Perhaps it is because ‘serious’ academics believe happiness interferes with objectivity. Perhaps because emotions are not
encouraged in a research environment” (113). With the shift in focus from professor to graduate student, there are many novels that do present academics as happy (if not shiny) people. And even in novels where academics are not so, academia itself is generally represented positively.

Despite adhering (technically speaking) to the grad novel formula, *My Education*, *Real Life*, and *All is Forgotten, Nothing is Lost* also fit the description of “tales of disillusionment, in which the hapless heroes find themselves hindered in their pursuit of knowledge and spiritual and professional fulfillment” (Schneider 3). Kelly writes of novels like these “demonstrate[ing] their allegiance to a genre that takes the university to task for its status as an ivory tower, insular and divorced from reality, and/or expresses disillusionment with academia generally” while altering the narrative in that “it is the graduate student who is disillusioned, not the academic” (“Supervision” 382). While McGurl is interested in the influence of the creative writing program on American literature, I am interested in how fiction about graduate studies reflects the lived experiences of graduate students and academics in general. Both concerns relate to questions about higher education that have existed without clear answers for generations of scholars.

Grad novels illustrate the continuing struggle between institutionalism, creativity, and individuality. Rather than answering the many questions raised by *The Program Era*, the products of that era—writers like Taylor, Choi, and Chang—further complicate them and illustrate that even those who lead creative writing programs grapple with the unquestionable influence they have had on American literature. This dissertation as a whole seeks to gain an understanding of perceptions about higher education from
fictional representations of graduate students. The diversion of these *literary* grad novels, from the commonly positive depiction of academia exhibited in so many grad novels written for a general reading public, along with their authors’ personal connections to graduate study display a desire to potentially “unsettle” their readers.
[W]riters of campus novels, particularly if they are themselves academics, and especially if they write little else, are prone to be regarded as having a very limited ‘two inches of ivory’ for their subject matter (at best a thin slice of whatever is meant by ‘the real world’), about which write knowledgably, wittily, entertainingly, satirically…

- Chris Walsh, “Not a Comic Novelist, Exactly,” p. 270

CONCLUSION

George Watson observes, “Academe is an odd subject for fiction. A university, after all, is a place for students who have barely started to live, and professors who have done all (or nearly all) the living they are ever likely to do” (33). Considering the experiences of grad students may be a way to address this critique, but it is still worth considering why university fiction, and grad novels in particular, should be examined.

One reason is the popularity of the subgenre. University fiction is not read exclusively by the individuals who populate the world of academia. Williams suggests, “college has become mass culture, and the proliferation of both campus and academic novels, as well as films and television shows, obviously respond to the greater centrality of higher education in American life” (577). Because of this, authors have “an audience for whom higher education is natural and expected, and who takes the professor as a conventional figure” (579). Alternatively, these novels could offer “to outsiders an insider’s view” (Moseley, “Randall” 206). This suggests that it is an unfamiliarity that attracts readers rather than the recognizable nature Williams points to42.

The idea that readers might want to see into an otherwise inaccessible institution is supported by Rossen’s concept of universities’ power. According to Rossen, “Much of

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42 Williams is careful to clarify that the recognition will come generally from readers in the middle and upper classes.
its force derives from an imposing façade—which suggests a powerful presence through its ability to exclude potential members” (30). If this is true, the low-brow nature of many grad novels might suggest a more inclusive experience. If the characters in these novels are not “harlequin[s] splitting hairs in […] inconsequential and labored discussion” (Salwak 214), perhaps academics are not so different from everyone else. And because “everyone else” might be reading university fiction, it’s valuable to consider whether that impacts the general opinion of academia.

According to Kelly, at least, it does: “ideas are encountered by the broader public of the PhD—on television screens, in films, in the pages of a book or newspaper […] and what is understood out there has implications for what happens in here.” She maintains that the PhD imaginary\(^{43}\) “effects individuals’ decisions about where to go to do a PhD, what to study, how to conduct themselves, how to be” (“Idea” 119). If all this is true, we might assume it also effects individuals’ decisions about what graduate study is and whether they want to pursue it themselves.

Another reason to examine these texts is for what they illustrate about a present moment in the history of higher education and conceptions of intellectualism of the time. Though Adam Begley contends that “[d]escriptions of the scholarly temperament are amusingly constant” the novels in this dissertation suggest otherwise. Begley claims that university fiction shows “they’ve been stamping out social scientists with the same cookie cutter for half a century. Ditto for English professors. The students are elemental, as unvarying as earth and fire” (142). I am more likely to side with Rossen who suggests

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\(^{43}\) Kelly defines the “imaginary” as “that which ordinary people have of the social world expressed and perpetuated in stories, images, and legends” (“Idea” 4).
these novels are “true to the ideals and anxieties of their times, and […] will tap into their readers’ collective fantasies about academe” (1).

