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An Interview with Alex Kudera, Author of
Fight for Your Long Day

MERRITT MOSELEY

University of North Carolina, Asheville

Published in 2010, *Fight for Your Long Day* is a new kind of academic novel: one with an adjunct instructor at its center. Jeffrey J. Williams has described a “new wave” of academic novels, set in “a world from which professors have largely disappeared,” a variety of “anxiety narrative” consisting of “trying to hold onto one’s perch, whether at work or at home, despite obstacles lining one’s precarious path.”¹

Fight for Your Long Day depicts a miserable day in the life of one Adjunct Cyrus Duffleman – his fortieth birthday, though only he knows this – in which he works his “long day,” teaching classes at four different colleges or universities scattered around the city of Philadelphia and ends his day working as a security officer at one of the colleges. Marginal, anonymous, anxious indeed, Duffleman can be seen as standing for all the faceless teaching fodder increasingly staffing the neoliberal institutions of American higher learning, where contingent faculty paid as part-timers but in fact – like Duffleman – working a full load constitute a large and increasing percentage of the teaching staff. Kudera places his book in the tradition of the academic novel but points out that all the academic novels he has read feature a main character who teaches at only one school, while his main character has five jobs at different sites.

Alex Kudera knows this life at first hand. He was a middle-aged adjunct himself when he wrote the book (his situation has stabilized since then), though his presentation of his anti-hero as a classic schlemiel – “worn down and defeated fat guy, adjunct instructor and repeat loser of his flock . . . inconsequential man . . . extra man . . . the man who knows too much about nothing anyone is interested in” – ranges “Adjunct Duffleman” along with hapless cogs in impersonal machines like Joseph K. or Good Soldier Švejk.²

Our interview was conducted via email.

ABC: Could you discuss the background to *Fight for Your Long Day*?

AK: I was teaching six classes a week and going to a marketing job for twelve hours of “light copy” and proofreading and also tutoring and picking up a couple of classes a summer, and seven hard days of work each week was killing me even if it wasn’t year round (summers were lighter). The book is about Cyrus’s “long day,” but, like many adjuncts and others trying to survive in America, I had multiple long days each week. I remember running into a friend on a trolley, talking things over (often I was in no position to talk to anyone beyond students by the end of semesters and school years), and I ended with, “I can’t believe these are our lives.”

Anyway, I lucked into a chance to live in Seoul, South Korea for seven weeks in the summer of 2004, with a substantially reduced teaching load, and I started writing the novel in June in Philadelphia before I left. It wasn’t part of any big plan although I’d always hoped to get back to writing fiction. Publishing a novel was always my dream. I remember making, and then breaking, annual New Year’s Eve resolutions to either get back to my first novel, a book written before I went to grad school, or to complete a new one. Once I got to Seoul, knowing how much teaching I’d have beginning in very late August, I made the most of it. I wrote like it was my last chance, ever, and I got on a roll, and so I flew back to America with a printed 280-page double-spaced full draft. As it turned out, that draft would go through many revisions, but it had Duffy’s entire day in it, every chapter in the final version is in that draft, and I’ve even found that there are some sentences and paragraphs in the published novel that are exactly the same as what was in my notebooks.

ABC: Do you read academic novels? If so, which would you recommend to an interested reader?

AK: I’ve read my share although I don’t consider myself an expert in the field. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein*, and Richard Russo’s *Straight Man* would be among my favorites although I wouldn’t say I’m extremely well read in the

genre. It's only been within the past few years that I've read a couple of David Lodge campus novels and Malamud's *A New Life*. John Gardner's *Mickelsson's Ghosts* is an academic novel that "got me off the mat" in the spring of 2004; it got me thinking I could attempt a novel again, and the novel I began after reading it became *Fight for Your Long Day*.

ABC: How do you see *Fight for Your Long Day* fitting into the tradition of academic fiction?

AK: Among academic novels, previously to writing *Fight for Your Long Day*, I was not aware of a novel about a true pay-per-course adjunct or any academic novel that focuses so much on the lives of American contract workers; I'd read James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale*, but its protagonist has a job at one school, so his life may appear somewhat normal to others with full-time work for a single school or company. Cyrus Duffleman's predicament is entirely different – no family, few prospects, uncertain future, etc. In *Fight for Your Long Day*, I wanted to illuminate a life that seemed missing from contemporary literature.

ABC: *Fight For Your Long Day* has an epigraph from Rousseau and feels pretty angry. Do you think the American university system is failing?--failing its students, or faculty, or the public? Why does reading *Fight for Your Long Day* seem a valuable experience for me, though it is depressing about US higher education?

