

In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic, by Professor X. New York: Viking, 2011, \$25.95 hardbound.

Room without a View

Peter Wood

Published online: 9 February 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012

In the Basement of the Ivory Tower is among the most authentic and best-realized first person accounts we have had so far of ordinary American higher education. It is ethnography written with both literary flair and moral sobriety, and it belongs on the short list of books that show us our situation as it really is.

Professor X, whoever he is, first stirred controversy by publishing in the June 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* an essay with the same title as this memoir of a decade spent as an adjunct English composition instructor in, first, a Midwestern liberal arts college, and then also a community college. The original “Basement”

Peter Wood is editor of *Academic Questions* and president of the National Association of Scholars, One Airport Place, Suite 7, Princeton, NJ 08540; pwood@nas.org. His most recent book is *A Bee in the Mouth: Anger in America Now* (Encounter, 2007).

introduced a distinctive voice, one distilled from years of private pain and disappointment but nonetheless touched by humanity.

Near the beginning of the *Atlantic* essay, Professor X declares, “I work at colleges of last resort. For many of my students, college was not a goal they spent years preparing for, but a place they landed in. Those I teach don’t come up in the debates about adolescent overachievers and cutthroat college admissions.”¹ (This passage recurs on page 44 in the fourth chapter of the book, and other bits of the essay turn up in various chapters.) Because Professor X portrayed the majority of his students as hopelessly over their heads even in basic writing classes, he was slammed by quite a few academics as a snob, as an incompetent teacher, and as—essentially—an enemy of the people.

At one point in the book he reprises some of the anathemas pronounced on him by the tribunes of college-English-for-all:

I feel sorry for Professor X’s students...

¹Professor X, “In the Basement of the Ivory Tower,” *Atlantic Monthly* (June 2008), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/06/in-the-basement-of-the-ivory-tower/6810/>.

Professor X is a white-collar criminal who couldn't qualify for the ivory tower and make it as a scholar...

Professor X's jeremiad provides convincing evidence of his own weaknesses as an educator. While his gloomy blend of fatalism, guilt, cowardice, and low self-esteem is perhaps not unique, it should not be seen as representative...

But perhaps many of [his students] could pass these courses if Professor X had the faintest clue as to how to teach them...

This is a GROSS failure of teaching and the man should be fired ON THE SPOT...

All of this demonstrated his wisdom in choosing to go to press anonymously and to veil the names of the colleges at which he teaches.

In the book-length version of "Basement," Professor X retreats not an inch. Rather, he elaborates his points, often with rhetorical flourish. Near the end of the essay, for example, after explaining that he has to fail many of his students, he declares:

I am the man who has to lower the hammer.

We may look mild-mannered, we adjunct instructors, but we

are academic button men. I roam the halls of academe like a modern Coriolanus bearing sword and grade book, "a thing of blood, whose every motion / Was timed with dying cries."

In the book, this conceit shows up in the preface, where he clothes it in corduroys and Birkenstocks and layers in more literary references:

We may look mild-mannered, we adjunct instructors, in our eyeglasses and our corduroy jackets, our bald heads and trimmed beards, our peasant skirts and Birkenstocks, our dresses with collars that look almost clerical, but we are nothing less than academic hit men. We are paid by the college to perform the dirty work no one else wants to do, the wrenching, draining, sorrowful business of teaching and failing the unprepared who often don't even know they are unprepared. We are faceless soldiers culled from the very dregs of academe. We operate under cover of darkness. We are not characters out of great academic novels such as *Pnin* or *Lucky Jim*. We have more in common with Anton Chigurh from *No Country for Old Men*. I am John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* but in a corduroy jacket and bow tie. I

feel evil and soiled. I wander the halls of academe like a modern Coriolanus bearing sword and grade book, “a thing of blood, whose every motion / Was timed with dying cries.” But what can I do?

Note the substitution of “hit men” for “button men,” and “wander” for “roam.” Professor X, as he tells us at the beginning of chapter 14, “Life Editing,” is a man who believes in revision. Actually, he says, “I believe in the editing process,” which is one of the few times I winced at his writing. How does “editing process” differ from just “editing?” That word “process” should process on over to the scrap heap of pleonasm.

So Professor X isn’t a perfect stylist, but he is a very good one. He gauges that his real readers won’t be perplexed by references to Vladimir Nabokov, Kingsley Amis, Cormac McCarthy, and Shakespeare. The lines from *Coriolanus* are a small comic triumph: inflating and deflating the adjunct in one thrust. His is the voice not of the theory-besotted English professor but of an adult who has read widely and enjoyed the journey.

Not that he is an especially happy man. There is, as one of those fulminating critics said, a “gloomy blend” in his outlook, though I wouldn’t say it is compounded out of fatalism, cowardice, or low self-esteem.

