

Book Review / Compte rendu

Olson, Gary A. (2013). *A Creature of Our Own Making: Reflections on Contemporary Academic Life*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. Pages: 197. Price: \$24.95 US (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4384-4578-6

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At face value, *A Creature of Our Own Making* should be an excellent read. A compilation of 58 columns written by Gary Olson for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* over a six year period, it covers a broad array of subjects, including most of those of immediate interest to those in colleges and universities today—budget cuts, accountability, academic governance, and educational technology. Some of these are essential to an understanding of the modern academy while others, such as charge-backs, campus safety, and who pays for departmental social gatherings, seem trivial in comparison.

Olson is well placed to write such columns and to publish such a book. As an established scholar of English and rhetoric, he writes succinctly and clearly and, as one with significant management experience in leadership roles in several American universities, he knows the academic world well through the eyes of both professor and senior administrator.

While the book offers thoughtful and often useful advice on a wide variety of topics pertinent to the modern academy, ultimately I found it disappointing.

Olson illustrates his self-described meditations with vague anecdotal evidence from his experience. While this may work well in a magazine column that one reads occasionally, the constant references to this or that “professor” or “dean” who had a certain experience is a less successful device when used too frequently in a series of articles that are read in one sitting. The general nature of these mini case studies lacks the vibrancy and immediacy of specifically documented instances of conflict or concern.

At Idaho State, Olson had a tough time as provost while serving a president who wanted him to significantly restructure the institution with a view to saving \$1.5 million. In the course of carrying out this assignment, he faced tremendous faculty resistance and ultimately a vote of non-confidence. While he makes a brief reference to this in one of his excerpted columns, and it perhaps helps us to understand better his concerns about faculty resistance to change and academic politics, I could not help but feel that his viewpoints would have been more persuasive had he shared some of the specifics of the challenges he faced and his personal feelings in response.

Ironically, he comes much closer to this approach in a letter he wrote to Louisiana Tech University, responding to his nomination for the presidency of that institution. While it is highly unlikely in the Canadian context that such a confidential letter would be available on the Internet, especially one from an unsuccessful candidate (Olson has subsequently been named president of Daemen University in New York), it addresses the nonconfidence issue from his perspective and is the kind of writing that would enliven his meditations considerably. By comparison, his compiled columns lack the urgency and vitality of immediate context.

Rather than simply reproducing the collected works, the book would be strengthened considerably by the addition of annotations at the start of each column, citing the dates of publication in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and, where helpful, giving more specific and immediate context to the matter at hand.

Olson has definite opinions and expresses them clearly. He appeals for more personal respect and a return to more traditional modes of academic governance in response to what he sees as a growing deterioration of academic politics. His admonitions would benefit from some analysis of the underlying causes of inappropriate faculty behaviour, such as a consideration of the role played by the sheltered ivory tower environment in which so many academics have pursued their studies and careers.

His concern about academic quality is persistent and commendable. He urges faculty to be more understanding of the need for budget cutting and reorganization and to strive for the highest possible standards in everything a university does, especially faculty recruitment. He places a very familiar premium on the quality of research and a professor's contributions to his or her discipline, and the importance of never accepting second best.

A significant contribution of the book is reflected in the column that contributed its title—*A Creature of Our Own Making*. While the particular issue here is tenure, the argument that academics are primarily responsible for their own plight and cannot simply lay all the blame for deteriorating standards (and other perceived and real ills) of the academy at the feet of administrators is an important one that may stimulate healthy debate and more proactive faculty and administrative efforts to work together for the common good.

Canadian readers will find much that is familiar about the academy but some of the content is far less applicable to our colleges and universities. The sections on faculty and administrative recruitment processes are less familiar to the Canadian experience. There is very little recognition of the impact of faculty unionization (which is the norm on most of our campuses) and it is hard to fathom any Canadian university board voting to eliminate its Senate. I would also have preferred to see more written about students and their role in contemporary academic life, covering such hot topics as tuition fees, academic governance, and modern curricula from their vantage point.

A columnist can be worth reading for several reasons—the light he or she sheds on a topic of interest, the bringing of new information to a pertinent topic, the inciting of strong reactions to clearly expressed perspectives and opinions that encourage readers to reexamine their own perspectives and prejudices, or the sheer brilliance of well set out and compelling arguments on important subjects.

Olson writes well, has definite opinions that are pithily expressed and some of the material may generate considerable discussion and reaction. Ultimately, however, the book does not stand out as more than a very basic primer for new entrants to the academy. My

overall disappointment reflects my feeling that most of Olson's positions are pretty standard and predictable. He tends to present the obvious (don't write emails when you are angry) and few of the positions he takes offer real insight or surprise. Nevertheless, there is much common sense and helpful advice to those new to academic administration.

In summary, the book has some appeal but for a limited audience, primarily new faculty members and those contemplating leadership positions in the academy. Unfortunately, those who are part of the university environment will already be familiar with much of what Olson presents while those outside the academy may simply find the whole context slightly bewildering. ❁