AK: Here is the epigraph: "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains. One man thinks himself the master of others, but remains more of a slave than they." It's from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* although before I searched for it, I remembered it as from the more widely taught *Second Discourse on Inequality*. Rousseau's *Emile* is of course widely taught in education programs, so it seems fitting to begin the book with one of Rousseau's quotations.

The first half of the quotation from Rousseau is often associated with social and economic justice movements and yet the second half explores an irony that the "master" could be even more of a "slave" –

obviously that irony wouldn't mean a thing to an intellectual freezing his ass off in Siberia while being abused by guards or common criminals he's living among, but for my purposes, its second half is as critical as its first. *Fight for Your Long Day* is full of paradoxes, some of which got ironed out in an editing process designed to make the book more accessible (easier to read), but many, hopefully most, remain. But certainly, the novel is meant to explore the anger and ambivalence of the moment, particularly urban anger as it relates to urban poverty and extreme inequality set against expensive higher education that we're told is increasingly necessary for career success or merely survival in America as our "exceptional" nation fights a "war on terror" which prioritizes fighting "evil" and "fixing" states overseas while ignoring domestic concerns.

To be perfectly honest, I don't know if higher education is failing at the moment. My wife's school hired a bunch of new people last year, I just saw that I'll have 9 new "colleagues" at Clemson [his new university position] most probably on one-year contracts, and, well, it seems like higher education is booming by some criteria. Have you noticed how loud it is at some schools? It sounds like a campus construction boom to me.

But on the other hand, untenured teaching positions are increasing and student debt has blown by \$30,000 total for undergraduate alone while the percentage of students in debt is at or past 70%. The job market they are entering into is questionable at best if one goes by the numbers. For example, as of summer 2015 workforce participation has declined almost steadily throughout our "recovery" and is near its lowest levels ever recorded (about 62%). Further, statistics from 2012 showed half of recent college grads (up to age 25) were either underemployed or unemployed, and another 2012 survey showed that 32% of millennials (aged 18 to 34) live with a parent or guardian. From these statistics, we can be certain a strong percentage of American college grads are not doing well. Yet where I'm observing right now, it seems as if many students who work hard and choose the right programs at "good schools" are getting jobs, including many true "career positions" relatively soon after graduating. I think this has always been America; there has never been success or failure for all, but only individual stories that illuminate different trends.

The student-debt problem seems to be the most significant problem, particularly in how it adversely affects the entire economy if so many younger adults can't afford to live independently or buy beyond basic necessities, but there are newer government programs to help such as income-based repayment (IBR). In fact, if graduates can pay monthly bills on time over twenty years (or ten for public-service workers), they can remain in good standing without ever paying off the total debt. When I finished college in the early nineties I was one of about half of undergrads who finished with debt and the median was only about \$14,000 but we didn't have such significant debt-relief programs.

I'm happy to hear that reading *Fight for Your Long Day* was a "valuable experience," and even though I'm not considered the most "reader friendly" writer, I'm always grateful when readers express similar views. I'm not certain I could explain why any individual reader likes or dislikes a book, not mine or anyone else's.

ABC: Many observers of the decline of English departments blame English professors themselves for the loss of student numbers and interest. Do you think there is some justice in this accusation?

AK: I've also seen numbers that suggest that some humanities programs are getting more students than ever before, and yet other numbers that suggest foreign language and literature are suffering stronger declines than English.

If it is the case that enrollment is down in English departments or that they are otherwise seen in decline, I suspect it's naïve to entirely absolve the English professors of any blame, yet it's obvious there are many other contributing factors – everything from perceived value of the degrees relative to their cost, the perceived superior value of STEM [this acronym, which means Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics, indicates the studies most favored today by governments and funders of higher education] and business degrees, society's denigration of literature and learning for learning's sake, and the rise of Internet usage and its seemingly consequent adverse effect upon the American attention span. *Fight for Your Long Day* is very much intended

to show how society devalues Adjunct Duffleman as much as he devalues himself.

It seems evident to me that if the goals of the university are partly to improve literacy, cultivate citizenship, and expose our students to countries and cultures unlike their own, then we need to solidify and improve the core. I've been told that students can graduate from college without reading a single novel, and I don't feel that is to anyone's benefit. Also, I don't mean that we should return to assigning Western classics in bulk, but rather that students need extended reading outside of their vocational specialization as well as exposure to foreign languages.

ABC: Duffleman is pretty hard on the MFA [Master's of Fine Arts degree, in creative writing]. Do you think its holders have been encouraged to cherish hopes that higher education has no plans to satisfy?

AK: Literary fame is a narcotic hard not to chase once it's in the blood stream, but I don't blame the programs. For whatever reason, too many people want to be writers and too many of us fail to acknowledge how much hard work it will take to achieve our goals. Or even to get a single book published.

