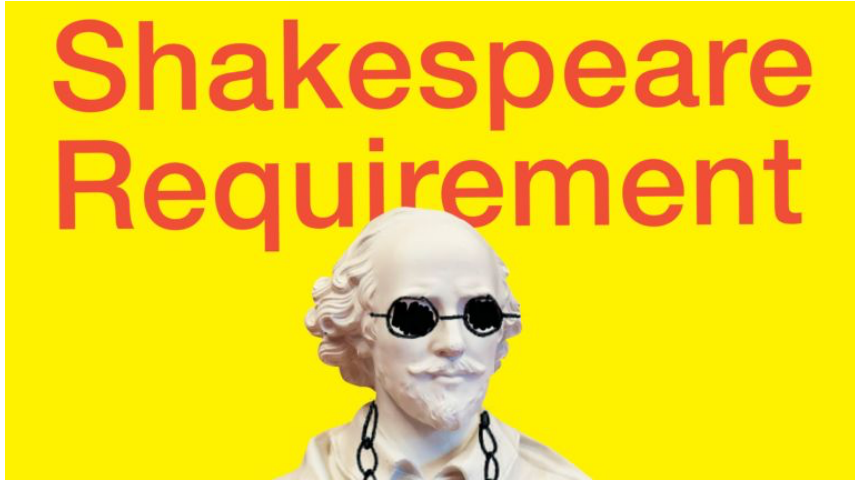


ENTERTAINMENT / BOOKS

'The Shakespeare Requirement' review: Campus satire by Julie Schumacher earns its laughs



"The

Shakespeare Requirement," by Julie Schumacher. Photo Credit: Doubleday

By Daniel Akst

Special to Newsday

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THE SHAKESPEARE REQUIREMENT, by Julie Schumacher. Doubleday, 308 pp., \$25.95.

Truly great comic fiction isn't merely funny. It has to make us laugh of course, but it also has to make us feel a lot more than amusement, something it accomplishes by introducing us to authentic characters we care about in a fully realized milieu that sheds a bright light on our own.

Julie Schumacher's hilarious 2014 novel, "Dear Committee Members," ticks off every box and then some, which is perhaps why it won a coveted Thurber Prize for American Humor, making its author the first woman whose work was so honored. "Committee" tells its story entirely through increasingly unhinged letters of recommendation written by cranky, put-upon Jason Fitger, a has-been novelist and weary creative writing professor at lackluster Payne University. The miracle is that, by the end, we come to regard the man writing them as not just reckless, sarcastic and oversharing, but as a flesh-and-blood human condemned to live with his mistakes — and caught up in

a tragedy as a result of his devotion to an ideal.

The groves of academe offer a mighty harvest for satire, and so Schumacher, herself a writing professor, has gone back for more. Her newest offering, "The Shakespeare Requirement," is a sequel, but it's quite a different book, even if Jason Fitger is still the protagonist, and Payne remains the scene of the crime. Where "Committee" proceeded by stealth, the new novel extracts laughter by means of brute force, relying on a pompous villain, star-crossed lovers, a charmingly sarcastic retainer who is smarter than her betters, an ingénue who loses her innocence and, yes, a dog.



Despite the stock characters — or perhaps even because of them — the book is funny indeed. All the worst features of modern campus life, begging for caricature, here get their wish: the army of administrators, the overpaid football coach, the emphasis on fundraising and the profound mediocrity of the students who, while insisting on their fragility, can erupt in self-righteous fury at

any time. Fitger begins his "Literature of the Apocalypse" class by simply having each of them read a paragraph of the assigned material aloud, which will seem pedagogically puzzling except that some of them, evidently, can barely do this. One can't even pronounce the word "tragic."

In keeping with the author's gloves-off approach, the epistolary pen is laid aside in this new work. No longer seen through the warped vision of our hero, Payne's campus is now revealed, in Schumacher's omniscient narration, as a petty and bureaucratic hellscape, its underfunded English department, chaired by no less than Fitger himself, a refuge for bickering and neurotic dinosaurs. These shabby oddballs and their antique discipline are suddenly in danger of extinction thanks to the imperial designs of market-oriented Roland Gladwell, gladiatorial head of the Economics department upstairs. Gladwell is scheming to eject the fractious English department from the building they share and take over the place entirely.

The economist has big donors behind him, but, honestly, Fitger is his own worst enemy. Here he is in a

restaurant:

Waiter: "Good evening. Have either of you dined with us before?"

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Fitger: "I don't see why that matters. We know what a restaurant is; we know how it works."

Waiter: "If you need anything, my name is Beck."

Fitger: "I assume your name is Beck even if we *don't* need anything."

But in navigating the treacherous currents of campus politics, our socially challenged antihero has the help of two good women: his ex-wife Janet Matthias, now romantically paired with the dean, and his administrative assistant, Fran Ignatieff, a member of the campus' deep state who knows where all the bodies are buried — and has probably buried a few herself. (Animal-loving Fran is the means by which Fitger comes into possession of a hairless rescue dog named Rogaine.)

Perhaps Fitger's greatest challenge, aside from winning back his ex-wife, is persuading Shakespearean scholar Dennis Cassovan to support the English department's Statement of Vision, a widely derided document needed if English is to survive Gladwell's new quality-assessment junta. Cassovan, whose name is almost the same as that of the pedantic scholar George Eliot's heroine foolishly marries in "Middlemarch," is appalled that English majors will no longer have to take a Shakespeare course, and refuses to sign any Statement of Vision lacking this requirement — one that would open the door to similar demands from all the other egoists in the department.

It all comes out right in the end of course, and it's all laugh-out-loud funny, even if, unlike last time around, we can sense the author laboring for laughs. Not to worry — she's earned them.

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