



Pictures from an Institution

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Beneath the unassuming surface of a progressive women's college lurks a world of intellectual pride and pomposity awaiting devastation by the pens of two brilliant and appalling wits. Randall Jarrell's classic novel was originally published to overwhelming critical acclaim in 1954, forging a new standard for campus satire—and instantly yielding comparisons to Dorothy Parker's razor-sharp barbs. Like his fictional nemesis, Jarrell cuts through the earnest conversations at Benton College—mischievously, but with mischief nowhere more wicked than when crusading against the vitriolic heroine herself.

Pictures from an Institution Details

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Author : Randall Jarrell

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From Reader Review Pictures from an Institution for online ebook

Lori says

Pictures from an Institution is Randall Jarrell's poignant and highly comedic book of a women's college. In his portrait of Gertrude, a haughty writer in residence, we have a masterpiece of characterization. The humor in the book is of a rarefied sort - still I would say this is the funniest book I have ever read. I have read Pictures of an Institution four times to savor over its parody and descriptions and laugh inside at the laser vision of Jarrell. It is not easy to write satire on this level. When I ask people for a truly funny book in literature of the 20th century most say Confederacy of Dunces and then draw a blank. I always recommend this.

Richard says

You know how mental retardates seem really good and decent and innocent even when they misbehave, because we realize they're too retarded to know any better? The narrator of this novel thinks that way about people in general.

Alison says

I was all enjoying this book and laughing out loud on a very cheerless B train, and enjoying how it positively revels in its artifices (short, punchy disquisitions on how impossible it is to make a "real" person seem like a "real" character, and vice versa), when Karl, who read it a few months ago (and gave it a very good review, so read his if you're interested in hearing more about the book itself), pointed out that the character of Gertrude was a lot like me. In fact, he said, "That's what being married to you is like." At first, I was all, "Hey! Whoa!" But then I kept reading, and Gertrude kept behaving more and more awfully, and I finally had to admit the justice of the charge. So, any of you who've been wondering what it's like to be married to me, read it.

Lesley says

This is one of many re-reads - Picture from an Institution is just so much one of those books that I pick up to check a quote or whether I recall a passage correctly and then I just get sucked in once more.

Still haven't found the particular passage I was looking for, but did find a line that I had previously hunted for fruitlessly, because I thought it must come much later along than page 2.

And I'm not actually reading the vintage Penguin edition, but that makes a nice picture!

Brent Legault says

This novel is a chain of first-rate insult and top-shelf wit. The chain does have some weak links in it though. Somewhere near the middle it begins to sag a bit. Or maybe I just grew tired of quip counting. It tightens up toward the end, for whatever that's worth. It's a mean novel that means nothing (as far as I can tell) to anyone but Randall Jarrell and roman-a-clefists. Brilliant, too. I wish he'd've written more of them.

keatssycamore says

Not the kind of funny that brings joyous, renewing laughter, but the kind that brings a preening, smug smirk to people so emotionally hollow that they believe "witty" is the same thing and, if not, it's better anyway.

Kay says

Don't you hate it when a book is recommended as hilarious and it turns out so unengaging, so lacking in sparkle that you sigh and put it down after 50 pages? I do.

Ben Loory says

halfway through, this book abandons itself and spends the rest of its pages just sort of dancing around. the story that was being set up (that of the satirical novelist come to the campus to write a book about it) goes off over the hills and leaves us with 150 more pages of delightful characters and witticisms... it was kind of a disappointment... when i started this book it was one of those HOLY SHIT! moments where you think you are finally finding A Perfect Book... this is oscar wilde / dorothy parker quality wit here, *for real*, only somehow done with the gentle fluffy funnylovingkindness of p.g. wodehouse... there is another review here on goodreads that says that jarrell treats all of humanity as if they were retarded children... he forgives them everything they do because they don't know what they're doing... and then on top of it there are these crazy metaphors all over the place...

(Gertrude the novelist has come to Benton college to write a book about it, and has been asking a lot of questions of the narrator, a professor there.)

I always answered her questions. If I hadn't, someone else would have-- and it was appropriate that she and Benton should meet and, each in its own way, preserve the memory of each other. But sometimes I felt sheepish-- felt like a flock of sheep, that is-- as Gertrude sheared from me (with barber's clippers that pulled a little) my poor coat of facts, worked over it with knitted brows, and then, smiling like Morgan le Fay, cast over my bare limbs her big blanket conclusions."

that's not even really a stand-out section... it's all like that...