The common theme of fate’s intervention illustrates one particularly important anxiety of students in higher education. The collapse of a building or loss of a scholarship, a close friend’s deployment to war or suspiciously damaged test results all point to a lack of agency in the different experiences of grad novel protagonists. There is a pervasive sense that, like the protagonists of The Historian and The End of Mr. Y, graduate students enter programs with the expectation of failure. We are told to only attend if we want a PhD because we want a PhD, and not to expect to find full-time, tenure-track employment after graduation. We are constantly reminded that roughly 50% of those who start grad school leave before earning their degree. We compete with other graduate students for funding that only partially covers the expenses of conference attendance. So much of this experience suggests we are not only stuck—but doomed from the start. Doomed to spend a large amount of money and energy on an objective we are as likely to miss as we are to reach. The fact that graduate school enrollment continues to increase, even while undergraduate enrollment decreases, despite these dire predictions, illustrates the desire for agency that additional education should provide.

The uncertainty of both graduate education and the job market for positions in higher education is not new. And while there are significant similarities between the anxieties expressed in Stewart’s Doctor’s Oral, from 1939, and the other novels published after 2000, the differences are telling as well. Joe’s concerns relate to the job and family he hopes to attain and create, while Wallace is fighting to defend his right to exist in academia. Joe’s examination requires memorization and recall while Gillian
struggles to prove a unique hypothesis. Joe’s story details events from a single day, while Paul and Rossi’s stretches over three generations of scholars. Joe’s outcome suggests a kind of arbitrariness in the nature of scholarship, while Sallie’s warns against allowing a project to consume one’s entire world. Tracking these types of changes as the subgenre develops may elucidate the priorities of individuals during a certain stage of life, as well as those of scholars in training.

Finally, grad novels provide a way to critique academia without adding to anti-intellectual attitudes. Watson maintains, “The university novel might be a study in disillusionment, but it was always a study in illusions too. All these young heroes believed, until they ceased to believe” (38). Grad novels may provide an additional turn where the heroes can believe again, perhaps in something more than an illusion. Protagonists like Gillian and Regina can leave academia either to change disciplines or to follow a different path completely, without the implication that their years and motivation have been stolen. Protagonists like Wallace can call attention to important problems in higher education without suggesting that the problem is higher education itself. Grad novel protagonists can present issues in academia without turning the scholar into either “a buffoon to be laughed at or a Faust to be hissed” (Lyons 3).

Common anti-intellectual arguments are among those aspects most satirized in academic novels. As Rossen suggests, “if one is an academic, it can still be easy to see the satire as directed towards one’s own enemies within the profession rather than against oneself as a possible offender” (185). But those outside the profession would not necessarily have a reason or personal experience to make any kind of distinction. By
adding another category of common academic character, fiction is able to present a wider
variety of scholarly identities and presumably combat harmful stereotypes.

For graduate students, uncertainty is an integral part of their identity. They are
planning for a future they’ve often been told they won’t achieve. They comment on
student writing and then receive feedback on their own writing from their professors.
They appear outwardly as adults, but often live a lifestyle that suggests otherwise. The
subgenre of the grad novel is also at a point of uncertainty. Novels like Taylor’s (Real
Life) and Choi’s (My Education) illustrate the grad novel’s potential for literariness.
Those like Thomas’ (The End of Mr. Y) and Wilson’s (A Jealous Ghost) exhibit its ability
to be cerebral in the most literal of ways. A novel like Stewart’s (Doctor’s Oral) proves
its resilience as a category. Moseley maintains that “the multifariousness of the
[university fiction] genre—its vigorous resistance to being summed up in any number of
categories—is another tribute to its fertility and brilliance” (“Types” 113). On one hand,
grad novels should be examined for all the potential their uncertainty holds. On another,
they should be read simply because they can be entertaining.
APPENDIX: Chapter One

DOCTOR’S ORAL BY GEORGE R. STEWART

The novel opens on the morning of Joe Grantland’s oral examination. The exam consists of three hours of questioning by seven professors: five from his department (English literature) as well as two from other disciplines. Readers learn that Joe has received a job offer, contingent on his passing of the exam. The exam will also determine whether he can move on to the dissertation stage in his program.