Adjunct Duffleman's "criticism" of the MFA programs is meant more as late-night nihilism and despair, a hatred of everything that has brought him to this point in the long day as well as his career. Cyrus could have spent fourteen hours on the car lot, as I did five or six days a week for 20 months before returning for a creative-writing MA, and he'd be the same guy – overextended, exhausted, anxious, and full of self-flagellation. So the line about MFAs is partly an "in joke" for all of us who have similar degrees as well as an opportunity to further behold the man.

It seems like MFAs produce many competent writers and some exceptional writers. I don't read too many authors with MFAs, but that's partly because I'm often reading books by authors whose careers began before the proliferation of these advanced degrees, and also because I read a fair amount of fiction from overseas. So I don't have a criticism, such as the one by Anis Shivani³ although I love that style of screed even if it's

not entirely true. But late in the novel, I hope the MFA comment, and its relevant parentheses, captures the despair, doubt, and exhaustion Duffelman feels after his long day, and particularly a long day with added sexual rejection and assassination in it.

ABC: Do you know Jeffrey Williams's comments on the academic novel (above)? In an article in the *Chronicle Review* called "Unlucky Jim: The Rise of the Adjunct Novel," he focuses on newish books in which the central characters are professors *manqué* and "the academic world is no longer a path to middle-class security." And elsewhere he proposes "that the contemporary academic novel presents 'anxiety narratives.'" That seems a pretty good term for your book, don't you think?

AK: Yes, "anxiety narratives" sounds like a thoughtful expression to me. Related to that, Dr. Ann Green taught *Fight for Your Long Day* in a graduate seminar, one I Skyped into, and she presciently asked if the "fight" in the title is meant as an emotional fight as much as a physical one. And that's absolutely right, that I hope the novel captures the emotionality of Duffy's moment trudging through all of his classes in urban America during the "war on terror."

I should say, as it relates to Jeffrey Williams, I'm not positive that academia ever was a universal path to middle-class security. In Malamud's *A New Life*, published in 1961, the main character is a renter, even a boarder – he lives in a room in someone's house. Although they're fun novels, *White Noise* and *Straight Man* focus so much on the problems of successful academics (department chairs) that we lose sight of the majority of people teaching and learning – indebted grads and undergrads, adjuncts, etc.

ABC: There is much discussion about the place of novelists on campus. What's your view of this phenomenon? Is housing the writer in the university good for the writer? Good for the university or college? Good for literature?

AK: In a best case scenario, the novelist is a creative person who has a more dynamic intellect than many scholars. I'd say it's great for the university to have as many genuinely creative people on campus as possible. Some scholars are creative, but not all (alas, it doesn't seem that writers are universally creative either although, thankfully, not all of us are tweeting someone else's novel and calling our tweets art). Also, many more English majors want to be creative writers than researchers, so it seems essential that English departments offer fiction writing taught by novelists and short story writers.

Is it good for the writer? Fiction writers need shelter, food, water, etc., so I'm guessing it is very good for writers in strict economic terms. Writers need to survive, just like everyone else. One reason the adjunct problem persists is because three thousand dollars for teaching a class, with a degree of certainty that there will be renewal, can be more solid than depending upon freelance work although I know some creative writers who are getting paid far more per hour to freelance.

As for literature, it seems like there are so many factors working against it – everything from the Internet and smartphone usage to watered-down curriculums (e.g. reading one play and two novels for an entire year of high school) to lower household incomes and more precarious employment (the routines of work, if not too taxing, are usually healthier for everyone, including readers and writers), so I wouldn't say housing writers in universities is any worse than housing them in Brooklyn. It seems like writers who move beyond MFA V. NYC⁴ will continue to offer topics that stimulate general readers. Also, I hope *Fight for Your Long Day* is the kind of novel that illuminates the university in a different way than previous novels have cast it, and I'm sure there is always room for a new take on most topics.

Notes:

¹ Jeffrey J. Williams, "Unlucky Jim: the Rise of the Adjunct Novel," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 12, 2012): B12-14; Williams, "The Rise of the Academic Novel," *American Literary History* 24:3 (2012): 581.

² Alex Kudera, *Fight for Your Long Day* (Kensington, MD: Atticus Books, 2010): 223.

³ A vocal critic of MFA programs who complains, for instance, that they are “primarily therapeutic rather than motivated by traditional notions of creativity and inspiration” (“Thoughts for AWP Week: Glut in Creative Writing Is Reverse Side of Drought in Humanities,” thenervousbreakdown.com [February 26, 2014]).

⁴ Novelist (and MFA holder) Chad Harbach has recently designated these as the two cultures of the American literary scene.