Sketchbook says

Skittering on life support, this aimless "comedy," narrated by the most toxic whiner in modern lit, grazes academic pretension with nonstop insult / put-down humor associated today with camp TV comics. It seemed funny to many elitists on publication in the early 50s and it amused me years later. On a reread ("Mommy, you have dishpan hands all over") I had to call Nurse Curtis with a Vodka IV.

A nameless professor at a women's school in the northeast burdens us with his smug-bitchy reportage. The college president, a former Olympic diver, *croons* his speeches. "His voice not only took you into his confidence, it laid a fire for you and put out your slippers by it." So far, so good. But this goes on and on : "That voice did not sell itself to the highest bidder, it just gave itself away to everybody." There's more : "He was not human. He had not had time to be; besides, his own gift was for seeming human." The president never says anything in the plotless pastiche or is the center of any scene. The narrator just keeps telling us about him like a standup comedian doing a monologue. But a monologue is not a novel.

The president hires as a guest writing teacher a woman novelist named Gertrude and she's supposed to be an ogre. But she never says anything either; we're just told about her by the unseen antagonist. Ex: On seeing the president, we're told, she felt "as if she'd just taken a drink." He's such valuable material for her next book that she "walked around and around him rubbing up and down against his legs, looking into the dish of fresh mackerel he wore instead of a face." The monologue continues. "Gertrude's bark was her bite; and many a bite has lain awake all night longing to be Gertrude's bark." O, there's more: "Gertrude knew the price of every sin and the value of none." But who is she? Does she have any characterization at all, beyond the monologue? Nope.

There's also a faculty wife who looks, we're further told, as if she'd waked up by chance and "her clothes had come together and involved her in an accident. She lived before Original Sin, and could only make mistakes." (Now the narrator sounds like the comic Phyllis Diller doing a monologue). Critics of the day swooned over this kind of stuff, which tells you all about 'em, ehh? Meantime, they ignored the gorgeous comic writing of Dawn Powell...

Inserted like spoons of castor oil so you can choke on fashionable culture of the 50s are names like John Cage, Jackson Pollock, Charles-Henri Ford, Janacek, Vivaldi and the revue song, Civilization, from Angel in the Wings ("Bongo, bongo, bongo...I don't wanna leave the Congo..") It's known today because it was introduced by Elaine Stritch (1947) and became part of her retirement-solo act.

A lauded poet, Jarrell displays pleasure with words, but, in his only novel, he reveals his talent is for the monologue -- not the novel.

Nancy says

Witty, cruel and ultimately soulless. I know it's supposed to be about Mary McCarthy, but to me it reads very meta.

Caroline says

This book had flashes of clever writing, but much more that was obscure and pointless. Perhaps prose by a poet tends toward taking risks of metaphor and expression that work in the more spare poetic medium, but fail in a prose narrative. There was an underlying snarky tone, in which nearly every character is faulted as pathetic, or mindlessly selfish and provincial, that made it further unsatisfying.

Stephen Durrant says

This book was recommended to me by an admired friend, who happens to be an English professor, as "the ultimate academic novel." I'm not so sure. Randall Jarrell is best known as a poet and writes brilliantly, but his book is almost entirely characterization. Very little happens . . . perhaps precisely because very little EVER happens at Benton College, the imagined liberal arts college he skewers here. Moreover, creating humorous stereotypes of university professors and administrators, for any of us who have worked on a campus very long, is a bit like shooting fish in a barrel: it's just a little too easy. Still there are some very funny scenes in this comedy, and anyone who has known the typical university president, who is more an institution than a person, the want-to-be novelist whose every social engagement is simply collecting fodder for her fiction, or the eccentric professor of music, who so often speaks with a German accent and imagines himself a great composer of twelve-tone music will find some very familiar characters on these pages.

Lobstergirl says

Randall Jarrell's only novel is a comedy, short on plot and long on characterization, set at a private women's college. The unnamed narrator is a visiting professor who is a stand-in for Jarrell; Gertrude Johnson, a novelist in residence who is studying the campus denizens in order to novelize them, is based on Mary McCarthy. We also get to know the president of Benton College and his South-African born wife, who Gertrude refers to as "the Black Man's Burden;" Gottfried Rosenbaum, a composer in residence, and his wife Irene; Sidney Bacon, Gertrude's attentive, doormattish husband; and some other minor characters.

