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MOO

By Jane Smiley

Alfred A. Knopf. 3413 pp

Because we encourage its members to be reflective, critical and analytic, to take broad and overarching views, academia fosters an atmosphere ripe for self-parody. Add to that the neurotic insecurity that compels many academics to take themselves far too seriously. Then set the keen intelligence, slashing wit and confident voice of Jane Smiley free to romp upon this fertile ground, and you get the best satire of university life since at least *White Noise*, and possibly ever.

Employing every shade of humor from DeVries Light to DeLillo Dark, Smiley's depiction of a fictitious Midwestern agricultural university nicknamed Moo U is all the more potent because it is so deadly accurate.

Radiating outward from Moo U's true nerve center—Lorraine Walker, the provost's secretary—Smiley accumulates a delightful ensemble cast of administrators, faculty and students. There's Ivar Harstad, the provost, who must translate each round of legislative budget cutbacks into actual pain on this typical state campus where it grows decreasingly possible to buckle adequate instruction within the tightening belt of fiscal resources. There's Ivar's brother, Dean Nils Harstad, who plans to marry cafeteria worker Marly Hellmich and, using laboratory fertilization, bring from her body six children within a year.

Behind the lecterns are Timothy Monahan, the novelist teaching creative writing, who seems unlikely to get tenure not because he's small-minded but because one of his stories appeared in *Playboy*; and Cecilia Sanchez, the Spanish professor forced to teach impossibly large classes while, outside the classroom, she drifts into a bizarre love quadrangle.

Most entertaining, perhaps, are the twinned obsessive ideologues, distinguished economics professor Lionel Gift and his mortal enemy Chairman X of the horticulture department. While Gift is a pure capitalist whose revered voice will try to justify gold mining certain to destroy Costa Rica's cloud forest (the destruction, he says, will prove "well within the bounds of acceptable exploitation"), Chairman X is the impassioned Marxist trying to save the planet and intent on stopping Gift right up to the novel's literally riotous finish.

In this large research institution world where grant-garnering and publication are everything and teaching virtually nothing, these professors peer indifferently upon a sea of student eyes glazed with lecture. One pair belongs to Bob Carlson, whose work/study job entails looking after prize hog Earl Butz, a swine more sensitive than Bob himself, and far moreso than former agriculture secretary Earl Butz. Another pair belongs to Chicagoan Mary Jackson, an African-American with a stunning wardrobe, struggling to

fit in among three perky, cornfed roommates (one scene, where Mary watches an upwardly nubile roommate dance at a fraternity party, is itself brilliant enough to justify the price of this book).

While the novel's excellence stems from its rich cast and its author's penetrating insight, Smiley airbrushes onto these pages a host of mini-lust stories and the hilarious efforts of Chairman X and others to thwart the greed of Gift and his cohort, Arlen Martin, a "little Texan with jug ears who was worth a billion dollars" and whose voice echoes a recent presidential candidate.

With the sole absence of athletic departments, *Moo* lampoons all phases of university life: the self-aggrandizing triviality of vast professional gatherings, the swelling cascade of memos announcing the latest austerity measures, the burgeoning hordes of PC police, the self-referential babble of deconstruction, the bogus foundation of many tenure decisions and the mass of students who, if asked "what single nutrient they might choose to have with them on a desert island...would answer unhesitatingly, 'Bud'."

Far superior to Smiley's Pulitzer-winning *A Thousand Acres*, *Moo* uses its humor to sweeten the sad truth seeping out between the laughs: that American education has fallen upon frightening times, when politicians voice homage to education but won't pay for it, when administrators talk not of young scholars but "customers," when the university exists merely as a rung toward a job rather than the custodian and transmitter of the best that civilization has thought and created. Smiley's professors and administrators, to preserve their jobs and open state checkbooks, here adopt not only the language of the merchants and legislators but also their values. When the laughter dies, Smiley has left us with a deep chill.