Joe’s girlfriend, Julia, had planned to make him breakfast on the morning of his exam. At the breakfast, Julia acts strangely and Joe eventually gets her to tell him that she is pregnant. Julia is tearful and worried about what it will mean, and Joe suggests that the job he’s been offered will pay enough for the two to marry and raise the baby.

Joe’s day consists of a few interactions with other graduate students, walks around the campus, and much though on his past and future in academia. About halfway through, the novel shifts focus to follow the professors leading Joe’s exam.

Readers see several of the examining professors in their own preparations (or lack thereof) for the exam. His advisor, Brice, worries about how Joe’s performance will reflect on him. Another professor, Angle, can’t be bothered to stop thinking of his own research project long enough to recall which student he’s assessing. Yet another, Kendrick, falls asleep and as a result is more than twenty minutes late.

The examination is depicted, and then readers see the professors discuss their decisions. Joe passes the exam by a single vote (4-3) and celebrates with Julia and his friends that evening. When he tells them about the exam results, he incorrectly assumes which professors supported him and which did not.
The narrator, Gillian Cormier-Brandenburg, opens the novel explaining that she is telling a story from a future perspective. The story itself revolves around her experiences as a 26-year-old graduate student, studying for a doctorate at the Harvard Divinity School. Within the first few pages, readers learn that Gillian’s dissertation work has stalled and she is in danger of losing the fellowship that covers her tuition and provides her with a small monthly stipend.

Gillian meets with her advisor, Dean Trubow, who wants her to change her dissertation topic. She is interested in what she calls “secular conversion” but is struggling to find any subjects to interview. When she refuses to change the focus, Trubow suggests she work at a halfway house that has posted job ads around the campus. He offers her a one-month extension to prove she still deserves the fellowship, but tells her she must show considerable progress if she hopes to keep it.

At first Gillian is resistant to the idea of working at Responsibility House, the halfway house Trubow pointed her towards, but she eventually interviews as she has no other idea what to do. Gillian is immediately offered the job and is told she will be in charge of the house in the evenings and when the manager, is not there. The idea of being in a position of authority terrifies Gillian—who is four feet, nine inches tall and considers herself “remarkably unattractive” (1). Still, she agrees to take the job.

Gillian spends her evenings at Responsibility House learning to assert herself and working on a chapter of her dissertation. She is surprised to find the women respect her, at least enough to listen to her and, for the most part, follow the rules as she enforces them. At the end of the one-month extension Gillian submits a chapter, but even she
recognizes it as superficial, jargony, and contains an excessive number of footnotes. She loses the fellowship and, not knowing what to do, decides to continue working at Responsibility House.

As she begins to form friendships with the women, Gillian begins to question the rule book she’d been diligently following in her supervisory role. She brings all the women together and they create a new list of rules together. The list offers the women more freedom and personal agency, but also requires additional...responsibility...to ensure they aren’t expelled from Responsibility House. Gillian eventually becomes the manager there and is incredibly successful at raising money for additional programs and services, and helping women transition into life outside of prison.

After an unspecified number of years, Gillian applies to Harvard for a PhD in psychology. Supported by a strong recommendation from Trubow, she is accepted and goes on to earn her doctorate. By the end of the novel Gillian is a successful professor with several well-respected publications. She has created a program for scholars whose work doesn’t entirely fit under a single discipline, has adopted a child, and is regularly invited to give presentations at various universities and conferences.

_**War of the Encyclopaedists by Christopher Robinson and Gavin Kovite**_

Two best friends, Mickey Montauk and Halifax Corderoy, are planning to move to Boston together to attend graduate school at two different universities. The summer before their move, Montauk’s Army Guard unit is called up for service in the Iraq War. The novel switches back and forth from Montauk’s struggle with his role as a lieutenant, and Corderoy’s grad school experience, which doesn’t meet his expectations. The
comparison of the stories raises questions about what it means to work, be an adult, and set priorities.

After mid-summer party, before the protagonists are separated, Corderoy leaves his girlfriend passed out on a couch. His girlfriend, Mani, has just been kicked out of the apartment she’d been staying in and Corderoy worries about the commitment of moving in together right before he leaves for grad school. The next day, after waking up to find her boyfriend gone, Mani gets hit by a car and ends up in the hospital. Corderoy and Montauk go to the hospital, but don’t stay to visit.

After Corderoy leaves for Boston, Mani moves into the house Montauk shares with a few of his friends from college. As Montauk will be in Iraq, and will pay rent while he’s gone, he tells her to take the room so she has somewhere to live. She has no money and no health insurance to pay the large hospital bill she acquired when she was hit by a car. So Montauk suggests she take his room in the house and that they get married, so she’ll receive a stipend every month and can be added to his health insurance.

