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Rosenblatt's Satirical Eye Focused On College Daze

Second novel looks at a dysfunctional school

BY MARY CUMMINGS

The trouble with Beet College, depending on whom it was you were asking, was either that it wasn't making enough money or that it had run off the rails in a soft-headed rush for relevance.

The college, as Roger Rosenblatt explained to those who had gathered in Chancellor's Hall at Stony Brook Southampton earlier this month to hear him read from his new novel "Beet," was 40 miles north of Boston and, "like all New England colleges," heavily "fortified by brick and self-regard."

Then, feigning fear that his listeners might actually believe there was such a place, he paused. Beet College—founded by Nathaniel Beet (1660-1732), a pig farmer whose twin passions were religion and animal husbandry (hence the college motto, "Deus Libri Porci")—was pure fabrication, he said, the pigcentric setting for his second foray into satiric fiction following his 2006 bestseller, "Lapham Rising."

In fact, rather than believing in the existence of Beet, his audience was more likely listening for hints that Mr. Rosenblatt's experience at the late LIUSouthampton might have provided the inspiration for this tale of a college teetering on the brink, its funds running out, its faculty frantically (and fruitlessly) laboring to save it with a new, alluring curriculum, its students feeling helpless, hostile, or both.

The temptation to see parallels may have been irresistible, but when asked about the wellspring of his story in a question put to him at the end of the reading, the author gave the reply one might expect from any satirist worth his salt who has followed the time-honored advice to "write what you know," and done so—with a twist. "I have been teaching all my life," Mr. Rosenblatt told his questioner. "I took the worst of what I remember because that is what's funny."

Mr. Rosenblatt launched his teaching career at Harvard after earning his doctorate there in 1968. And—who knows?—even Harvard at its worst may have provided a bit of grist for the mill. Since then he has achieved national recognition for his essays; written a dozen books; had his plays produced Off-Broadway; and received numerous awards for his work in print and on television. He has never stopped teaching, though, and was recently named a distinguished professor at Stony Brook Southampton.

Among the book's characters, it is professor Peace Porterfield who believes that the college's troubles arise from a misguided attempt to please students rather than

teach them, and it is Joel Bollovate, the sleazy developer presiding over the board of trustees, who sees the college as nothing more than a financial failure. Porterfield, who is far too idealistic and decent to articulate his low opinion of the college in ways that the sensitivity police would characterize as "hurtful," can depend on his wife Olivia, who hates the place, to vent her disdain uninhibitedly.

Even more pointed are the comments of Porterfield's friend and colleague, the straight-shooting Derek Manning, who considers most of "the race and gender stuff," bunk and rails against "the dumbass idea that the purpose of education is to make people proud of who they are instead of what they might become."

Mr. Rosenblatt offered a quick rundown of a few of the other players in this wildly dysfunctional campus community before going on to read from a gem of a chapter that makes hilarious sport of that deadliest of campus rituals—the poetry reading. There is Professor Lipman, teacher of communication arts, including a very popular course on How To Write for The New York Times. Professor Jefferson oversees the I am Woman Center, Professor Godwin the Sensitivity Center, and Reverend Lookatme counsels that God is his pal and should be yours, too. Professor Smythe, "the smarmiest" of all, according to the author, "knows how to suck up to everybody."

Among the students, Matha Polite is a self-styled, foul-mouthed radical, a transfer from Magnolia Blossom College for southern belles, which she abandoned, along with her former personality, after some "unfortunate business" with Professor Portebelloe of the comparative literature department. Akim bin Laden (AKA Arthur Horowitz), "a sweetnatured terrorist," is part of her coterie, as are Betsy Betsy and Peter Bagtoothian, "the one bona fide thug" in the motley band whose mission—to close down the college—happens to match the one hatched by the appalling Joel Bollovate and his stooge, President Lewis Huey. Taking questions after the reading, Mr. Rosenblatt offered some insights into the way he works. The book had taken about six months to write, he said, adding that the process for him involves "a lot of brooding time." The most important thing, he stressed, is to be clear on what the work is about before you dive in.

And what, precisely is "Beet" about, one questioner wanted to know, prompting Mr. Rosenblatt to elaborate, in terms less harsh perhaps but no less heartfelt than Derek Manning's, on the "serious complaint" at the root of his satire.

"All funny things start with something serious," he said, "at least in satire." What bothers him in a serious way is that students today have been led to believe that higher education is all about boosting their self-esteem. As a professor, he suggested, he has never felt that it was his job to instill in his students the sense that they are born world-beaters. On the contrary, he recalled that when he was a student himself, he and his classmates were taught "to think the worst of ourselves, to be humble, and to seek out the best minds."

Whether those who possessed them were black, white, male or female "was not the issue," he said. The idea was "to find the best, learn from them, and feel humbled by the experience. This is not a world that thinks you are wonderful," he added. "It doesn't give a rat's ass about you and, given the chance, it will treat you poorly." In the book, said Mr. Rosenblatt, Professor Manning, "a caustic son of a bitch, says all of these things." Manning's fault, he went on, is that, unlike his friend Porterfield, "he doesn't do anything about it."

Mr. Rosenblatt offered one more important insight before the evening came to a close, a gift to every aspiring writer in the audience. Following up on a question relating to editing and revision, Mr. Rosenblatt declared that paring a manuscript down by chucking everything that might get in the way of what the book means, slow its pace, or interfere with character development is not only easy, "it's a wonderful liberation."

Once you get over your false sense of pride, your sense that you can't live without this or that passage and you get it out of the way, "you can't even remember what was in it," he said. "It was expendable. Ruthless revision of oneself makes you very happy."

Sage advice from the man who admits to having included an 80-page essay in the first draft of his first novel, and then boiling it down to the "one small paragraph" that served the same purpose in the final published edition.



Roger Rosenblatt

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