Gertrude is viciously witty. When holding forth, "she had the contempt for her audience that the real virtuoso so often has." She is someone who "told big lies like Hitler's." Nurturing does not come naturally to her; conversations with children are difficult, and domesticity a challenge. At a dinner party she throws,

There was very little of Gertrude's dinner, but what there was was awful: it was a dinner you would not have invited a dog to. You felt with naïve resentment: "You'd think if she'd wanted to have people to dinner she'd have cooked them more than this"; ah, but she hadn't wanted to, not really. She felt, somewhere in the

depths of her Lucy Stone-ish heart, that cooking is a man's job, and soon, so did you. After her dinners guests had often wanted to pay Gertrude the simple tribute of a sampler, one bearing in chain-stitch or lock-step the words Kinder, Kirche, Küche.

After the meal, the guests are relieved to consume a bakery cake: “It was good to eat something that had felt a cook’s transfiguring hands.”

Gertrude is the star of the novel, but Jarrell’s comedic talents are sprinkled over the others too. President Dwight Robbins has a public speaking voice that “not only took you into his confidence, it laid a fire for you and put out your slippers by it and then went into the other room to get into something more comfortable. It was a Compromising voice. President Robbins was, in Shaw’s phrase, “a man of good character where women are concerned,” and he had never touched a Benton girl except in a game of water-polo; yet as you heard him speak something muttered inside you, “To a nunnery, go!”

And speaking of the student body, “Nowadays Benton picked and chose: girls who had read Wittgenstein as high school baby-sitters were rejected because the school’s quota of abnormally intelligent students had already been filled that year.”

At times, though, the witticisms feel too Wildean:

People say that conversation is a lost art: how often I have wished it were!

She had never married; neither had her mother, her grandmother, any of the Battersons – one felt that.

James Murphy says

Pictures from an Institution was poet Randall Jarrell's only novel. Published in 1954, it's a satire portraying the intellectual swaggering and pomposity prevalent in an enlightened women's institution called Benton College. Meant to be funny--it's subtitled A Comedy--it is. Jarrell must have had fun ridiculing what he saw as the foibles and pretensions of the academic life he himself was part of. It's said to be modeled on Sarah Lawrence College in New York where Jarrell taught, though he says Benton is more of a type rather than a specific school. You'll laugh out loud at the preening and the eccentricity, the confusion and backbiting. The latter, particularly, is the metier of Gertrude Johnson, the creative writing professor meant as a caricature of Mary McCarthy, who was once also a faculty member of Sarah Lawrence. His portrait of her in an ensemble of characters whose mannerisms Jarrell sees in high satire is savage. Such scenes as a cocktail party, an assembly, the president's struggles with the self-inflated novelist teaching the school's writing program, will make you smile if not laugh out loud.

The main problem is that it's hard to relate to the characters and the academic backdrop of a novel removed 60 years from us. Like so many novels published decades ago, the lush and practiced quality of the narrator's voice helps to date it. The blurbs themselves accompanying my edition strike the same tone as the material; most are by contemporaries of Jarrell. Of the two more contemporary to us, Noel Malcolm may be correct in

considering it the forerunner of our campus novels of today, but Michael Wood's claim of the novel as meditation isn't believable. The one bright spot is Gertrude Johnson, only because she's a send-up of the iconic Mary McCarthy, who we know enough about to understand as Jarrell pictures her, and is therefore familiar. The rest is too clouded by the tyranny of time to claim relevance in our world far-removed from Benton. The small town, small campus feel of Benton and the almost closeted academia of its faculty seem provincial. It reads like our own 1950s except the biting spirit of Jarrell's prose prevents us from holding it close nostalgically.

MJ Nicholls says

A smug self-involved novel written for the wine-quaffing elite so they might titter around their canapés at the *bons mot* expressed about a footnote in the revised Oxford edition of *The Iliad*. The narrator is a pompous New York scenester and the novel reminiscent of all those moments when you're watching a Woody Allen film and it's going all right, then suddenly you have this overwhelming urge to kill all the privileged neurotic whining nuisances gobbling up all the caviar before you. Maybe it's a class thing. I was raised in Compton, Edinburgh where we don't tolerate books of such a dated self-regarding nature, boyee. A parting warning: be suspicious of all books that subtitle themselves 'comedies.' Usually the wish is father to the thought, dear homey.