In Boston, Corderoy finds he is unable to find his place in his grad program. He feels simultaneously unprepared for and disparaging of the academic jargon his classmates use and the constant competition between them. Because of his roommate’s strong political feelings, Corderoy’s moderately liberal beliefs become much stronger. When Bush wins the 2004 election, Corderoy becomes obsessed with the news and eventually retreats from the world. He spends all day in bed and becomes very depressed. By the end of the first semester, he has three unwritten papers, and no desire to do anything. He drops out of the program and, upon learning she is in Boston, finds and moves in with Mani. Their relationship is never clarified, but they are sleeping together
and Mani becomes pregnant. After briefly considering the options, Mani decides to terminate the pregnancy, and Corderoy worries he’ll ask her to move out.

Meanwhile, in Baghdad, Montauk is in a Jeep that drives over an IED. He breaks several bones and is confined to a wheelchair, though it’s not clear if it is permanent. One of the other soldiers in the Jeep is terribly wounded, and his entire face and body is badly burned. The two end up in the same ward of a D.C. hospital.

As Montauk’s legal wife, Mani is notified of Montauk’s accident. She and Corderoy travel to Washington, D.C. to visit him in the hospital. On the way, Corderoy tries to deal with the fact that Montauk and Mani are married—even though he understands why Montauk offered and is sure Montauk is a better man than he is. At the hospital, Corderoy and Montauk work through the awkwardness when Montauk tells Corderoy to punch him.

When Montauk is able to leave the hospital, Mani and Corderoy throw a party for him. One of Corderoy’s professors comes to the party, suggesting that Corderoy will keep the promise he made finish grad school after saving up some money to support himself. Mani has decided she can only commit to Corderoy one day at a time, but Corderoy has finally realized he is in love with her and decides to be happy with her choice to stay with him in the moment.
Chapter Two

*The End of Mr. Y* by Scarlett Thomas

Ariel Manto has just started a PhD program when her professor, the reason she came to the department, disappears. The novel opens a few months after the disappearance when a campus building collapses into a defunct train tunnel. As a result of the collapse, Ariel ends up walking home and becoming lost. She notices a second-hand bookstore where she finds a box of books that seems to have been put together especially for her research interest. It includes a supposedly cursed and extremely rare book, *The End of Mr. Y*. According to the curse, anyone who reads the book will die soon after.

Ariel reads the book but finds a page has been torn out. She knows from context that the page is important and decides not to read past where it should have been. Because of the building collapse, two other grad students are assigned to share Ariel’s office until it is safe to return to their own. While cleaning her office before they move in, Ariel discovers the missing page. On it is a recipe for a potion Mr. Y drinks in the story. When Mr. Y drinks it, he is able to travel through other people’s minds.

Ariel is determined to try the potion herself and discovers it actually works. She becomes obsessed with what Mr. Y had called “the Troposphere” despite discovering that, while her consciousness is in it, her physical body is vulnerable. She learns that staying for too long in the Troposphere means your body dies.

Along with the danger the Troposphere poses, two armed men begin looking for Ariel as they know she has the book and the recipe. When one of her new officemates, Adam, refuses to tell them where Ariel lives, they beat him until he is able to get away
and make it inside a church. Once they are gone, he goes to find Ariel and the two go on the run to hide from the men.

Ariel realizes that her advisor, Saul Burlem, must have been the one to tear out and hide the page. She thinks he must have disappeared to avoid the men and she wants to find him for help. By using the Troposphere and entering his mind, she learns how Burlem came into possession of *The End of Mr. Y*, and how he wishes he had destroyed it.

When she enters the Troposphere again, after finding Burlem and realizing he is unable to help, she discovers Adam has also tried the potion. His consciousness finds hers in the Troposphere. With the help of a mouse-god, Ariel and Adam travel through time: first to bring an end to the scientific practice of using lab mice for experiments, and then to convince the author of *The End of Mr. Y* to burn his draft and the only copy of the recipe before it is ever published.

After time traveling, Ariel learns that Adam knowingly stayed in the Troposphere too long and is physically dead. He tells her he stayed because he wanted to find Ariel and he wanted to know what the Troposphere is. Though Adam tries to convince her to return, Ariel decides she also needs to know everything about the Troposphere and allows her physical self to die as well. Adam and Ariel spend an inexpressible amount of time exploring the Troposphere until they reach the end and discover themselves in what is possibly the Garden of Eden.

*The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova

*The Historian* is made up of three different stories. The novel begins with an unnamed narrator finding a mysterious book in her father’s office. She asks her father,
Paul, about the book and the letter she’d found with it addressed to, “My Dear Unfortunate Successor.” In pieces that are broken up by scenes of the narrator with her father, Paul tells the story of when he was in graduate school and his advisor was kidnapped by Dracula.

