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London Review of Books

Dirty Little Secret

Fredric Jameson

The Programme Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing by [Mark McGurl](#)
Harvard, 466 pp, £14.95, November 2012, ISBN 978 0 674 06209 2

The secret Mark McGurl discloses is the degree to which the richness of postwar American culture (we will here stick to the novel, for reasons to be explained) is the product of the university system, and worse than that, of the creative writing programme as an institutional and institutionalised part of that system. [*] This is not simply a matter of historical research and documentation, although one finds a solid dose of that in *The Programme Era*: it is a matter of shame, and modern American writers have always wanted to think of themselves as being innocent of that artificial supplement to real life which is college education, to begin with, but above all the creative writing course. Those who can, do; those who can't, teach. Think of the encomia of European intellectuals like Sartre and Beauvoir to the great American writers who didn't teach, didn't go to school, but worked as truck drivers, bartenders, nightwatchmen, stevedores, anything but intellectuals, as they recorded 'the constant flow of men across a whole continent, the exodus of an entire village to the orchards of California', and so on.

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[*] Elif Batuman wrote about *The Programme Era* from a different point of view in the [LRB of 23 September 2010](#).

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Letters

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From Frank Jackson

The university is surely Fredric Jameson's point of view, but is he writing about what he knows (*LRB*, 22 November)? Does he read the American fiction cobbled together in the workshops that are the subject of Mark McGurl's *The Programme Era*, by writers who've come after Philip Roth, Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates? Jameson's account of McGurl's triads and dialectics doesn't explain why the first sentences of so many stories in the Best American series follow the same formula. Start with the words 'when' or 'after'; mention the first name of a character; dangle a pronoun with no antecedent; drop one heavy symbol or allusion; and use vaguely abstract phrasing to lay out a fairly banal situation. Here's the first sentence of Maile Meloy's story 'Demeter', about splitting child custody, in the 19 November issue of the *New Yorker*: 'When they divided up the year, Demeter chose, for her own, the months when the days start getting longer.' It's odd that so many students told 'find your voice' so often find the same one.

Frank Jackson

Pittsburgh

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From Marcus Thorngrove

Fredric Jameson says this about Faulkner: 'Virtually alone among modern American writers, he never had anything to do with writing programmes' (*LRB*, 22 November). It is a 'matter of shame', Jameson writes, that nearly all other modern American writers did. Here are 14 modern American writers, all of them born after Faulkner, none of whom appears to have had anything to do with writing programmes: Nathanael West, Henry Roth, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, William Gaddis, Jack Kerouac, John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, Norman Rush. That is not to mention the many modern American writers who taught on writing programmes only after they had launched their careers and in many cases written their masterpieces. Richard Yates did not go to college, let alone graduate school, and taught writing only after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*. Saul Bellow is another example.

Marcus Thorngrove

New York

From Thomas Jones

Frank Jackson says that many of the first sentences of stories by creative writing graduates 'start with the words "when" or "after"; mention the first name of a character; dangle a pronoun with no antecedent; drop one heavy symbol or allusion; and use vaguely abstract phrasing to lay out a fairly banal situation' ([Letters, 6 December](#)). He illustrates his point with the beginning of a recent story by Maile Meloy: 'When they divided up the year, Demeter chose, for her own, the months when the days start getting longer.' I had a quick look for other stories that follow the formula. There's one (out of 11) that comes close in Meloy's collection *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It* (which, I admit, I reviewed favourably in the *LRB* a couple of years ago): 'When Valentine was nine, her mother's new lover took them one night to a bonfire the college kids had at the lake.' Others by other writers weren't too hard to find (better examples no doubt exist; these don't all follow every one of Jackson's rules):

When the front door had shut the two of them out and the butler Baines had turned back into the dark heavy hall, Philip began to live.

When she opened the door and saw him standing there she was more pleased than ever before, and he, too, as he followed her into the studio, seemed very very happy to have come.

After his trial they gave Constantin a villa, an allowance and an executioner.

After his wife's death Mason Grew took the momentous step of selling out his business and moving from Wingfield, Connecticut, to Brooklyn.

We knew him in those unprotected days when we were content to hold in our hands our lives and our property.

The only trouble is, none of those openings – by Graham Greene, Katherine Mansfield, J.G. Ballard, Edith Wharton, Joseph Conrad – was 'cobbled together in the workshops that are the subject of Mark McGurl's *The Programme Era*, by writers who've come after Philip Roth, Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates'. The problem of first-sentence uniformity, if it is a problem, may have less to do with creative writing programmes (whatever else may be wrong with them) than with the constraints of the short story as a form: you've only got a few thousand words so you try to get the who, the when and the where down as quickly as possible. The fault may be Chekhov's as much as anyone's: 'During my stay in the district of S. I often used to go to see the watchman Savva Stukatch, or simply Savka, in the kitchen gardens of Dubovo.' Though Kafka didn't help: 'Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte,

fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt.' But then again, 'when' is also the first word of *The Canterbury Tales*.

As for Jackson's disparaging of Meloy in particular, I wouldn't make great claims for her story in the *New Yorker* (though it isn't bad) but I wonder if it's quite fair of him to describe explicitly retelling a Greek myth as 'dropping a heavy symbol or allusion' (it's a bit unsubtle to call a novel *Ulysses* too). Then there's his sneering at her using 'vaguely abstract phrasing to lay out a fairly banal situation' – in Meloy's case, 'splitting child custody'. What would Jackson make of this? 'The litigation had seemed interminable and had in fact been complicated; but by the decision on the appeal the judgment of the divorce court was confirmed as to the assignment of the child.' Henry James never went to Iowa either.

Thomas Jones

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