

HOLIDAY ALIBI FOR DEATH IN THE FACULTY

During the summer holidays I have tried to catch up on some reading, especially light relief or the escapist variety I normally reserve for bedtime and yet often, during the academic session, feel too tired to finish. I indulged myself with a real variety this holiday – from feminist detective stories to classic American “pulp” to some poetry and an Israeli novel which has been heralded as a likely major classic.

About a year ago, also during the summer, I’d had a real binge on the new genre of feminist detective writers, reading in rapid succession such authors as Amanda Cross, Katherine Forest and Marion Foster as well as some of the more traditional women crime writers like P. D. James, Ruth Rendell and Dorothy Simpson and the ones who have recently been rediscovered by Pandora Press such as Anthony Gilbert and Josephine Bell. Given the ways in which they had all tended to fade into each other in my mind I felt that this summer I ought to be more eclectic in my reading matter.

Of course some of these books were more memorable than others: the least memorable being the one with the best title for a campus or academic novel, namely *Death in a Tenured Position*. By the time I inadvertently came to read it for a second time – the first having been in North America while teaching summer school in Toronto – the American title had been replaced in the British publication by a title perhaps more in keeping with the now tenuousness of British academic life. It is now known as *Death in a Faculty Position*.

This summer I decided only to read one of this genre and tried to

catch up on Sara Paretsky: on the one hand a more traditionally hard-boiled detective and yet on the other also a more modern feminist than Amanda Cross’s detective. Paretsky’s first novel – and the last one that I have read – is also largely a campus or academic detective story, based on the University of Chicago (rather than an East coast university) and crucially involves the activities of the UWU – University Women United. One chapter is particularly memorable (and enjoyable) for the way in which it gently and sympathetically mocks the activities of this group of feminist students and their earnest radicalism. The type of crimes that fascinate Paretsky and her detective – V. I. Warshawski – are also *au courant*, being those involving insurance and other financial misdemeanours of big business.

As part of my attempt to be more eclectic in my summer reading I was also inspired to read a book that I had missed out on in my “youth” through what now, with the benefit of hindsight, seems to be dreadful intellectual or academic snobbery. The source of the inspiration was the reading, earlier in the academic year, of a brilliant feminist literary and social analysis of both the book and the film by an old colleague and friend, Helen Taylor, entitled *Scarlett’s Women: Gone with the Wind and its female fans*. Reading *Gone with the Wind* was a most interesting



and exciting experience, contrary to all my expectations, since I had presumed it to be merely a rather simple romantic tale. I was particularly fascinated by the way in which Margaret Mitchell wove her story around detailed accounts of the history of the American Civil War.

I deeply regretted not having had the benefit of having read it – and Helen Taylor’s masterly critique – for courses that I have taught on comparative and American social policy. I have always recommended films and novels to my students on these courses as a way of getting to grips with the social and historical context of public policy development. After all, how useful *Gone*

with the Wind would have been, especially when coupled with Helen Taylor’s commentary, shedding light on the ways in which gender and race relations were used and understood.

See *Under: Love* by David Grossman was a totally different literary experience. I found it incredibly difficult to read with understanding and yet at the same time totally compelling. I never considered abandoning it as, for example, some of my friends told me that they had done. Yet I did understand why they might because, in terms of the experience, I felt it was not dissimilar to that of reading Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and I had frequently considered abandoning that. It is not the plot or story line that is important but rather the range and depth of emotional feelings conveyed and yet at one and the same time the feeling of being somewhat distanced from reality, the characters and their lives.

However, Rushdie’s theme is altogether simpler than that of Grossman and is not strictly comparable being more of a satirical and mocking novel. Grossman’s novel is in four different parts and consists of four rather discrete stories told with varying degrees of complexity in an attempt to come to terms with the continuing and contemporary effects of the Holocaust. It uses four different characters and completely different kinds of lives to convey

these effects – one is the author as a young boy, a second a famous Polish story teller who perished in the Holocaust, the third the fictional character of the author’s grandfather and finally the mythical boy who lived a whole life in 24 hours.

The fourth part of the book is written as if it were an encyclopaedia of this mythical boy’s life, interwoven with the other characters and fragments of social history. This part starts with the Hebrew word for love, for which there is no entry except a cross reference to sex and ends on a more optimistic note about the nature of prayer, since the Hebrew translation is from the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The whole book is a powerful and moving set of experiences interwoven into a varied pattern of story and anecdote. While on holiday, I happened on a review of the book and interview with the author. It struck me how little I’d understood and yet how moved I’d been by it. Reading the review in the Jewish Historical museum in the heart of Amsterdam also seemed to be a singularly appropriate experience.

Although much of my summer reading seems to have been tangential, to say the least, to my core academic work it does seem to be important for keeping me in touch. I was heartened by one colleague telling me how she had spent time on her Italian holiday finding out about Italian educational policy for the sake of it and another for continuing to sample the rich vein of women detective writers. At the British Educational Research Association conference last week I felt better placed to be able to put into perspective the interesting debates on social justice and a current agenda for educational research.