The third plotline is that of Paul’s advisor, Rossi, after he’d discovered a book exactly like the one the narrator found in her father’s library. Rossi’s story is told through letters he left to Paul upon learning Paul had found a book—the one the narrator found at the beginning—which is a sign that a scholar has caught Dracula’s attention. Rossi’s story explains how he began to research the small book he found in his library carrel, which led him to begin searching for Dracula. He received two warnings to desist in his research: the first when his friend was killed, the second when he sees his name over an image of Dracula’s tomb, implying he will die if he continues. Rossi stopped researching after the second warning and supposedly does not return to the topic or share his story before Paul comes to Rossi with a book of his own.

During his research, Paul also receives a warning. The body of a small feral cat he’d been feeding is left on his windowsill. When he feels himself being watched by some unworldly presence, he begins to research his dissertation topic—Dutch mercantilism—in order to convince the presence he has given up the work on Dracula. He has not, however and one night, while doing research in the university library, Paul meets another graduate student interested in vampires. The woman’s name is Helen and she eventually tells Paul that Rossi is her father and that he abandoned her mother while she was pregnant. Knowing Rossi had, at some point in his impressive scholarly career, been interested in Dracula, Helen decides she will research Dracula herself, and publish
before Rossi can. When she learns what Paul is doing, Helen decides to come with him on his hunt.

Along with the letters, Rossi included the drawing of a map he’d discovered that he though was a map to the tomb. The map takes Paul and Helen around the Eastern Europe—first to Istanbul, then to Budapest, then to Romania, where Helen’s mother lives. Before reaching Romania, Paul and Helen discover the story behind Rossi’s abandonment. Rossi met Helen’s mother while he was traveling as a young scholar himself. He met her and fell in love with her, promising to come back, marry her, and bring her back to the United States with him. Before leaving Romania, however, Rossi unknowingly crosses paths with one of Dracula’s minions. The minion spikes Rossi’s drink with a drug that makes him completely forget everything about Helen’s mother. He returns to the states without any memory of the woman he’d met while away. Helen is able to share this with her mother, who cries with both happiness that Rossi had not intentionally abandoned them, and sadness for what could have been.

Paul and Helen eventually find Rossi in the crypt of a Bulgarian monastery. Upon seeing Helen, Rossi initially mistakes her for her mother who he is suddenly able to remember. Helen tells him that she is his daughter, which brings a smile to Rossi’s face. Rossi explains how he began researching Dracula again after learning another scholar at the university was interested in him—the other scholar being Helen—and so reattracted Dracula’s attention. Dracula told him he was impressed with Rossi’s tenacity and we discover that the books and warnings are meant to test scholars. Rossi passed the test by continuing to research Dracula despite two warnings. Dracula tells Rossi he has been looking for a scholar to help him catalog his vast and ever-growing library. Though he
refuses Dracula’s offer of an eternal life of scholarship, Rossi cannot help exploring and learning what he can while he is still alive.

When Paul and Helen find him, Rossi tells Paul that he must drive a stake through Rossi’s heart because Dracula has been turning him into a vampire. He says he is too far gone to be saved. Before dying, Rossi tells Paul to locate a certain book in Dracula’s extensive library as he has left something in it. Paul drives the stake into Rossi’s heart—therefore freeing his soul—and locates the book where Rossi told him it would be. The book contains a written account of Rossi’s time with Dracula.

Helen and Paul get married and have a daughter (the narrator) but Helen, who had been bitten twice over the course of their hunt, becomes depressed and supposedly kills herself. In the narrator’s timeline, however, Paul disappears one evening leaving a note saying he has gone to look for the narrator’s mother.

The narrator, with the help of a young scholar named Barley, takes off after her father in a search mirroring Paul’s and Helen’s a generation earlier. Helen is eventually found after Paul, with help from Barley’s advisor, seemingly vanquishes Dracula. Helen is officially reunited with her family until she eventually dies from cancer.

The novel ends with the narrator, who became a history professor herself, visiting a library that has rare scholarship on Dracula and vampires. She says the visit is a tribute to her father. After a few hours of reading, the narrator leaves the library, but is followed out by one of the librarians. The librarian tells her she’d forgotten some of her things and hands her a notebook and small book matching the description of the ones that sent Paul and Rossi on their adventures.
Chapter 4

REAL LIFE by BRANDON TAYLOR

Wallace is four years into a PhD in Biochemistry at a large university in the Midwest. As a queer black man from Alabama, Wallace always feels out of place in his program and around his friends.

