A Tale of Hyenas, Toddlers, and Edith Wharton Scholars

A review of Jake Fuchs' novel Death of a Prof, the Nursery School Murders:II
By Julie A. Sparks

Has anyone else noticed how recent fiction has delighted in holding English professors up to scorn--humiliating, reviling, and sometimes even killing them? Consider Robert Grudin's Book: A Novel (1992), which brilliantly lampoons the pomposity and silliness of contemporary literary theorists and features an English professor so bizarrely homicidal that he tries to kill not only a fellow professor, but also that man's novel. Consider Margaret Edson's Wit (1993), which depicts a brilliant John Donne scholar as a heartless egomaniac who can be redeemed only by immense suffering and an excruciating death by ovarian cancer. Consider D. J. H. Jones' particularly sadistic Murder at the MLA (1993), which systematically executes four despicable specimens of English professor (again, mostly of the lit. crit. variety), selecting as the scene of the crime that crucible of tyranny, angst, and self-aggrandizement, the annual convention of the Modern Language Association. Finally, consider the most recent example of this subgenre of the murder mystery: Jake Fuchs' Death of a Prof: The Nursery School Murders: II (2001). What does it say about the current state of the profession that these literary executions of English professors are committed *by* English professors (except for Wit, which was written by an elementary school teacher)?

If the answer to that question is not immediately obvious, congratulate yourself for having chosen a less vicious profession than that chosen by these murder victims. If you are yourself an English professor, well, you hardly need Jake Fuchs' brilliant satire to introduce you to the likes of Cedric McAuley, an arrogantly successful Edith Wharton scholar whose reputation-making scholarly article was plagiarized from a grad student, and who continues to get published because "he's provocative, and because he's been published so much already" (30). Insiders of this world will also be familiar with Cedric's grad-student mistress, a "post-post feminist" who, despite her

bad grades and test scores, gets into Berkeley on her rich husband's influence, cynically manipulates the boorish and chauvinistic Cedric to win good grades and an assistantship, and plans to become an English professor because, as she sees it, in that privileged role "[y]ou do what you want! You hardly have to work! You go to exciting places for conferences! I can't really go into business on my own [. . .] But I can be an English professor, no problem" (230).

Fuchs also explores the plight of another species of English professor, those with a true devotion to great literature but with too little savvy or too much integrity to exploit the current climate of doctrinaire postmodern (or post-postmodern) criticism. Aaron Matthews, Fuchs' example of this old-fashioned type, is a failed (that is, under-published) Edith Wharton scholar who is trapped in the purgatory of freshman composition classes at a state college (CSU, San Francisco) and struggles to supplement his meager salary by earning a "Faculty Achievement Rating Terminal Increment," otherwise known as a "fartie." Anyone familiar with current trends will recognize this "evil import from the corporate world," which are awarded by college administrators who don't trust professors to be productive without financial pressure, and who don't "care about teaching or scholarship half as much as they did about publicity" (24). If you think this is an exaggeration, ask any CSU professor you know about the Faculty Merit Increase, or FMI (pronounced "F-me.") In short, this novel delivers a dead-on indictment of a system ripe for satire with an incisiveness and wit that would do Jonathan Swift proud.

But even if you do know all about the current state of the English profession, even if you are yourself in its clutches, either as a student or at some level of the teaching pyramid, read this book for its other delights. Read it to enjoy its complex and interesting characters—adults, children, and animals all keenly observed and described with a rare combination of wit and compassion. Many of these characters are despicable to a degree that makes them fun to hate, yet in most cases Fuchs provides enough details of their lives to show us the pathos in their situation, however "privileged" the characters may appear to be at first. Fuchs is especially good when

depicting the children whose nursery school antics hold up a mirror to the adult goings-on. Two of these children in particular--the sweetly somber Dierdre and the brainy, klutzy, sad little Boris—stand out as indictments of their self-absorbed parents. They are as endearing and as moving as any child in Dickens' canon (they reminded me particularly Flora Dombey and Pip, respectively), but there is nothing cloying in Fuchs' treatment of them.

Similarly, Fuchs uses animal characters to mirror the brutality in human nature, our nobler qualities of empathy and courage, and our ability to camouflage our true character. For example, the hyena, pictured on the cover as a fierce-looking cartoon, with red tongue lolling from a snarl, plays against its popular "laughing" image in a scene towards the end. First Fuchs gives a matter-of-fact physical description: "This particular *Crotua*, a female named Munchie, was chunky in build and about the size of a very large dog. She was sandy-colored with dark spots; her face was long and narrow. She had bat ears and a thick tuft of hair sticking up from the top of her head. [. . .] Muchie's upper and lower jaws didn't meet squarely, the lower angling off to the right, exposing a mess of teeth. Each one seemed twice as long as little Artie's longest fang. All crammed together, they looked like a bunch of hypodermic needles." (209). Then Fuchs adds an interpretive layer—anthropomorphism at its most useful. "Through the bars of her cage, Munchie was giving Maren the 'eh?' look that a cat will assume when some silly human is making much moan over a slain bird. That ridiculous tuft, as if she were sitting at the breakfast table before sprucing up for work. Do mass murderers present the same expression, bland and goonish, to those they appall? Do serial killers? Squatting on her thick haunches, the hyena made Maren think of awful men, although Munchie wasn't male, who sneak into people's homes and do unspeakable things." (210).

The character who looks into the face of a hyena and sees a psychopath is the unlikely sleuth and the soul of the book. As wife of one of the chief suspects , this thoughtful nursery-school teacher is forced to consider the terrible possibility that her emotionally unstable husband,

the unsuccessful Edith Wharton scholar, might be capable of great brutality. The reader follows her methodical search for clues and appreciates her difficulty in piercing the killer's camouflage. She is a strong, stoic character, as coolly humane as Swift's houyhnhnms. Unlike so many women drawn by male writers, she is admirable without being cloying, engaging as a human being first, as a wife and attractive female second. We understand her misgivings about her husband, and we care about whether the two of them can revive their failing marriage. Although the tone of the novel shifts deftly from gentle humor to biting, lacerating satire, ultimately the serious, unflinching gaze of its decent, empathetic heroine dismisses what is evil and comes to rest on what is lovable in the human animal.