In the Basement of the Ivory Tower is as much about Professor X’s own chastened vanity as it is about the American vanity of believing that everyone should go to college. These themes alternate chapter by chapter, sometimes comingling.

Professor X, with his day job as a government bureaucrat, is lured by the real estate bubble to purchase a house he can’t really afford. The mortgage and the upkeep sour his marriage and force him to look for extra work: he lands a position as an adjunct, and so begins his sojourn in the academic basement. There he discovers both how much he loves teaching and how ill-suited most of his students are for college-level learning. He finds a few exceptions, but they are very rare indeed.

Earlier in life, Professor X had tried writing novels, but he lacked the knack. He did find his way as an occasional essayist, but it wasn’t until he stood in front of the classroom that the muse truly spoke to him. His students, as students invariably do, recognize that he takes them seriously and cares far more than his paycheck demands about what they learn. One writes,

Course was better than I thought.
Before this I would of never
voluntarily read a book. But

now I almost have a desire to pick one up and read.

Almost! Another observes,

He's kind of enthusiastic about things that probably aren't that exciting to most people, which helps make the three hours go by quicker.

Despite its title and some of the attendant publicity, *In the Basement* isn't a cynical book. Professor X can and does lament the ignorance and apathy of his students, but he does so with considerable charity and no real disdain. "American public education has not served these students very well," he laments, "and now, as they enter college so vastly unprepared, there is a real poignancy to their growing recognition of this astringent truth."

He is especially powerful on the subject of grades. He feels the "noble reflex" to be "compassionate about the curveballs life has thrown our fellow human beings," but knows he must nonetheless give them the grades they earn:

They will work—or are working—as bailiffs or federal marshals; in sheriff's department; as nurses of all kinds; in the billing or human resource divisions of large institutions; in county, state, or federal prisons; as court or correction officers; or as

caseworkers in the caverns of whatever social service agency will have them. Whether much of their college coursework will actually be of any use to them, other than qualifying them for the job, is questionable.

Yet still they must be graded.

When he fails a student, "I am impeding that student's progress, thwarting his ambition, keeping him down, committing the universal crime of messing with his livelihood," yet fail them he does. "I know that by passing the incompetent I will cast a shadow of defilement upon the degrees of those more talented souls who have managed to navigate college successfully." When they fail, it is seldom a close call. "My students who fail do so with an intensity that is operatic. They lack skills on a grand scale..."

Which, of course, raises the questions of how and why those students ever found themselves in a college classroom in the first place. It isn't that big a mystery. "Colleges are blessed with a magical business model," the author observes, in which "American consumers" view the pursuit of a degree as "a sure-fire, can't lose financial investment and, even more crucial than that, a moral imperative." Faced with "the American college juggernaut," the student sees "few other options." The students, however, benefit only

intermittently from this situation, while “the biggest winners in the game of credential inflation are the colleges themselves.”

On matters like this, Professor X isn't breaking new ground and I don't think the book is intended as a fresh analysis of the plight of American higher education. It is, rather, the florescent-bulb lit, linoleum-tile subterranean perspective it says it is. He tells us about his textbooks, his research paper assignments, and his writing workshops. He explains the difficulty of teaching students who can't write how not to plagiarize. And he tells us all this in achingly vivid prose.

Professor X is deeply skeptical of President Obama's grand plan to double American college enrollments. He quotes the president declaring that “We need to put a college education within the reach of every American,” and wryly observes, “It seems to me we have done that already.” He adds,

I have had no choice but to recognize that many of my students have no business being in college. Putting an end to their participation without sentencing them to a life in the aisles of Wal-Mart would require Americans to relinquish their ill-thought-out love affair with higher education.

And this, he acknowledges is unlikely.

His next-to-last chapter, however, is titled “The College Bubble.” It is one of those points where the story of his personal travails and his account of the shaky world of higher education comeingle. Professor X discovered the hard way what the real estate bubble was all about. The darkness that it brought into his life was more than financial. His students now “investing” in college degrees that represent the thinnest veneer of learning are likewise treading on dangerous ground. “Markets tumble, houses enter foreclosure, students fail.”

And yet, Professor X isn't offering a counsel of despair. After a decade, his “household finances have improved,” and “something like peace returned to our home and marriage.” He declines to evict a family of sparrows that have nested beneath his air conditioner. “Let them have their shelter as long as they need it.” He reaches for the twigs of solace at the end of the book as well, as he pictures his students, “all of us there gathered, trembling with fright, short of breath, sick at heart, but perhaps hopeful....There seems a meaning in all this mendacity that lies just beyond our grasp. Every new assignment, at least, starts us thinking.”

That hopefulness against the odds may be what is most striking in this finely observed and deftly written memoir.