The novel takes place over the course of a single weekend but contains various flashbacks from Wallace’s time at the university and, at one point, his childhood. It begins when Wallace discovers that the work he’d done all summer has been ruined. This is especially depressing because, for the first time in four years, Wallace felt positive about his work. As his research progress has been so drastically pushed back, Wallace decides to meet his friends at ‘the lake’ for the first time in years.

At the lake readers meet a group of Wallace’s friends and see how and why Wallace feels awkward around them. Readers learn that Wallace’s father had died somewhat recently and, when his friends find out, they can’t understand why Wallace isn’t more upset. To make it easier on them, Wallace refrains from explaining the abuse and neglect he suffered as a child, and pretends to mourn for his father.

That evening one of the friends, Miller, comes back to Wallace’s apartment with him. Miller and Wallace have had a strained friendship up to that point, but that night—though Miller insists he is straight—they have sex.

The next day Wallace meets his friend Cole for a game of tennis. During the game, Cole admits that he discovered his boyfriend, Vincent, has joined a dating app. Cole still loves Vincent and doesn’t know if he should confront him as doing so will show that he had joined the app himself.
Later that day, Wallace goes to work in the lab and is confronted by another student, Dana. Dana is a fellow BioChem student and has illustrated hostility towards Wallace from the time she entered the program. Upon finding Wallace in the lab, Dana begins to verbally attack him. She uses racist and homophobic slurs to offend Wallace and, when Wallace expresses anger and annoyance about the way she speaks to and treats him, she emails their lab director to say that Wallace is a misogynist.

That evening Wallace attends a dinner party where a comment he made at the lake—that he considered leaving the program—was mentioned. One of the guests, a grad student named Roman from a different department, suggests that leaving would show Wallace to be ungrateful since he has been receiving a scholarship and had been accepted “knowing what [his] deficiencies were” (161). When no one says anything about Roman’s racist insensitivity, Wallace mentions Vincent’s appearance on the dating app to shift the focus from himself. Roman makes an insinuation that he and Vincent have slept together, and Cole and Vincent get into an argument.

Wallace spends the night in Miller’s room and they share personal stories from their past. Wallace tells Miller about the sexual abuse he experienced as a child, and his parents’ failure to protect or comfort him. Miller tells Wallace about a time he nearly beat another boy to death because he knew what he wanted to do with his future and Miller did not. After Miller falls asleep, Wallace leaves and walks home.

Miller shows up at Wallace’s house the next morning, angry that Wallace had left. Wallace apologizes and they make up, and then Miller asks Wallace to come to brunch with him and a group from the dinner party. Wallace doesn’t really want to go but does because Miller wants him to. They arrive and it is clear that Vincent and Cole have
reconciled. Vincent scolds Wallace for what happened at the dinner. One friend begins to speak up, but Vincent brushes it off and continues to admonish Wallace. Wallace simply smiles and accepts Vincent’s anger.

After brunch, Miller starts to speak up about Vincent’s behavior, but Wallace tells him he “cannot have this conversation a single time more” (243). Wallace understands that “[t]here will always be good white people who love him and want the best for him but who are more afraid of other white people than of letting him down” (188). Context tells readers these events are common, and likely the reason Wallace hadn’t been to the lake in so long.

Wallace’s lab director calls him into her office to reprimand him for Dana’s email. She tells him she cannot deal with bigotry in her lab and asks whether he truly wants to stay in the program. Wallace considers explaining about the encounter with Dana, but decides it won’t accomplish anything. Instead, he admits that he’s not sure what he wants and agrees to think it over.

Miller shows up at Wallace’s apartment and the two get into a physical fight. After fighting, they take a shower together and decide to walk down to the lake. The final scene of the novel flashes back to Wallace’s grad school orientation. In it, Wallace meets Miller, Cole, and the other friends from the dinner and brunch. The section establishes Wallace’s hopes for the program and his optimistic expectations for his time with these new friends.

MY EDUCATION BY SUSAN CHOI

Most of My Education takes place in 1992, the first year of Regina Gottlieb’s graduate program. She lives with a medical student called Dutra and their relationship
begins when Regina moves in without a bed. She asks Dutra where she can get one, and he suggests she sleep in his. They sleep together in both meanings of the word for the first few weeks of living together, but by the time the novel begins, they have settled into a mostly platonic friendship.

One of the professors in Regina’s department, Nicholas Brodeur, has a reputation for his sexuality and supposed affairs with students. In her fascination, Regina signs up for his course despite its advanced status. When she meets with him to drop the course, he instead offers her a teaching assistantship to help him with an undergraduate course. Regina accepts the assistantship as it is a chance to get close to Brodeur. Through her work with Brodeur, Regina meets his wife, Martha Hallett. Martha is a professor as well and the two have recently had a baby named Joachim. Regina begins a relationship with Martha, and much of the book focuses on their struggles to be together despite Martha’s discomfort at their age differences (Regina began graduate school right after undergrad) and the fact that Regina is not only a student, but a student who works with her husband.

Joachim has a nanny, Lucia, whoresents Martha for the fact that “she was not, by her nature, maternal” (103). Lucia also judges Regina for being in a relationship she sees as detrimental to Joachim. Regina and Martha are not often open about their relationship in front of people who know their situation, but Lucia not only sees it, but is more than willing to comment on it as well.

Martha and Brodeur’ marriage continues to deteriorate and Martha asks Brodeur to move out. Regina—with emphatic support from Martha—takes a leave of absence from her graduate studies. Regina and Martha continue their relationship, though the
changes in their independent lives do not improve the situation. The relationship comes to a crisis when Martha sleeps with Dutra, who had gotten to know Martha through Regina. When Regina attends a party at an apartment next to where Brodeur has been living, the two commiserate over their common experiences with Martha without actually talking about her. They begin a sexual relationship that lasts several months. In the spring of what would have been the end of Regina’s first year of graduate school, Regina drives away from Brodeur’s apartment a final time. We are told they have long phone conversations and that Brodeur sends Regina postcards when he travels, but they do not meet in person. This closes the 1992 portion of the text.

The novel picks back up in 2007 when Regina is married and has a son of her own. She has become a successful author, and even has a nanny like Lucia—though Regina’s nanny is not resentful or rude. Regina receives a call from Dutra and we learn they’ve been sporadically in touch over the years. Dutra is a surgeon and, when he calls, has married a woman to whom he proposed the day they met in person. Two months later, Dutra tells Regina he is getting a divorce and that he lost his job because of a sexual harassment accusation.

Dutra takes off without telling Regina, and time continues to pass. When Regina is working on another book at the campus office of a friend, she spots Brodeur riding by on a bicycle. When their paths cross a second time, Brodeur recognizes Regina and they spend time catching up. He tells her about Martha who has moved to California and lives on a property with sheep and chicken. According to Brodeur, she’d “found her way back” to the person she’d been when they first met (260). He also tells her about a website Joachim created and gives her the address.
At some point later, Regina receives a call from one of Dutra’s exes. They have both received large checks from Dutra, but have not heard from him for an indeterminate, but seemingly-long, period of time. The two meet up and the ex, Alicia, explains her backstory with Dutra—which was not what Regina had believed. In the telling, she also reveals that Dutra had been in love with Martha and still ‘carries a torch’ for her.

Regina begins reading Joachim’s blog and, after a while, emails him through it. She tells him she’s an old friend of his parents, and asks him to say hello to Martha for her. She includes her phone number in the email. Martha calls soon after and says she wants to see Regina. Regina has a trip to Oakland planned for the following week and says she will rent a car and drive out to see Martha and Joachim. In her planning she also contacts Dutra, who lives near the Bay Area. She makes plans to meet up with him as well, at a sushi restaurant on the last night of Regina’s trip.

Once together in person, Martha tells Regina that she never quite got over her and the two spend two nights together. Regina and Lion form a quick friendship and, while Martha is taking care of the sheep and chickens, Regina enlists him to help her with “a Plan” (292).

Regina asks Martha if she remembers Dutra and Martha does, but believes Dutra hated her. Regina tells her he never hated her, and about Dutra’s life over the past decade. She asks Martha to come to dinner with her to see Dutra again. She tells her Joachim is already counting on the dinner, and Martha agrees to go.

Joachim and Regina drive separately and stall in their trip to the restaurant. Dutra is initially uncomfortable with Martha and calls Regina asking her to hurry. Instead, Regina and Joachim waste another hour driving and talking. When they arrive at the
restaurant, they see Dutra and Martha leaning “toward each other, submerged in deep
talk, neither laughing nor grave but as if they’d been talking for years” (296). Regina tells
Joachim to join them but excuses herself saying she has to catch her plane. She leaves
before Martha or Dutra notice her.

ALL IS FORGOTTEN, NOTHING IS LOST BY LAM SAMANTHA CHANG

The novel begins with the protagonist, Roman Morris, near the end of his MFA
program at the School, in Bonneville, Michigan. He is studying poetry and has become
obsessed with his professor, Miranda Sturgis. Roman is in a workshop with Miranda, and
on the evening of the last class, they begin a relationship.

Roman keeps the relationship secret from everyone, including his two closest
friends in the program, Bernard and Lucy. It lasts for the final semester of Roman’s
program. At the graduation celebration, Roman tells Miranda he’d won a competitive
postdoc position in California. She leaves the party without saying goodbye.
The next section begins several years later, and we learn Lucy and Roman are married.
They live in Lincoln, Nebraska, where Roman is a creative writing professor. They have
one son named Avery.

When Avery is about twelve, Lucy asks Roman to invite Bernard to stay with
them. She and Bernard had stayed in touch, and the small apartment he lives in in New
York will be unavailable to him for a few months. Bernard takes buses from New York to
Lincoln and stops in Bonneville to see Miranda on the way. He mentions this to Lucy and
Roman and tells them she is still teaching at the School.

This section includes a flashback to a year or so after Roman’s graduation when
he comes to New York to receive a prestigious poetry award and stays in Bernard’s tiny
flat. While there, he discovers that Miranda led the committee that selected Roman’s poetry for the prize. This taints the award for Roman, and he worries everyone will think he won only because she picked him.

Later that year, Bernard returns to the School to give a reading. While there he confronts Miranda about her role in his award. She admits that at least some small part of her decision was based on the thought that he’d come to visit her after winning. The admission hurts Roman’s pride and he never contacts Miranda again.

Back out of the flashback, Roman finds a draft of Bernard’s poetry. It is the poem Bernard had been working on while they were in workshop together, and it “is more than wonderful […] It’s astonishing” (155). Its brilliance makes Roman feel confusingly both awed and jealous. He begins to question the life he’s been living as a well-paid professor. Roman’s insecurity grows and he ends up taking it out on Bernard. To Lucy’s disappointment, Bernard decides to leave and Roman asks Bernard not to contact him again.

Lucy becomes depressed, both at Bernard’s leaving and at Roman’s disinterest in having another child. Over the course of Bernard’s stay, Lucy had become suspicious of the way Roman tried to change the subject any time Miranda’s name entered a conversation. She begins to wonder about “the rumors [she’d] heard” when they were in graduate school (171). This leads to an argument and Lucy brings up Miranda’s role in the award Roman won. She tells him “Miranda suffered for that prize” (173), insinuating Roman would not have won it without Miranda’s support.

The final section takes place more than a decade later. Roman and Lucy have divorced, and Roman holds a new position at a university in California. Lucy has moved
to Minneapolis, Minnesota where she returned to the writing she’d neglected during her time with Roman.

Roman has, sometime between the second and third sections, received a Pulitzer for his second book of poetry. While touring universities to give readings, he reunites with a former classmate who became a professor in New Mexico. The two had dated briefly at the start of the program, and then had an antagonistic relationship for the remainder. Reuniting so many years later, they are happy to see each other, and his former classmate admits to being jealous of Roman’s apparent self-assuredness. As she points out, he had proved that his assuredness was not undue.

Roman receives a letter from Bernard asking for a visit. Bernard has contracted lung cancer and does not have long to live. He wants to see Roman before dying, and Roman flies to New York to see him. On the way he thinks about the time he let pass and the friendship he lost because of his pride.

From his hospital bed, Bernard admits that he’d always known about Roman’s relationship with Miranda and had been extremely envious. He tells Roman he had been in love with Miranda and believes he may have continued to be until she died. The two ultimately decide, however, that Bernard had been the lucky one because “[i]nadequate love is love. Unrequited love is love” (202). Roman takes a leave of absence from the university to stay with Bernard.

Bernard dies and, when Roman goes to help clean out the apartment, he finds an unopened letter from a publisher interested in publishing Bernard’s poetry. In his will, Bernard has left any money his poems earn to the Church and has made Roman and Lucy coexecutors of his writing.
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Kacy Walz grew up in a suburb outside Minneapolis, MN. Raised by two lawyers, she initially believed she would attend law school as well. Based partially on her parents’ advice, she eventually abandoned that plan in favor of academia.

As a master’s student at Boston College, Kacy focused on Modernist American literature. By the time she was ready to apply to doctoral programs, her interest had shifted to Contemporary American and the genre of Creative Nonfiction. Her original dissertation topic was based on memoirs by female authors. After a number of years struggling to force the topic into the form of a dissertation, her advisor wisely suggested she seek a different focus.

Her experiences in graduate school and with a complete change of dissertation topic, she is able to relate to the protagonists of grad student novels slightly too well. She is so grateful to all those who helped her through her stuck point and to a successful dissertation defense.